



Frontline Organisations as Sites for Political Learning: Managing Asylum Waiting Time in the Formative Years (1983–1988) of the Danish Asylum System

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Abstract • The central aim of this article is to shed light on how *frontline organisations*, in addition to serving an essential role on behalf of the state in responding to the individual needs of vulnerable groups, can also be understood as sites for knowledge production and political learning: as producers of so-called “tacit frontline knowledge” *downwards* and influencers *upwards* on learning processes within the state bureaucracy. The article accentuates these analytical notions based on an empirical case study of a humanitarian organisation, Red Cross Asylum, which has served as a central operator of asylum centres in Denmark since 1984. It reveals how, during the 1980s – in addition to managing the daily operations of local asylum centres – Red Cross Asylum generated tacit frontline knowledge as attempts to mitigate social and mental health issues resulting from prolonged waiting times (e.g., by initiating various social and educational activities). The article also demonstrates how some of the tacit knowledge produced in the asylum centers ended up influencing central policymaking during the 1980s and, ultimately, the contemporary asylum system.

Keywords • political learning, frontline organisations, tacit knowledge, asylum seekers, asylum waiting time

Introduction

Large and unforeseen inflows of refugee claimants are nothing new, having occurred periodically in recent decades. In the Northern European context, the number of “spontaneous refugees” (the predecessor to the term “asylum seekers”) increased considerably during the 1980s. Since then, the question of how states should respond to individuals claiming protection status has remained a source of political conflict – and an unresolved challenge.¹

Previous research has examined state responses to inflows of refugees from various perspectives (see section 2). This article seeks to contribute with new research insights by directing attention to the frontline organisations “in the middle”. In addition to fulfilling a vital role on behalf of the state in addressing the legal, humanitarian, and economic needs of individuals seeking refugee protection, this article argues that frontline organisations can also be understood as crucial sites for knowledge production

1 Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen, “International Refugee Law and Refugee Policy: The Case of Deterrence Policies,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 27, no. 4 (2014), 574–95; Karen N. Breidahl, Evelyn Z. Brodtkin and Jonathan Miaz, “The Global Challenge of Mass Migration and Asylum: Comparative Analysis of Street-Level Organizations at the Front Lines,” *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis* 26, no. 1 (2024), 1–9.

and political learning.² Thus, the central aim is to cast light on how frontline organisations, under some circumstances, can serve as producers of so-called “tacit knowledge,” “downwards” though their everyday frontline practices and “upwards” as influencers of learning processes within the state bureaucracy.³

The article accentuates these analytical arguments, drawing on an empirical case study of a central humanitarian organisation: Danish Red Cross Asylum (RCA). In 1984, the state authorities in Denmark delegated the responsibility for operating asylum centres to RCA, which thus found themselves in charge of managing asylum seekers’ everyday lives while they awaited a decision on their quest to gain a resident permit.

The following research question guides the article: How did RCA, in the period 1983–1988, contribute to knowledge on how to manage asylum waiting time through their everyday frontline practices (downwards), and how did this knowledge contribute to political learning within the state bureaucracy (upwards)?

The theoretical framework of the article brings together insights from several perspectives. First and foremost, street-level theory⁴ accentuating how frontline organisations (synonymous with street-level organisations), occupy a position of political significance by operating as the interface between the state and government in action, on the one hand, and individuals (e.g., asylum seekers) on the other. It is through individuals’ everyday interactions with frontline organisations (e.g., asylum centres) that experiences of “the state” and its “policies” are produced⁵ as these interactions bring practical meaning to abstract political concepts such as rights and obligations, power and authority, voice and civic standing.⁶

By advancing the distinction between “downward” producers and “upward” influencers, we seek to accentuate that frontline organisations not only serve as policy producers downwards, which is the central point in street level research. We also advance the argument that they sometimes serve as producers of tacit frontline knowl-

2 Breidahl, Brodtkin and Miaz (2024), 1–9; Michael Lipsky, *Street Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* (Russell Sage Foundation, 1980); Karen N. Breidahl, *Når staten lærer: En historisk og komparativ analyse af statslig policy læring og betydningen heraf for udviklingen i den arbejdsmarkedsrettede del af indvandrerpolitikken i Sverige, Norge og Danmark fra 1970 til 2011* (Aalborg: Aalborg University, 2012); Niklas Andersen and Karen N. Breidahl, “The Power of Ideas in Policymaking Processes: The Role of Institutionalised Knowledge Production in State Bureaucracies,” *Social Policy and Administration* 55, no. 5 (2021): 848–62.

3 This approach draws on the theoretical design and development in the collaborative research project “Educating Newcomers to the Welfare State. Organizational Responses to Migration 1960s–2010s and their Influence on Danish Central Policy” (EduState), consisting of Mette Buchardt (PI), Karen N. Breidahl (Co-PI), Sophy Bergenheim and Siv Holm Hjortlund, funded by Independent Research Fund Denmark <https://www.en.culture.aau.dk/research/research-groups/cfu/educating-newcomers-to-the-welfare-state>, 2022–2026, see Buchardt, Mette and Karen. N. Breidahl. “Educating Newcomers for the Modern Welfare State: Danish Frontline Organisations as Educational Sites and Drivers of Knowledge from the late 1960s to the late 1990s.” *Nordic Journal of Educational History*, this issue. The source corpus for this article is collected in this project.

4 Breidahl, Brodtkin and Miaz (2024), 1–9.

5 Evelyn Z. Brodtkin, “Putting Street-Level Organizations First: New Directions for Social Policy and Management Research,” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 21 (2011), 199–201; Evelyn Z. Brodtkin, “Street-Level Organizations and the Welfare State,” in *Work and the Welfare State: Street-Level Organizations and Workfare Politics*, ed. Evelyn Z. Brodtkin and Gregory Marston (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 17–34; Lipsky (1980).

6 Joe Soss, Richard C. Fording and Sanford F. Schram, *Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 284.

edge – a knowledge that may end up having an influence upwards. Therefore, downward knowledge production that take place on the ground in the everyday encounters between staff and individuals should be regarded as more than concrete, isolated actions. The accumulation of such frontline practices can, sometimes, led to the production of tacit knowledge, derived from personal experience and practice rather than formal instruction. This could involve problem identification (i.e., identifying what kinds of problems asylum seekers are facing while waiting) and developing new practices for how to manage these problems (e.g., educational activities in terms of language courses and how to behave (societal norms) etc.).

The term “tacit frontline knowledge” is inspired by Michael Polanyi’s seminal writings on tacit forms of knowing and Van der Aa and Van Berkel’s later elaboration of the concept; how frontline staff develop practice when faced with complex problems and when established knowledge proves insufficient.⁷ The article will reveal how tacit frontline knowledge in the asylum centres, to a large extent derived from the informal educational and civilising practices that took place in the everyday encounters between centre staff and asylum seekers, their communal activities, and in their attempts to manage the instability and insecurity that stem from extended waiting times.

