The social networks of asylum seekers and the dissemination of information about countries of asylum

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The views expressed in this document are those of the authors, not necessarily those of the Home Office (nor do they reflect Government policy).
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Executive summary

1. This report is one of three commissioned by the Home Office with an interest in understanding whether and how so-called 'spontaneous' asylum seekers choose a country of asylum. Its focus is the dissemination of information about countries of asylum to potential asylum seekers, and particular attention is paid to the role of asylum seekers' social networks.

2. Although there are no clear definitions found in the literature, social networks are usually understood to comprise family and friends, community organisations and intermediaries such as labour recruiters and travel agents. They can operate legally and illegally and link origin and destination countries. They are widely recognised to be very influential in migration, through providing information about destinations, facilitating migration and aiding integration after arrival. With certain reservations, social networks have also been found to influence the migration of asylum seekers specifically. However, there are cases where asylum seekers move without contacting social networks even where they exist.

3. Social networks are not the only source of information for potential asylum seekers: others include formal institutions and the media, including the Internet. However social networks are almost invariably the most trusted of sources. They are perceived by potential asylum seekers to provide the most relevant information and unlike other sources, are trusted not to distort information. The information they provide is also perceived as up-to-date. There are reservations about all of these assumptions.

- Particularly where they have spent a substantial period of time in the country of asylum, people can lose their intuition for what might comprise relevant information for potential asylum seekers from their country of destination.
- In addition there can be a tendency for migrants already in a country of potential asylum to focus only on the positive aspects of their experiences, or to misrepresent their experiences.
• There is no reason to assume that social networks are necessarily in a position to provide up-to-date information. The implication is that even where information has been disseminated through social networks asylum seekers can arrive in countries of asylum without accurate knowledge of conditions including about asylum policy and practice.

4. Perhaps the most promising channel for disseminating information about asylum policy and practice is represented by migrant and refugee community organisations. Information disseminated directly by formal institutions is unlikely to be trusted, the media is probably not sufficiently widespread or accessible in countries of origin, and friends and family will be unlikely to be informed about policy approaches. In contrast, information disseminated by migrant and refugee community organisations is likely to be trusted, and it may be possible to convince them that they too are stakeholders in the process of information dissemination. One way to do this is to emphasise that information dissemination can be a positive strategy or intervention in the decision-making of asylum seekers. To do this, there need to be guarantees that the information is accurate and up-to-date. It can be targeted constructively not only to potential asylum seekers, but also to those included in resettlement and family reunion programmes.

5. In recent years the social networks of asylum seekers have changed dramatically. First, they are characterised by new geographies – with asylum seekers increasingly arriving in countries of asylum with which they or their country of origin have no previous link. Second, a rising proportion of potential asylum seekers are moving to Western Europe via transit countries – especially in Central and Eastern Europe – where they often spend significant periods of time. Third, human smugglers are playing a growing role in the migration of asylum seekers, and have begun to fulfil many of the functions traditionally served by social networks.
6. The changing nature and geography of asylum seekers’ social networks have some significant implications for information dissemination and the migration decision-making of asylum seekers.

- First, some asylum seekers have effectively lost control of their own migration, with their destinations being dictated by smugglers rather than, for example, by the location of friends and family.

- Second, transit countries may well have become more important than countries of origin for targeting information dissemination. Many asylum seekers leave their country of origin with only a vague notion of a final destination, and then narrow their choice in transit.

- Finally, smugglers can be an important source of information on destination countries for potential asylum seekers.

7. The report identifies ten implications for any possible information dissemination strategies, which are flagged throughout and summarised in Table 4. Three wider issues are also raised.

- It is important to recognise where information campaigns or dissemination strategies can and cannot make a difference. It seems unlikely that there is any scope for intervention in social networks to influence the decision-making of asylum seekers. The most realistic aim for dissemination strategies should be the provision of accurate information upon which asylum seekers are able to base their decisions.

- The links between social networks, information dissemination and migration decision-making are complex so that any attempt to disseminate information about asylum policy and practice runs the risk of unintended consequences. For example, depending on the content of the information disseminated, the dissemination of accurate information may attract more asylum seekers rather than fewer.
Furthermore a corollary of providing accurate information to potential asylum seekers is to provide accurate information to smugglers as well.

- Governments in countries of origin and transit are likely to be just as influential as governments in destination countries in the dissemination of information to potential asylum seekers and their final migration outcomes.

8. Finally, the report identifies two key priorities for future research. One is to extend the analysis of the social networks of asylum seekers, both by including smugglers in the definition of social networks, and by incorporating the functions other than only information dissemination by which they can facilitate or hinder the migration of asylum seekers. The need for further research in these areas is partly being addressed through existing Immigration Research and Statistics Service work, which includes research on facilitation offences and the illegal population in the United Kingdom. The second priority is to extend the focus of information dissemination beyond solely social networks, to understand more fully, for example, both the role of other sources and the mechanisms of dissemination. Each of these research areas will pose difficult, but not insurmountable, methodological challenges.
Section 1 Introduction

This report is one of three commissioned by the Home Office with an interest in understanding whether and how asylum seekers choose a country of asylum. This report draws mainly on a literature review to ask whether, and if so how, information about countries of asylum is disseminated to potential asylum seekers before they arrive. A second feasibility study has been undertaken by Roger Zetter and a research team at Oxford Brookes University. This report will be published shortly and provides a comparative analysis of the impact of asylum policies and practice on asylum applications in the EU over the past decade, with detailed case study work on Germany, Italy, Sweden, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Finally, a report by Vaughan Robinson from University of Wales Swansea focuses on the decision-making processes of asylum seekers through a detailed qualitative investigation. In particular, it examines the factors influencing the decision to seek asylum in the UK in preference to any other country.

Clearly, the reports are closely linked. For example, it is difficult to analyse the dissemination of information about countries of asylum without also considering what aspects of the country that information might cover. In order to distinguish it from the other reports, and also to minimise the potential for overlap, this report focuses on patterns and processes of information dissemination. In particular, it focuses attention on the role of asylum seekers' social networks. It is widely recognised that social networks are the most important source of information about destination countries for potential migrants, including asylum seekers, and these networks are likely to continue to be so.

Originally commissioned as a feasibility study designed to inform future research, this report is also a stand-alone study, with its own conclusions and recommendations concerning the scope for information dissemination campaigns and strategies. Throughout the report the implications for information dissemination strategies are highlighted. At the same time, the final section provides suggestions for the ways in which the scope of this
study might be broadened for further research. One of the key conclusions of the report as a whole is that further research is certainly required.

