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Information dissemination to potential asylum seekers in countries of origin and/or transit

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This is a summary of the key findings from a research project investigating how potential asylum seekers receive, evaluate and use information about the UK while in their countries of origin and/or transit and whether this influenced their decision to claim asylum in the UK. The report builds on the feasibility study *The social networks of asylum seekers and the dissemination of information about countries of asylum* (Koser and Pinkerton, 2002).

Key points

- On arrival, few asylum seekers knew much about the UK or its asylum policies and procedures.
- Respondents had consulted a limited range of sources of information about the UK before leaving their countries of origin. The main sources of information were family and friends, both in the UK and in the countries of origin, smugglers, media and libraries. Few used official sources of information such as the local British embassy.
- Despite extended periods in transit, few of the respondents had learned much about the UK and its asylum rules. Some had been unable to learn en route because they were being smuggled in secret.
- Many respondents regretted not having had better information about eligibility and how and where to claim asylum.
- Some had not been aware of legal migration channels (e.g. through family reunification) and opportunities open to them for asylum in the UK. Most would have adhered to the asylum process more closely had they understood it. However, better information would not have dissuaded some respondents from using smugglers, since many felt that they had no alternative way of getting to safety in the UK.
- Information could proactively be disseminated in countries of origin and transit and in the UK. The majority of respondents would trust information disseminated by the UK government and would have been interested in the rules governing the availability of assistance, procedures concerning work possibilities and removal policy.
- An information campaign focussing exclusively on immigration and asylum policy is unlikely to influence potential asylum seekers' decisions as policy considerations alone did not determine the choice of destination of any of the respondents. Other information in a campaign, for example, highlighting the dangers associated with being smuggled to the UK and providing information about legal routes of entry, would be helpful.
- Lessons might also be learned from the Belgian government's efforts at communicating with Kosovans in Kosovo about asylum and immigration and the Canadian programme of 'in-country' asylum processing in Colombia.

The research had five objectives:

- to gather information on the relative importance of different mechanisms for information dissemination to potential asylum seekers
- to explore the characteristics of asylum seekers in relation to the intermediaries they use to receive information
- to investigate the role and type of information that asylum seekers, refugee and migrant organisations and Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) currently have access to through government departments, formal institutions and other intermediaries
- to assess the relative importance of different sources of information to potential asylum seekers in terms of trustworthiness and accuracy
- to consider the actual and potential impacts of both current information dissemination and positive policy interventions on the size and composition of asylum flows and on the success or otherwise of specific policy measures.

The research

The research focussed on asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Colombia, Kosovo and Somalia, each of which had generated significant numbers of asylum seekers to the UK in recent years. The four groups were distinctive in terms of their historical ties with the UK, the kinds of protection given, the timing of their arrival, the routes and methods used to reach the UK and the kinds of problem they faced in their countries of origin.

Interviews were conducted with 87 asylum seekers already in the UK, the majority of whom were identified through refugee and community organisations. The sample was chosen to reflect a diversity of backgrounds and included men and women, a mix of age groups, people at different stages of the asylum procedure, people who entered this country at different times between 1995 and 2002 and asylum seekers living in different parts of the UK. As such, the achieved sample closely reflected many of the key characteristics of asylum applicants in the UK. The great majority were under 40 years of age, predominantly male, generally poorly educated, could speak little English and had come to the UK via a third country. Most of the Afghans, Colombians and Somalis originated from a limited number of urban areas subject to high levels of insecurity and conflict. By contrast, the Kosovans came from a far wider range of places but mainly from urban areas. Most of the respondents (66) had travelled with the assistance of a smuggler.

A semi-structured questionnaire was used to interview the participating asylum seekers. Six migrant and refugee organisations helped to organise the interviews. Five interviews were conducted at Tinsley House detention centre and four Somali women were interviewed in the home of one of the respondents. Seventeen respondents attended group discussions on key themes emerging from the interviews.

Information was also derived from other sources. Key informants in government, international organisations, travel companies and NGOs were consulted, both in the UK and during research visits to Colombia, Kosovo, Pakistan and Somalia. UK asylum statistics were used to profile the research sample and relevant literature was reviewed. Official UK sources of information were also consulted.