Moreover, the framework accentuates theoretical notions of what will be termed “political learning”. It recognises that frontline organisations – due to their role as policy producers and implementers on behalf of the state – form part of the state apparatus and its learning capacity. Thereby frontline organisations can be approached as contributing to the overall state capacity – that, according to Theda Skocpol’s classical theorising can be defined as – the capacity to diagnosing social problems and the administrative capacity to handle them.⁸ Moreover, they form part of the learning capacity of the state that, according to Breidahl’s (2012) theorising on “policy learning within the state bureaucracy”, refers to the administrative capacity of states to adopt and learn from the broader society and from previous experiences. The same also applies to humanitarian organisations and nongovernmental organisations serving as operators for the state, including those that formally define themselves as operating outside the state.

That the article refers to “political learning” and not just “learning” stems from Harell Lasswell’s classical definition of politics as “Who Gets What, When, How”. A definition that approaches politics as a fundamental process of distribution and allocation of valued goods. We argue that the learning processes of interest in this paper also have distributive, and thereby political, relevance and implications. Although the allocation of resources to e.g. educational activities on the surface may appear as a technical and administrative concern, it has broader implications for more fundamental issues concerning the right to aspire and build a future while waiting.

7 Michael Polanyi and Amartya Sen, *The Tacit Dimension*. (University of Chicago Press, 2009); Paul van der Aa and Rik van Berkel, “Fulfilling the Promise of Professionalism in Street-Level Practice,” in *Understanding Street-Level Bureaucracy*, ed. Peter Hupe, Michael Hill and Aurélien Buffat (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2015).

8 Theda Skocpol, “Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research,” in *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Theda Skocpol (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

9 Harold D. Lasswell, “Politics: Who Gets What, When, How,” (New York: Whittlesey House, 1936), ix, 264.

In terms of upward influence, we argue that insights and knowledge derived by staff in frontline organisations sometimes can have an influence “upwards”¹⁰: on learning processes within the state bureaucracy (e.g., regulating administrative conditions and resources) and, more broadly, at central policymaking processes setting the conditions for what asylum seekers can (not) do while waiting. We illustrate the latter dynamics in the analysis by outlining, among others, how, in the late 1980s, parliament passed legislation giving asylum seekers the “right” to participate in educational activities, and how this decision can be traced back to RCA’s repeated attempts over several years to accentuate the need for activities in the asylum centres and their own attempts to invent practices.

It is an important part of the theoretical argument of the article, that the ability of frontline organisations to produce knowledge and serve as sites for political learning upwards is not a permanent feature but is fundamentally conditional. The need of the state bureaucracy to learn from the broader society is especially prevalent in periods of major upheavals and transformations, where existing and well-established knowledge prove insufficient.¹¹ The large and sudden inflow of asylum seekers in 1984 represent such an incident. Under these circumstances, the state administration and policy-makers require new insights and ideas for how to solve pressing societal challenges. Additional conditions can also influence whether and to what extent frontline organisations serve a crucial role in producing knowledge and influence policy making; their autonomy and discretion (prevalence of state regulations) and the absent of professional well-established knowledge.

The article draws on empirical sources (cf. section 3) that allow us to reveal the role of frontline organisations in the Danish asylum system in the early and mid-1980s (1983–1988). It was during this time period that “building blocks” for the contemporary asylum system were established, when the questions regarding refugee politics and policies entered the national agenda and regarded as economic challenges, and when the need for welfare state retrenchment became a prominent issue in the broader public.¹² Finally, the 1980s also marked a critical phase in the establishment of the Danish asylum system. Due to a stark and unforeseen increase in spontaneous refugees, the state authorities were forced to expand existing capacity. Empirically, the

10 The notion of “upward” influence is also inspired by Anat Gofen, Oliver Meza and Carlos Moreno-Jaimes, “Frontline Organizations as Experimental Settings for Policy Change: Why Public Management Matters Even More,” *Public Management Review* 26, no. 7 (2024): 1827–48.

11 Peter A. Hall, “Policy Paradigms, Social Learning, and the State: The Case of Economic Policymaking in Britain,” *Comparative Politics* 25, no. 3 (1993), 275–96.

12 Jørgen Goul Andersen, “The Scandinavian Welfare Model in Crisis? Achievements and Problems of the Danish Welfare State in an Age of Unemployment and Low Growth,” *Scandinavian Political Studies* 20 (1997), 1–31.

article accentuates how RCA, due to their central role as operators of asylum centers, became an important component in this capacity building.¹³

Despite the close connection, it is important to distinguish between the Danish Red Cross as an overall organisation, established in 1876, and “Red Cross Asylum” (RCA), a specific subsection (asylum department) established in 1984, when RCA started operating asylum centres.¹⁴ In 1987, RCA was financially and organisationally separated from the other Red Cross departments.¹⁵

The next section elaborates further on how the focus of the article is situated within existing research followed by a section outlining the research design and empirical material. Then follows a three-part empirical analysis, while the final section summarises and discusses the central findings.

State responses to inflows of refugees and political learning dynamics

A rich body of studies has examined asylum life, policies and politics from a variety of perspectives. This article is particularly situated within research on how states and governments have tried to use various policy instruments to control border-crossing migrants and on policy efforts enacted by states to manage refugee populations after their arrival (e.g., in facilitating their incorporation).¹⁶ As part of this broader research agenda, some studies have examined the phase, where asylum seekers are awaiting a decision on their asylum application.¹⁷ This article also contributes to existing research regarding state responses to forced migration by focusing on the frontline organisations in “the middle” in between state authorities and people – the space where policies are produced on the ground.¹⁸ Moreover, as also outlined above, it introduces novel analytical insights by accentuate how frontline organisations, under some circum-

13 In Denmark, like many other countries, non-profit organisations (sometimes referred to as non-governmental organisations) are designated by state authorities to provide care and safety to asylum seekers while waiting. This is described in detail by Karen N. Breidahl and Evelyn Z. Brodtkin, “Managing Asylum: Street-Level Organizations and Refugee Crises,” *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis* 26, no. 1 (2024), 42–63. The fact that social welfare is delegated to organisations outside the state (for-profit and non-profit organisations alike) is far from exceptional. Instead, it is notable that RCA has remained a central operator (in the early 2000s, municipal operators also entered the organisational landscape).

14 Dansk Røde Kors, “Historien,” *Røde Kors Danmark*, accessed May 26, 2025, <https://www.rodekors.dk/om-os/historie>.

15 Danish Red Cross, “Audit strategy and plan for 1999,” December 1998, Danish Red Cross Private Archive.

16 Arjen Leerkes, Mark Leach and James Bachmeier, “Borders Behind the Border: An Exploration of State-Level Differences in Migration Control and Their Effects on US Migration Patterns,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38, no. 1 (2012): 111–29; Gallya Lahav and Virginie Guiraudon, “A Reappraisal of the State Sovereignty Debate: The Case of Migration Control,” *Comparative Political Studies* 33, no. 2 (2000): 163–95.

17 Katrine Syppli Kohl, *Asylaktivering og ambivalens: Forvaltningen f asylansøgere på asylcentre* (Copenhagen: Københavns Universitet, 2015), 238; Katrine Syppli Kohl, “Ambiguous Encounters: Revisiting Foucault and Goffman at an Activation Programme for Asylum-Seekers,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (2020), 177–206.

18 Breidahl and Brodtkin (2024), 42–63; Vicki Lens, “From Practice to Policy: Excluding Asylum Seekers at the US Border,” *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice* 26, no. 1 (2023), 1–15; Florian Sichling, “Frontline Politics: Street-Level Organizations, Family Unification and the Right to Asylum in Germany,” *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice* 26, no. 1 (2023), 64–80.

stances, can serve as producers of tacit frontline knowledge downwards and as sites for political learning upwards.

