

**Home Office Research Study 243**

# Understanding the decision-making of asylum seekers

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

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## Glossary of terms

**Agent:** someone who assists asylum seekers (and perhaps other migrants) to leave one country and gain entry to another in exchange for a (one-off) financial reward. Agents are different from traffickers since the latter exploit the migrant and transport them to another country for continued financial gain, even after they arrive in the destination country. Traffickers might, for example, force migrants into prostitution or make them work illegally.

**Anticipatory asylum seeker:** someone who realises that circumstances in the country of origin will shortly make it impossible for them to continue to live there, and who therefore plans to leave in advance of that point in time. They therefore have the time to liquidate some of their assets and pre-plan how and when they will leave and where they will travel to.

**Asylum seeker:** someone who has fled their country of origin in order to make an asylum claim in another country.

**Convention refugee:** someone who has fled their country of origin because of persecution or fear of persecution, can meet all the requirements of the 1951 United Nations Convention on Refugees, and has therefore been granted full refugee status.

**Quota refugee:** someone who has already been granted a form of refugee status by the destination country before leaving the country of origin, usually as part of an internationally brokered agreement by which the destination country agrees to take a finite group (or quota) of refugees over a short period of time.

**Spontaneous asylum seeker:** an asylum seeker who has left their country of origin individually or as part of a small group and seeks to make their case for asylum only on entry to the destination country.



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## Executive summary

This research has two objectives. Firstly, to explore how and why a sample of asylum seekers in the UK had chosen to migrate to this country in preference to other possible destinations. Secondly, to incorporate in the explanations those values, attitudes and expectations that were subliminally held by asylum seekers, but which nevertheless informed their decision-making.

There were 65 interviews with asylum seekers in 63 households, with each interview lasting 80-120 minutes and being taped for later transcription. Interpreters were used when the respondent requested this. A minority of interpreters was drawn from the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) register. The majority was provided by refugee community organisations (RCOs). Most of the interpreters contracted through RCOs were themselves refugees.

There is no way of knowing whether the respondents constitute a representative sample of all asylum seekers and therefore the research does not claim to be representative. Whilst every effort was made to generate a sample that contained a wide variety of asylum seekers who had different experiences and legal statuses, some nationalities are unrepresented or underrepresented.

Many of those in the sample were fleeing persecution, violence or threats of violence. They were therefore more concerned about escaping from their country of origin than they were about which country they would eventually seek refuge in. The experiences of those in the sample group do not necessarily correspond with the wider population of asylum seekers. It may be that those who are genuinely in need of protection are more willing to engage in research of this kind.

The principal aim of respondents in the sample was to reach a place of safety. There were a number of factors influencing choice of final destination. One of these was the ability to pay for long distance travel. Some asylum seekers had to be satisfied with intermediate destinations including, in some cases, the UK.

Agents played a key role in channelling the asylum seekers in the sample to particular countries. Some agents simply facilitated travel to a destination chosen by the asylum seeker. Other agents directed asylum seekers to particular countries without giving them any choice. Yet other agents offered asylum seekers a priced 'menu' of destinations from which the asylum seeker could then choose.

For those respondents who were in a position to choose a destination country, several key factors shaped their decision to come to the UK. These were: whether they had relatives or friends here; their belief that the UK is a safe, tolerant and democratic country; previous links between their own country and the UK including colonialism; and their ability to speak English or desire to learn it.

There was very little evidence that the sample respondents had a detailed knowledge of: UK immigration or asylum procedures; entitlements to benefits in the UK; or the availability of work in the UK. There was even less evidence that the respondents had a comparative knowledge of how these phenomena varied between different European countries. Most of the respondents wished to work and support themselves during the determination of their asylum claim rather than be dependent on the state.

## Background

The conjoined topics of asylum seeking and asylum seekers became much more prominent issues in the UK during the late 1990s, and there have been few signs since then of any diminution in interest in them. There are perhaps three main reasons why the issue of asylum seekers has taken on greater prominence. These are:

- The growing scale of asylum seeking to the UK;
- Changes in public opinion towards the issue, as reflected and forged by media representations; and
- Increasing political concern about the demand for asylum seeking and the consequences of accepting more people as refugees.

Two beliefs underlie these concerns. Firstly, that many asylum seekers migrate to the UK to take advantage either of generous welfare benefits or permeable immigration controls rather than to flee persecution. Secondly, that asylum seekers have a sufficiently detailed knowledge about these phenomena to make rational and informed choices about destinations.

This sense of crisis and panic has been manifest in opinion polls inquiring about attitudes towards asylum seeking and asylum seekers. The Readers Digest (2001) poll of 2000 commissioned from MORI exemplifies this. This survey of adults throughout the UK found that 80 per cent thought refugees came to Britain because it is a 'soft touch'. *The Mail on Sunday* (2001) poll undertaken by MORI in 2000 uncovered very similar attitudes with 49 per cent of its respondents saying that they 'strongly agreed' that 'refugees come to Britain because they see Britain as a soft touch'. In addition, 59 per cent agreed with the statement that 'a very large number of those seeking asylum are cheats'. The popular media has often reflected such sentiments, as demonstrated by the *Daily Mail's* statement that 'we resent the scroungers, beggars and crooks who are prepared to cross every country in Europe to reach our generous benefits system' (Refugee Council, 2001).

The issue of asylum seekers occupies an important place in current British political and public debate, yet very little is known about why those claiming asylum in the UK do so here. Research examining the decision making processes of those fleeing persecution to the UK is extremely limited. Key questions remain unanswered, including whether and how asylum seekers actually choose their destination country, what criteria they use, and how they make this decision. Where research has been undertaken on these issues, it has often faced difficulties in reaching those best placed to answer such questions – asylum seekers and refugees themselves. Instead, research often had to rely on key informants from refugee organisations.

### **Existing research on the decision making of asylum seekers**

Two studies have examined why asylum seekers claim refuge in the UK (Morrison, 1998; Böcker and Havinga, 1998).

Morrison's (1998) report for the Refugee Council examined the smuggling of refugees to the UK. The research involved undertaking interviews both with key representatives from a range of organisations with responsibilities for refugees, and refugees themselves. A total of 27 case studies was used, representing five nationalities. The research sample included both men and women, from a range of age groups. It also encompassed respondents who had been in the UK for differing amounts of time, single people and family groups, and people who had experienced varying types and lengths of journeys to reach the UK. Morrison highlighted the fact that many refugees had very little choice in where they fled to, with it often being sheer coincidence that brought them to the UK. But Morrison also indicated that personal preference on the part of the individual can play a part in determining migration decisions. Important factors shaping respondents' desires to come to the UK included the presence here of family and friends, and the perception of Britain as a country that is "committed to protecting, and promoting human rights" (1988: 24). The author also made the point that many refugees flee to 'Europe', rather than a particular nation state within that continent.

The other main investigation into the reasons asylum seekers choose to come to the UK, was the comparative EU funded study of the Netherlands, Belgium and the UK undertaken by Böcker and Havinga in 1998. Forty five interviews were conducted with key informants, divided equally between the three countries. These key informants were persons working in refugee associations, organisations providing assistance to asylum seekers, lawyers, immigration officers and interpreters. Key informants represented about 60 per cent of those interviewed, with the remainder being individual refugees. Böcker and Havinga concluded that four main factors underpinned why asylum seekers opted for certain destinations in

preference to others. These were the ties that exist between countries of origin and refuge (e.g. colonial linkages, political and economic ties, and pre existing migration networks), perceptions of any country's economy, society and asylum policies, the varying physical and legal accessibility of different countries, and chance events during the journey.

Böcker and Havinga (1999) further argue that the relative importance of these four factors depends upon the nature of the departure itself. For those forced to flee at short notice, accessibility, and what happens on the journey itself may be the most important factors. For those with time to plan, the characteristics of possible host countries, and links that exist with these countries, may be more important. The report concluded by trying to rank the factors affecting migrant destinations. The authors argue that "for almost all interviewees, the most important factor influencing the country of destination for asylum was reported to be the presence of friends, relatives or compatriots in the country" (Böcker and Havinga 1999: 51). The asylum policies and reception procedures (such as housing) operated by individual nation states were thought to be relatively unimportant.

A number of authors have also considered the decision making of asylum seekers entering countries other than the UK. Two reports (Doornheim and Dijkhoff, 1995; Bijleveld and Taselaar, 2000) have looked at the Netherlands as a destination, and a third has looked at Canada (Barsky, 1995; 2000). Doornheim and Dijkhoff's (1995) work was based upon an examination of asylum cases and interviews. The study concluded that many asylum seekers were not specifically choosing the Netherlands, so much as a Western country. However, where the Netherlands was being actively selected, it was either: because an agent was making the choice; because an asylum seeker had family and friends there; or believed that the country was a democracy; or thought that their application for asylum would receive a fair hearing there. Bijleveld and Taselaar (2000) summarised the conclusions of a conference held in the Netherlands in 1999 that examined the 'pull factor' bringing people to the Netherlands. The research argued that it was important to distinguish between those people travelling with the aid of agents, and those travelling independently. Independent travellers "often have vague intuitive notions about the Netherlands as a kind, democratic, aliens friendly country with good social services. The presence of family and friends is also considered a pull factor for this group" (unpaginated). Conversely, agents often make well informed decisions about the destination to which asylum seekers will be sent. Important factors in their decision making include "the duration of the [asylum] procedure, the quality of care, the high success rate and the fact that the Netherlands can be characterised as a transport nation [i.e. it is a major centre of international air and sea routes]".

Outside of Europe, one of the most important investigations into the decision-making processes of asylum seekers is Barsky's work on asylum seekers in Canada (with particular reference to

Québec). The project involved interviews with 56 asylum seekers, and also with other key informants. Barsky concluded that asylum seekers often had little choice over their destination because of 'natural barriers', amongst which were access to financial resources, the absence of travel documents, and barriers put in place by states, such as airport and visa restrictions, and safe third country policies. But Barsky also argued that within these limitations, refugees were able to exercise some choice about where they sought asylum, and had clear reasons for applying to Canada in preference to other countries. Perceptions and knowledges of Canadian asylum policy, and the perceived characteristics of society in Canada/Québec were found to be important. The latter included perceptions of: welfare benefits; social policies; the political climate; levels of racism; a strong economy; good ethnic relations; opportunities for social mobility; human rights; and Canada being an 'Anglo' country.