Research for this report has mainly relied on secondary sources. These have included published and unpublished sources as well as primary data. As well as a list of references, the bibliography at the end of this report includes additional sources of information to which direct reference has not been made. In part, the focus of this study is very similar to earlier research by Koser (1997), that was based on interviews with asylum seekers (in the Netherlands). Where appropriate, reference is made to that research in this report. Finally, a small number of interviews have been conducted with both representatives from refugee community organisations and academics, in order to inform the analysis. Interviews at refugee community organisations were with caseworkers, who were able to provide some insight into the perspective of asylum seekers. Any larger study would need to interview asylum seekers, but clearly this can be problematic.

The report is structured in eight main sections. Section 2 tries to establish why an investigation of information dissemination to potential asylum seekers is important, and crucially not only for the governments of countries of asylum. It argues that information dissemination should be viewed as a positive strategy in which there are stakeholders other than the governments of countries of asylum. These include migrant and refugee community organisations and asylum seekers themselves. The following section briefly reviews our current understanding of the complex relationship between social networks, information dissemination and the migration decision-making process. It also defines what is meant by the concept of social networks. Section 4 asks how this relationship applies to the specific circumstances of asylum seekers. One of its conclusions is that at times asylum seekers move to countries of asylum where they have no social networks, and about which they have no prior information.

One of the reasons that social networks are particularly important in the dissemination of information is that they are one of the few information
sources that potential asylum seekers are likely to trust. Section 5 looks at how potential asylum seekers evaluate information. It shows that information disseminated by friends and family cannot always be relied upon in terms of accuracy.

Section 6 demonstrates how, over the past decade, the social networks of asylum seekers in Western Europe have changed dramatically. Specifically, they are characterised by new geographies, transit countries are of increasing significance, and smugglers and traffickers are also increasingly important. Section 7 considers the implications of these changes for the dissemination of information about countries of asylum and the decision-making process of potential asylum seekers. The final two sections consider policy and research implications in turn.

Section 2 Information dissemination as a positive strategy

One of the most interesting observations during this study has been the reluctance of those who represent asylum seekers (for example refugee and migrant community organisations) to engage with the question of how information about asylum policy and practice is disseminated. This clearly has implications for any further study in this area. The main reason appears to be a concern that information might be used as a method for excluding or deterring potential asylum seekers from arriving in the UK.

Clearly, an approach based on misinformation in order to deter potential asylum seekers would be inappropriate. This certainly does not appear to be the intention of the UK Home Office. Instead, by placing the emphasis on accurate information, it is possible to present the dissemination of information as a strategy for ensuring that potential asylum seekers (and others) have access to up to date and relevant information upon which to base their decisions.
Implications for dissemination strategies

Where strategies for disseminating information about asylum policy and practice are adopted, there need to be guarantees that the information is accurate and up-to-date.

It is important to emphasise that information dissemination should not only target so-called ‘spontaneous’ asylum seekers, that is people applying for asylum either ‘at port’ or ‘in country’ (Koser, 1996). A significant proportion of asylum seekers in the UK over the past decade has also arrived through formal resettlement channels, especially those from Bosnia and later Kosovo (Black et al., 1997). In addition, significant numbers of arrivals within the asylum regime come under family reunion programmes, to join those whose applications have already had a positive outcome. Each of these types of asylum seeker can be considered to be legitimate targets for information dissemination before they arrive in a country of destination.  

Information is a human right. Everyone should be entitled to access and use information about potential destination countries. In this sense the dissemination of accurate and up-to-date information to ‘spontaneous’ asylum seekers should be supported by all concerned, including migrant and refugee community organisations. It would be hard to argue, for example, that it is preferable for asylum seekers to arrive in the UK without an idea about policies and conditions here rather than with a prior knowledge.

It is probably easier to build consensus around a policy for providing information to asylum seekers arriving under resettlement or family reunion programmes. Respondents at Refugee Action who were interviewed during this research, for example, emphasised that people included in these programmes often arrive with unrealistically high expectations about the UK. Recounting experiences with recent arrivals, one caseworker told us that such

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1 This report is not concerned with information dissemination – for example about the asylum procedure and welfare entitlements – for asylum seekers once they have entered a country of destination, although this is also an important area for policy.
high expectations could hinder initial settlement, and even longer-term integration.

Presenting the dissemination of information as a positive approach also emphasises the range of stakeholders in the process. Arguably, far from resisting information dissemination, refugee community organisations, and even potential asylum seekers themselves should have just as much of an interest as the governments of countries of asylum in developing an infrastructure for the dissemination of accurate information.

### Implications for dissemination strategies 2

| **The dissemination of information about countries of asylum needs to be presented as a positive approach in which migrant and refugee community organisations are stakeholders.** |

The central question that arises in this context is whether, and to what extent, policymakers can most appropriately intervene in information dissemination. By seeking to understand how information is currently disseminated to potential asylum seekers, this is a question that the rest of this report begins to answer. The focus is on asylum seekers’ social networks.

### Section 3 Social networks, information and migration decision-making

#### 3.1 Social networks

Social networks have been studied for many years across a range of disciplines, but there is still a lack of consensus about their definition. In the international migration literature, definitions have tended to focus either on the composition of social networks or on their geography.

In international migration, social networks (also sometimes referred to as immigration networks) typically comprise family and friends, community organisations and associations and intermediaries such as labour recruiters.
and travel agents (Boyd, 1989). To date, most attention has focused on family, friendship and community ties. A distinction is often made between 'personal' networks including family and friends, and those based on more distant relations, for example with co-ethnics or co-nationals who are not necessarily personally acquainted with potential migrants.

According to more geographical definitions, social networks are normally understood as one of a series of processes that links origin and destination countries in international migration (Kritz and Zlotnik, 1992). In origin countries, potential migrants are embedded in a set of relations with family and friends. In destination countries, they may have both personal and impersonal contacts.

3.2 Social networks and migration decision-making

A significant body of literature shows that social networks can play a central role in the migration decision-making process (for a summary see Gurak and Caces, 1992). Three hypotheses summarise their role (Ritchey, 1976):

- The affinity hypothesis states that the higher the density of the network of friends and family in the origin society, the lower the probability of migration.
- The facilitating hypothesis shows how social networks can facilitate migration, for example through lending money to lower the cost of migration, or by supporting integration in host societies.
- The information hypothesis focuses on the way that information provided through social networks about potential destinations can promote migration.

Through these processes, social networks have been found to impact on the migration decision-making process in three main ways. First, social networks can influence migration selectivity – that is, who does and does not migrate. For example, according to the affinity hypothesis, those migrants with closer ties in their country of origin will be less likely to migrate – the implication may be that single people will migrate before married people. According to the
facilitating hypothesis, those migrants for whom it is easier to integrate in destination societies – for example, economically active young men – may be the most likely to migrate. Similarly, where information concerns employment opportunities, the information hypothesis may also influence who does and does not migrate.