The article also contributes new insights to existing street-level research by foregrounding the role of frontline organisations from a historical perspective. Uncovering frontline organisational practices in a historical perspective can be a challenging endeavour, as most street-level research relies on field research (observations and interviews) rather than on documentary sources.¹⁹ However, we argue that being sensitive to timing and how conditions evolve over time influence the role of frontline organisations as knowledge producers and their possibilities to influence learning processes within the state bureaucracy.²⁰ The time perspective also help accentuate a crucial argument in street level theory – that what frontline organisations can (not) do – also in terms of serving as knowledge producers upwards and downwards – depends on the structural conditions; that is, legal, political, and governmental conditions.²¹

Finally, and not at least, the article also seeks to contribute to existing research within history of education and, more specifically, on educationalisation.²² Thus, although the central focus of this article not is on education politics, as such, but asylum politics, the empirical findings reveal how educational activities (in the beginning mostly informal) constituted an important element in managing asylum waiting time and how these activities become a prevalent practice for the center staff in mitigating problems related to prolonged waiting time. Asylum centers thereby ended up as “educational sites” by serving an important role in educating newcomers in a broader sense.²³ Moreover, demonstrating how more formal educational activities were enacted in parliament in the late 1980s due to pressure from RCA is illustrative for RCAs efforts to “education-ize” waiting time problems in the asylum system. As appear from the Buchardt & Breidahl’s introductory article in this special theme, political and social problems have increasingly been *educationalized*; sought solved through educating the population. This has not only taken place through the formal education system but also through broader social policy.²⁴ With the Danish asylum system, we have a case where the struggle around providing the “right” of asylum seekers to participate in educational activities can be interpreted as an attempt to alleviate social problems at the centres and as an instrument to suppress social conflicts.

Methodology: Research design and empirical sources

The article relies on a historical case study of the Danish asylum system in the 1980s (1983–1988); the period where the asylum system was founded and RCA depicted as

19 See also, Cecilie Bjerre, “Making Policies: The History of the Danish Child Welfare System at the Local Level,” *Journal of Policy History* 34, no. 4 (2022), 529–54.

20 Paul Pierson, *Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis* (Princeton University Press, 2004).

21 Breidahl and Brodtkin (2023), 1–22.

22 Marc Depaepe and Paul Smeyers, “Educationalization as an Ongoing Modernization Process,” *Educational Theory* 58, no. 4 (2008): 379–89.; Daniel Tröhler, “Educationalization of Social Problems and the Educationalization of the Modern World, In *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory*, edited by Michael A. Peters, 698–703. Singapore: Springer, 2016.

23 Buchardt & Breidahl (this issue).

24 Breidahl (2012). Buchardt & Breidahl (this issue).

the central operator of asylum centres. The foundation of the Danish asylum system took place after the expansion period of the Danish welfare state, involving the provision of universal social rights provided by the state (cf. the introductory article). However, due to their status as “outsiders to the welfare state”, asylum seekers – back in the 1980s and still today – have faced significant restrictions in their access to social benefits and services, including public education.²⁵

The empirical basis of the study consists of archival documents generated by RCA (head office and the local centres); the government in office from 1983–1988; relevant ministries, government agencies, commissions, and other entities and – the most prevalent source in this article – daily logs from different asylum centres. The analysis thus encompasses *micro* and *meso* practices at the frontline level and central policy-making at the *macro* level.

Some of the sources (e.g., the daily logs from the centres) have been accessed through the RCA private archive, to which we were granted direct access. Other sources were obtained via subject access requests for internal documents in The Danish Immigration Service (*Udlændingestyrelsen*) about the communication and collaboration between RCA and the Directorate for Foreigners (DfF – *Direktoratet for Udlændinge*) in the period 1983–1988. Without this unique access, these sources would otherwise have been withheld from the public. This includes meeting agendas and correspondence (written letters) between RCA and the DfF in the years 1983–1988. The collected source material, produced in real-time as part of internal decision-making processes, provides insight into the organisational logic and contextual conditions, reflecting the reasoning, decisions, and practices at the time.

The sources are utilised in the three analytical sections:

The *first* part outlines some of the central trajectories leading to the formation of a center-based asylum system in the early 1980s. Relying on policy documents, it outlines key features in the structural conditions and their evolution over time.

The *second* part of the empirical analysis investigates everyday frontline practices within the local asylum centres, and how tacit knowledge were produced within RCA. It primarily draws on a collection of daily logs maintained by the staff at different asylum centres during the 1980s, comprising around 1000 pages. Moreover, it draws on center reports covering daily tasks and circumstances at the centres that was reported to the central RCA administration. Altogether these sources provide valuable insights into the practices and everyday life at asylum centres. Through a systematic coding of the logs, we identify recurring problems and challenges recognised by frontline staff and the interventions enacted to deal with them in everyday organisational life. The analysis focuses on two key areas identified in the coding process: 1) *problems requiring frontline action* and 2) *frontline interventions to manage these problems*. The coding results are presented in the empirical analysis in Tables 1 and 2.

The third part of the empirical analysis detects political learning processes upwards by examining how staff experiences and knowledge generated by RCA in local asylum centres (and later compiled by RCA headquarters) were, in various ways, channelled

25 Karen N. Breidahl, “Asylum Seekers’ Social Rights while Waiting: Comparative Insights from Denmark, Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands,” in *Migrants and Welfare States: Balancing Dilemmas in Northern Europe*, ed. Christian A. Larsen (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022), 49–63.

upwards to the central policy level and into the state bureaucracy. It mainly draws on internal reports and formal RCA correspondence together with relevant policy documents. Detecting the direct influence of RCA on central policymaking is a challenging endeavour, and it is important to distinguish between “influence” versus “attempts to influence” central policymaking and learning processes.

We argue that the empirical material should be regarded not merely as descriptive accounts but as indicators of deeper organisational learning processes, structures, and mechanisms.²⁶ Thus, by analysing sources over a longer period, the study provides new insights into organisational dynamics (stability and change).

Despite the extensive material collected during the period, it is essential to acknowledge its inherent limitations and the partial nature of the insights it provides. Thus, although the logs are comprehensive, it is important to recognize that they only provide partial insights into the everyday frontline practices of asylum centre staff. Important events and practices may have occurred at the centres without being documented in the daily logs. Consequently, the logs inevitably offer a selective account of frontline activities. Furthermore, it is important to note that the logs exclusively reflect the perspectives of the staff, thereby omitting the voices and lived experiences of the asylum seekers at the centres.

The early 1980s – the formation of the Danish asylum system

The following section contextualises the central trajectories leading to the formation of a centre-based asylum system in 1984 and outlines some of the conditions under which RCA operated asylum centres in the 1980s.

