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Editor: Carole Byron
Printed by: TABS

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ISSN 1473-8406

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

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This is the summary of a feasibility study, commissioned by the Home Office, which examines how information about countries of asylum is disseminated to potential asylum seekers before they arrive in their destination country. Particular attention is paid to the role of asylum seekers' social networks.

Key points

- Social networks are very influential in migration, providing information about destinations, facilitating migration and aiding integration after arrival.
- Although information is available from other sources such as institutions, the media and the Internet, social networks are the most trusted. They are also *perceived* by potential asylum seekers to provide the most relevant and up-to-date information and are trusted not to distort information. However, in reality there are reservations about each of these assumptions.
- In recent years, the social networks of asylum seekers have changed:
 - social networks 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
 - a rising proportion of potential asylum seekers are moving to Western Europe via transit countries where they often spend significant periods of time
 - smugglers are playing a growing role in the migration of asylum seekers, and fulfil many of the functions traditionally served by social networks.
- These changes have implications for information dissemination. Transit countries may be 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.
- Smugglers can also be a source of information on destination countries for potential asylum seekers. Some asylum seekers have effectively lost control of their own migration. Their destinations are being dictated by smugglers rather than, for example, by the location of family and friends.
- Governments in origin and transit countries are likely to be just as influential as governments in destination countries for the dissemination of information to potential asylum seekers.

Potential asylum seekers should have access to information before they arrive in a country of destination. By placing the emphasis on the accuracy of information, dissemination of

information is more likely to be viewed as a positive strategy or intervention in the decision-making of asylum seekers.

The views expressed in these findings are those of the authors, not necessarily those of the Home Office (nor do they reflect Government policy)

Refugee community organisations and even potential asylum seekers themselves have as much interest as the governments of countries of asylum in developing an infrastructure for the dissemination of accurate information.

Asylum seekers who should receive information include:

- 'spontaneous' asylum seekers – that is people applying for asylum either at a port or in the country
- those who arrive through formal resettlement channels, for example, from Bosnia and Kosovo
- those who arrive to join their families under family reunion programmes.

In recent years the circumstances of asylum seekers have changed and this has implications for information dissemination. Transit countries may be 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.

Changes in asylum seekers' circumstances

- Asylum seekers increasingly arrive in countries of asylum with which they or their country of origin have no previous link.
- A rising proportion of potential asylum seekers are moving to Western Europe via transit countries where they often spend significant periods of time.
- Smugglers are playing a growing role in the migration of asylum seekers. They may dictate the country of destination and fulfil many of the functions traditionally served by social networks.

The research

This is one in a series of studies commissioned by the Home Office to learn more about how asylum seekers choose a country of asylum. This study analyses how information about countries of asylum is disseminated to potential asylum seekers before they arrive. It is based on secondary sources such as published and unpublished work as well as earlier fieldwork conducted by Koser (1997). In addition, a small number of interviews were conducted with academics and with caseworkers from refugee community organisations. The latter provided some insight into the experiences of asylum seekers.

Sources of information about countries of asylum

Social networks

Although there is no clear definition of social networks (sometimes referred to as immigration networks), they usually consist of family and friends, community organisations and associations, intermediaries (such as those who recruit labour) and travel agents. 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 relationships.

Disseminating information about possible destinations is one way in which social networks have been found to facilitate international migration, although it is important to note that they can serve other functions too. Social networks influence the migration decision-making process through:

- migration selectivity, i.e. who does and does not migrate
- migration timing
- migrants' choice of destination.

However, some care needs to be taken in applying these generalisations to asylum seekers. Some asylum seekers may not have the time or the resources to contact social networks and to receive, evaluate and use information in their decision whether, when and where to migrate.

Other sources of information

Other sources of information for asylum seekers on potential destinations include formal institutions, the media and migration agents.

There has been little systematic research on the role of institutions that represent the UK and other destination countries overseas in transmitting information. It is not clear to what extent, and in what ways, information about asylum policies is disseminated through embassies and consulates in the main countries of origin for those seeking asylum in the UK. In addition, little is known about the role of other institutions, such as non-governmental organisations (like the British Council), in disseminating information within countries of origin.

