

## **The Asylum Dialog Tank (ADT): A Process of Empowerment, Agency, and Social Change.**

A social art intervention initiated by Morten Goll, Joachim Hamou, and Tone Olaf Nielsen.

### **Background**

Over the course of the last fifteen years, the Danish Alien Act has been altered several times, with the aim of making it less attractive to seek asylum in the country. The Social Democrats that governed the country during the 1990s began this process, but was voted out of office in 2001, when a coalition of right-wing parties won the election on the premises of getting tougher on the foreigners. The new right-wing government, supported by the ultra nationalist and outspoken xenophobic Danish People's Party, launched a massive attack on basic human rights of refugees through a series of tightening, which today renders Denmark as the European nation with the toughest Alien Act of all. Exhibiting its blatant hypocrisy, this government at the same time launched an activist foreign policy, which led to the Danish participation in the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2002 and '03. Although these military interventions have caused thousands of civilians to flee their homes, Denmark has never acknowledged its responsibility as one of the warring parties. On the contrary, it has taken several measures to repatriate Iraqi and Afghan refugees, which has sent Denmark on collision course with human rights and the recommendations of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Although these changes have provoked many critical voices on the way in which the Danish asylum centers are functioning, no one has so far asked the asylum center residents directly about their opinion.

### **Living conditions as an asylum seeker in Denmark:**

No right to work

No right to live outside the asylum camps, or to choose which one

Grown ups cannot follow Danish classes and have very limited access to education

Children go to special schools with a lower level and no graduation exam (but a rising number are now allowed in public schools)

Health care only for acute diseases

### **And for the rejected asylum seekers also:**

Forced to live in deportation camps

Must report to the police in the camp twice a week (just asking why you are not going home)

No pocket money, food in cafeteria (you get 230 DKK a month)

No activity programs

No time limit: if Denmark can't deport you (many countries do not want their citizens back. If you don't have any ID, or you are stateless you can stay like this forever. The average time of stay in the asylum camps is 3.5 years for an adult. About 800 people have been here for more than 4 years.

Imprisonment also without time limit, (many have been imprisoned for over a year) only on suspicion that you will leave the country illegally or go under ground.

Most other European countries have time limits, some down to weeks.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Asylum Dialog Tank**

ADT was founded in response to this situation. It took form as a series of workshops in the Danish asylum centers Kongelunden and Sandholm during the months of January and February 2009. The participants were residents from asylum Center Avnstrup, Center Kongelunden, and Center Sandholm as well as students from The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, The School of Architecture, Copenhagen College of Social Work, The Danish School of Media and Journalism, The University of Copenhagen, Architects Without Borders, and more. During the two workshops, the participants collectively developed ideas and strategies on how to improve the living conditions for asylum center residents in Denmark. ADT Kongelunden had about 24 participants, 9 of which were residents. The ADT Sandholm had 46 participants, 32 of which were residents.

It was a key strategy of the ADT workshops that all participants were considered equal, regardless of their legal status. ADT does not accept stigmatizing labels such as “phase 1, 2, or 3 asylum seekers”, partly because they refer to different degrees of rejection by the Danish state, partly because they lead to victimization, and partly they connote “unreliable individual.” In ADT, on the contrary, any identity that the refugees and students chose to present themselves by was accepted. Overall, ADT was a social experiment in which the refugees were invited to act as experts on asylum law and asylum center living, while the students were invited to help find alternative solutions to the Danish system in close collaboration with the residents. Since the Danish state has made it its trademark to disrespect the rights of refugees, the only way to restore justice and dignity is to ask the refugees in the camps for help.

The workshops at Center Kongelunden and Center Sandholm each contained three elements: a video workshop, a dialog tank, and a presentation. The purpose of the video workshop was to introduce the workshop participants to each other and to prepare them for the following dialog tank. Participants were divided into groups, all of which were asked to formulate a question that would become the subject matter for their videos. For three days, the group members then collaborated on producing and editing their videos. The purpose of the questions was to engage the participants in a critical reflection on their immediate situation, and thus, it also functioned as a kind of research for the dialog tank. It was a mandatory guideline that the groups developed questions that could be posed to both refugees and Danes. Each group produced a 5-10 minute video that were shown to the entire workshop.

The purpose of the dialog tank was to analyze the asylum center in question, and to develop alternative solutions to the problems found there. The dialog tank was divided into a phase of problem recognition and a phase of problem solving: During the last phase, we searched for answers and solutions to the problems identified during the first phase.