The passage of the Aliens Act in 1983 was pivotal in establishing a centre-based asylum system in 1984, as it clarified the legal status of spontaneous refugees – an early term for what is now referred to as asylum seekers. Their legal status had previously been ambiguously defined, as they were categorized as “spontaneous” refugees and thus held a different status than the so-called “recognized refugees” acknowledged by the UN – such as those from Hungary (1956), Chile, and Vietnam during the 1970s.²⁷

Prior to the early 1980s, the number of spontaneous refugees present within the state’s borders remained low averaging approximately 70 individuals per year from the mid-1970s.²⁸ The Ministry of Justice oversaw the determination of their legal status, and the Danish Police was responsible for their accommodations. Most applicants were housed in hotels or empty apartments. Necessary services and money for food, clothes, medicine, etc. were provided through the Social Security Act, with no available resources for educational activities or the like.²⁹

26 Michael Heller, “Rethinking Historical Methods in Organization Studies: Organizational Source Criticism,” *Organization Studies* 44, no. 6 (2023), 987–1002.

27 Most of them were considered “recognised refugees,” cf. the UN 1951 Refugee Convention. Instead of an asylum determination process, they were handed over to Danish Refugee Council (from 1956), which was responsible for the introduction of newly arrived (recognised) refugees.

28 Anne Brøcker, “Udlændingelovgivningen i Danmark 1983–1986: Faktorer i Den Politiske Beslutningsproces,” *Politica* 22, no. 3 (1990): 332–45.

29 Transition to Red Cross by the Directorate. Note by the Directorate for Foreigners, October 1984, DNA, The Danish Immigration Service, casefiles 1984–1987, casefile 117.

The legal status of spontaneous refugees began to receive increased attention following the establishment of a commission by the Ministry of Justice in 1977, which ultimately led to the Danish Parliament's adoption of the Aliens Act in 1983.³⁰ Consequently, a civilian agency under the Ministry of Justice – the Directorate for Foreigners – was assigned responsibility for the reception of refugees, while an independent Refugee Board was established to adjudicate appeals in asylum cases.³¹

The 1983 Aliens Act allowed asylum seekers to remain *within* the borders of the Danish state pending the decision on their case.³² Although the Act did not regulate or specify in detail the practical or administrative conditions for accommodating asylum seekers while awaiting adjudication, it increased the demand for capacity to manage and organise their waiting period, including the provision of reception and accommodation facilities.

At the beginning of 1984, the existing reception system were unexpectedly overwhelmed by a sudden and substantial influx of refugees from the Middle East and other regions. While only 322 individuals applied for asylum in 1983, the number surged to 4,300 in 1984 and further to 8,698 in 1985. The waiting time exceeded the official three-month standard in most cases,³³ and the pre-asylum phase stretching out over years for many asylum seekers, which strained the capacity of the reception system.³⁴ The dramatic increase in the number of asylum seekers necessitated an expansion of the physical capacity to accommodate them, including extensive practical challenges related to housing, staffing, beds, and inventory. It was under these rather chaotic circumstances that RCA ended up as the central operator of asylum centres in August 1984.³⁵

RCA's selection as the operator of asylum centres was the result of years of sustained efforts by the organisation to assume greater responsibility for the reception and care of asylum seekers.³⁶ In 1982, RCA established a so-called "contact office" for asylum seekers requiring guidance on everyday matters in Denmark, such as how to take public transport, borrow books from the library, and navigating local services.³⁷ Around the same period, RCA also started to advocate (through various channels: formal documents, in local newspapers, etc.) for the need to establish centres to accommo-

30 Ministry of Justice, *Report on the Immigration Act Administrative Guidelines Report Number 882*, 1974: Annex F and G, 1974).

31 Brøcker, 1990.

32 *The Aliens Act: Act no. 439 of 10 June 1987*, 7.

33 Danish Red Cross, *The Capacity Issue at Sandholm Center*, internal report, 1987, DNA, The Danish Immigration Service, casefiles 1984–1987, casefile 116.

34 DfF's operating expenses increased considerably during the 1980s: In 1984, the expected expenses were at DKK 12.4 million, which more than doubled to DKK 29.3 million in 1986. The expenses remained high in the following years (DKK 30.9 million in 1987, 28.1 million in 1988, and 26.5 million in 1989); cf. *The National Budget, 1984–1989*.

35 Directorate for Foreigners, *Transition to Red Cross by the Directorate*, 1984.

36 See also, Hjortlund & Bredahl, forthcoming

37 Danish Red Cross, "Når En Flygtning Banker På – Scener Fra 25 Års Asylarbejde i Dansk Røde Kors [When a Refugee Knocks on the Door – Scenes from 25 Years with Asylum in Danish Red Cross]," 2009.

date asylum seekers while waiting.³⁸ This included, among other things, the need for centralised support, easier access to resources and assistance, and better monitoring of asylum seekers' well-being. RCA also emphasised the importance of a humanitarian organisation to operate the centres, referring to the expertise of these organisations in providing care and maintaining a focus on asylum seekers' dignity and rights.³⁹

In August 1984, amid a sharp increase in the number of asylum seekers arriving in Denmark, RCA entered negotiations with the Ministry of Justice regarding accommodation strategies. These discussions were guided by a proposal that articulated RCA's central vision for organising a coherent asylum system.⁴⁰ The proposal outlined several key improvements to the asylum system, including enhanced physical conditions in the centres, reduced waiting times, structured introduction to Danish society, and the involvement of volunteers in daily operations. It further recommended locating centres near Copenhagen to avoid social isolation, limiting the waiting period to a maximum of two weeks, providing information about Danish society to mitigate potential cultural conflicts, and engaging asylum seekers in everyday tasks such as cooking and cleaning.⁴¹

Before the negotiations were concluded, RCA was asked in August 1984 to provide immediate accommodations for 48 Iranian nationals. Four months later, in December, the Ministry of Justice formally appointed RCA as centre operators, and a framework agreement between the DfF and RCA was signed,⁴² making RCA responsible for 14 centres.⁴³ The framework agreement stated that the DfF maintained the formal administrative and financial responsibility for the pre-asylum phase, while RCA took over the operational responsibility for delivering services in the pre-asylum phase.⁴⁴ Despite its formal appointment, considerable uncertainty persisted about the practical modalities of RCA's operation of the asylum centres. At that time, therefore, RCA ended up with extensive autonomy, while existing knowledge about how centres should be operated and how staff should manage asylum seekers during the waiting period was limited.⁴⁵ Instead, "managing asylum waiting time" became an ongoing subject of negotiations at regularly meetings with the DfF and Ministry of Justice. Central topics at these

38 Danish Red Cross, Newspaper Article from the Red Cross regarding the Need for a Center, 1984, DNA, The Danish Immigration Service, casefiles 1984–1987, casefile 115.

39 Danish Red Cross, Proposal for a Permanent Central Reception Center Under Danish Red Cross, 1984, DNA, The Danish Immigration Service, casefiles 1984–1987, casefile 115.

40 *Ibid.*

41 Directorate for Foreigners, Letter from Erik Ninn-Hansen to Supreme Court Prosecutor, Stampe, 1984, DNA, The Danish Immigration Service, casefiles 1984–1987, casefile 117.

42 Directorate for Foreigners, First Draft of the Framework Agreement between Danish Red Cross and Directorate for Foreigners, 1984, DNA, The Danish Immigration Service, casefiles 1984–1987, casefile 116.

43 Danish Refugee Council, Note on the Process regarding the Danish Red Cross's Efforts for Asylum, 1987, Danish Refugee Council Archive.