More generally, Barsky (2000) also argued that asylum seeking plans can change radically while an individual is en route to the destination initially selected. As an asylum seeker transits through other countries s/he may acquire extra information. Circumstances might change. Or the agent might unilaterally make changes to arrangements.

Finally, Barsky also suggested that asylum seekers sometimes travel to relatively distant countries that have few connections to their country of origin, even when they could have claimed asylum in nearby nation states with which they have strong colonial ties or where there exists linguistic similarity. He identified four main reasons for such decisions. Firstly, asylum seekers may know that nearby countries have a low acceptance rate for refugees (or they may have already had an application refused there). This precipitates a longer migration to a country that is viewed as more likely to offer asylum. Secondly, neighbouring countries may be dangerous, or be perceived by asylum seekers as being unsafe. Thirdly, those people fleeing government instigated persecution may not wish to seek refuge in a country which has good political relationships with their country of origin, primarily for fear of deportation. Fourthly, despite the fact that the presence of co-ethnic communities in potential countries of destinations are often a positive attraction, they can also be a source of fear of further persecution. Some of Barsky's respondents knew that relatively small numbers of co-ethnics lived in Canada, and this positively influenced their decision making.

A brief review of the existing literature suggests that the amount of choice that asylum seekers have about where they flee to is extremely limited for four main reasons:

- Firstly, many people fleeing from persecution are 'acute refugees' forced to leave their country of origin at extremely short notice, and therefore with little time to plan journeys or destinations;

- Secondly, the access that people have to money and travel documents can determine how far they can travel, to which countries, and by what means;
- Thirdly, the pattern of transport networks, of visa restrictions and other immigration controls creates a situation where some countries are accessible, whilst others are not;
- Fourthly, asylum seekers often need to enlist the help of agents (or facilitators) to help them get out of their own country, and reach a place of safety. Although these agents make well informed decisions on the countries to which they send asylum seekers, these decisions may not reflect the choices of asylum seekers themselves, and the latter may not even be aware to which country they are travelling.

However, research also emphasises that asylum seekers do make active choices and decisions within the possibilities open to them, even if the amount of knowledge (and their ability to act upon it) is restricted. These choices are influenced by a number of factors.

Links between the place from which a person flees and their eventual country of refuge are often important. Colonial links for example create powerful connections for many asylum seekers. Languages and cultures may be shared and asylum seekers in ex-colonies may also view the 'mother country' in an idealised way, and consider that it has a duty to accept them when they apply for asylum. Established traditions of migration to a particular country and the presence there of a large community of co-ethnics create strong attractions.

The characteristics of particular countries may also make them attractive to individual asylum seekers. The levels of acceptance of asylum seekers and the ways in which countries support refugees can be important considerations. Perceptions of the general characteristics of a host country, such as its political culture, landscape or traditions can also act as attractions.

In addition, factors unique to individual asylum seekers are important. The presence of family or friends can act as strong pulls towards an individual country.

### **The scope of this research project**

This research set out to examine why and how a sample of asylum seekers (who were already resident in the UK) had chosen to migrate to the UK, and what knowledge and perceptions they had at their disposal to make this decision.

In order to make the project feasible, the scope of the research was narrowed down to the population of asylum seekers who had already sought and gained entry to the UK, and then to a sample of these. This sampling strategy imposes three limitations on the research work. Firstly, since no research was undertaken amongst asylum seekers resident in other European countries, it is not possible to comment on the motivations of those who considered the UK as a destination but then rejected it, or those who never even considered the UK at all.

Secondly, since no part of this research was undertaken in the countries of origin, it was not possible to engage directly with asylum seekers who were actively making up their minds about which country to flee to. It is acknowledged that this research is retrospective in nature and therefore relies upon the accurate recall of the respondents and also might involve a degree of ex post facto rationalisation.

Finally, the sample size was restricted to 65 asylum seekers. Although this is a larger sample than has been used in any other comparable study, and is also a large sample for qualitative research, it is not possible to assess whether the research respondents are statistically representative of the asylum seeking population of the UK. Given the absence of any reliable quantitative data on the socio demographic characteristics of this segment of the national population, it is not possible for this research to claim representativeness. It should however be noted that some nationalities are unrepresented or underrepresented in this research sample and also that a high number were in need of protection relative to the overall asylum seeking population. It may be that those who are genuinely in need of protection are more willing to engage in research of this kind. It should therefore be noted that throughout this report the research findings relate only to the sample respondents, unless otherwise stated.

### **Specific objectives of the study**

The aim of this project was to examine the factors and knowledges that underlie the decision of asylum seekers to migrate to one country rather than another. This necessarily required an investigation of the degree to which asylum seekers had control over their eventual destination and the amount of choice they had had. In addition the perceptions and images of the UK, the specific factors which attracted them to the UK and the factors which discouraged them from going elsewhere were examined.

In writing this report it is recognised that the term 'choice' is a contentious one when applied to the migration of asylum seekers. Therefore the research begins from the position that



personal decision making is rarely a rational exercise in which people have full knowledge of all the alternatives and weigh them in some conscious process designed to maximise returns. Nor is it believed that asylum seekers are passive victims propelled around the world by external forces (Kunz, 1973). Instead, the research conceptualises asylum seekers as active agents who search out both information and contacts and change, circumvent, and create institutions in order to achieve desired objectives.

The subsequent chapters do not examine, in any great depth, the circumstances which had led to the respondents' migration to the UK. Nevertheless this topic was discussed at the beginning of each interview, because it was at the heart of each interviewee's experience, and it was what mattered to them. Knowledge of the circumstances that had led people to flee their home countries is an essential precursor to understanding the decisions they subsequently make about how and where to claim asylum.

Most of the respondents had not left their home country from choice. They had left simply to safeguard their lives. The overwhelming impetus for leaving home was to reach a place of safety; and for many people it did not matter greatly where that place was, or what kind of place it might be. This was especially so for those acute asylum seekers who were forced to leave home overnight, for fear of being murdered or tortured. Houses, cars, jobs, families were left behind. People had no idea where they would go, or if they would ever come back. Old people, young people and families were uprooted overnight and removed from everything they knew and everything they had.

If asylum seekers are seen as active agents, each adopting different strategies and each with different goals, it is necessary to reconceptualise flight, seeing it not as a single event but as a process rooted within and informed by the biography of that individual. The decision to flee, and the subsequent decision about where to flee to, arise from an individual's past, represent that individual's present and frequently shape their future. Moreover, the various influences that constitute an individual's biography might be consciously acknowledged by that individual or they may operate at a taken for granted level. Giddens (1984) describes the latter level as the 'practical consciousness'.

Adopting such a view of decision-making does not totally individualise all decision making or deny the possibility of generalising about decision making since people who live in the same historical, political and cultural setting will share elements of their biographies, for example access to migration networks or having lived in a former colony. A key objective of this research is therefore to explore how an individual's biography affects their decision making, both explicitly and at the level of practical consciousness.

Gaining access to this deeper level of explanation is particularly important in circumstances where respondents have a vested interest in telling particular stories. Only by penetrating the practical level of consciousness can deliberate attempts by respondents to represent themselves in particular ways be challenged. Barsky (1995), for example, found that asylum seekers consciously represented themselves to immigration officers in a way that was designed to make them appear consonant with the 'American Dream'.

## **Methodology**

### ***Choosing a data collection methodology***

These beliefs about human agency, and its complexity and rootedness in individual biographies, led to the adoption of qualitative research methods, specifically in depth interviews. It was felt this was the only way that the practical consciousness of the respondents could be explored and the depth and quality of information that is needed be gained. Such techniques are now well established in the field of refugee studies. It is acknowledged that erring towards quality of data in preference to sample size prejudices the ability to generalise out from the sample and prevents claims that the sample and data are representative. Given the potential complexity of the decision making process and the desire to penetrate the level of practical consciousness it is felt this was a trade off worth making.

The topic guide was piloted with three refugees in South Wales. This allowed the interviewers to develop both familiarity with the material and their interviewing strategies. It also ensured that the research had not omitted pertinent material, and gave the opportunity to check the responses that were likely to be obtained from particular lines of enquiry. After each pilot interview the interviewees were formally invited to describe how they felt about the setting, content and conduct of the interview, how they had found the interview technique, what lines of enquiry they had found sensitive and whether there were any other issues that should have been discussed. A point was also made of asking directly how the interview could have been improved. Piloting proved to be a very useful process and highlighted a number of issues important to this research: firstly, the issues of trust and honesty to which the report turn to in Gaining trust (page 14) and Verifying research results (page 16); secondly, the fact that the research would have to accommodate the desire of most respondents to tell 'their story', even if some of this was not strictly relevant to this project; and thirdly, the very strong emotions that surfaced when people talked of their pasts, and therefore the need to be ready for this and sensitive to it.

After piloting, the topic list that was used to guide interviews contained six sections and some 40 issues (see Annex 1). Interviews lasted about 80 minutes, although some took up to 120 minutes. Permission was sought to record all interviews for later transcribing, and only three respondents refused this request. In these cases written notes were taken during the interview and these were later augmented from memory. The tapes were then transcribed.

### ***Sampling strategy***

Although it was impossible to derive a statistically representative sample of respondents, the research attempted to capture as many different types of experiences and voices as possible. Purposive sampling ensured that the research had a variety of respondents along the following criteria: country of origin, gender, age, length of residence in the UK, legal status in the UK, place of residence in the UK, household type, and type of migration (e.g. whether respondents had come into the UK as part of a group or individually). At the Home Office's request four main nationalities (Somalis, Sri Lankans, Iranians, and Romanians) were over sampled.

### ***Locating respondents***

Finding asylum seekers and refugees in the community is commonly acknowledged to be problematic, given the level of official information that exists about this part of the population (Robinson, 1998). Initially, the Home Office was to provide a sampling frame of names and addresses of asylum seekers and refugees to be contacted for the research. However, the Data Protection Act prevented this, forcing the research study to source respondents from other contacts and organisations which were approached for introductions.