The third and last element of the ADT workshop consisted of a presentation, during which the participants presented their ideas and solutions to the entire group. All three elements will be elaborated upon below.

Denmark used to be one of the Nice Guys and follow the advice from UNHCR. But over the years, and most drastically with the new Alien Act in 2002, we have moved quite far away from UNHCR. The most fundamental difference is that to get asylum in Denmark you have to be *individually* in danger of persecution – it is not enough to come from a very dangerous place or belong to a persecuted group. If you read the UN definition again, you will not find a word about this. And if you compare with the situation of the Jews in Nazi Germany, most of them would not be included by the Danish definition. The economic burden of accepting refugees seem to mean more than the moral responsibility to offer them safety.<sup>ii</sup>

### **The result of the problem definition phase**

During the problem definition phase, we discussed the shortcomings of the Danish asylum centers in general, as many of the residents participating in ADT had several of years of experience with many different centers. The conclusion was that the centers are generally in okay condition, and that the Danish Red Cross, which has been appointed by the Danish state to run the centers, is doing a good job. Over the years, the Danish Red Cross has done its best to improve the architecture and interior of the centers in accordance to clients' needs. It is beyond doubt that The Danish Red Cross is doing its best to help its clients, but as long as they agree to act according to an inhumane Alien Act, the organization's humanitarian measures are bound to fall short of their clients most basic needs. However, the asylum center residents who participated in ADT, all expressed that they could endure the disrespect of their human rights, if only there was a set time limit to this situation.

Danish asylum centers were built to accommodate refugees only temporarily – and no more than 12-24 months, while waiting for their application to be processed. In reality, asylum seekers live in these enclosed and parallel worlds for much longer – some up to 12 years. Room and boarding comes with the prohibition of work, education, and integration into the general society. In most cases, the asylum seekers would prefer to work or study, this way contributing to the society they live in. Instead, asylum seekers face isolation, poverty, and mental paralysis. The state has banned these people and rejected their desire to live a normal self-sustaining life, and they are thus left as clients of a dubious welfare state, which does not want them, but cannot force them to leave. From the inside it seems that the Danish asylum centers are designed to break people down. Even if Denmark decided to turn the asylum centers into five star hotels, the residents would still feel imprisoned, since they don't enjoy the basic rights to a normal self-sustaining life.

The consequence of the above is that Danes generally perceive asylum seekers as costly clients and parasites on the Danish welfare system rather than potential colleagues and contributors to society. But the fact is that they have become so against their own will.

The asylum procedure in Denmark has been undergoing big changes over the years. The new Alien Act from 2002 also tightened the rules for family reunification, for citizenship and for allowances to newcomers. The result is that Denmark now has one of the world's toughest laws on foreigners – both refugees and immigrants. The following organizations have since 2002 repeatedly criticized Denmark's foreign policy in various reports:

ECRE (European Council on refugees and exiles)

ECRI (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance)

UNHCR (UN High Commissioner for Refugees)

CERD (UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination)

Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Amnesty International

LIBE (EU Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs)<sup>iii</sup>

### **The result of the problem solving phase**

Faced with this reality, ADT concluded that the Alien Act is the biggest obstacle. Thus, we have to work to change the voters' perception of asylum seekers. In order to do this, we identified a strong need for the existence of a self-organized independent platform outside of the centers upon which refugees would be able to develop and display identities of their own choice. Through such a platform, they would gain agency and self-empowerment to simultaneously change public opinion and fight for social justice. Consequently, ADT decided to create two new independent institutions:

1. Visavis, a newspaper controlled and written by the asylum seekers addressing the Danish public.
2. The Trampoline House, an asylum seeker driven and controlled drop-in culture house designed as a meeting place for asylum seekers and Danes.

Both are intended to serve as mouthpieces for refugees living in Denmark and as a means for social justification and integration. It is ADT's goal that both Visavis and The Trampoline House will become permanent non-government institutions in near future. The newspaper will be written and produced by refugees, aided by a professional editor, and a board consisting of refugees and Danes. As for the distribution of the paper, we are working on adopting the distribution concept of *Hus Forbi*, an existing Danish newspaper for homeless people. This paper is sold on the streets by homeless, thus facilitating direct contact between citizens and the homeless.