44 Directorate for Foreigners, First Draft of the Framework Agreement, 1984, 116.

45 This changed remarkably during the 1990s, when DfF imposed stricter regulations and oversight over asylum centre operations (see Holm Hjortlund, forthcoming).

meetings included the resources provided to RCA, number and types of employees, the roles played by volunteers, etc.⁴⁶

The framework agreement specified the scope of daily operations within the asylum centres, including responsibilities such as reception, meal preparation, cleaning arrangements, and other routine tasks, with funding provided by the Danish Refugee Council (DfF). RCA had to provide “three meals organised by Red Cross daily”.⁴⁷ Additionally, RCA received a one-time payment of DKK 100 per asylum seeker to cover the cost of clothing and shoes.⁴⁸ The agreement further stipulated that volunteers (rather than hired staff) would be tasked with organising recreational activities within the centres (e.g., teaching basic Danish). DfF did not fund these activities, however, and asylum seekers were prohibited from participating in formal educational activities. Instead, RCA had to develop their own activities for the centre residents, together with their own vision for the asylum work: to establish a more lasting asylum centre system that could lay the ground for a “dignified, independent and meaningful” waiting time.⁴⁹

The limited set of guidelines and regulations that were developed served to delineate the boundaries between expenses covered by the state – such as basic necessities like housing and food – and more “humanitarian” activities, including recreational initiatives and Danish language instruction, for which RCA bore full responsibility in terms of both financing and organising.

RCA as downward producers of tacit frontline insights

RCA’s considerable autonomy in managing asylum seekers during their waiting period necessitated that frontline staff at the centres develop their own operational practices and routines. The following analysis examines some of these practices, drawing on insights from daily RCA staff logs. These logs contain hourly entries documenting events, tasks, emerging issues, and other relevant matters, serving as an internal communication tool for colleagues to coordinate and reflect on the centre’s day-to-day operations.

These ranged from everyday issues such as bedbug infestations and interpersonal altercations to more exceptional events like childbirth. The logs illustrate how staff were compelled to develop their own informal rules and procedures to maintain a degree of social order and stability within the centres.

With information gleaned from the logs, Tables 1 and 2 provide an overview of some of the key elements in the tacit knowledge produced on the ground during the 1980s. Table 1 highlights the staff-defined problems and Table 2 the prevalent frontline interventions.

When referring to centre staff in the following analysis, it is important to note that the distinction between paid employees and volunteers was somewhat blurred during

46 Danish Red Cross, Note to the Directorate for Immigration, regarding Staff Allocation at the Asylum Centers, 1985, DNA, The Danish Immigration Service, casefiles 1984–1987, casefile 118. Danish Red Cross, Letter to the Ministry of Justice from the Danish Red Cross: Memo to the Ministry of Justice from the Danish Red Cross regarding the Framework Agreement, 1985, DNA, The Danish Immigration Service, casefiles 1984–1987, casefile 118.

47 Directorate for Foreigners, First Draft of the Framework Agreement, 1984, 2–3.

48 Ibid. Adjusted for inflation; this roughly corresponds to DKK 250 in 2025 (roughly €33).

49 Danish Red Cross, Proposal for a Permanent Central Reception Center, 1984.

the 1980s. However, we are confident that the entries in the staff logs were primarily, if not exclusively, authored by paid personnel.

Staff-identified problems related to waiting time and everyday life

The staff logs consistently highlight challenges and problems associated with the waiting period, many of which remained unresolved throughout the time period examined. Central among these were concerns about asylum seekers’ mental wellbeing, difficulties in maintaining social peace, and frequent tensions in communal areas such as kitchens – manifesting in disputes over meals, intergroup conflicts, and alcohol-related incidents. Moreover, staff repeatedly noted ambiguities in care responsibilities and financial arrangements, which contributed to operational uncertainty and stress.

Table 1: Problems Requiring Frontline Action

<p>1) Lack of social order</p>	<p><i>“Major uproar today – the residents feel they are being stepped on... I’ve promised them the following: that we will try to be polite, that they will get the promised fruit once a day as well as apple juice 1–2 times a week, and that no one from our side will say things like ‘shut up’”</i>.⁵⁰</p> <p><i>“I’m convinced that during the coming day (or night), there will be greater or smaller clashes between Arabs and Tamils”</i>.⁵¹</p> <p><i>“Around 1 AM on Sunday, problems arose around the kitchen. The Ramadan people were sitting and eating in the kitchen when a couple of others wanted something to eat, which led to a commotion, and I was called in. I got the kitchen keys from the Ramadan people. For the last week, they will eat in their rooms”</i>.⁵²</p>
<p>2) Well-being problems</p>	<p><i>“Regarding the house meeting: The asylum seekers requested bus passes, access to the swimming pool and sports facilities, and a sewing machine. The meeting was marked by the restlessness the asylum seekers are experiencing and an unjustified sense of entitlement”</i>.⁵³</p> <p><i>“I repeatedly emphasised how important it is for them to do their chores. They seem somewhat despondent”</i>.⁵⁴</p>
<p>3) Challenges around financial and regulatory uncertainties</p>	<p><i>“847–727, room 7, needs new glasses (stronger). We need to check if they can be made in Vestervig (in Klostergade) or in Thisted. Uncertainty about who will pay”</i>.⁵⁵</p> <p><i>“I get the impression that many of the refugees are terribly bored these days. There have been countless enquiries. Could we possibly use the social fund for something like this?”</i>⁵⁶</p>

50 Guard Log from Red Cross Center Slettestrand, 1985, Red Cross Private Archive.

51 Guard Log from 681 Red Cross Center, 1986, Red Cross Private Archive.

52 Diary Notes from Center Svaneparken, 1990, Red Cross Private Archive.

53 Guard Log DRK-Søndervig, 1986, Red Cross Private Archive.

54 Guard Log from Red Cross Center Slettestrand, 1985, Red Cross Private Archive.

55 Guard Log from Red Cross Center, Agger, Vestervig, 1986, Red Cross Private Archive.

56 Guard Log from Northern Jutland, 1986, Red Cross Private Archive.

The three themes and the quotations presented in Table 1 illustrate the most consistently reported “problems” identified by centre staff during the period under study (1983–1988): lack of social order, issues related to asylum seekers’ wellbeing (e.g., psychological stress), and difficulties stemming from financial and regulatory uncertainty. These problems appear persistently throughout the staff logs and are evident across the various centres represented in the material.

Due to the circumstances in the formative years of the 1980s – particularly the urgent need to establish centres in response to the unexpected and steadily increasing number of asylum seekers, the staff logs suggest that the centres were characterised by a high degree of instability and operational uncertainty. The staff noted that nights were often experienced as stressful or hectic, and their comments on the unusual absence of noise during these periods (“an unusually quiet night”⁵⁷) illustrate how a typical evening at the centre was often marked by chaos and unpredictability. These observations also reveal a deeper uncertainty among the staff regarding how best to manage the waiting time, leaving both employees and asylum seekers in a continuous state of flux and emotional tension.

One of the most prevalent problems noted in the logs was the lack of “social order,” referring to recurring conflicts between the asylum seekers (often described in terms of conflicts between nationalities) and between staff and residents over issues like cleaning, dishwashing, and theft. It thus became clear that the challenges surrounding social peace in the centres were a significant part of daily life, as logs frequently refer to requests from asylum seekers to resolve conflicts.