There were four generalisable lessons learned from trying to assemble a sample in this way. Firstly, most of the organisations that were cold called were reluctant to co-operate in the research despite assurances of impartiality and confidentiality. Secondly, there was considerable reluctance to participate in a study being funded by the Home Office, even though it was emphasised that this research was independent of the Home Office and that the Home Office's role was solely as funders. Thirdly, the research met considerable suspicion about its motives, rooted in a belief that Home Office involvement in the project reflected a hidden agenda. Lastly, the research faced even greater difficulties getting organisations to help source and encourage respondents when it became clear that no incentives or gifts would be offered directly to respondents. Only after negotiations with the Home Office was the research team able to offer limited travelling expenses to some respondents.

Despite these obstacles it was possible to persuade organisations and individuals to assist with the research. Three factors were central to this success. The first of these was having prior contacts with known individuals in organisations who were prepared to trust the research team, and the motives of the research. These key contacts then persuaded others of the integrity of the research and vouched for it, a process that then gathered momentum with each successful interview or contact with an organisation. The second contributor to the research success was the credibility of the researchers, who were already known to organisations and in some cases had already worked with them on joint projects. And thirdly was the belief that asylum seekers would have an opportunity to speak directly to the Home Office through this research.

Interpreters were sourced from the IND register and also from within refugee communities. Where an organisation that introduced the researchers to the respondents was also able to provide professional interpreters, this opportunity was taken and was found to assist in building trust between the organisation, individual asylum seekers and the project itself. In other cases, organisations recommended an interpreter who worked within the community, and again contracting someone known to potential respondents proved to be a valuable way of establishing credibility and building trust. Sometimes, however, these trusted intermediaries were not actually professional interpreters, and although they did their best, the quality of translation was not perfect. This was considered to be an acceptable trade off for accessing respondents and gaining trust. In addition, all the unofficial interpreters had been asylum seekers and this gave them valuable knowledge. In some cases they stated their own view after having translated that of the respondent, and while this was discouraged, some quotes of this type have been used in this report, although attribution is clear. All respondents were offered the services of an interpreter and some of those who did not require one nevertheless requested that an interpreter be present.

### ***Conducting the interview***

The interviews for this research were conducted between October 2000 and February 2001. All potential respondents were provided with a flyer that described the purpose of the study, who was funding the work, the duration and broad content of the interview, and information about the backgrounds of the two researchers undertaking the project. In some cases these flyers were distributed personally by the research team who also provided a verbal précis of its content and offered to answer any questions. In other cases the organisations themselves preferred to distribute and explain the contents of the research flyers, so as to maintain the anonymity of potential respondents until such time as they offered to participate in the study.

Those respondents who agreed to help were then contacted directly to arrange a time and location for the interview. An effort was made to accommodate any reasonable request for timing of interviews and respondents were offered a choice of three possible locations for the interview: the respondent's own home; the premises of the organisation which had introduced the research to them; or neutral territory such as a hired room. Most of the respondents opted for the second of these options. Interviewees were also given a choice of a male or female interviewer.

Thirteen interviews were conducted at Tinsley House Detention Centre near Gatwick Airport. Centre managers provided a list of those being detained, their nationality, gender and native tongue. A sample was then selected from the list of detainees and staff brought detainees individually to an interview room where they were left to participate in the research without supervision. The research project was then described and detainees asked whether they would be willing to be interviewed. Only one person declined, on the advice of his solicitor. All interviews were then conducted in an interview room, without the presence of Centre staff.

The conduct of the interview followed strict guidelines with each respondent being told the purpose of the survey, the role of the Home Office as funder of the research, and that the final report would not name or identify any individual respondent. Respondents were also told that they could decline to answer any individual question to which they objected, and that they could end the interview at any point without offence. Lastly, but very importantly, they were informed that nothing they said would have a positive or negative influence on their asylum application, if that was still pending.

The research was designed to ensure that each interview was a guided conversation, and that it created and sustained a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. This will be discussed further in a subsequent section.

Lastly, all interviews were undertaken by one of three interviewers. Each of these had considerable experience of qualitative empathetic field research. Team interviewing was used in about a third of the interviews, as it was felt that this offered considerable benefits that justified the extra cost. In addition, Opinion Research Services of Swansea was contracted to undertake a proportion of the research interviews. This brought a researcher to the project who was highly skilled in qualitative interviewing but was new to the field of refugee studies and therefore came without any academic pre-conceptions. This helped ensure that the research did not simply find what the literature had taught to expect.

## Sample characteristics

In total 63 interview sessions were undertaken. Table 1.1 shows the breakdown of interviews by nationality. It shows that while the research ensured that approximately 80 per cent of the respondents were sampled from the four nationalities specified by the Home Office, it also included a variety of other voices and experiences, including those who had entered some time ago as quota refugees.

**Table 1.1: Number of interviews by nationality**

Sri Lanka	21
Somalia	8
Iran	14
Romania	7
Chile	3
Iraq	2
Sudan	2
Ukraine	1
Algeria	1
Afghanistan	1
Rwanda	1
Congo	1
Saudi Arabia	1
Total	63

In total 65 people were interviewed during the 63 interview sessions, because there were two married couples interviewed. Thirty one per cent of respondents were female and 69 per cent male.

As Table 1.2 demonstrates, the modal length of residence of respondents in the UK was 1 to 5 years, although some had just arrived, and others had been here many years. This was reflected in the different immigration statuses of respondents. Twenty nine per cent were still awaiting a decision, 20 per cent had had their application refused and were either awaiting an appeal or deportation, 19 per cent had been granted full refugee status, and 12 per cent had been granted Exceptional Leave to Remain. Thirteen respondents (20 per cent of the total number of people interviewed) did not disclose their immigration status.

**Table 1.2: Length of residence of respondents in UK at time of interview**

	Number	%
Less than 1 year	18	28
1 – 5 years	31	48
5 – 10 years	7	11
Over 10 years	8	12
Not disclosed	1	1
Total	65	100

Table 1.3 shows that, not unexpectedly, most of the respondents were relatively young when they arrived in the UK, with only 8 per cent aged more than 40 years and three arriving as children.

**Table 1.3: Age of respondents on arrival in Britain**

	Number	%
0 – 15	3	5
16 – 24	25	38
25 – 39	17	26
40 – 59	1	2
60 +	4	6
Not disclosed <sup>1</sup>	15	23
Total	65	100%

Table 1.4 indicates that the respondents had had a range of occupations in their countries of origin. The largest number had either been in education or had been unemployed, but others had been shopkeepers, teachers, civil servants, businessmen, engineers or in medicine.

1. In these cases the interviewer(s) did not feel that it was appropriate to ask the interviewee how old they were, or the interviewee declined to disclose this information. Most interviewees for whom precise age information could not be ascertained were either in their late teens or 20s.

**Table 1.4: Occupation of respondents in country of origin**

In full time education	21
Not working	4
Shop proprietor	3
Teacher	3
Businessman	2
Government worker	2
Working in a hospital	2
Engineer	2
Military service	1
Banking inspector	1
Lorry driver	1
Electrician	1
Social worker	1
Doctor	1
Market salesman	1
Agriculture	1
Other	8
Not disclosed	10
Total	65

Lastly, of the 63 interviews, 33 per cent were undertaken in South Wales (mainly in the Cardiff area), 24 per cent in Birmingham, 21 per cent in the Tinsley House detention centre at Gatwick airport, 11 per cent in London and 11 per cent in Crawley.

## Fieldwork issues

Two main issues arose during the conduct of the fieldwork and these are worthy of fuller discussion. These include issues around gaining the trust of asylum seeker respondents, and how to ensure that the results of qualitative research are reliable.

### *Gaining trust*

Given that many asylum seekers and refugees have been the victims of persecution, harassment and violence in their countries of origins it was not surprising that the issue of trust permeated all aspects of the research.



This report has already described how important it was for organisations to first have trust in the researchers before they introduced them to potential respondents. The policy of full disclosure was also important in building trust with potential respondents. The research team not only explained the purpose of the survey fully and honestly, but also explained its relationship with the Home Office. Since this research was asking people to trust it with the information collected, it also made a conscious attempt to give trust. Before the interview efforts were made to ensure that the research flyers distributed to potential respondents contained information about the researchers and their careers to date. Ex-directory home telephone numbers were included on the flyers as a sign of good faith and openness. Potential respondents were encouraged to ring to discuss the project and any concerns they might have about it.

Conscious steps were taken during the interview to create an atmosphere of trust and openness. The room was laid out in an informal manner (for example without tables and with chairs in a circle rather than facing each other), the microphone and tape recorder were discreetly placed and most respondents were offered a beverage on arrival.

At the start of the interview physical contact with the interviewee was made where this was culturally appropriate, usually through either handshakes or a hug. Humour was introduced into proceedings as quickly as possible to lighten the atmosphere and dispel any impression that the researchers were cold or impersonal technocrats. In order to achieve the same objective, considerable thought was also given to what clothes to be worn for particular interviews. For example, suits or dark clothing were not worn in interviews with Eastern Europeans since such a dress code is frequently associated with members of the secret police. For interviews with Sri Lankan respondents ties and jackets were worn since academics in Sri Lanka are respected members of the community and would be expected to dress formally. The research also took into account the difference in age between the interviewers and respondents in order to relate the research to respondents of different ages.

Throughout the interview body language that was open and trusting was adopted, and a great deal of enthusiastic and confirmatory feedback to respondents was provided. Humour was used during the interviews where appropriate. Tissues were always available when respondents became upset by recounting their experiences, and the interview was adjourned (and tape recorder turned off) until the respondents were ready to continue so that the research did not intrude on the respondent's distress. These measures helped create a rapport between the interviewer and the respondent.

Finally, it was felt that a good measure of the degree to which the research had won the trust of the respondents was their willingness to endorse the research to other potential interviewees. Both in Tinsley House and in the community, former interviewees often became the supporters and facilitators of this research.

### ***Verifying research results***

Whilst the use of empathetic qualitative research is essential when trying to penetrate respondents' practical consciousness, it does have consequences. Chief amongst these is the issue of verification. While a formal questionnaire undertaken with a large sample produces results that are statistically verifiable, and therefore meet the conventional criteria of scientific 'proof', the same cannot be said of qualitative research. Rather, the researcher has to look elsewhere for 'verification' and use different measures to demonstrate the 'quality' of their data, and the honesty of their respondents.