Sources of knowledge

Some of the respondents had received information about the UK before leaving their country of origin. Their main sources were family and friends (at home or abroad), the media, libraries and smugglers. Even though many respondents had spent extended periods in one or more transit countries, they had learned little about the UK while living there.

Of the 87 respondents, 66 admitted to having travelled with the assistance of a smuggler. Few of the Colombian respondents had used smugglers, mainly because the majority arrived in the UK before the introduction of transit visas in 2001. The smugglers offered a range of services:

- providing false documentation
- making travel arrangements for the respondents (and sometimes travelling with them)
- giving information on how to get into the UK.

While some smugglers genuinely helped their clients, and on occasion continued to do so after arrival in the UK, many had clearly misled them, some deliberately. For example, one Colombian respondent was charged an additional fee by her agent for advice about the asylum procedure in the UK although she was actually told nothing.

Knowledge of the UK

Few of the respondents knew much about life in the UK before arrival and very few understood the rules about claiming asylum. In the main, their knowledge was limited to general impressions of life in the UK. Few knew about the possibility of detention, the availability of financial assistance or where to claim asylum. Among the Somalis, all but three said they did not know what a visa was when they arrived. Virtually none knew the regulations governing work, the voucher system (in place at the time of the study), dispersal policy or the debate about identity cards.

Where respondents had acquired information before arrival, it had mostly been learned in the country of origin rather than in third countries.

Unaccompanied children, young adults and many of the women respondents seemed to have known little about the UK before they arrived, in large part because many had come to the UK as dependants.

Potential sources of information

In asylum seekers' home countries

The research found that it is possible to communicate directly to potential asylum seekers in their home countries through the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), local

Reasons why respondents knew little about the UK

- Many had not chosen their destination – the decision was typically made on their behalf either by smugglers or by the family at home.
- Some had been given limited or even misleading information, particularly when the main source was the smuggler. One Colombian respondent said that he was told he would be able to work in the UK as soon as he arrived.
- Some had left their countries of origin in a hurry and had not had time to access relevant information. As one Kosovan put it: *'All we cared about was escaping and protecting our children. That was all that was on our minds'*.
- Few had family and friends already in the UK and, even when they did, these sources had tended to provide an overly favourable picture of the UK. One participant at a Colombian group discussion admitted: *'We tend to tell people at home what we earn here but not what it costs to live'*.
- They were generally both young and poorly educated, and this limited their access to information sources.
- Few could speak very much English.

media, airlines and travel agents, NGOs and United Nations (UN) organisations.

In transit countries

NGOs and UN organisations operating in transit countries could also be used for information dissemination provided that this causes them no embarrassment or compromise.

In the UK

Foreign diplomatic missions, NGOs, legal representatives, refugee organisations and local media and cultural outlets could be used in this country.

Group discussions with respondents revealed that they share few contact points in the UK and that important political, social and cultural differences sometimes divide them. These differences would need to be overcome in an information campaign.

The UK government as a source of information

The UK government disseminates information through two principal channels: UKvisas and the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND).

UKvisas deals with immigration matters but not with asylum. It publishes leaflets, maintains contact with overseas posts, has a website and meets representatives of ethnic minority communities within the UK.

IND has a main User Panel that includes NGOs, legal practitioners and representatives of certain ethnic minority communities. Its main function is to disseminate information on immigration and asylum policy to interested parties in the UK. IND also maintains a website – its use has

increased considerably since it was launched in December 2000. It was consulted extensively immediately after the publication of the White Paper: 'Secure Borders, Safe Haven: Integration with Diversity in Modern Britain' in 2002 (Home Office, 2002).

Very few respondents received information from any UK government source before reaching the UK. It appears that the British government does not communicate effectively with potential asylum seekers either in their countries of origin, transit or in their neighbouring countries. Where there is no official representation, proxy consular agents could be used, as the Canadians do in Somalia. The Canadian government has an informal arrangement with a Canadian national living in Hargeisa, Somalia, to provide immigration information and act as a courier for sending travel documents to relevant authorities for Canadian Somalis.