Signs of social chaos in the asylum centres also emerged through a recurring theme in the staff logs: the asylum seekers’ “well-being” (cf. Table 1). This was a persistent concern that, according to staff, demanded immediate attention. Staff frequently associated poor well-being with the lack of structured activities that could lend meaning to everyday life. As a result, they identified the absence of such activities as a key source of boredom and restlessness among asylum seekers. This, in turn, made it challenging to engage them in daily routines and often led to situations where psychological support was deemed necessary.

Recurring concerns in the staff logs regarding asylum seekers’ well-being included prolonged waiting times, residence permit rejections, and the potential impact of these factors on mental health. Staff actively considered how they might support residents in navigating these challenges – for instance, by contacting legal advocates to explore possibilities for expediting cases or offering other forms of assistance. These efforts became central to the RCA’s attempts to influence policymaking at higher levels, including advocating for measures from the DfF aimed at improving asylum seekers’ well-being (cf. Part 3 of the empirical analysis).

A third problem recognised by the staff was the limited regulations and uncertainties related to the available resources provided by DfF (e.g., to fund activities, resource allocation for the staff). Although the framework agreement between RCA and the DfF outlined some overall guidelines, deciding who should cover unexpected expenses or costs that the framework agreement left unaccounted, including personal expenses for individual asylum seekers, became an ongoing challenge. This accentuates how

57 Guard Log from 681 Red Cross Center, 1986, Red Cross Private Archive.

the lack of formal regulations from the DfF left the staff frustrated over being unable to provide necessary help.

When asylum seekers requested specific items – such as a stroller – the staff typically responded on an ad hoc basis, often relying on support from the local community. These situations underscored the autonomy, initiative, and resourcefulness required of staff during this period, as they navigated limited formal structures to meet immediate needs. Additionally on financial decisions, including the allocation of the centre’s financial resources for activities or discussions on whether there was “enough money” to rent movies in periods when there was a particular sense of boredom at the centres further illustrated the discretionary judgments made by staff. Furthermore, the logs documented staff-level decisions to implement a trial arrangement for clothing distribution, increasing the frequency to twice a week and specifying the days for weekly distribution. Such matters were decided locally, at the specific centre, and therefore not regulated by the RCA headquarters. This local autonomy required that staff continuously innovate and adapt practices to address the needs of asylum seekers and manage the problems they experienced in their everyday frontline practices.

Staff logs document occasions where formal regulations were circumvented in order to meet urgent needs – for instance, through personal financial contributions or the provision of supplementary items like children’s clothing, tea, and paracetamol, exceeding the officially sanctioned quotas. Such practices highlight the moral and practical dilemmas faced by staff, who frequently had to exercise discretion and compassion within a system constrained by strict resource and policy boundaries.

The analysis above illustrates the many prevailing challenges in the asylum system, as well as how these frontline organisations – and the staff – became crucial sites for producing tacit knowledge about new societal problems along the way as established knowledge proved to be insufficient. As we will document in the following, the centre staff were also crucial in terms of intervention practices for how to manage the asylum waiting time.

Asylum centres as sites for everyday frontline interventions

The frontline staff at the centres occupied a crucial yet inherently conflictual role in addressing the problems that emerged during daily operations. On one hand, they had considerable autonomy to “do something,” as the regulatory framework was vague and left room for discretion. On the other hand, their capacity to act was constrained by limited resources, which restricted what they could realistically achieve. As a result, RCA itself had to take on the responsibility of organising and financing daily activities for asylum seekers during the period under study (1983–1989), compensating for the lack of institutional support.

Table 2 outlines various interventions and solutions implemented to address everyday challenges identified by staff. Some initiatives focused on organising social activities aimed at preventing social disorder and alleviating the restlessness experienced by asylum seekers. Others involved expanding the staff’s role to include acting as gatekeepers for asylum seekers’ needs – both within the centres and in relation to external actors. In addition, some of the interventions resembled more conventional educational activities, such as language instruction and civic education, while others were informal and improvised, responding directly to immediate needs and everyday challenges.

Table 2: Examples of frontline practices and interventions

1) Organising daily activities	<p><i>“Medhi (radio and TV man) has made contact with Jørgen Jørgensen (a radio shop in Hørup) – he’s allowed to go there and do some work!”⁵⁸</i></p> <p><i>“I have spoken with Hamish Steward (the Center for Renewable Energy). We can send 2–3 people over there on Monday morning. Parvig really wants to go; he hasn’t been feeling well lately and isn’t attending school”⁵⁹</i></p> <p><i>“There were 39 of us at Cirkus Arena last night, thanks to Preben. Lots of laughter. It was a wonderful change of pace for most”⁶⁰</i></p>
2) Gatekeeper for needs inside and outside the asylum centres	<p><i>“I’ve had a long conversation with Mehmert. I’ve tried to make him understand that on Monday, after the rejection, he can receive legal assistance and that we’re willing to help him as much as we can”⁶¹</i></p> <p><i>“Room 3, Nr. 849–740, fell on the corner of the ping-pong table. He cut his eyebrow! Per drove him to the doctor for treatment. He needs to have the stitches removed in 12 days. He had forgotten his ID, so he used Per’s name”⁶²</i></p> <p><i>“I’ve called Kragerup about 848–598; he has family there and would like to return to them. The man is very depressed”⁶³</i></p>
3) Inventing and enforcing house rules	<p><i>“Tabakh’s behavior has become increasingly problematic, both towards Grete and Tina, as well as among the Iranians themselves. Consequently, I gave him a stern reprimand and moved him to room 20, informing him that I wouldn’t tolerate further complaints from him”⁶⁴</i></p> <p><i>“Regarding all our sick residents, I’ve agreed with Liffie that a daily sick list will be compiled. This list will automatically exempt people from their chores”⁶⁵</i></p> <p><i>“The rule is that cleaning must be done immediately after dinner by those whose turn it is. Otherwise, there will be no evening snack”⁶⁶</i></p>

Most of the interventions and “solutions” developed by staff were temporary and reactive, with limited attention to asylum seekers’ long-term needs or future life in Denmark (in cases where they were permitted to stay). Instead, these efforts primarily reflected an urgent need to prevent immediate social problems and maintain order

58 Guard Log from Red Cross Center, Agger, Vestervig, 1986, Red Cross Private Archive.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 Guard Log from Northern Jutland, 1986, Red Cross Private Archive.

62 Guard Log from Center Middelgrundfortet Holmen, Copenhagen K, 1986, Red Cross Private Archive.

63 Diary Notes from Center Svaneparken, 1990, Red Cross Private Archive.

64 Guard Log from Northern Jutland, 1986, Red Cross Private Archive.

65 Guard Log from Center Middelgrundfortet Holmen, Copenhagen K, 1986, Red Cross Private Archive.

66 Guard Log from Center Fulgebakken, 1986, Red Cross Private Archive.

within the centres – such as managing conflicts, de-escalating threats, and addressing signs of unrest.

One prominent attempt to dampening social conflicts in the centres was to offer asylum seekers different kinds of activities such as volleyball tournaments, parties, or access to sewing machines (cf. Table 2). These activities were all introduced ad hoc, primarily to keep the asylum seekers occupied with time-consuming activities or tasks, such as social activities or cleaning, to alleviate boredom.