Second, social networks can influence migration timing. Again, all three hypotheses have a bearing. According to the affinity hypothesis, a parent may only migrate after his or her child has left home. Where social networks are responsible for lending migrants money for their journey, they will only be able to migrate once sufficient money has been raised. In addition, migration may only take place on the basis of information, for example, about a particular job opening or changing migration policy.

Finally, social networks can influence migration channelling – that is, the destination chosen by migrants. Put simply, migrants will tend to head for destinations where they already have established social networks. These networks can provide information before migration, and assist with finding a home or a job after migration. According to the classic migration model, social networks develop around pioneering migrants in a new destination, and provide momentum for further migration from their origin community or country (Gurak and Caces, 1992).

**Implications for dissemination strategies**

It is not possible to separate out the information function of social networks from other functions, such as facilitating migration and assisting integration. The mere presence of social networks in a destination country may be more important than the information disseminated.
Section 4  Social networks, information and asylum seekers

4.1 Social networks and asylum seekers

Some care needs to be taken in applying the hypotheses outlined in the preceding section to asylum seekers as they are clearly based on a series of assumptions that may not always be applicable. Most importantly, the hypotheses assume that potential migrants have a choice over whether, when and where to migrate. Essentially social networks inform these choices. Interviewees during this research went to great lengths to emphasise that asylum seekers might not always be able to exercise a choice in this way. Clearly, where an individual feels under threat of arrest or persecution, his or her primary motive is simply to escape, as soon as possible and to any safe country.

At the same time, it is important to emphasise that research does not demonstrate a clear correlation between motivations for movement and the influence of social networks (e.g. Koser, 1997). Even people whose motivations to move are clearly economic can move under pressure, for example, to escape a debt collector. Similarly, for many refugees, moving is a way of exercising at least some control over their own destinies. The former may not have time to mobilise social networks, the latter may.

Earlier research by Koser (1997) explicitly attempted to apply Ritchey’s three hypotheses to the migration of asylum seekers. The research focused on 32 Iranian asylum seekers in the Netherlands. It concluded firstly that the presence or otherwise of household members had no bearing on the migration decision of all but two respondents. This largely reflected the conditions under which the respondents said they left Iran. In contrast, the facilitating and information hypotheses were found to be more widely applicable. Twenty-five of the respondents, for example, reported that they had borrowed money from friends and relatives in Iran before leaving. And of 26 respondents with friends and family already in Western European countries, all but eight reported having sought out information from them about potential destinations before leaving. At the same time it is significant to
highlight that eight respondents did not apparently have the time to contact social networks.

**Implications for dissemination strategies 4**

Social networks can be influential in the migration of asylum seekers, including through the provision of information. However, some asylum seekers move without contacting social networks even where they exist.

### 4.2 The dissemination of information about destination countries

Social networks are clearly not the only source of information on potential destinations for asylum seekers. Others include formal institutions, the media and migration agents (Koser and Pinkerton, 2001). However, there are indications that social networks are the most trusted of sources.

Perhaps surprisingly, the most significant research gap surrounds the role of institutions which represent the UK and other destination countries overseas in the dissemination of information. For example, it is unclear to what extent and in what ways information about asylum policies is disseminated through embassies and consulates in the main countries of origin for asylum seekers in the UK. It is possible that formal mechanisms for disseminating information about policies either do not exist or are inappropriate. Neither is it clear to what extent other institutions, such as non-governmental organisations (such as the British Council), play a role in disseminating information within countries of origin.

Similarly, there has been little systematic research on the extent to which the media might play a role in disseminating information. Clearly this depends both on the coverage within specific types of media, and their accessibility to potential asylum seekers. It seems reasonable to suppose that the media may not be the most important disseminator of information on asylum and other policies, but may be important in the formation of an overall opinion of the economic, political and social climate in a potential destination. While the media, and particularly the Internet, could provide a mechanism for
information dissemination, reservations about differential access between and within countries and between different groups need to be acknowledged.

Much greater attention is paid in section 6 and 7 to the role of smugglers and traffickers in the migration of asylum seekers in Western Europe. There are contradictory indications about both the extent to which they have knowledge and the extent to which they are willing to impart this information to their clients. It would appear that the extent to which they divulge information varies according to their relationship with the client which can range from the sympathetic to the purely exploitative.

The majority of the limited literature (Boyd, 1989; Gurak and Caces, 1992; Hovy, 1993; Koser, 1997; Ritchey, 1976) emphasises that social networks are the most important source of information for migrants about potential destinations. This finding has been corroborated during this and other research with asylum seekers. For the dissemination of information specifically to asylum seekers, personal sources such as these are likely to be particularly significant for two reasons. First, they will often be particularly sensitive to relevant information. Second, they are likely to be the most trusted of all sources of information.

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<th>Implications for dissemination strategies 5</th>
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<tr>
<td>There are a range of mechanisms through which information about destination countries can be disseminated, including formal institutions, the media, migration agents and social networks.</td>
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**Section 5 Social networks and the evaluation of information**

**5.1 Relevant information**

There is a range of information about destination countries which asylum seekers are likely to consider, where they have a choice of destinations. Relevant information is likely to include details about policy (especially changes in policy), political considerations (for example democracy and a free
press), economic considerations (such as access to the labour market) and social considerations (for example the existence of community organisations or the activities of racist organisations). At the same time, it needs to be acknowledged that at least some asylum seekers choose the UK simply on the basis of reputation or even rumour.

One reason why social networks appear to be the most important source of information about destination countries for asylum seekers, is that friends and family are more likely than other sources to be able to identify the information that is of particular relevance to potential asylum seekers. This is perhaps particularly the case where these networks comprise other migrants, including asylum seekers and refugees. There is, however, an important reservation that needs posting at this stage. One respondent during this research was keen to emphasise that, particularly where they have spent a substantial period of time in the country of asylum, people can lose their intuition for what might and might not comprise relevant information for potential migrants from the country of destination. The anecdote he used to illustrate this point is presented in Box 1.

5.2 Trustworthy information
For information to be trusted its source needs to be trustworthy. One of the principal reasons why asylum seekers seem unlikely to attach weight to information disseminated by formal institutions, is that these are not trusted. Interestingly, this does not appear to arise from a concern that institutions in destination countries will provide misinformation in order to deter asylum seekers, rather the issue is a lack of trust of any formal institution. This is exacerbated in cases where asylum seekers have been forced to flee their home countries because they have experienced or fear persecution.
Box 1 Social networks and relevant information

While social networks are usually assumed to be able to provide the most relevant information for potential migrants, individuals who have spent long periods in the country of asylum may lose touch with what is relevant in the country of origin. One respondent – a Bosnian - illustrated this with reference to a recent conversation with his mother. He recalled telling her that one of the things he treasured most about UK society is the Radio 4 ‘Today’ programme. For his mother, he told us, he might as well have been speaking a foreign language.