The Trampoline House will be a private non-profit drop-in culture house run by refugees and users of the house. The founding principles of the culture house are integration, learning, exchange, networking, and mutual respect. It will serve as a platform for shifting activities: café, concerts, exhibitions, reading groups, Danish/foreign languages

classes, video workshops, pro bono legal aid and counseling, hair dresser shop, bicycle workshop, etc. Some of the activities are already offered by the Danish Red Cross, but only for some asylum seekers depending on whether they are categorized as phase 1, 2 or 3 refugees. Other activities are not at all allowed for asylum center residents. The culture house will accept all refugees and Danes regardless their legal status, and since it is independent of the state, we can operate according to the needs of the users of the house rather than according to the Alien Act. The Trampoline House is the asylum seekers' possibility to organize and represent themselves, to establish and develop relations to the Danish society, and to command a platform, from which they can inform Danes about their situation. Every human is a valuable resource, not a victim.

The Newspaper's editorial office will be located in the Trampoline House. The paper's prime function is to serve as a link between people living in the asylum centers and people living outside of them. It must be readable for refugees and Danes alike, since the goal is to promote integration and to brake down isolation. In line with this, the people who will work on the paper have to be both refugees and Danes.

The Trampoline House opened as temporary test site in the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts' exhibition space, Q, on March 5, 2009. During the opening night we had about 250 visitors, refugees and Danes alike. The following days we experienced a full house, of 20 – 60 visitors at all times. The temporary site closed on March 15, but having proved the necessity for a Trampoline House, our next step will be to raise money to establish a permanent platform. In the meantime we will launch the first issue of Visavis on May 15, 2009.

ADT presently counts: Kalbsh Ahmad, Kaosar Ahmed, Marewan Ahmad, Soran Karim Ahmad, Refa Aldan, Abdul Ali, Ahlam Alnies, Hassan Arab, Mohammadi Arash, Lethe Bjørg, Pavlovic Bojan, Maureen N. Chi, Nabil Darwish, James Dickson, Mia Edelgart, Morten Goll, Johanna Guldager, Hamid Haidari, Selini Halvadaki, Joachim Hamou, Stine Laurberg Hansen, Aziz Hashimi, Farzad Hassani, Elsa Hepta, Sofie Holten, Husan, Hasan Jalali, Ziad Kabbani, Mira Kellerman, Memo Kara Khalil, Arendse Krabbe, Misja Krenchel, Aram Mahamadi, Fatma Mahmoud, Aras Manaana, Ditlev Marboe, Maja Moesgaard, Otman Miloud, Tone Olaf Nielsen, Maher Omar, Yassin Rahmani, Nabila Saidi, Afraz Naif Saleh, Ann Sofie, Stan, Therese, Hasim Ullah, Ester Vilstrup, Laura Winge, Erik Yakubjan, and Eva Ågaard.

Several grass roots organizations currently work to change the conditions in the camps. We would like to express our thanks to these groups because of their work and their dedication, which has been our inspiration. ADT's contribution to this field is that we are a network of refugees and Danes, who have begun the work of breaking down the invisible wall that institutionalized racism presents.

Morten Goll, Joachim Hamou, and Tone Olaf Nielsen

#### **Links:**

**The Trampoline House:** [www.trampolinehouse.dk](http://www.trampolinehouse.dk)

**Visavis:** [www.vis-a-vis.dk](http://www.vis-a-vis.dk)

**Asylum Dialog Tank:** <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=30835787623>

**The New Times:** <http://www.newtimes.dk/>

**Refugees Under Ground Committee:** [www.flygtningeunderjorden.dk](http://www.flygtningeunderjorden.dk)

**Bedsteforældre for Asyl:** [www.bedsteforaeldreforasyll.dk](http://www.bedsteforaeldreforasyll.dk)

**Luk Lejren:** [www.luklejren.dk](http://www.luklejren.dk)

**Støt Alle der Lever på Tålt ophold:**

<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?sid=daf7bfc9451600d099915a8bd34ab113&gid=37818881622>

**Danskere for et Anstændigt Danmark:**

<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?sid=5e61c7329aadd171fc0cabeb7ec9ede1&gid=51021933712>

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i

**AN INTRODUCTION TO DANISH ASYLUM POLICY** by *Michala Clante Bendixen, January 2009*

ii

**AN INTRODUCTION TO DANISH ASYLUM POLICY** by *Michala Clante Bendixen, January 2009*

iii

**AN INTRODUCTION TO DANISH ASYLUM POLICY** by *Michala Clante Bendixen, January 2009*