The following are the factors that suggest that respondents were honest in their answers:

- A significant proportion of the respondents had nothing to lose by being honest. They had either already been granted the right to remain in the UK, or they knew that their application for asylum had failed and that they were about to be deported. Whatever they said would not affect their legal status;
- Once they had trust in the research many respondents volunteered information that was highly sensitive and much of this related to issues which were not of direct interest to the research. For example, detailed information was volunteered about illegal immigration routes, mechanisms, prices and agents;
- Some of the respondents were honest to the point where it would have damaged their asylum claim had the collected information been used by the Home Office to examine individual asylum claims. A very small number of respondents, for example, said that they had migrated to the UK simply to find work, and that they had used the asylum channel of immigration because they thought it would maximise their chances of entry;
- The respondents were frequently divulging information that had resonance in the literature;

- A number of respondents kept in contact with the research project and research team after their interviews, which would have been unlikely if they had been deliberately dishonest during the interview.

Although these independent indicators suggest that the respondents were honest, conscious steps were taken to maximise the likelihood of responses being honest, additional to the trust building referred to above. Two strategies were particularly important in this context.

First, establishing the position of the research with respondents. This enabled the researchers to be seen as 'listening ears' and not critical scientists. This was done at the start of the interview by explaining the researchers' interest in their experiences and in them as people. Each respondent had an extended opportunity to tell about the circumstances that led to their asylum seeking in the UK, even though this information was not strictly essential to the project. The research position was further affirmed at the beginning and end of the interview by explaining that the research would give asylum seekers a voice that might challenge media stereotypes. This was often pivotal in the conduct of the interview. A number of respondents even said that they were desperate for someone to tell the world (and the Home Office) the 'real story' of asylum seeking.

Second, during the interview the research adopted a strategy of triangulation, through continual probing. The conversations were managed in such a way that the same information was requested in different ways and at different points in the interview, so that the veracity of answers could be checked. Connections were continually sought between disparate answers.

## **Analysis**

The analysis of the research material was lengthy but straightforward. An iterative process was designed to identify key themes which ran through a number of interviews. The key themes in the material were identified through repeatedly listening to the tapes and reading the transcripts. The search for key themes was also informed by reading the literature and prior knowledge of asylum seeking and refugee migration. Once key themes had been identified, these were then verified by re-reading the transcripts in order to find supporting or contradictory evidence. When these themes were found to be adequately grounded in the interviews and were also the most significant issues to come from the interviews, quotations from the transcripts to exemplify or amplify the point that was being made were extracted. This iterative process was completed separately by two researchers who then

brought their findings together and compared and discussed them. This procedure was designed to ensure that any personal analytical biases possessed by either researcher had to be fully and convincingly justified.

## **Summary**

This research employs empathetic qualitative field methods to investigate why asylum seekers might choose to migrate to the UK rather than another destination country. The choice of research method was driven by a desire to understand the complexity of decision making and to contextualise the decision to migrate within the individual's longer historical, cultural and social biography. While such methods offer considerable benefits they also have potential weaknesses which have been discussed above. Earning the trust of respondents and devising alternative means of verifying the quality/honesty of responses was central to the research approach.

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## 2.

# The role of agents

This chapter looks at three key issues: first, the actual services that agents provide; second, the different interactions that take place between agents and asylum seekers, focusing upon the extent to which the agent imposes particular destinations; and third, the ways in which agents can less directly influence the decision-making processes of asylum seekers.

Before addressing these points it is important to note that agents were critical determinants of the destination eventually reached by asylum seekers. Overall, 42 of the respondents had been assisted by agents, but this was true of nearly all the Sri Lankans and Iranians that were interviewed. Respondents said that agents often offered the only means of escaping the country of origin and reaching a place where asylum could be sought. Consequently if individual asylum seekers wanted to leave their home country they had to give over control of migration decision-making to these paid facilitators. In some cases agents were in a position to impose their will upon their clients about destinations and routes, but in others, agents and asylum seekers negotiated, with the outcome depending on the ability of the latter to pay and the former to deliver chosen destinations.

### **Services provided by agents**

This research has found that, in simple terms, agents provided three types of services to asylum seekers:

The first of these was the provision of travel documents, including tickets, visas and passports. One of the respondents, for example, used an agent to flee from Sri Lanka. She paid 600,000 Sri Lankan rupees, for which she received a false passport and air tickets to London via Singapore and South Africa. Another Sri Lankan woman was provided with passports for herself and her daughter, and travel from Jaffna to Trincomalee, Trincomalee to Colombo, Colombo to Moscow, where they stayed over for two days and then Moscow to Heathrow. For this the agent charged £20,000. A Yemeni simply bribed a Saudi Arabian agent to arrange an exit visa for him.

The second type of service offered by agents was the actual facilitation of journeys. In certain cases, agents even travelled with asylum seekers, often so that they could re-possess false documentation before arrival in the UK. One of the respondents (an Afghan male) for

example described how he had left Afghanistan on foot through the hills to find an agent recommended to him by his cousin. This agent then transported the asylum seeker in stages by road to Moscow, travelling only at night in lorries, a journey that took some two and a half to three months. Another respondent, an Iranian male, contracted an agent to take him from Iran, through Iraq to Turkey. This cost him \$400 and involved being transported by car, lorry and donkey. He then paid another agent in Istanbul to take him to the UK in the back of an articulated lorry, for which he paid a further \$3500.

The third type of service was the channelling of asylum seekers towards particular destinations, either through limiting the possibilities available to them, offering a choice of migration destinations, or giving advice on specific countries. One Iranian man described how he had asked an agent in Turkey about the possibility of travel to various countries, and explained that he would prefer to travel to Australia, New Zealand or Canada. The agent told him that these destinations were difficult to arrange and very expensive. The respondent then enquired about the Netherlands and Germany, but was told by the agent that these were 'not good places to go to'. The agent recommended the UK instead, suggesting that it was easier to get into, and easier to get asylum there because Britain needed and respected cheap labour. Another respondent, a Sri Lankan female, approached a trusted agent (a 'good man' in her words) and was offered France, Switzerland, Germany and the UK as possible destinations, from which she picked the latter. Each destination had a different price, and direct travel to a country was more expensive than travel via third countries. A Sri Lankan female described how the agent she approached in Jaffna was offering a variety of destinations (France, Germany and England) but how he was selecting destinations for his clients according to the languages they spoke and where they had friends and relatives resident. He chose the UK for her because she spoke English.

The exact mix of services provided to any one client varied greatly, according to the relationship that existed between the agent and asylum seeker and their relative 'power' in any negotiations. This report considers these different relationships in the next section.

### **Balance of power between asylum seekers and agents**

Three main types of interaction between agent and asylum seeker were found to exist. In each of these, the decision-making process was differently weighted between the agent and asylum seeker. In some cases the asylum seeker chose the destination, whereas in others it was the agent who made this decision on behalf of his client.

In the first of these types of interaction, the asylum seeker is the decision-maker. Some asylum seekers knew where they wanted to travel prior to contact with an agent. In such cases the agent acted simply as a facilitator, providing travel documents and assisting with the actual journey, but not playing an active role in shaping the migration destination. For example, a male Sri Lankan respondent said that *'I had the intention of coming to London from the beginning, with the help of the agent'*.

In some instances, the agent is the decision-maker and determines the migration destination. In these cases the asylum seeker had no involvement in deciding where they would seek refuge. Agents sometimes offered to take asylum seekers to a 'safe country', without giving any indication of where this might be, or enquiring whether the asylum seeker had any preferences. One male Sri Lankan respondent indicated that he did not know that he was going to the UK and was only told by the agent that he would be taken to a place where he could seek asylum: *"Until I came here I did not know it was London"*.

In other instances (especially in Sri Lanka) agents negotiated with older relatives of the asylum seeker, with the latter not being consulted about possible destinations.

In some cases, the agent offered only one destination. This might have been because the agent had already made arrangements for a group of people to travel together to that destination. In this situation, the asylum seeker may be faced with the choice of taking the immediate offer of coming to the UK with a group, or having their departure delayed. For many, this was not a real choice. If they turned down the offer, they would either face further persecution (if they were still in the home country) or possible deportation (if they were already en route).

*[The agent said I am] sending a group to Britain... 'Do you want to go with them?'. I said OK ...*

(Male respondent, Iran)

*The person told me... 'I have a ticket and you can go to London, to England', so I say 'I have to take that chance to go'*

(Male respondent, Congo)

Agents sometimes offered clients the choice of taking one offer that was already available or waiting for another in the future. In cases where the UK was offered first, respondents accepted this offer rather than wait longer:

*So this person who said they could arrange for you to leave the country – was it only Britain that he was suggesting?*

(Researcher)

*No, there were other places as well.... But [the UK] is the first place...he could get people into...*

(Female respondent, Somalia)

Between these extremes of the asylum seeker being solely responsible for the destination and the agent directing clients, there was a middle ground, which entailed negotiation between the parties and a more equal decision-making process. The majority of respondents either had a preformed idea of where they would most like to travel to, but for a number of reasons, their chosen agent would not or could not assist them in undertaking migration to that place; or had no preformed idea of where they would claim asylum but chose from a range of options offered them.

### **Mechanisms by which agents channel migration**

In two of the three types of agent-asylum seeker interaction described, the agent plays some part in shaping the destination of the migration, either through imposing or negotiating a destination. Agents can channel the migration of asylum seekers in three main ways, each of which are discussed below.

#### ***Negative channelling: denial of access to certain countries***

One of the key factors determining where an asylum seeker can travel to is the amount of money that s/he can afford to spend on their migration. Longer distance migration generally incurs larger payments to agents. However, the cost of migration also depends on whether direct transportation links are available and other factors which make it easier for the agent to facilitate travel for asylum seekers to that destination. Agents therefore charge different prices for different destinations and make this explicit to the asylum seeker. As one male Iranian put it “[t]he agent...said different price for different countries. And Europe was cheaper to get to, because it’s closer...”