In contrast, there is a consensus that social networks – particularly personal networks – are viewed by asylum seekers as the most trustworthy sources of information. What is interesting, however, is that while personal networks are trustworthy, they may not necessarily be accurate. Several respondents for this research highlighted the tendency for asylum seekers and refugees either to focus only on the positive aspects of their experiences in host countries, or to misrepresent their experiences. This is a tendency that has been found among other migrants too, and seems to relate to a concern not to portray oneself to family and friends at home as having failed (IOM, 1994a).

Implications for dissemination strategies

Potential asylum seekers are unlikely to trust information disseminated by formal institutions.

5.3 Up-to-date information

The need for information to be up-to-date is particularly significant where it relates to asylum policy and practice, the details of which can change. While policies tend not to change as regularly as immigration practice, the relative speed and accuracy with which information about each of these is disseminated will vary accordingly. In this respect, the preceding two subsections highlight a contradiction. Formal institutions are likely to be able to provide the most up-to-date information on asylum policies and practices, but are unlikely to be trusted. Personal networks are trusted but are unlikely to
be able to provide detailed up-to-date information about asylum policy and practice.

The implication of this contradiction is that asylum seekers may often arrive in destination countries without a detailed knowledge of asylum policies. Whilst some do, the impression from this research is that the majority probably do not. One of the interviewees for this research – a case officer in Southampton – recounted the following anecdote. He described the arrival within one week of a number of Polish asylum seekers, all of whom knew one another before leaving Poland and had travelled to the UK together. The group applied for asylum in-country, and spread out their applications over a number of days. In the middle of this period the National Asylum Support Service scheme for in-country applicants was introduced. As a result, some of the applicants remained in Southampton, while others were dispersed to Glasgow.

**Implications for dissemination strategies**

Asylum seekers may arrive in destination countries without detailed knowledge of asylum policies, even where they have established social networks.

One way that this contradiction might be resolved is through the activities of migrant or refugee community organisations. There is a plethora of such organisations in the UK and other Western European countries of asylum, and there are indications that at least some of them may be active in providing information about these countries. Box 2 contains an excerpt from a Kosovar community magazine, published in the UK. Every article in the magazine is reproduced both in Kosovar and English. This particular article cites information provided to this community, and many other refugee communities, by the Refugee Council. It contains up-to-date information concerning the provision of support for asylum seekers.
New Support Delayed

In issue 2/3 we reported that the Immigration and Asylum Act had been passed, expressed our doubts about how this would improve the system, and questioned its fairness. Since then the Home Office has announced that the implementation of the new support arrangements for asylum seekers will be delayed in England and Wales.

From 3 April only people who apply for asylum at port (as soon as they enter the UK) will enter the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). Under the new arrangements they will not be entitled to benefits; instead they will receive a support package of vouchers and £10 in cash. Accommodation will only be offered outside London and the Southeast.

People who apply in country (after they have arrived in the UK) do not have any entitlements to benefits and will continue to be supported by social services departments. These new arrangements will only apply to new arrivals in the UK. All existing asylum seekers will continue on their current means of support until a decision is made on their application.

Kosovars who came on the Humanitarian Evacuation Programme (HEP) who apply for an extension to Exceptional Leave to Remain (ELR) or asylum will continue to receive benefits until the Home Office makes a decision on their case. If they are granted ELR or asylum they will continue to be entitled to benefits. If they are refused ELR or asylum it is unclear how HEP Kosovars will be supported.

The Refugee Council will be producing further information when the situation for HEP Kosovars is clarified. To be on our mailing list please fill in the subscription form on page 10.

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2 Lajmëtari (The Messenger), Issue 6, April 2000: 3
The magazine from which this excerpt is taken appears only to be circulated within the UK, and therefore does not comprise a direct source of information for potential asylum seekers. However, it does provide a means for updating their friends and family in the UK. What is unclear is the extent to which migrant and refugee community organisations also disseminate information directly to countries of origin, and this is an area worthy of further research.

Other research among refugee community organisations, however, does highlight an important reservation (Al-Ali et al., 2000). There is no reason to assume that these organisations are necessarily representative, in either destination or origin countries. A particular ethnic or political group may well dominate them, and in this sense the motivations to assist the migration of asylum seekers may depend on their individual affiliations.

**Implications for dissemination strategies**

Migrant and refugee community organisations may provide a mechanism for disseminating up-to-date information about countries of asylum that is considered trustworthy by potential asylum seekers.

**Section 6  The changing social networks of asylum seekers**

The preceding sections have complicated what might be imagined to be a fairly straightforward process. It is often assumed that potential asylum seekers receive information from friends and family in destination countries, and choose their destinations on the basis of this information. In contrast, this report has so far highlighted that at least some asylum seekers do not have the time to contact friends and family; that sometimes the information disseminated by them may not necessarily be relevant, trustworthy or up-to-date, and that as a result at least some asylum seekers arrive in destination countries either with no prior information, or with only inaccurate information.
This section further complicates the picture. It demonstrates how both the geography and composition of asylum seekers’ social networks have changed in the last decade. The following section considers some of the implications of this for the dissemination of information and our understanding of the migration decision-making process.

6.1 New geographies

The migration patterns of asylum seekers have traditionally been understood as largely determined by pre-existing links between their origin and destination countries, for example colonial and trade links, or geographical proximity (Hovy, 1993). Once established, these migration patterns endure, as social networks based on those who have already arrived in the destination country support the further migration of friends and family from the origin country.

Such traditional patterns of migration have indeed endured in the UK, for example asylum applications from India and Pakistan have remained fairly stable throughout the 1990s. However, they have been overlaid with new patterns, which do not conform with traditional explanations. Table 1 demonstrates some of the most important new patterns for the UK, originating in Afghanistan, China, Colombia, Ecuador and Romania. Asylum applications from these countries have steadily grown from very small flows in the early 1990s. Indeed an examination of inter-annual changes over the 1990-2000 period indicates that these nationalities represent some of the fastest rises in asylum applications. New patterns have similarly been found in many other Western European countries over the last decade (Koser, 1996a).

The implication of new geographies for asylum seekers’ social networks is that at least some asylum seekers are effectively pioneers, that is, they are arriving in countries where there are no pre-existing social networks. It can be expected that social networks will often evolve around these new arrivals.
Table 1 Asylum applications in the UK from ‘new’ and ‘old’ origin countries

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<td>250</td>
<td>435</td>
<td>1205</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>610</td>
<td>425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>555</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>370</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>770</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>605</td>
<td>1015</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>2065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>1475</td>
<td>3245</td>
<td>1700</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>1810</td>
<td>2915</td>
<td>1915</td>
<td>1615</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>2615</td>
<td>2825</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>1530</td>
<td>2075</td>
<td>1450</td>
<td>1275</td>
<td>2030</td>
<td>3255</td>
<td>2220</td>
<td>1285</td>
<td>1030</td>
<td>1365</td>
<td>1710</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.2 The growing significance of transit countries

Although data limitations preclude detailed analysis, there are indications that a significant proportion of asylum seekers now arrive in the UK (and other Western European destinations) via transit countries – particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, and to a lesser extent in Southern Europe. One reason that it seems plausible to suggest that their number may be increasing, is that by making direct migration more difficult, one of the unintended consequences of some asylum policies in Western Europe has been to divert asylum seekers to transit countries (Koser, 1996a). Such policies include stricter visa regimes, carrier sanctions and the deployment of Airline Liaison Officers (ALOs).