Similarly, there has been little 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 for asylum seekers. The media, and particularly the Internet, could provide a mechanism for information dissemination strategies. However, access to such information would vary for different groups as well as between and within countries.

Smugglers and traffickers have an expanding role in the migration of asylum seekers in Western Europe. However, their information may be limited and inaccurate. Also, the extent to which they are willing to impart this information varies according to whether the relationship with their 'clients' is one of sympathy or purely exploitative.

Evaluation of the quality of information

Social networks are consistently the information source most valued by potential asylum seekers for the following reasons:

- Friends and family are thought more likely than other sources to be able to identify the information that is of particular relevance to potential asylum seekers. However, particularly where they have spent a substantial period of time in the country of asylum, people can lose their intuition for what comprises relevant information for potential migrants.
- Social networks are seen as trustworthy sources of information. One of the principal reasons why asylum seekers seem unlikely to value information

disseminated by formal institutions is that these sources are not trusted. This appears to stem from a general lack of trust about formal institutions rather than concerns about deliberate misinformation. This is perhaps not surprising given the circumstances and conditions in which many asylum seekers have been forced to leave their home countries. However, although social networks are viewed by asylum seekers as the most trustworthy sources of information, they may not necessarily be accurate. There is often a tendency for migrants to focus on the positive aspects of their experiences in host countries or to misrepresent their experiences.

- Information needs to be up-to-date, particularly in relation to asylum policies and practice where the details can change. Formal institutions are able to provide the most up-to-date information on asylum policies and practices but given that these are less likely to be trusted, information could be disseminated through migrant or refugee community organisations.

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 potential asylum seekers. The most realistic aim for dissemination should be the provision of accurate information upon which asylum seekers are able to base their decisions.

The changing nature of social networks

The geography and composition of asylum seekers' social networks have changed significantly in the last decade.

- Patterns of migration – traditional patterns of migration, for example from India and Pakistan, have been overlaid with new flows, originating in Afghanistan, China, Colombia, Ecuador and Romania.
- Transit countries – 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).
- Smuggling – there is evidence that the role of smugglers and traffickers in the migration of asylum seekers, particularly in Europe, has increased.

These changes have implications for the dissemination of information and the migration decision-making of asylum seekers:

- the dissemination of information about potential destinations has effectively become irrelevant for some asylum seekers as they have ceded control over their migration decisions to smugglers and traffickers
- transit countries are a new target for information dissemination. For some asylum seekers transit countries are locations where they can receive and evaluate information for which they perhaps did not have time before leaving their origin country
- smugglers have become the primary source of information on potential destination countries for some asylum seekers.