The cost of travelling to any one country also varies according to the route taken. Direct air journeys from Sri Lanka to the UK, for example, cost more than a longer journey via Russia that may include clandestine travel by foot or lorry for much of the way. While such journeys



are cheaper they involve much more risk. Travel may be in dangerous environments (the respondents spoke of travel in containers and in the engine compartments of trains), and it may involve stopovers that increase the chance of detection. So asylum seekers have to balance danger against cost.

*If you stop in places two, three . . . sometimes it take three months...*

(Male respondent, Sri Lanka)

*And that's a lot cheaper?*

(Researcher)

*People advise me, don't do that, it's dangerous...they will put you in a room...with a lot of people...men, women. And you don't know what is happening. So I didn't want to take a chance.*

(Male respondent, Sri Lanka)

Some respondents had a clear idea of where they wanted to travel to, but their chosen agent(s) could not, or would not, assist them. Those attempting to travel from Iran to Canada, for instance, found that they could not afford this. One female respondent from Iran said that *"I like Canada ... I asked the smuggler: 'Is it possible for me to go there?' But they asked for more money which I hadn't had"*. A male respondent from Sri Lanka similarly commented that *"if I go [to] America or Australia I have to spend more money. If I come [to the UK] I'd spend nearly £5000. Australia is £7000, America is £8000"*.

Agents also refused to assist with migrations to distant countries because it was too difficult for them to do so, or because they did not undertake smuggling to that country. In these cases the agent therefore acted as a gatekeeper, denying access to certain countries.

### ***Positive channelling: offering a range of possibilities***

Where asylum seekers approached an agent with no clear idea of where they wanted to go, or where asylum seekers had been denied their initial choice of destination, agents frequently offered a range of alternative destinations. By doing so the agent set the parameters within which the asylum seeker could choose, most often based upon the amount of money the asylum seeker could afford to pay. It was at this point that many of the respondents became active decision-makers.

In many cases respondents undertook an initial land journey with the help of a first agent, and having reached a major city with good air links, approached another agent with the intention of travelling to their chosen destination. For example, Iranian respondents who reached Istanbul by land with the hope of onward air travel to the United States found that they could not afford to reach that continent. Instead, agents offered a list of European countries to which the agent operated and that were within the means of the asylum seeker.

This kind of negotiation is important for two reasons. Firstly, it demonstrates how in many cases, the range of destinations considered by an asylum seeker can change radically before or during the journey if assistance with travel to the asylum seeker's preferred destination is denied. More specifically, it suggests that many asylum seekers had not initially considered seeking asylum in the UK until an agent presented this as a possible option. Secondly, negotiation is important because images, knowledges and perceptions of countries that may not have been used in the initial choice of destination may only come into play later when agents offer alternatives. One Iranian man said "[when I was in Istanbul] somebody told me 'You can go to England', and I remember all the things from childhood I [knew about] London".

### ***Positive channelling: offering advice on different destinations***

In a minority of cases agents advised on the best country for the asylum seeker, though the advice they gave was often very limited and generalised. Where the UK had been recommended as a desirable destination, this tended to be for two reasons: its attitudes and policies towards asylum seekers and the fact that English is spoken. The type of advice offered to asylum seekers on these issues is discussed below.

Agents generally portrayed the UK as a country where asylum seekers were made welcome, and where individuals would be allowed to enter if they presented a good explanation of their circumstances to officials. In several cases, the UK was painted as being more sympathetic towards refugees than other European countries:

*I ask him about the other countries...Germany... is not good at all. Netherlands and UK is better than the other countries*

(Male respondent, Iran)

*The agent tell[s] me UK is best for refugee at the moment. Government accepts many refugees*

(Male respondent, Iran)

*England people they have a good relationship with foreigner*

(Male respondent, Iran)

One interviewee from Iran, for example, explained that the agent advised him to go to the UK in preference to other European countries because he had no documents to support his claim for asylum and the UK was more likely to accept him as a refugee because it was 'sympathetic'.

Another common reason for an agent advising a respondent to come to the UK was the language:

*I wanted to go to France...[or]...Sweden, but they say England is better... because the spoken language is English. English is the most common language in the world, so I say okay.*

(Female respondent, Iran)

The welfare support offered to asylum seekers after entry was rarely described or mentioned by agents. Where information about support for asylum seekers was provided, it was usually in a highly generalised form and did not mention specific entitlements or restrictions. Very little information was provided by agents on the level of welfare benefits, the type of housing provided for asylum seekers, or the employment opportunities and regulations for refugees. Respondents were told simply that they would be 'looked after' if they went to the UK.

It may be that agents simply recommended the UK as a destination because that was easier for them to arrange rather than because it benefited the asylum seeker, although there is no research evidence of this.

## **Conclusion**

This research indicates that agents play a key role in directing migration towards or away from particular countries. However, the influence of the agent upon any given individual asylum seeker depends on the circumstances. In some cases the asylum seeker has the knowledge and resources to ensure they achieve their preferred destination. At the opposite extreme some of the respondents were sent to countries without being told their destination. For the majority of respondents, however, the interaction between agent and asylum seeker was relatively equal in nature with the eventual destination being a joint decision based on the asylum seeker's preferences, the availability of migration networks, the proximity of the preferred country and asylum seeker's ability to pay.

The research also found that agents channel migration in both negative and positive ways. They can deny travel to certain locations, offer asylum seekers menus of countries to which they can travel, or offer advice on the relative merits of different countries, most often based upon their asylum policies, and the advantages of linguistic similarity.

Where the options available to asylum seekers are limited by agents, they nevertheless make active choices and value judgements within these limitations. Asylum seekers are often forced to completely re-evaluate their migration plans at very short notice, and this can happen during the journey as well as before departure from the country of origin. Unable to travel to the United States, for instance, and faced with a new, limited set of migration choices within Europe, asylum seekers often draw upon their perceptions of life in those countries as they make their decisions.

Images of the UK as a country were more extensive and of greater relevance to the decision-making of asylum seekers in the sample than perceptions of UK asylum procedures or welfare support. Whilst images of the UK were obviously unimportant for those who had no say in their destination, for the remainder perceptions of the UK (and their quantity and quality) were often crucial in shaping their decision to seek asylum here.

In understanding the role that images of the UK played in shaping the decision to seek asylum here, two points need to be emphasised. Firstly, such images do not operate in isolation, but are relevant within the wider context of the asylum seeker's reasons for leaving their country of origin. Secondly, asylum seekers actively negotiate the images they received of the UK, and are not merely passive recipients.

The analysis of the interviews has isolated four sets of images that influenced whether the respondents chose to come to the UK. Each of these images is discussed in turn, and quotations that demonstrate their significance are provided. Limitations of space prevent extensive use of quotations, so instead those that are used reflect the types of comments most typically made by respondents.

### **The context of images of the UK**

It is important to consider the role of images about the UK in context. In only a tiny minority (three out of 65 interviews) was evidence found to suggest that the respondents chose to leave their native countries specifically because of the perceived attractions of living in the UK. Images of life here were not the reason for leaving home. Rather, in nearly all cases studied, actual or perceived persecution was the impetus for migration, and people were electing to leave their home countries rather than move to particular destinations.

In terms of quality of life, the main thing to be gained from moving to the UK was personal safety. Leaving home also meant leaving family, homes, jobs and personal possessions. For many life in the UK meant a reduction in their perceived quality of life, and immense cultural and linguistic barriers. The UK was certainly not viewed as a land of 'milk and honey'. On a number of occasions, interviewees were puzzled as to why a considerable amount of the discussion was focused on what they knew about the UK before they came here. Their key

concern was for their safety. As one Sri Lankan respondent put it *"I am only interested in the civil war"*. Another extolled the virtues of his own country relative to the UK: *"... the living conditions are better in a sense. Open field and weather is good. It is nice to be in our country. We are only here because of the problem. Given a chance, if things are good, we [will] all go back"*.

It is also important to recognise that asylum seekers are not passive recipients of the images and knowledges that they receive. The research respondents were sometimes aware that the images of the UK held before leaving their home country were exactly that and might not be borne out in reality. In particular they realised that countries changed and that their perceptions might be outdated. They were also aware that they were acquiring information from a variety of different sources and that this might lead to contradictions and inconsistencies. For instance, the government-controlled media in Iran had portrayed the UK in a very different light to the BBC World Service. Even so, asylum seekers had clearly sorted through these views of the UK, thereby actively shaping their opinions.

Where asylum seekers were offered a choice of countries by agents, they were far more likely to choose the country about which they knew most. The relative quantity of information that interviewees had about the UK was important as well as the nature of that information:

*He [the agent] said first Holland... I said 'I don't know anything about that'. Second idea, Germany. And I don't have any knowledge about that country. Then he said, 'Okay you go to France'. Same answer. So... I said 'take me to London'*

(Male respondent, Sri Lanka)

## **The political climate of the UK**

A theme that threaded through many interviews was that Britain was a peaceful, safe country where they could live quietly. One female respondent from Rwanda commented that *"people are not fighting. No violence around. It's a good place to live"*. In another case, a male respondent from Sri Lanka knew only that he was going to a war-free zone.

Knowledge of the UK as a democratic country was also widespread. Many respondents knew that British political institutions had a long history. A number of interviewees indicated that they thought the UK would be a democracy because it was a European country:

*I hear only little bit [about Britain before leaving Romania]. I know you have freedom in ...Britain. You have the right to say things...*

(Male respondent, Romania)

*[I knew] it is a democracy... you can think what you want... it's a free country. Everyone has heard that.*

(Male respondent, Iran)

Asylum seekers who had fled because of political persecution in their native country often knew that freedom of speech was a part of the British political system, and valued this very highly. This is illustrated below:

*I think... Europe [is] democratic. You can go to Hyde Park and you can shout..*

(Male respondent, Yemen)

*So Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park was something that you knew about before you left Saudi?*

(Researcher)

*I heard about many people [who] don't like government [in Bahrain]. They go [to] London, [and] nothing happens [to] these people.*

(Male respondent, Yemen)

*So when you heard that people could go into the Park and speak, what did you think about that?*

(Researcher)

*I can't believe that! You know, this is nice country.*

(Male respondent, Yemen)

The UK was also seen as a very powerful country, and this was sometimes linked to the idea that it had long political traditions, and that it was a country with a considerable and influential history. For some respondents this power was thought to be a positive factor, although for others the notion that the UK is a powerful country led to negative perceptions, borne out of a belief that the UK interferes with the affairs of other countries for its own ends. This was particularly the case with Iranian respondents who felt that the UK had destabilised their country. One interviewee likened the UK to a fox, continually stealing from others to survive. Several respondents felt that the UK had a duty to look after citizens from

its ex-colonies who were fleeing persecution. In fact some Sri Lankan respondents even thought the UK was to blame for the actual problems that had created their need to leave their country of origin, and therefore had a duty to admit them.