Koser’s earlier research among Iranian asylum seekers in the Netherlands (1997) found that of 32 respondents, all but three had arrived in the Netherlands via transit countries. Significantly, only a limited number of transit countries were reported, namely Pakistan, Turkey, Romania or Hungary. One implication is that particular nationalities tend to move via particular transit countries. One explanation may be that evolving visa regimes in transit countries target certain nationalities and not others.

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A series of detailed studies of transit migration has been conducted by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), and data from those studies lend credibility to the assertion that transit countries are growing in significance for asylum seekers (IOM, 1994a,b,c,d; 1996). These studies also showed that migrants often spend considerable periods of time in transit countries. Of 159 respondents in the IOM (1996) study, 70 per cent had lived in Turkey for over one year, while 34 people had been there for over 49 months. Another IOM study examining transit migration in Bulgaria, explained some of the reasons why migrants can spend such long periods in transit, and highlighted in particular prolonged delays in obtaining visas and tickets for onward travel (IOM, 1994a).

The implication of these findings for asylum seekers’ social networks is that new networks are probably evolving in transit countries. This idea is reinforced by findings that many asylum seekers spend considerable periods in transit countries, and that particular nationalities seem to be focused on particular transit countries.

6.3 The role of smugglers and traffickers

At least part of the explanation for the new geographies in the migration patterns of asylum seekers and the growing significance of transit countries is the growing role of smugglers and traffickers in the migration of asylum seekers, particularly in Europe. Definitions of trafficking and smuggling are still emerging (Morrison and Crosland, 2001). According to the work of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Elaboration of a Convention Against Transnational Crime (Vienna 1999) “trafficking persons means the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, either by the threat or use of abduction, force, fraud, deception or coercion, or by the giving or receiving of unlawful payments to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person”. The smuggling of migrants “shall mean the intentional procurement for profit for illegal entry of a person into and/or illegal residence in a state of which the person is not a national nor a permanent
resident”.\textsuperscript{5} Put simply, the distinction between smuggling and trafficking is that the former involves the clandestine movement of people across borders, whereas the latter also entails placing them in exploitative positions in destination countries, classically prostitution. For a more detailed discussion of the competing definitions of trafficking and smuggling, see Salt and Hogarth (2000).

Of the 32 Iranian asylum seekers interviewed by Koser in the Netherlands (1997), 29 reported that smugglers had been involved in their journeys between the Netherlands and Iran. Smugglers were found to have assisted asylum seekers in three specific ways: to escape Iran, to travel across Europe and to enter the Netherlands. One of the conclusions of Koser’s research was that asylum seekers, faced with increasing restrictions on their movement, often have no alternative but to pay smugglers to assist them. Koser concluded that the growth in smuggling has been another unintended consequence of asylum policies in Western Europe. This conclusion has been corroborated by a recent report published by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Morrison, 2000).

There are severe data limitations for estimating the number of asylum seekers who are smuggled into Western Europe and the UK specifically, and these are discussed in detail elsewhere (Morrison, 2000; Salt and Hogarth, 2000). However, there is a growing consensus that an increasing proportion of asylum seekers – possibly the majority – now pays migration agents of one kind or another to move them into Western Europe. The German Federal Refugee Office estimated that about half of the asylum seekers arriving in Germany in 1997 had been smuggled, while the Dutch Immigration Service estimated that 60-70% of asylum seekers in the late 1990s had been smuggled (Morrison, 2000). A small-scale case study among refugees in the

\textsuperscript{4} Article 2, Revised Draft Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and punish Traffickers in Persons, especially women and children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational organised Crime, 23 November 1999, UN General Assembly

\textsuperscript{5} Article 2, Revised Draft Report Against Smuggling in Migrants by Land, Air and Sea, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organised Crime, 23 November 1999, UN General Assembly
UK in 1998 (Morrison, 1998) indicated that smuggling into the UK was also occurring at a significant rate.

Even less is known about the trafficking of asylum seekers. However, a number of recent press reports, and several anecdotes, suggest that asylum seekers are also trafficked in Western Europe.

There are even indications – albeit at present only reported in the media – that for traffickers the UK may be a transit country and not a final destination. For example, an article in The Guardian referred to the trafficking of West Africans via the UK to Italy, where they were coerced into prostitution. In several cases, they had applied for asylum in the UK, and then simply disappeared. The notion of Western European countries becoming transit countries also emerged during Koser’s research, when several respondents said that if their asylum applications in the Netherlands were unsuccessful they would pay to be smuggled to the United States (Koser, 1997).

The apparently widening role of smugglers and traffickers would appear to provide a case for extending our definition of social networks to include them. They can be thought of as the illegal aspect of migration agents, the legal aspect of which includes labour recruiters and travel agents (Salt and Stein, 1997). As the following section demonstrates, smugglers in particular are increasingly taking on some of the traditional functions of social networks, including facilitating migration and providing information.

Section 7  New social networks, information and the migration of asylum seekers

What are the implications of the changing geography and composition of social networks for the dissemination of information and the migration decision-making of asylum seekers? This section focuses on three aspects. First, it seems that for some asylum seekers the dissemination of information about potential destinations has effectively become irrelevant. They have ceded control over their migration decisions to smugglers and traffickers.
Second, for some asylum seekers transit countries have become locations where they can receive and evaluate information for which they perhaps did not have time upon leaving their origin country. Transit countries have become a new target for information dissemination. Third, for some asylum seekers, smugglers have become the primary source of information on potential destination countries.

7.1 Losing control of the migration cycle

The limited existing research suggests that, for at least some asylum seekers, smugglers and traffickers can control the selectivity, timing and channelling of migration (Koser, 1997; Morrison, 1998). Traffickers recruit migrants for their specific needs, for example labourers to work in particular industries or young women and even children, to work as prostitutes or in the pornography industry. Even smugglers are reported to be actively recruiting clients, and it should not be forgotten that they are often in effect business people whose motivation is to move people in order to realise a profit (Salt and Stein, 1997). There are also more indirect ways in which smugglers can influence migration selectivity. For example, the amounts they charge for their services can be substantial, although they vary depending on the origin and destination (Salt and Hogarth, 2000). As an indication only, the Iranian asylum seekers interviewed by Koser in the Netherlands reported having been charged between $4000 and $6000. An implication is that only those who can afford to pay these charges, or who can access such sums through loans, can migrate and that the choice of destination is influenced by the ability to pay the required amount.