Conclusions

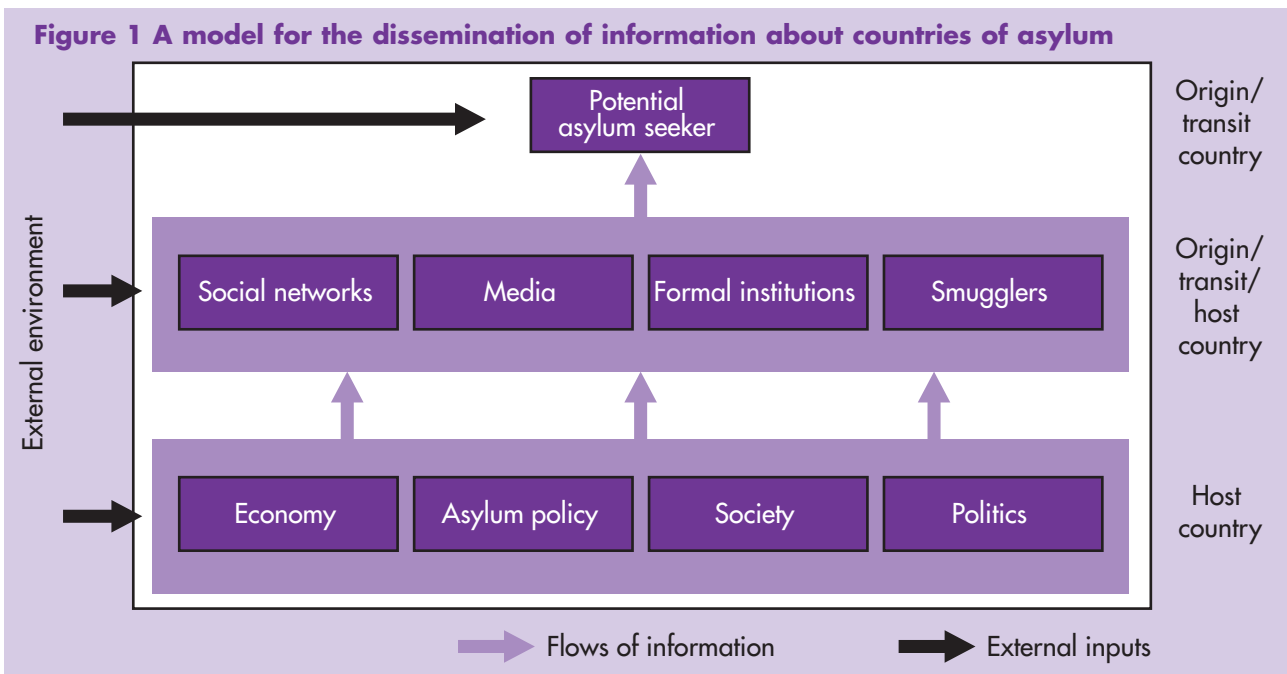
The study identifies ten specific implications for the future dissemination of information to potential asylum seekers (Table 1).

Table 1 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 should be presented as a positive strategy 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. Just the 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 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.

At the same time, the study recommends that the extent to which dissemination actions can intervene in the decision making of asylum seekers should not be overestimated:

- there is limited scope for policy makers to directly influence the dissemination of information through social networks, which appear to be the most trusted sources by potential asylum seekers. At the same time



there may be potential for interventions via refugee and community organisations, or the media and Internet

- there is a risk of unintended consequences arising from the dissemination of information to potential asylum seekers. For example, the dissemination of information about a country of asylum could attract more rather than fewer asylum applications. In addition, the dissemination of information will simultaneously enable both potential asylum seekers and smugglers/facilitators to be better informed
- dissemination strategies are more likely to succeed where they proceed on a multilateral basis, involving collaboration both between different destination countries in the European Union, but also between origin, transit and destination countries.

Future research

The study recommends further empirical research 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.

The model depicts a number of areas where further research can contribute:

- it would be useful to specify what sorts of information about destination countries are of particular

importance – for example, asylum policy and practice, and employment opportunities

- intermediaries (individuals and organisations that disseminate information to potential asylum seekers) need to be more clearly identified, and their methods for disseminating information more clearly specified
- potential asylum seekers themselves – where do they receive information and how do they evaluate it?
- flows of information – research could, for example, examine how long it takes information from destination countries to reach potential asylum seekers, which might in turn affect the accuracy of information
- identifying an 'external environment' – the model is a reminder that the dissemination of information is a dynamic process which can change over time.

Elaborating the processes summarised in this model would require the interviewing of sensitive populations. Confidence-building among asylum seekers and their representatives would have to be a key element in the research process.

A follow-up study has been commissioned in the light of these recommendations, which will focus on how, to what extent and by whom, information is disseminated between the UK and selected countries of origin and transit. The follow-up study includes extensive interviewing among asylum seekers themselves, as well as research in countries of origin.

Reference

Koser, K. (1997). Social networks and the asylum cycle: the case of Iranians in the Netherlands. *International Migration Review*. Vol. 31 (3), pp 591–611.

A more detailed report by K. Koser and C. Pinkerton *The social networks of asylum seekers and the dissemination of information about countries of asylum* will be available on the Home Office RDS website publications.rds@homeoffice.gsi.gov.uk

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