

COA International Exchange Event

Self-reliance through Digitalization in Asylum Reception

How to enable residents of asylum reception centres to increase their self-reliance and active involvement through digitalization of accommodation and guidance processes.

internationalknowledgeplatform@coa.nl



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Eindhoven - The Netherlands

Introduction

The world has become increasingly digitalized. People are becoming more and more used to digital channels of communication. Organizations have automated working processes and are increasingly making use of Artificial Intelligence. This also applies to asylum seekers, for many of whom a mobile phone is an essential lifesaver during their journey, as well as to asylum reception agencies in the EU.

Digitalization offers opportunities and threats. For example, the digitalization of asylum procedures and reception systems can strengthen the self-reliance and self-determination of applicants for international protection, but it may also make less digitally skillful people feel discouraged and excluded. The workload of employees at reception agencies can be dramatically reduced, so they can focus more on personal guidance of residents. But they may also experience further digitalization as a threat, especially when Artificial Intelligence is involved. The organization as a whole can hugely benefit from digitalization of processes, but frequently failing systems or low-quality data inputs can frustrate everyone enormously.

Stanford University in collaboration with researchers in Denmark investigated how digital tools can improve the experiences of refugees and facilitate interaction between policymakers and refugees. The risks of digitalization are highlighted in reports from ECRE's Asylum Information Database (AIDA) and UNHCR's Digital Transformation Strategy 2022-2026. They range from social isolation and exclusion of vulnerable groups to potential rights violations. These critical perspectives emphasize the need for a human-centred approach when designing and implementing digital solutions.

The level of digitalization of asylum procedures and reception throughout the European Union shows significant variation, from rather basic to well-developed. The European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) is setting up a Centre of Expertise in Digital Transformation to make asylum and reception processes more efficient and effective. Their 2023 Strategy on Digital

Innovation emphasized the importance of technology for better reception and integration of migrants.

Digitalization at COA

The Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) accommodates and guides applicants seeking international protection in the Netherlands. COA and partners in the Dutch landscape of asylum reception have taken many steps to further digitalization over the past years. Some examples include:

- Asylum application processes have been digitalized to a large extent. COA, the Immigration Service (IND) and the Repatriation Service (DT&V) share information about individual applicants for international protection in one system, to the extent allowed by privacy laws and regulations. As a result, employees have real-time insight in the application stages of individual asylum seekers.
- COA has digitalized its capacity management, so the analysis of the availability and further need for accommodation, as well as the placing of residents in reception centres, is based on digital technologies.
- COA's information management is automated: non-personalized data of the numbers of residents, their countries of origin, age and gender categories, as well as the developments in these numbers (changes in inflow and outflow) are constantly monitored, analyzed, processed and shared with relevant partners, as well as on coa.nl (updated weekly).
- COA uses Artificial Intelligence for screening and matching beneficiaries of international protection (acknowledged refugees) with municipalities, with the aim of optimizing the chance of building a successful life there.
- COA, municipalities and the Education Service (DUO) share information about beneficiaries of international protection (refugee status holders) through the systems Plateau and TVS. This concerns information required for integration and housing.
- Employees of COA assess and monitor the well-being of individual residents using six domains (self-care, day structure, social network, personal wellbeing, external contacts, and future planning) and put these assessments in the system, which makes the transfer of insights to other COA-colleagues easier and forms a solid basis for consistency in COA's approach towards individual residents.
- COA has developed MyCOA that enables and stimulates residents to be self-reliant. MyCOA includes information for residents about the asylum procedure and about life at a reception centre (rights and obligations, health care, safety), even data specific to the centre of residence (addresses and telephone numbers, opening hours, scheduled activities, news, vacancies). MyCOA also includes individual information such as: Have I got email? The MyCOA app is available in 10 languages.
- COA has a multichannel device/ information strategy, through which information about residents is distributed to the device which is most suitable (either by mobile or laptop/desktop).
- COA developed a card for residents for fast-digital identification of residents and (un)attended access to COA-premises.
- The Health Care Service for Asylum Seekers (GZA), which provides general practitioner (GP) medical services at COA reception centres, uses an automated system, which makes it more efficient and reliable.

Almost all these digitalization steps streamline and improve processes and are primarily aimed at supporting the organization and its employees, which also benefits the residents of the reception centres. **But significant steps to enable asylum seekers increase their self-reliance through digitalization are yet to be made.**

COA has developed a roadmap for digitalization of its work, which includes participation and self-reliance of the residents of COA's reception centres. The main focus points of the digitalization roadmap are as follows:

1. Supporting residents of reception centres in developing digital skills and managing their affairs independently, thus increasing their self-reliance;
2. Using digital tools/applications to support employees in providing better personalized guidance to residents;
3. Reducing the workload of employees by digitalizing processes that are currently physically organized and take a lot of time, such as reception intake;
4. Improving the digital skills of employees and organizing work processes more efficiently.