*Because the country was ruled by the British people and the problem began when they handed over their power to the local people. The British people will understand why there is suffering and why they had to come to the UK*

(Male respondent, Sri Lanka)

*After the Independence, the Sinhalese people got the [powers]. The British Government should have...thought about the minority...So the country that you fled to, was originally responsible*

(Female respondent, Sri Lanka)

In countries such as Iran and Iraq, respondents explained how the governments often portrayed the UK and the United States in a negative light. For example, one male respondent from Iraq commented that *"they give a picture [of] Britain and America as...a devil and they want to kill Iraq. They make this black picture [of] Britain"*. Paradoxically these negative images can actually encourage asylum seekers to choose the UK because the UK government is believed to be hostile to the regime. For example, a number of Iranian and Iraqi respondents came to the UK because it was perceived as being more critical of the Iranian and Iraqi regimes than either the US or France, and therefore more likely to grant asylum and less likely to repatriate unsuccessful applicants for asylum:

*We don't want to bring... risk to ourselves, [by going to] France, because they deal with Saddam, [and] their policy [is] against us*

(Male respondent, Iraq)

## **Colonial ties**

Colonial images of the UK were very evident among the respondents, particularly amongst those from Sri Lanka and Somalia. Three themes emerged from the interviews as to why colonial heritage made the UK an attractive destination. Firstly, the notion of linguistic and cultural similarity between the UK and its former colonies. Secondly, the often deeply held belief that although the UK had granted its colonies independence, there still remained a strong bond between them and the motherland. Thirdly, as is discussed above, some respondents felt that the UK had a duty to look after citizens from its ex-colonies that were fleeing persecution.



For those respondents who could speak English, this was a powerful reason for choosing the UK as a destination. In particular many Sri Lankan and Somali respondents had been taught in English, and the educational systems and practices in these countries had often also been modelled on those in the UK under colonial rule. All those respondents who could speak English believed that adjusting to a new life would be easier in a country where they could speak the language. Those who had had their education interrupted by flight also felt they would be able to re-enter education more quickly. As one male respondent from Sri Lanka said, *"I decided to go to London because my second language is English. I can manage. If I go to Germany or France, or Holland, I couldn't manage, because I have to learn that language. London is no problem"*.

The colonial legacy also meant that respondents from Sri Lanka and Somalia had a basic idea of what the UK and British life might be like, and this knowledge was frequently greater than that for other countries.

For those from former colonies, knowledge about the UK was generation-specific. Older respondents (especially from Sri Lanka) spoke of direct experience of colonial rule and contact with British administrators. One Sri Lankan interviewee described how her husband, who was a stationmaster, had received a visit from Governor Salisbury who had been very complimentary about the flowerbeds at the station. The Governor had then asked the stationmaster if he needed anything. The man had replied that his family still lived many miles away and a posting to a station nearer his home would be very much appreciated. To his surprise, and delight, the Governor had arranged this within 24 hours, and it was apparent from the research interview that this simple act had changed how the stationmaster felt about 'English' people.

Younger interviewees had not learned about the UK from direct contact with colonialism, but from parents or through an education system that had often retained a strong British influence. The architectural and cultural traditions left behind by the British were also important:

*Our traditional culture is mainly British influenced. For example... we wear white wedding dresses. That's not in our religion and it's not really in our Somali traditional culture, but...they had that from the British. Exchanging the rings which again doesn't exist in our religion, and the cake...is very British...Even the language, [has] a lot of English in there. For example, 'cabbage'. We say 'cabbage' in Somali as well...There's a lot of British in Somaliland.*

(Female respondent, Somalia)

*Most of the vehicles we are using here, the way we drive in Sri Lanka (right hand drive) and also the money system, everything is... a good connection between the two countries.*

(Male respondent, Sri Lanka)

A common language and perceived cultural similarity, in tandem with a relatively extensive knowledge of what the UK was like as a country, therefore created a strong impetus to choose this country over other possible destinations. Moreover, despite the ending of colonial rule many of the Sri Lankan and Somali respondents still felt that a bond existed between the UK and their country. As one male respondent from Somalia said, *"because ... they used to colonise us...we feel like, we are closer....people you can understand"*.

## **Landscape and culture**

Although some knowledge of rural landscapes within the UK did emerge from the interviews, most respondents viewed the UK as a predominantly urban country, or their images of it were limited to metropolitan areas. One interviewee even imagined the whole country to be one single city. This Sri Lankan male said *"I expected the whole country to be tall buildings, to be busy. I couldn't believe there is another part of the UK until I came to Wales"*.

Two sets of images dominated the respondents' discussions of the UK's urban landscapes. The first cluster depicted a predominantly modern, clean country, with tall buildings. The opposing image painted the UK as an old country with Victorian buildings, fog and often as dirty. The way in which these seemingly contradictory visions of the UK could run through the same interview highlights the way in which asylum seekers can hold in tension competing sets of information about particular countries.

Many respondents had images of the UK that emphasised modernity and civic cleanliness. This was reflected in the responses of those who were asked by the researcher what they imagined Britain to be like. A female respondent from the Sudan said that she expected Britain to have *"... high buildings, white streets, clean"*. A male respondent from Sri Lanka said that *"I thought all [the houses] must be brand new houses. Only after coming here I know what the houses are"*. When asked by the researcher why he thought all the houses would be new, he responded *"because you are modern world and new houses would be everywhere"*.

This perception of urban modernity was often linked to a perception that the UK was a rich country which was technologically advanced.

*And did you think before you left Sri Lanka...did you think that England would be a richer country than home, or a poorer country?*

(Researcher)

*You are the top of the world.*

(Male respondent, Sri Lanka)

*You are the richest country in the world.*

(Male respondent, Sri Lanka)

This image of urban Britain as modern and affluent co-existed with, but was contradicted by, a parallel image of the UK as a much more traditional country. Images of London as a city with long traditions and old buildings ran through many interviews, drawing a strong contrast with the idea of technological modernity. When asked what he expected London to be like, a male respondent from the Yemen said: *"London I had known about long time, about the Greenwich [Mean] Time and...Tower Bridge. This is old, old country"*.

The idea of the UK, and London in particular, as old, was linked to the notion of a misty, polluted and dirty city with a cold climate. For example, one Iranian male described how the TV programmes and books he had seen in Iran painted London as always having dirty streets, and a male Iraqi respondent said, *"London is the city of big fog, the fog city"*.

Most respondents who possessed some knowledge of the UK had gleaned a certain amount of this from books, music or films. Famous authors such as William Shakespeare were most frequently mentioned and depictions from Sherlock Holmes novels and films created powerful images of the streets of London. An Iranian man spoke of how his images of London had been formed through reading Sherlock Holmes novels, and how he still expected to see such nineteenth century streets in London. Filmic representations of the UK were found to be less important in shaping expectations of what the UK as a country would be like. Knowledge of British music was also limited, although particular pop groups had conveyed strong images about the UK. The particular groups cited displayed a clear generational pattern. Older respondents who had come to the UK in the 1970s mentioned the Beatles as having had a big effect upon them.

*If I'd asked you to name five British people [before you came here], would you have been able to?*

(Researcher)

*Well, Ringo Star, Paul McCartney ....*

(Male respondent, Chile)

*So the Beatles were significant then. And what kind of images had the Beatles created for you?*

(Researcher)

*Cool, free, anti-establishment, you know.*

(Male respondent, Chile)

The perception gained from listening to British music (that the country was progressive and tolerant) also surfaced in interviews with younger respondents, through the music of the Spice Girls, for instance. One male respondent from Romania talked about the way in which he viewed the British as conservative and resistant to change. However, when he talked about watching MTV he described a very different picture of the UK: *"But also we have a lot of music from MTV [etc] and we also know about young people and youth from England and they are not cold. They are very modern, and they are the image from Romania's point of view..."*

The other key area of British life about which a large number of respondents knew, was football, in particular Manchester United Football Club. This reflects the status of the team as a global brand and the current availability of British football worldwide on satellite TV. Not only did Manchester United create a perception of the UK as a globally successful country, but the club also gave the impression that the UK was a rich nation. One male Iranian respondent referred to Manchester United as 'the richest club in the world'. Another commented that:

*... even from when I was a child I loved England too much. It was my favourite country. I saw Manchester United playing football. So really it was a country of dreams for me. (Male respondent, Iran)*

## **Perceptions of British people**

In the same way that many of the respondents had contradictory perceptions of what the UK would be like, they also had contradictory and complex views about British people.

Many respondents talked about famous British people with whom they were familiar. Interviewees identified three main groups of public figures about which they had known before leaving home. The first of these comprised politicians, and in particular prime ministers. Many respondents knew of Margaret Thatcher, and were familiar with her label as the 'Iron Lady', her personality and demeanour reinforcing a sense of the UK being a powerful country. The second group that was well known was the royal family. Again, the images of kings, queens and palaces created a vision of a rich country, although many respondents were aware of the class division within British society. Princess Diana was widely referred to, in particular in relation to her charity work overseas, and her campaigning against land mines, although in this role she was not viewed as primarily English or British but as an international ambassador. Thirdly, a varied group of inventors, protestors and other figures had caught the attention of respondents whilst living in their country of origin. One respondent talked about having read about Isaac Newton, whose work created an image in his mind of the UK as a technologically advanced country.