Many respondents said they would trust information disseminated by the UK government. However, the level of trust varied by national group – Afghans and Kosovans remained the most suspicious by far. Their experiences since arriving in the UK (in most cases their asylum applications had been turned down) had lowered their expectations and could influence the messages they send home.

What kind of information do potential asylum seekers need?

Most respondents said that they would have done things differently had they had more information. Many regretted not having had better information about eligibility and about how and where to claim asylum on arrival. Some had been unaware of legal migration channels to enter the UK, for example, through family reunification. Most would have adhered to official processes more closely had they understood them, although a few would not have claimed asylum and would have entered and remained in the UK illegally. A few said that they would not have come: several would have headed for an alternative country, and others might not have left their countries of origin. However, it appears from the interviews that better information would not have dissuaded some from using smugglers because they felt that there was no realistic alternative.

The study found that it is difficult to generalise about what influenced the decision of the respondents to come to this country. This is because, while some respondents were influenced by particular aspects of UK policy, policy considerations alone did not determine their choices. The implication is that an information campaign that focuses exclusively on immigration and asylum policy and practice will not affect the decisions of potential asylum seekers.

Learning from other information dissemination programmes

In the study countries, two examples were found of foreign governments (Belgium and Canada) managing to communicate details of their programmes effectively.

Examples of effective communication in country of origin

- The Belgian government runs an information dissemination programme from the Pristina office of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), which was launched in direct response to the rising number of illegal Kosovan migrants arriving in Belgium. Its effectiveness stems from its use of a wide range of media including billboard posters, leaflets (produced in three languages: English, Albanian and Serbo-Croat) and radio advertisements.

Even though the primary objective of the programme was to try to reduce the incidence of illegal immigration from Kosovo, it provided information about where, when and how to apply for Belgian visas and Schengen visas and highlighted the dangers associated with travelling with smugglers.

- The Canadian government operates a programme of 'in-country' asylum processing in Colombia, where human rights are under particular threat. The Canadian consulate makes annual visits to the main cities in Colombia and leaves information wherever it is possible to do so. Most applications come via the web and some are sent even from the remotest places.

Key recommendations

- Any UK government information campaign should be planned in a similar way to an advertising or publicity campaign. Although it is difficult to identify the audience accurately because the nature and sources of asylum seekers are constantly changing, the UK government could learn from the experiences of other governments which manage to communicate details of their programmes effectively.
- Where changes to UK policy and practice occur, these need to be communicated quickly and accurately to the target population, to asylum seekers already here, legal practitioners, immigration officials and others who are in close contact with asylum seekers in the UK or in countries of origin and transit.
- Information campaigns work best when they have a clear, uncomplicated message. More attention is paid to the 'headline' than to the detail of the message.

- It is important that potential asylum seekers are told about legal migration channels (e.g. family reunification) and opportunities open to them for asylum in the UK or elsewhere (e.g. in countries neighbouring the country of origin).
- It is vital to communicate proactively with potential asylum seekers in their countries of origin and transit. It would help if UK visas could extend its mandate to cover asylum procedures. This would make it easier to send more messages through local British embassies. Where there is no official representation, proxy consular agents could be used.
- In the UK, information should be disseminated proactively through migrant and refugee organisations even if the fragmentation of those communities complicates the task. Other channels include legal representatives, foreign diplomatic representations and local media and cultural outlets.
- Some potential asylum seekers may not trust official sources of information. The government should therefore try to disseminate information through a variety of media including the BBC, certain local radio stations, cultural outlets, the Internet, NGOs, UN organisations and airlines and travel agents.
- The UK membership of the main IND User Panel should be extended to include more representatives of specific ethnic minority groups and refugee community organisations.
- Information should be disseminated in the relevant local languages. The style used should be suitable for those with limited education and poor command of English.
- Government websites should be opened for each country even when the UK does not have official representation. Such a system would also be appropriate for communicating with the asylum-seeking communities living outside their countries of origin and those in transit countries.
- Official efforts at disseminating information would need formal mechanisms to evaluate the effectiveness of the information disseminated. There should be a clearly formulated strategy for the dissemination of information (for example, via specific information campaigns) and a method of evaluating its effectiveness should be designed as part of that strategy.

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