The daily logs document numerous efforts to initiate activities, often in collaboration with local volunteers or organisations such as sports clubs and cultural associations. These activities included visits to local libraries and swimming pools, reflecting a broader attempt to foster social engagement and provide meaningful experiences for asylum seekers.⁶⁷ The aim was to mobilize resources outside the asylum centres and foster connections between asylum seekers and the surrounding communities, as the logs indicate that many asylum seekers expressed a clear interest in participating in such activities.

Some activities were initiated in response to asylum seekers' own requests. In a few cases, the logs describe how the asylum seekers themselves took the initiative to organise activities or seek staff support to make them happen, or for the staff to assist with their asylum cases.⁶⁸

The logs also document how staff occasionally sought to alleviate individual issues such as boredom and restlessness by facilitating contact with the local community. In doing so, they assumed the role of gatekeepers or brokers for asylum seekers' needs (cf. Table 2). One example is how centre staff acted as intermediaries between asylum seekers and local companies, helping to establish connections that could lead to meaningful engagement or opportunities outside the centre.

Insights from the logs also reveal how the staff served a vital role in addressing the asylum seekers' diverse needs "inside and outside the centres" (cf. Table 2). For example, the centre staff facilitated contact between asylum seekers and their family members (outside the centres or in different locations). In several instances, the staff were actively involved in enabling asylum seekers to transfer to another centre (i.e. in case they had family there). Moreover, RCA mediated between asylum seekers and the police, as well as between asylum seekers and Dff legal representatives regarding asylum cases. Staff sometimes even acted as intermediaries if an asylum seeker owed money to other asylum seekers. The logs also note staff efforts to assist with asylum seekers' cases, dedicating significant resources to liaising with various agencies and different branches of the welfare state, including health agencies.

Beyond legal and administrative matters, staff also played a key role in ensuring access to healthcare. These efforts included transporting individuals to doctor appointments, contacting healthcare providers, and distributing medications. Ordinary staff also carried out basic healthcare-related tasks, such as distributing medication, cleaning wounds, and checking on individuals with a high fever.⁶⁹ In such roles, RCA effectively became gatekeepers and brokers to wider society.

67 Diary Notes from Center Svaneparken, 1990, Red Cross Private Archive.

68 Ibid.

69 Guard Log from Red Cross Center Slettestrand, 1985, Red Cross Private Archive.

One of the common themes in the logs concerns how to create and enforce house rules (cf. Table 2), reflecting the ongoing efforts to maintain social order within the centres.

Correspondence between the DfF and RCA, particularly concerning negotiations around hiring additional staff, reveal that RCA and the centre staff had expected that asylum seekers could be involved in practical daily tasks, such as cleaning and cooking.⁷⁰ Several illustrations from the logs bear witness to how several initiatives were taken to enact house rules. One centre decided that they needed to supervise the cleaning activities, noting: “From now on, we try to let one Lebanese, one Iranian, and one Pole to be responsible for cleaning the hallways, toilets, and bathrooms. If they have a problem, they come to one of us.”⁷¹

The logs also reveal how conflicts often broke out between asylum seekers over issues like cleaning standards. In response, staff enforced restrictions for unfulfilled duties, for example by cancellation the evening snack (cf. Table 2) if the cleaning team did not complete their tasks. In addition, staff developed procedures for how asylum seekers should report illness in the morning to be excused from daily duties (cf. Table 2).

This illustrates how several initiatives had to be developed in day-to-day encounters with asylum seekers, exemplifying some of the tacit frontline routines that were produced on the ground. Such initiatives were later discussed and brought together in more formal, systematic ways. As both logs and letters to the DfF indicate, these initiatives often proved difficult to implement.⁷² One of the challenges (cf. Table 1) involved daily problems involving asylum seekers in cleaning due to their mental well-being, and it was ultimately decided that it would be more appropriate (including hygienic reasons) for trained kitchen staff to carry out the cooking.

These interventions illustrate how, in the absence of clear top-down regulations on how to “manage” asylum seekers, certain practices gradually became institutionalised within the asylum system and were translated into concrete initiatives. The timing and conditions under which these practices emerged also highlight how tacit knowledge production at the frontline was made possible precisely because of the lack of centralised governance. This regulatory vacuum granted staff extended autonomy, enabling them to develop context-specific responses to everyday challenges.

Upward influence on central policymaking and learning processes within the state bureaucracy

The problems related to waiting time, which were identified and addressed by staff at the local centres, also received considerable attention at the RCA headquarter. As the body responsible for the overall administration of the centres and negotiations with state authorities, RCA engaged with these concerns at a strategic level, reflecting how local experiences informed central discussions and negotiations with state authorities (Ministry of Justice, Directorate for Foreigners).

⁷⁰ Danish Red Cross, Agenda for a Fixed Center Structure with Staffing that can Create an Improved Environment for Asylum Seekers, 1986, DNA, The Danish Immigration Service, casefiles 1984–1987, casefile 117.

⁷¹ Guard Log from Red Cross Center Slettestrand, 1985, Red Cross Private Archive.

⁷² Danish Red Cross, Agenda for a Fixed Center Structure, 1986.

Minutes from meetings between the RCA headquarters and the DfF throughout the 1980s reveal how leading figures in RCA – particularly former Chairman Jørgen Chemnitz – repeatedly sought to draw civil servants’ attention to the problems associated with prolonged waiting times. These concerns were raised in negotiations over resources and contractual conditions, reflecting RCA’s efforts to influence policy and improve the situation for asylum seekers.⁷³ As the number of asylum seekers grew, the challenges within the centres became increasingly visible and difficult to ignore.

The “recognised problems” related to waiting time were raised during negotiations concerning the structural conditions under which RCA could provide accommodation for asylum seekers during prolonged waiting periods; for example, in discussions about resource allocation to RCA and their requests for additional staff and funding for activities. Concerns around the implications of waiting time were also prevalent in negotiations with DfF around concrete efforts and services provided to asylum seekers (e.g., right to education, healthcare).

One illustration of this, evident in the meeting minutes between RCA and the DfF, is how RCA raised several concerns (e.g., around “security issues”) asking for solutions/administrative regulation of the relocation of some “problematic” refugees – and due to “psychologically challenged groups,” the need to open three small centres with special staff resources.⁷⁴ In 1985, they also requested two employees just for conflict resolution between asylum seekers and the asylum seekers and staff.⁷⁵

Another illustrative example appears in April 1985, when RCA submitted a request for funding to hire a psychologist with expertise in crisis management. The request was based on nearly a year of experience operating asylum centres, during which RCA identified a clear and pressing need for psychological support. The intention was to provide assistance not only to asylum seekers but also to staff, to prevent both human and financial strain. However, the Directorate for Immigration (DfF) initially rejected the request, arguing that the challenges faced in the centres did not meet the criteria for an “acute illness”. Instead, DfF proposed hiring a doctor on a consultancy basis and establishing three centres with special status to address the emerging needs.⁷⁶

This status meant that the centres housed asylum seekers with more complex needs, often including acute psychological vulnerabilities. They also served as accommodation for individuals considered particularly challenging – those whom other centres were not equipped to manage. The agreement marked the first step toward establishing a health-oriented support system, which later became standard across all centres and remains in place today.