Perceptions of what people in the UK were like were both highly positive and highly negative. Many interviewees had favourable expectations of the British population, thinking that they would be 'nice' people who were 'friendly'. Several respondents imagined British people to be accurate and punctual in nature. One female respondent from the Sudan said that *"in Sudan when you want to say that this person is a very accurate person you say [he] is like a British. We used to think that when they say something, they do it immediately but when I came here it was different"*. One of the Sri Lankan interpreters similarly commented that *"If [British people] say you will be here at 9 o'clock, you will be here. We don't! We don't keep up time. So, if somebody does... they say, "Oh he's like an English man!"*

One of the strongest images of the British people was their dress. Respondents often had a mental picture of cleanliness and people of smart and formal appearance. Particularly striking was the image of men wearing suits, ties and hats, often gleaned from old adverts, books or mail order clothing catalogues:

*The people, really clean with ties, going to big business, you know, big companies....I thought this is the head, this is the country that decides what ... happens in wars. They are really important people.*

(Male respondent, Iran)

One of the methodological concerns of undertaking the research project was that research participants might be wary of disclosing the negative images of the UK and British people that they held, especially where they were waiting to hear the outcome of their asylum

application. However, the respondents seemed prepared to reveal not only the positive images they had of the UK, but also the negative. One recurring negative theme was the idea that the British were rather 'cold' and could be conservative and reserved:

*In Iran...even the normal people they say English people are ... cold, they don't talk to anybody, they are not friendly.*

(Female respondent, Iran)

*I tried to find out a little bit more about England. I knew from TV...that British are cold and it's because of the weather (chuckle), so cold ...*

(Male respondent, Romania)

The idea of the British being cold people was sometimes linked to a belief that the British were racist. One respondent from Chile described how a fellow refugee living in the UK had written to her and told her that *"this place is horrible, they are very racist"*. When asked by the researcher whether he was referring to the whole of Britain or just London, she responded: *"No in London, and that the people were sort of very distant and you know they were not very flamboyant like us, very cold, boring British people, very boring. [They also] said... about the people [in Dundee] being racist and very difficult to get on with"*.

Another image held by some of the respondents was of the British as big drinkers and hooligans. A male respondent from Iran said that *"before I left [I heard] British people are very dangerous...They drink. Football: I heard...not winning, they are angry"*. Another respondent from Algeria made similar comments during a discussion with the researcher:

*Drinkers you say... more so than the French then?*

(Researcher)

*More than all the other Europeans.*

(Male respondent, Algeria)

*Are we talking about young people?*

(Researcher)

*Young people drinking wine, alcohols...*

(Male respondent, Algeria)

*And behaving properly?*

(Researcher)

*Nah. Usually the English are connected with hooliganism.*

(Male respondent, Algeria)

Therefore whilst much about the British was admired, asylum seekers also expected to face racism, indifference, and loutishness.

## **Conclusion**

For nearly all of the respondents interviewed during the course of this research the decision to leave the country of origin was driven by the need to escape persecution and not by the positive attributes of life in the UK. When forced to migrate from their home country, most asylum seekers had very limited choices about which countries they could feasibly reach and their key aim was to reach a place of safety. However, within the confined choices available to them there was clear evidence that asylum seekers made active value judgements about the different countries to which they could travel, in order to secure the best future open to them. Images of the characteristics of those countries played a part in their decision-making processes.

Asylum seekers had actively negotiated and made sense of the images of the UK they had acquired. They made judgements about how accurate certain portrayals of British life might be, especially in terms of how they had been produced at different points in time. Both positive and negative images were available to many asylum seekers, and from a wide range of sources. Negative depictions of the UK did not necessarily deter migration to this country, especially when the government at home had produced them.

Analysis of the research interviews suggests that four main sets of images are salient in decision-making. Firstly, perceptions of the UK as a free, democratic country. Secondly, a belief that there was some kinship with the UK deriving from colonial times. Thirdly, a perception that the UK was a modern, powerful and rich country. Fourthly, positive and negative expectations of what the British people would be like.

Having considered the less tangible aspects of asylum seeker decision-making, this report now turns in subsequent chapters to more practical considerations, namely expectations of support either from family and friends or from the state.





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## 4.

## Family and friends in the UK

The presence of friends or family in the UK played a part in determining why one third of the respondents came to the UK rather than another country, and the research analysis indicates that family and friends shaped the migration decisions of asylum seekers in two distinct ways.

Firstly, the prospect of family reunification in the UK or the knowledge that when they arrived they would know someone (even if not a close relative) acted as a strong magnet for many asylum seekers once they had already made the decision to leave their home country. For these people, family and friends acted either as the primary reason for choosing the UK or as a factor that tipped the balance in favour of migrating here. Secondly, relatives and friends in the UK passed information about life in this country back to potential asylum seekers, either before or during the latter's journey. The report discusses each of these in turn, and its conclusions are rooted in selected quotations from respondents.

### The presence of family and friends

The desire to be near to family members is one that most human beings experience, and it was perhaps to be expected that those fleeing persecution would travel to a country where they could be near people they knew and loved. In several cases the presence of family in the UK was the primary reason why respondents chose to come to this country:

*When I heard my family had come to Britain I decided to come here.*

(Male respondent, Somalia)

*... when we have to leave the country, we just think about here because my brother was here, it was better for us to come here.*

(Female respondent, Iran)

The overriding importance of family was emphasised by several interviewees who suggested that if their family members in the UK had moved to another country, then they would have sought asylum there, not in the UK. For example one female respondent from Chile said that *"there is a good chance that if [my parents had] moved to another country, probably I would have chosen that country"*.

In some cases the presence of 'significant others' in the UK had been only one of many reasons for opting for the UK and had merely tipped the balance away from choosing other countries. One Chilean respondent explained how she and her husband had to choose between seeking refuge in Canada and the UK:

*I don't think we came because there was much attraction to come here, to be quite honest. It's because we had those two friends [here]. That was the link. We felt that we were not going to be isolated. That there would be somebody that we could speak to in Spanish [and] ...from Chile. There was somebody that we liked and loved and it will help...our sense of... homesickness.*

(Female respondent, Chile)

One Romanian respondent was attracted to Western European countries (including the UK) because of the possibility of finding work here, but his choice of the UK was also partly because he had friends here.

The presence of a very distant relative (who perhaps the asylum seeker did not know personally) or a family friend in the UK might, at first sight, seem an inadequate explanation for deciding to seek asylum here. However, for asylum seekers faced with a choice of countries about which they know little, the presence of such a person in the UK can be extremely important. At the very least it provides someone who can be approached when they first arrive.

In a number of cases, families were forced to flee their home country but were not able to travel to the UK together. Whilst the reasons for the initial migration of family members to this country may have been multifaceted, the decision of spouses and children to come to the UK at a later date was primarily one of family reunion. There were three main clusters of reasons why families were not able to travel together. Most important among these was the fact that it was frequently too expensive for a whole family to travel at the same time, and so the journey to the UK was staggered. This was especially true when a paid agent was organising the migration. Secondly, especially in the case of Somalia, families had become separated either due to the chaos of civil war or their allocation to separate refugee camps in neighbouring countries. The third reason why families travelled separately was because it would be too dangerous to leave their home area together:

*If the whole family left home, then obviously someone would have noticed it and the boys [the Tamil Tigers] would have followed them... So only one person could leave and we made a decision that the husband would leave.*

(Female respondent, Sri Lanka)

## **Family and friends as sources of information/assistance**

Although this research has found that the presence of family members in the UK partly explained the decision of respondents to seek asylum in this country, the amount of information passed from relatives in this country to potential asylum seekers before they left was extremely limited. Telephone calls were one of the most important ways in which people kept in touch with family members living in the UK. However, in many cases they had only spoken to such relatives on a handful of occasions, rather than regularly over a long period. One respondent had only spoken to his relative two or three times in 15 years. Furthermore, few respondents had received letters from relatives in the UK.

There are several reasons why asylum seekers might not have made contact with relatives in the destination country prior to departure. Firstly, where individual asylum seekers had to flee their home country at short notice there may not have been time. Secondly, prior to their decision to leave their country of origin they may never have considered that they might need to travel to the UK, so there would have been no need to acquire information about the UK. Thirdly, respondents from Sri Lanka and Somalia often spent a considerable amount of time as displaced people within their own countries, before crossing an international border. One Sri Lankan respondent had lost contact with her sister in England when she had been forced to flee from Jaffna. She only re-established contact ten years later on her own arrival in the UK. A fourth reason that may explain the paucity of communication with family members in the UK is the potential danger of revealing emigration plans to too many people. Most respondents only told their parents and siblings of their intention to leave. The more people that knew, the greater the risk of them being interrogated by those who had caused the respondent to leave. Informing relatives in the UK of migration plans either by telephone or letter could therefore be potentially dangerous.

Where family or friends in the UK supplied information to respondents before they left home it was often generalised in nature and very scant. Some of the key themes that emerged included the safety of the UK, the support offered to asylum seekers, and the likelihood of being accepted as a refugee. Those asylum seekers who had travelled via other countries (such as Turkey) had sometimes contacted friends in the UK from these staging posts when it became clear that there was a chance that they might be coming to this country. Advice about opportunities for education and work also featured in the information given to respondents. One Romanian male said simply that he had been told he could earn 'good money' in the UK. Examples of the types of information received from friends and family include:

*I was told that my daughter would be better off in a country like that...education was the most important thing and especially because of the language, English language.*

(Female respondent, Sri Lanka)

*One of my friends told me...you get a lot of freedom in the UK.*

(Male respondent, Sri Lanka)

*My friend he told me don't worry about food, clothes, home.*

(Male respondent Iran)

*My sister who lives in Bradford had been telling me that it is a very peaceful country, very good for education and so many good things about England.*

(Female respondent, Sri Lanka)

## **Conclusion**

For respondents who were interviewed during this research the presence of family and friends in the UK created strong incentives for the decision to claim asylum in this country. In some cases, the existence of such ties acted as the primary reason for choosing the UK. In others the fact that a relative or friend was living in this country was one of a number of factors, but one which tipped the balance towards claiming asylum in the UK. Even where asylum seekers had only vague connections with distant relatives in the UK, the knowledge that they would know someone in this country made it more attractive than other possible destinations where they would be completely alone.