This step towards a more automated and accessible way of working can contribute to improving the reception and guidance of asylum seekers: humane, safe, cost-efficient and agile, also in upscaling and downscaling. It also meets the changing needs and expectations of asylum seekers and reception workers.

The anticipated implications of this digitalization trajectory for residents of the COA reception centres, the COA employees and the organization as a whole are given below:

The resident/asylum seeker	The COA employee	The COA organization
As a resident, I receive personal guidance in a digital environment and always have access to relevant information such as my file and wallet, with links to activities and employers. COA makes it possible for mandatory steps, such as identification and location selection, to take place digitally. I can indicate my preferences for a next location myself and arrange the registration for it digitally. This promotes my self-reliance and involvement in my asylum process. I feel safe at my location, because I know that (digital) supervision can be carried out to maintain the peace and quiet with the help of smart controls. In addition, the digital environment offers 24/7 digital support, such as advice on health care and incident reports. If I still need help, I can go to a physical location at specific times to ask for help. I have influence on how my process runs and the digital environment is user-friendly, accessible and available in my own language.	As a COA employee, I have access to integrated systems that reduce my administrative burden and enable me to work efficiently. The systems connect seamlessly and automate many tasks. Because the residents are mainly self-reliant, this saves me time and provides scope for customization and guidance. I can work at multiple locations and have a device that suits my preference. With digital innovations and training, I offer efficient and high-quality customized guidance to COA residents, while I have digital access to their integral data and information from COA. Thanks to digital (supervision) resources at the locations, I notice that there is a good view of what is happening at the locations and this provides peace of mind for me and my colleagues. I can easily report special features and tasks in a clear digital environment, which ensures a better division of tasks. I also have access to a personal development platform with training courses.	As an organization, we are able to use real-time reliable information to make decisions. This is possible through optimized processes with integrated systems and data-driven insights. Everything that is digitally possible, is done digitally. In order to promote a calm environment in the reception centres, we offer residents the opportunity to indicate their preferences for a location. Using technologies, we automatically make the best possible match between person and location. This places the responsibility with the resident and results in a quieter location. In addition, there is more insight into the actions and safety of residents through the digital approach that the COA uses. We work with reliable data through the structured storage of data and forecasts about inflow and outflow at locations. With real-time information about residents, waiting times and location capacity in our digital operational 'cockpit', we can quickly adjust at both the operational and strategic levels.

COA is keen to learn from peers in other countries and exchange ideas on how it can effectively enable residents of asylum reception centres to increase their self-reliance and a sense of self-determination through digitalization of processes targeting accommodation and guidance.

International events organized by COA

Since 2022, COA's International Knowledge Platform has been organizing international exchange of knowledge, experiences and best practices in the field of reception and guidance of asylum seekers. One of the ways it does this is by organizing an international exchange event each year. The themes vary from year to year: Nomadic Unaccompanied Minors (2022), Sustainability (2023), Labour Participation (2024). The theme of the international exchange event 2025 will be: Self-Reliance through Digitalization of Asylum Reception. For more information about our events, see the [website](#) of the International Knowledge Platform.

Objectives of the International Exchange Event 2025

1. **Establishment of contacts:** Bring professionals from different countries and sectors together, facilitate contacts and getting to know each other better;
2. **Exchange of knowledge and experiences:** Organize transfer/exchange of knowledge and insights about digitalization of asylum reception and related subtopics, as well as facilitate the active exchange of experiences;
3. **Inspiration:** Inspire participants with innovative ideas and best practices, which we will highlight, and encourage them to inspire each other with their own ideas and best practices;
4. **Awareness:** Make participants more aware of change processes and what they require from the people involved, mostly residents and employees with different digital skills levels and different backgrounds. Also, make them aware that the management of reception organizations needs to ensure that the people involved are ready for it;
5. **Site visits:** Organize visits to COA reception centres where the participants can see the use of digital solutions in practice and talk with residents and employees on the spot – as well as see what asylum reception in the Netherlands looks like;
6. **Role model:** Act as a role model in using digital applications to organize this event, so participants experience them as users.

Intended results

- Participants have gained knowledge and insights about this and related topics;
- Participants are inspired to set up initiatives in their own asylum reception context;
- Participants have strengthened their ties with European peers, making it easier to contact them again in the future;
- Participants are more aware of change processes and what they require from the people involved;
- COA harvests ideas and best practices that can help to further develop its plans to foster the self-reliance of its residents through digitalization.

Intended participants

Registration will be open to anyone with a professional interest in this topic, from all over Europe, and even beyond the European borders. Participants can register online for the event and sign up for breakout sessions. A maximum of 150 people can participate in the in-person event, while online participation will be unrestricted.