73 Directorate for Foreigners, Memorandum on Health Work with Asylum Seekers, 1986, DNA, The Danish Immigration Service, casefiles 1984–1987, casefile 116.

74 Directorate for Foreigners, Minute from Meeting the 7.10.1985 with Representatives from Danish Red Cross, DNA, The Danish Immigration Service, casefiles 1984–1987, casefile 115.

75 Danish Refugee Council, Note on the Process regarding the Danish Red Cross’s Efforts for Asylum Work, Danish Refugee Council Archive.

76 Directorate for Foreigners, Memorandum on Health Work, 1986, DNA.

In 1986, RCA introduced a new proposal concerning the framework and content of their asylum work, described as a suggestion for “a more long-term and permanent solution for asylum work”.⁷⁷

RCA’s motivation for the new proposal was rooted in the argument that its role as operator of asylum centres should be regarded as a permanent responsibility rather than a temporary assignment. RCA emphasised that Denmark consistently received thousands of asylum seekers, many of whom spent extended periods in the centres, thereby necessitating a more stable and long-term organisational framework. In a formal letter (including a long appendix) sent to then-Minister of Justice Erik Ninn Hansen, RCA identified central challenges that later would come to appear to be a more lasting feature of the asylum system:

The expectation of a waiting time of only a few months has also contributed to the fact that most asylum centers neither physically nor normatively have been built with a view to the asylum seekers having to stay at the centers for a longer period of time.⁷⁸

RCA identified several severe problems, including “unrest, aggression, and violent behaviour in the centres and towards the Danish local population”.⁷⁹ They pointed to a notable increase in asylum seekers presenting with severe mental health issues, instances of domestic violence and child abuse, as well as cases of children refusing to eat. Additional, hygiene-related issues, such as scabies, bedbugs, and the spread of minor infections, were also reported in certain centres.⁸⁰

The proposal also included several solutions for how to alleviate some of the problems around waiting time, which included specific requests for more formal activities and the enactment of an education programme.

As a result of RCA’s letter and proposal, a parliamentary legal committee was established in 1987 to commission a report investigating the identified issues. The final report included several critical observations regarding the length of asylum waiting times and put forward concrete proposals aimed at improving the asylum system. The housing conditions were deemed problematic, the resources for recreational activities too limited, and the absence of activities and extended waiting times were acknowledged to have negative consequences for asylum seekers’ health. RCA proposed improvements to the physical environment at the centres, extended access to activities in the local community, school and education, health screening upon arrival, and several other initiatives.

As previously discussed, staff had already identified many of these issues and proposed practical solutions. These tacit frontline insights became valuable knowledge in negotiations with civil servants, offering a window into learning processes within the state bureaucracy. Beginning in the late 1980s, the DfF implemented some of these recommendations – though far from all.

77 Danish Red Cross, Danish Red Cross Proposal for Restructuring the Reception Program for Refugees in Denmark, 1986, Red Cross Private Archive.

78 *Ibid.*, 4.

79 *Ibid.*, 4–5.

80 *Ibid.*, 5.

After discussions with RCA, the Ministry of Justice further suggested the implementation of an education programme for asylum seekers, including basic Danish lessons and a brief introduction to Danish society, financed by the authorities.⁸¹ This was with an agenda to: “increase social contact with the refugees and thereby help alleviate human and social problems.”⁸² Two years later, DfF began financing regular teaching activities.⁸³

The empirical insights provided above are illustrative for how tacit knowledge derived from everyday encounters with asylum seekers in the centers served as a background for RCA attempts to influence central policymaking “upwards”. Some of these attempts ended up having a notable influence on the overall asylum system structure during the 1980s, other attempts had a modest influence. Referring to how the overall term “politics” is approached in this article; it is a central finding that the outcome of these learning processes was not just mundane administrative adaptations. Instead, it had implications for the everyday life of the asylum seekers and the centre staff opportunities to navigate center life and mitigate problems stemming from prolonged waiting time. Therefore, we approach these learning processes as “political learning”. The extensive knowledge production downwards and political learning processes upwards that took place during the 1980s was in many ways exceptional and illustrative for the structural conditions that were prevalent in this period.

This form of political learning – and the upward influence exerted by RCA – was in many ways exceptional for the 1980s. It reflects how the structural conditions of that decade created sudden opportunities for knowledge production and influence, largely due to limited central regulation and a high degree of local autonomy.

Conclusion

Beginning in the early 1980s, Denmark and other Western nations have faced substantial and repeated influxes of asylum seekers escaping war and persecution. Periods of particularly high arrivals – such as in 1984/1985, 1992/1993, and 2015/2016 – highlight the enduring nature of the asylum challenge.

The aim of this article has been to foreground the critical role of frontline organisations as sites of knowledge production and political learning during the formative years of the 1980s. These organisations contributed downwards through the generation of tacit knowledge, and upwards by informing learning processes within the state bureaucracy. To support this analytical endeavour, the article has introduced a conceptual framework – building on existing theoretical approaches – that helps illuminate these often-overlooked dynamics.

The empirical analysis documents how the structural arrangements for accommodating asylum seekers during the adjudication period left centre staff employed by Red Cross Asylum (RCA) – the central operator of asylum centres – with considerable autonomy, but also with severely limited resources throughout the formative

81 Directorate for Foreigners, Minutes of Meeting between the Ministry of Justice, the Chief of Police, the Directorate for Foreigners, and the Danish Red Cross, 1986, DNA, The Danish Immigration Service, casefiles 1984–1987, casefile 116.

82 Directorate for Foreigners, Minutes of Meeting, 1986, 1.

83 Danish Refugee Council, Note on the Process regarding the Danish Red Cross's Efforts for Asylum, 1987, Danish Refugee Council Archive.

years of the 1980s. As a consequence, staff were compelled to identify and respond to problems related to prolonged waiting times and to devise practical “solutions” for managing everyday social life within the centres. Importantly, approaches to managing asylum seekers were not designed by policymakers from above, nor were they based on established professional frameworks. Instead, they emerged downwards, shaped by frontline experiences and practices. The empirical material, especially the asylum centre staff logs, reveals how frontline staff encountered new and unforeseen problems along the way. The centre staff – and, to some extent, the broader community – thus became involved in shaping the operations and daily life of the asylum centres. These dynamics illustrate how frontline organisations can function as sites of downward knowledge production.

Moreover, as a key frontline organisation, RCA played a central role in highlighting the challenges faced by asylum seekers – particularly through its regular negotiations and meetings with civil servants from the DfF. Some of these efforts laid the foundation for new approaches to managing asylum seekers, several of which remain in place today. One of the central elements of asylum management that came out of these processes were the enactment of teaching activities for asylum seekers funded by the authorities. Thus, the findings bear witness of how RCA served an important role in the provision of educational activities for asylum seekers. Among others, through their attempts to provide more loosely defined educational activities (language courses) by drawing on volunteers and how educational later became more formalised, due to the upward influence of RCA on central policy making. Moreover, we argue that the findings contribute to the broader discussion on educationalisation by accentuating how problems around prolonged waiting time and its many expressions in the asylum centers – social conflicts and lack of social order – were attempted mitigated by educational activities. By the late 1980s, educational activities for asylum seekers had been formalised, and looking ahead to today, many of these features remain in place.

Acknowledgements

The study has been funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark.

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