Raising money also has implications for the timing of migration. One respondent in the Koser study reported spending one month in hiding in Teheran, while he raised sufficient money to pay a smuggler in advance. Most respondents in the same study also reported that smugglers determined the length of time they spent in transit countries. In particular, delays arose in the provision of documents and tickets for onward travel.
Finally, eleven respondents in the same study reported that smugglers had effectively determined their final destination. Some had simply wanted to go to Western Europe, and the Netherlands which at the time appeared to be a country to which smugglers could move them. What is more significant is that in certain other cases, asylum seekers had intended to go to a destination other than the Netherlands, but had in effect been obliged by smugglers to go there. Usually their intended destination had been chosen on the basis of the existence of social networks there. In other words, smugglers can in some circumstances override the effect of social networks on the migration of asylum seekers.

It is worth emphasising that these findings are from a small-scale case study, and far more research is needed to understand how smugglers and traffickers impact on migration patterns. The implication appears to be, however, that for at least some asylum seekers the location of family and friends no longer influences their migration destinations. By extension, information about potential destinations is effectively redundant for these asylum seekers, as the choice of destination is no longer theirs to make.

**Implications for dissemination strategies**

For at least some asylum seekers, smugglers, facilitators and traffickers choose their final destination. The dissemination of information to potential asylum seekers will be irrelevant in these cases.

7.2 Transit countries as new targets for information dissemination

It is worth reiterating a point that was repeatedly stressed during interviews for this report, which is that many asylum seekers leave their country of origin under duress, and do not have the time to mobilise social networks or to evaluate information about potential destinations. Evidence that an increasing proportion move via transit countries, and that a significant number spend considerable periods there, suggests that transit countries may provide an opportunity for asylum seekers to make assessments about the situation in
potential destination countries that they could not make before leaving their homes.

Implications for dissemination strategies

The dissemination of information about potential countries of asylum may have a greater influence on asylum seekers in transit countries than in origin countries.

What has become clear during interviews is that the period spent in a transit country can influence asylum seekers’ choice of a final destination in different ways. Some leave their homes aiming for a particular destination, and maintain that focus in transit. Others leave home with no more than an intention to ‘head west’ (to Europe), and sharpen their focus in transit. Still others may change their minds about potential destinations in transit. Box 3 develops a typology that covers the principal options.

Box 3 A typology of the possible impacts of time spent in transit countries on the choice of a final destination

A  The case of an asylum seeker who leaves his/her home with no firm idea of a final destination, and chooses a destination in transit
B  The case of an asylum seeker who leaves his/her home with no firm idea of a final destination, and does not choose a specific destination in transit
C  The case of an asylum seeker who leaves his/her home with a firm idea of a potential destination, and maintains that idea during transit
D  The case of an asylum seeker who leaves his/her home with a firm idea of a potential destination, and changes his/her mind in transit

It is important to emphasise that the typology in Box 3 only covers those asylum seekers who eventually move on from a transit country to a final destination. There may be significant numbers of asylum seekers who cannot move on from transit countries, and for whom transit countries therefore effectively become destination countries. Of 159 respondents interviewed
during an IOM study in Turkey (1996), for example, 104 had already tried and failed to enter a destination country in Western Europe. Nevertheless, clearly a significant proportion of asylum seekers will also fall within the typology covered in Box 3 and eventually move on from a transit to a destination country. Table 2 presents data on the intended final destinations of transit migrants in Ukraine.

Table 2 Intended destinations of transit migrants in the Ukraine, by region of origin (%)\(^6\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Intended Destination</th>
<th>Germany</th>
<th>Scandinavia</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>U.K</th>
<th>Other European Country</th>
<th>North America</th>
<th>Any W. European Country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIS(^7)</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>18.2</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>27.8</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other African</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>countries</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>68.2</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is interesting that a significant proportion (14.3% in the case of respondents from Ethiopia) are covered by Type B in the above typology – namely they apparently plan to leave the Ukraine still without having decided upon a final destination other than any Western European country. All other respondents had a final destination in mind, and some interesting patterns emerge. It is

\(^6\) IOM (1994b). Note that the rows may fail to total 100% as large numbers of respondents refused to answer this question.

\(^7\) Newly Independent States of the former Soviet Union
salutary to note, for example, that the UK was not the first choice of destination among any of the eleven regions of origin covered. Clearly, a range of factors is likely to have influenced the choice of a final destination, not least for some the direct experience of having tried and failed to enter a country in Europe. It seems likely that information about countries of asylum disseminated to potential asylum seekers while in transit countries is at least one of these factors. It may have helped them form an impression where they had none before, it may have reinforced pre-existing impressions, and it may have changed their minds.

Table 3 shows the sources of information on intended destination countries reported to the IOM by transit migrants in Turkey. Again the data demonstrate some interesting regional variations, but for the purposes of this report three points are worth highlighting. First, social networks based in the transit country were an important source of information for several nationalities, and the most important for Iraqis. This reinforces the suggestion above that new social networks may be evolving in transit countries, and that their role in information dissemination should not be underestimated.

Second, all of the nationalities reported receiving information from social networks based in the origin, transit and intended destination country. This reinforces the previous observation that the changing social networks of asylum seekers are greatly complicating the dissemination of information about potential destinations. Even assuming that all information about potential destination countries originates there, the routes through which it can reach asylum seekers are multiple (Box 4).
Table 3 Sources of information about intended destination countries for transit migrants in Turkey, by nationality (%)\(^8\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Relatives/friends in Turkey</th>
<th>Relatives/friends in destination country</th>
<th>Relatives/friends in origin country</th>
<th>Traffickers/smugglers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bosnia</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Third, for a significant proportion of transit migrants, smugglers or traffickers were a source of information on potential destinations. For Bosnians they were reported to be the most important source.

Box 4 A typology of dissemination routes for information about potential Destinations (D – Destination, O – Origin, T – Transit)

- **D – O**: The dissemination of information from the destination to an asylum seeker in the origin country
- **D – T**: The dissemination of information from the destination to an asylum seeker in a transit country
- **D – T – O**: The dissemination of information to social networks in a transit country, from where it is disseminated to an asylum seeker in the origin country
- **D – O – T**: The dissemination of information to social networks in the origin country, from where it is disseminated to an asylum seeker in a transit country

\(^8\) IOM (1996)
7.3 Smugglers as a source of information on destination countries

It is important to begin any discussion about smugglers with the caveat that still very little is known about their activities. In particular, it is important to guard against generalisations. For example, smuggling operations almost certainly operate at a variety of scales and with a variety of motivations. Nevertheless, there appears to be a consensus that most smugglers have detailed knowledge about asylum policies in the areas in which they operate. Mainly anecdotal evidence indicates, for example, that smugglers are responsive to the opening and closing of border crossings, know for which countries particular destination countries require visas, and know with which countries particular destination countries have signed readmission agreements (Koser, 2000).