The main target groups are: policy makers and practitioners in the reception and guidance of asylum seekers in Europe. Also, people who are experts or active in the field of digitalization and innovation.

Date and location

The event will take place on 15 and 16 May 2025, in the Netherlands. The exact location is still to be decided, but Eindhoven region is under consideration.

Contact

COA International Knowledge Platform
E: InternationalKnowledgePlatform@coa.nl

Background materials

- AIDA Report '**Digitalisation of asylum procedures: risks and benefits**' (December 2021): <https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Digitalisation-of-asylum-procedures.pdf>
- Algorithm Watch **Automating Society Report** (September 2020): <https://automatingsociety.algorithmwatch.org>
- BAMF/EU2020.de Presentation '**Blockchain Use Cases in the German Asylum Procedure**' (October 2020): https://migrationnetwork.un.org/sites/g/files/tmzbdl416/files/docs/cdr_20201007_blockchainusecasesintheermanasylumprocedure_eu-prasentation.2pdf_0.pdf
- Caribou Digital & Robert Bosch Stiftung Publication '**The European Digital Identity Wallet: Why it matters and to whom**' (June 2024): <https://www.bosch-stiftung.de/sites/default/files/publications/pdf/2024-10/European-Digital-Identity-Wallet-Brief.pdf>
- European Commission '**Solidarity with Ukraine: Commission launches an EU platform for registration of people enjoying temporary protection or adequate protection under national law**' (May 2022): https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/solidarity-ukraine-commission-launches-eu-platform-registration-people-enjoying-temporary-protection-2022-05-31_en
- EUAA **Strategy on Digital Innovation** (October 2023): https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2023-10/2023_EUAA-Strategy-on-Digital-Innovation-in-Asylum-Procedures-and-Reception-Systems_EN.pdf
- EUAA Query RCN.2024.004 '**Use of fully automated system(s) to manage accommodation centres and processes for residents and stock**' (September 2024): not online
- IGC Information Request '**Innovative Practices and Efficiencies in the Asylum and immigration System**' (May 2024): not online
- IOM **Digital Inclusion Project**: <https://www.iom.int/digital-inclusion>, including the **Migrant E-nclusion Resource Hub**: <https://www.iom.int/migrant-e-nclusion-resource-hub>
- Migration Strategy Group Publication '**AI, Digital Identities, Biometrics, Blockchain: A Primer on the Use of Technology in Migration Management**' (June 2020): <https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/Bither%20%20Ziebarth%20%202020%20-%20technology%20in%20migration%20management%20primer%20.pdf>
- Migration Strategy Group Publication '**Digital Wallets and Migration Policy: A Critical Intersection: Use cases as well as risks when it comes to the adoption of digital wallets in the migration sector**' (June 2022): <https://www.bosch-stiftung.de/en/publication/digital-wallets-and-migration-policy-critical-intersection>
- Mixed Migration Centre '**The emerging digital nervous system: Technology, mixed migration, and human mobility across borders**' (December 2022): <https://mixedmigration.org/the-emerging-digital-nervous-system-technology-mixed-migration-and-human-mobility-across-borders/>
- MPI Report '**Rebooting the Asylum System? The Role of Digital Tools in International Protection**' (October 2022): https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi_digitalization-asylum_final.pdf
- OECD/EMN Inform '**The Use of Digitalisation and Artificial Intelligence in Migration Management**' (February 2022): <https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/topics/policy-issues/migration/EMN-OECD-INFORM-FEB-2022-The-use-of-Digitalisation-and-AI-in-Migration-Management.pdf>
- Refugee Studies Centre, Forced Migration Review #73 '**Digital disruption and displacement**' (May 2024): <https://www.fmreview.org/digital-disruption>
- Christine Rosen, '**The Extinction of Experience: Reclaiming our Humanity in a Digital World**' (December 2020)
- UNHCR **Digital Transformation Strategy 2022-2026** 'Strengthening protection, building self-reliance and optimizing delivery' (2021): <https://www.unhcr.org/digitalstrategy>
- UNHCR/ITU/GSMA/Government of Luxembourg Project **Connectivity for Refugees**: <https://refugeeconnectivity.org>
- Utrecht University, Kinan Alajak etc. '**The dangers and limitations of mobile phone screening in asylum processes**' (May 2024): <https://www.fmreview.org/digital-disruption/alajak-ozkul-leurs-dekker-salah>
- Utrecht University Project **Co-designing a fair digital asylum procedure**: <https://fairdigitalasylum.sites.uu.nl>
- Webinar '**Borders, technology and movement: Implications of technology use by states and refugees**' (June 2024): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xci5pr2NNLk>