What is far less clear is the extent to which smugglers divulge their information to their ‘clients’, including asylum seekers. Again the evidence suggests that there is no general answer: in some cases smugglers are an important source of information but in others they are not. Koser (1997) found that most of his respondents (Iranian asylum seekers in the Netherlands) had been given very precise information by smugglers. For example, several reported that they had been trained by smugglers on how best to respond to questioning by border police and immigration officials, for example by not admitting their country of origin or naming any countries through which they had transited. In contrast, respondents during interviews for this report recounted examples of asylum seekers simply being ejected from the back of a truck on the M25 (London), with no idea of where they were, let alone any detailed information about asylum policies.

One explanation may relate to the motivations of smugglers. In at least some cases it appears that smugglers are sympathetic to their clients, for example they may be religious organisations assisting people to escape religious persecution. The term ‘white knights’ is sometimes used to describe this idea (Salt and Hogarth, 2000). On other occasions smugglers may simply be business people, for whom their clients represent no more than a profit. It may be that the former will be more likely to assist asylum seekers to remain in
asylum countries by providing detailed information and advice, while the latter will effectively abandon asylum seekers once their payment has been secured.

**Section 8  Implications for information dissemination strategies**

Possible implications for efforts to disseminate information about asylum policy and practice to potential asylum seekers in advance of their arrival in the UK have been flagged throughout this report. They are summarised in Table 4. Rather than discussing each in detail, this section considers three wider and more systematic issues that arise.

**8.1 Recognising the usefulness of information dissemination**

This report has focused on the interactions between social networks, information dissemination and the migration decision-making of asylum seekers. It is important to be realistic about the extent to which strategies to disseminate information can intervene in this set of relations. First, there is a very limited scope for direct intervention in social networks (Gurak and Caces, 1992). Even if information dissemination can be presented as a positive strategy, it remains unlikely that the friends and family of potential asylum seekers will be responsive to information provided directly by policy-makers. Smugglers have also been found to be an important source of information for some asylum seekers, and it is hard to envisage policy-makers interacting directly with them either.

This report has suggested that the most appropriate target for information dissemination may be the less personal aspects of social networks comprised of migrant and refugee community organisations. Their role in the dissemination of information about destination countries is poorly understood, but there are reasons to believe that they may be a source of information that is trusted by potential asylum seekers. The extent to which this trust might be compromised by direct interaction with policy-makers remains unclear.
Table 4: Implications for information dissemination strategies

1. Where strategies for disseminating information about asylum policy and practice are adopted, there need to be guarantees that the information is accurate and up-to-date.

2. The dissemination of information about countries of asylum needs to be presented as a positive approach intervention in which migrant and refugee community organisations are stakeholders.

3. It is not possible to separate out the information function of social networks from other functions, such as facilitating migration and assisting integration. The mere presence of social networks in a destination country may be more important than the information disseminated.

4. Social networks can be influential in the migration of asylum seekers, including through the provision of information. However, some asylum seekers move without contacting social networks, even where they exist.

5. There are a range of mechanisms through which information about destination countries can be disseminated, including formal institutions, the media, migration agents and social networks.

6. Potential asylum seekers are unlikely to trust information disseminated by formal institutions.

7. Asylum seekers may arrive in destination countries without detailed knowledge of asylum policies, even where they have established social networks.

8. Migrant and refugee community organisations may provide a mechanism for disseminating up-to-date information about countries of asylum that is considered trustworthy by potential asylum seekers.

9. For at least some asylum seekers, smugglers, facilitators and traffickers choose their final destination. The dissemination of information to potential asylum seekers will be irrelevant in these cases.

10. The dissemination of information about potential countries of asylum may have a greater influence on asylum seekers in transit countries than in origin countries.

Clearly, it is possible to disseminate information via routes other than social networks. For example, this report identifies a knowledge gap regarding the extent to which formal institutions disseminate information in countries of
origin or transit. At the same time, the report has suggested that these are unlikely to be trusted by potential asylum seekers.

A more innovative approach might be to focus on the media, and particularly the Internet. One advantage of the Internet is that its information can be easily and quickly updated. It may also be that the Internet can be accessed with relatively little risk across many origin and transit countries, although the extent to which it is used by potential asylum seekers is unknown. More research is needed to understand the actual and potential role of the Internet for disseminating information about countries of asylum.

Finally, there is a growing consensus that the migration of asylum seekers has a momentum of its own which is hard to stop. Information dissemination per se is unlikely to deter asylum seekers coming to the UK. One reason is that, for a variety of reasons identified in this report, asylum seekers may arrive in destinations without prior information. At best, information dissemination might mean that those who arrive have a more realistic understanding of what to expect. This would of course be consistent with the idea of presenting information dissemination as a positive strategy.

8.2 Complexity and the risk of unintended consequences

The social networks of asylum seekers are dynamic; they have a changing composition and geography. Moreover the dissemination of information is complex and the migration decision-making process is far from straightforward. The risk for any intervention in such a complex area is of unintended consequences. For example, this report has already alluded to the notion that the re-direction of asylum seekers via transit countries, and their exposure to smugglers, can be seen as an unintended consequence of asylum policy.

By definition unintended consequences are hard to predict, but it is important that they are thought through carefully. For example, it is important to consider the extent to which the dissemination of information about a country
of asylum might attract more, rather than fewer, asylum seekers. While the dissemination of information may enable potential asylum seekers to be better informed, it will also enable smugglers to be better informed. This also raises the question of how the government in a country of asylum would respond to an asylum seeker who could demonstrate that he or she arrived there on the basis of inaccurate information disseminated via formal institutions.

8.3 A multilateral perspective

A final level of complexity is added by the need to harmonise any efforts to disseminate information. First, harmonisation would be required across countries of asylum in the same region, most obviously the European Union. It seems likely that at least some asylum seekers compare several potential destinations. What would need to be avoided is the emergence of competition between countries of asylum to portray their own country as the least attractive destination. It is easy to conceive of such competition resulting in a temptation to disseminate misinformation.

A second potential tension arises around the different agendas of origin, transit and destination countries. For information dissemination from destination countries to be truly effective, it would need to be supported by governments and agencies in the other sets of involved countries. At times this will be unlikely. For example, origin and transit countries may have different motivations for encouraging migrants to stay or leave, and thus may have different motivations for facilitating the dissemination of accurate information about countries of asylum.

Section 9  Key priorities for future research

One of the reasons that it is not possible to translate the implications for information dissemination strategies that arise form the findings of this feasibility study into concrete recommendations is a lack of data and knowledge upon which to base such a strategy. Perhaps the central finding of this report is that further research is needed in this area.
Having written a review focusing specifically on the social networks of asylum seekers and the dissemination of information about countries of asylum, it is our contention that any further and larger-scale study should have a broader remit. The role of social networks is very important in our understanding of the migration of asylum seekers, but that role extends beyond the dissemination of information. Similarly, the role of information is important to understand, but a focus on social networks alone cannot provide a comprehensive overview.

9.1 Extending the analysis of social networks

One possible direction for further research might be to extend the analysis of the social networks of asylum seekers. There are two important extensions. First, a wider definition of social networks is needed, including changes both in the geography and composition of social networks (Box 5).

Box 5 A revised definition of social networks in international migration

Social networks comprise personal contacts with friends and family as well as commercial contacts with migration agents including labour recruiters, travel agents, smugglers and traffickers. Relations with networks can be voluntary and involuntary. Networks can facilitate migration in a range of ways, including by disseminating information. However, migration can take place in their absence. Networks exist and function across a range of countries, including origin, destination and also transit countries.

Second, a more comprehensive overview of the interaction between social networks and the migration of asylum seekers is required. A good starting point is Ritchey’s three hypotheses. While this report has begun to investigate the information hypothesis as it applies to asylum seekers, it has not touched upon either the affinity or the facilitating hypothesis. These are likely to be relevant, especially given the changing character of asylum seekers’ social networks. For example, if asylum seekers need to pay significant sums of money to smugglers, to what extent has their migration become a family decision, with limited resources being targeted on a particular family member?
Furthermore to what extent and in which ways do smugglers facilitate, and to what extent hinder, the migration of asylum seekers in contemporary Europe?

9.2 A model for the dissemination of information about countries of asylum

An alternative research direction would be to focus on the dissemination of information about countries of asylum. Social networks would comprise an important element in any such research, but by no means the only one. Figure 1 depicts in simple terms a model for the dissemination of information about countries of asylum (Koser, 1993; Koser and Pinkerton, 2001). It is adapted from a model successfully tested in another context, and might provide at least a starting point for research in the current context.

Clearly, the model would need to be revised, but it does highlight some of the key research areas. The model has five key components. First, there is a range of conditions in the country of asylum that generates information, which is likely to be of value to potential asylum seekers. This may include information on asylum policies, but also on economic, political and social conditions. It is hoped that together Vaughan Robinson’s and Roger Zetter’s Home Office reports will elaborate on this component of the model.

A second component is intermediaries who disseminate information to potential asylum seekers. This report has identified some of the more important intermediaries. They are likely to include formal institutions, social networks, the media and smugglers. It has also shown how they may be located in a variety of locations. What is far less clear at this stage is how these intermediaries disseminate information. What, for example, is the role of the Internet in information dissemination?
A third component is the potential asylum seeker who receives information. Further research needs to consider where and how asylum seekers receive this information. Another issue of importance that has emerged during this report is the question of how potential asylum seekers evaluate information. Potential asylum seekers must develop some *a priori* means of assessing the reliability of information that is disseminated to them. This report suggests that at least in part their assessment will be based on the extent to which they trust intermediaries in the information system. This also raises a question about the extent to which asylum seekers trust smugglers.

A fourth component is flows of information. They can themselves be considered to have attributes, the most important of which is probably accuracy. As was suggested earlier in this report, where formal institutions become involved in the dissemination of information it is essential that accuracy be guaranteed. It was suggested that one reason why some potential asylum seekers may not trust information from these sources is a concern that information might be manipulated. This is probably unlikely in the
case of formal institutions, but is a greater possibility for other information intermediaries. It was suggested, for example, that the information provided by friends and family may not always be accurate, as it can be prone to exaggeration. It is unclear to what extent smugglers might manipulate the information they disseminate to potential asylum seekers.

A final component of the model is a series of inputs that relates the system to the external environment which emphasise that the dissemination of information is dynamic. Conditions in countries of asylum change, the composition of social networks and other information intermediaries change, and the accuracy of information flows is also likely to change.

Finally, it is also worth mentioning two further extensions of the analysis of the dissemination of information to asylum seekers that do not focus on conditions in the country of asylum. Both have been identified as important research gaps during interviews for this report. First, how is information about conditions in their country of origin disseminated to asylum seekers or refugees in countries of asylum who might be considering return? Second, how is information about return programmes disseminated to the same group? In a recent review of return programmes for rejected asylum seekers, a failure to disseminate information on both these aspects was found to be an important obstacle to return (Koser, 2001).

9.3 Research methods
The difficulties associated with interviewing vulnerable populations such as asylum seekers and refugees are widely recognised (Atkinson and Flint, 2001; Bloch, 1991; Cornelius, 1982; Faugier and Sargeant, 1997), and it is not the intention here to rehearse them. Rather, there are three points we would like to emphasise.

First, in order properly to investigate either of the projects outlined earlier in this chapter, it would be essential to conduct multi-sited research. To understand properly either the impact of social networks on the migration of potential asylum seekers, or the dissemination of information to potential
asylum seekers would require research in countries of asylum, origin and transit countries. Far too much research on issues of asylum is focused only on countries of asylum, and there is a real danger that this can provide only a limited insight into a wider process.

For either of the above projects, it is becoming clear that an understanding of the smuggling process would also be important. There are serious methodological issues at stake here, perhaps most importantly that it might actually be dangerous for researchers directly to interview smugglers. The best alternative that seems to be available is to interview asylum seekers about their experiences with smugglers, the approach adopted by Koser (1997).

It is, however, important to acknowledge reservations with this approach. Asylum seekers may be reluctant to divulge information about smugglers, especially if they consider their interaction with smugglers to have a bearing on their asylum applications. In addition asylum seekers probably only have a limited insight into the smuggling process. It is unlikely, for example, that they can say very much about smugglers’ motivations, or where smugglers obtain their information about countries of asylum. Finally, interviewing asylum seekers in countries of asylum only provides a partial picture of smuggling. It cannot tell us about those who have not been able to leave their countries of origin because they could not afford to pay smugglers, or those stranded in transit countries. This observation again reinforces the need for multi-sited research.

Finally, in our opinion an important and often untapped research potential lies with migrant and refugee community organisations. It is our impression that these organisations often have important insights into a whole range of processes associated with asylum, including the two identified for further research. They also provide a means for disseminating findings to asylum seekers and refugees. A concerted effort needs to be made to assure these organisations that research is worth supporting and assisting. A valuable feasibility study might propose methods for confidence-building amongst
them. The starting point for confidence-building might be to include their representatives in consultations right at the beginning of the research process, when aims, objectives and methods are being developed.

References and additional reading

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