The amount of information supplied by friends or family already living in the UK was found to be much less than expected. In some cases asylum seekers had had no reason to contact distant relatives in the UK until it became clear that they would have to leave their home country. Acute asylum seekers frequently either did not have time to seek advice or information from relatives abroad or found this impossible due to internal displacement within the country, or for fear that their emigration plans would be discovered. Where family and friends did provide information about what to expect in the UK this related most often to the safety of life here, the likelihood of asylum seekers being allowed to stay here, and the support offered to refugees in the UK.

This chapter examines how much asylum seekers knew about UK asylum policy before they arrived here and the extent to which this knowledge shaped their migration destination. In this chapter the focus is on perceptions relating to the determination of asylum claims. Knowledge of entitlements to welfare benefits and housing are dealt with in Chapter 6. Again typical quotations are used to illustrate and exemplify the themes identified in the analysis.

### Knowledge of the UK asylum system

The current debate about the arrival of asylum seekers in the UK presupposes that those fleeing persecution readily identify with the label 'asylum seeker' and procedures that are attached to it. Especially in the case of 'acute' flight, many of the respondents did not arrive in the UK with the intention of claiming rights, or in the knowledge that they would have to insert themselves into a series of complex procedures, such as interviews, forms and fingerprinting. A number of respondents had no idea that they would have to claim asylum in this country:

*Actually, when you speak about asylum seeking I didn't know exactly what it is. ... I just thought I'd go there and if somebody asked 'Why did you come to this country?' I say 'This is my problem', and they say 'OK, this is a really bad problem, you can go'... Actually when I came in this country I didn't know that I must have a solicitor and convince...the Home Office about my claim and what is this claim? I mean... this is reality, not a claim.*

(Male respondent, Iran)

*I didn't know that I can claim asylum. So then, this lady said the procedure; you have to do all this things... It is a big procedure, isn't it!*

(Female respondent, Sri Lanka)

*All I knew was 'I'll come here and then face the music.*

(Female respondent, Sri Lanka)

## The UK's attitude towards asylum seekers

Overall impressions of the way in which the UK viewed and dealt with asylum seekers were generally positive. Most respondents had believed that they would be able to enter the UK without difficulty, and that they would be offered refugee status:

*Did they think that they would automatically be allowed into England, or did they think there was some chance that they would not be allowed?*

(Researcher)

*They have heard and thought that the refugees, asylum seekers, will be given asylum, so they never thought they'll be sent back.*

(Interpreter commenting on the views of a married couple from Sri Lanka)

*[W]hat I heard from most of the Sudanese refugees, from family and friends, yes maybe I would suffer a lot but at the end...I will have...reached, something positive.*

(Female respondent, Sudan)

Overall, the UK was viewed as being sympathetic towards asylum seekers, and in some cases actively encouraging refugees. The main sources of information on UK asylum policy included agents, friends and relatives living in the UK, and information from newspapers or from rumours in the country of origin.

The analysis found that the perceptions which asylum seekers had of their likely treatment operated on three scales. Firstly, respondents knew that some asylum policies were common to the whole of Europe, the UK included. Secondly, respondents had perceptions about asylum policies and attitudes that were unique to the UK. And thirdly, some knew sufficient to make comparisons between different European countries.

Several respondents believed that all European countries were sympathetic towards refugees, and that the UK would therefore be the same. For example, one Iranian respondent commented that *"I came [here] because I know that this country... can protect me against Hezbollah because this government is one part of Europe and Europe is open for anybody..."*

One of the strongest themes to emerge from the interviews was the perception that the UK was sympathetic towards asylum seekers and had a reputation for looking after refugees. In some cases the UK was even viewed as actively encouraging people to come here:

*And what did you know about the asylum system in Britain before you left [your country]?*

(Researcher)

*I did not know about asylum, but I only know the Government ... encourages us.*

(Male respondent, Sri Lanka)

*I feel that England today is encouraging people to come in ... I mean the government, the Labour government they want the people to come in.*

(Male respondent, Iran)

The UK was also perceived as being more tolerant of asylum seekers than other countries especially within the European context. One male respondent from Romania commented that “it also seems to be the only country in the whole of Europe that [is] still receiving asylum seekers, and who are trying to help them. Really help them, not to make their lives worse than in their country”. Similarly a male Iranian respondent said that “[i]n Turkey, people say now England they accept refugee people...but they say in Europe you cannot because other European countries they are very difficult for refugee people”.

In some cases agents shaped the perceptions of asylum seekers, thereby directly influencing their final destination. Agents advised some of the respondents that the UK was the best place to go to, for instance:

*I ask him about the other countries, Netherlands, Germany. He say no, it is not good at all and Netherlands and UK is better than the other countries.*

(Male respondent, Iran)

As was previously indicated in one case an agent advised an asylum seeker to come to the UK because he did not have supporting documentation for his claim. He argued that because the UK was more sympathetic towards refugees, it was more likely that he would be accepted here than in other countries:

*I told him about my matter and he told me you have to go to Britain because you can't give any evidence, you haven't got any evidence.*

(Male respondent, Iran)

In the case of Sri Lankan respondents in particular, colonial ties created an expectation that the UK would look more favourably upon asylum seekers from a former colony than other possible

destination countries. For example, among this group there was a widespread belief that Germany was deporting far more asylum seekers back to Sri Lanka than the UK. This information had come primarily from newspaper reports in Sri Lanka, and more general rumours:

*Do the papers write much about Britain?*

(Researcher)

*They write... that from Germany they [asylum seekers] are being sent back home to Sri Lanka but in Britain they don't do that. Lately.. they are continuously writing about people who are being sent back home from various countries.*

(Male respondent, Sri Lanka)

*What made you think it was a safe country?*

(Researcher)

*If I go Germany, the German Government sent back some Sri Lankans...If I go Britain, the Government never sent back in Sri Lanka.*

(Male respondent, Sri Lanka)

*Originally all the European countries were [sending] them back. I asked did you know that when you were leaving. He said 'Yes I knew'.*

(Interpreter commenting on the knowledge of a male respondent from Sri Lanka)

*How did you know that all the other European countries were sending them back?*

(Researcher)

*From the head[lines] of newspapers. It's usually somebody who's been sent back and he's gone missing since being back.*

(Male respondent, Sri Lanka)

## **Conclusion**

Most of the respondents knew very little about UK asylum policy before their arrival. Perceptions of the way in which the UK deals with those claiming asylum were frequently framed in terms of general expectations. Respondents felt that the UK was a tolerant country that was sympathetic to asylum seekers and some respondents perceived that the government was actively encouraging asylum seekers to migrate to the UK.



This positive perception worked on three levels. Europe as a whole was viewed as having a good record in terms of its treatment of asylum seekers. As a European nation the UK was therefore included in this perception. At a national level, the UK was perceived to be a country that looks after asylum seekers. Respondents also made comparisons between countries, and the UK was viewed favourably in relation to other European states. In particular, asylum seekers from Sri Lanka had read press reports and heard rumours that Germany was deporting many asylum seekers, and therefore concluded that the UK was a better place to seek asylum.

The report concludes that detailed knowledge of asylum procedures or perceived weaknesses in these procedures were less important reasons for the respondents coming to the UK than a perception that the UK is a tolerant democracy.



This research also examined how much the respondents knew of the support they would receive from the state upon arrival in the UK, focusing on three areas: welfare benefits, housing, and healthcare. In each area the report examines the expectations that asylum seekers had about the support they would receive, the ways in which support could act both as an incentive and a disincentive to choosing a particular destination country and whether asylum seekers had chosen to travel to the UK in preference to other countries because of the entitlements they expected to receive here.

Despite being probed on these issues respondents were found not to be well informed about how they might be treated after arriving in the UK. Some of the following sections are therefore quite short since respondents knew little. As with the last chapter, most respondents had only very vague and general expectations, centering on the belief that they would be 'looked after'.

### **Welfare benefits**

Most respondents had very limited knowledge of what financial support they would be entitled to as asylum seekers or refugees in the UK. Eleven interviewees claimed to have had no idea of what help they would receive, and this seems likely given that many of these respondents had previously provided detailed information about how they had entered the UK illegally using agents.

Many respondents expected to be self-sufficient when they arrived in the UK, either through finding employment or by drawing upon the support of co-ethnics or family groups. For example, one woman from Sri Lanka stated that "I thought you'd just go to a friend's house, or...a small room and... stay there, and find a small job and try to live a life". Another woman from Iran made similar comments:

*I didn't know about benefit, I didn't know about Social [Security]. I said 'OK, my life couldn't get worse anyway'. I'll go and ... clean the floor and just get out of here [Iran]'. I did cleaning for a few months because I didn't know... Social [Security] can help you... And after that somebody said 'why don't you go to DSS, you are entitled for benefits'. But I had no idea about the... benefit system. I just thought I go*

*anywhere...and I scrub the floor just to get out of this country [Iran]. It was so depressing living in there. I had a good life, I was well off, but emotionally I was dying inside.*

(Female respondent, Iran)

Where respondents did expect financial support from the government their expectations were of a general nature. Detailed knowledge of the amount paid to asylum seekers or whether this would be in cash or in vouchers was not known:

*He [a friend in Britain] said "If you come England, you know English. You can manage here ... the Government ... give you some benefits and if you come, you can manage".*

(Male respondent, Sri Lanka)

The prospect of receiving benefits was found not to be a major factor influencing the destination of the respondents. In the short term many anticipated that they might receive state support, but in the longer term, most wanted to find a job and did not want to live on state benefits:

*I don't like government is spending that tax money [on] me and I don't want [it]. I just want to go to work [but] I know I cannot. I want to as soon as possible go work.*

(Male respondent, Iran)

*I work in a Pizza [restaurant], I worked there for three months...because I don't want to take Government money ...*

(Female respondent, Iran)

None of the asylum seekers who were interviewed indicated that the UK was thought to offer more generous support than other possible destination countries.

## **Housing support**

Amongst respondents the level of knowledge about how much help asylum seekers would receive from the government with finding housing and the kind of accommodation they might be given was extremely limited. Few had specific ideas about what kind of accommodation they would be offered. Instead, the expectation of help with housing was background knowledge and some thought they would have to find accommodation by themselves.

Evidence from this research indicates that housing was not a significant factor attracting respondents to the UK in preference to other countries. Asylum seekers thought they would receive some short-term shelter from whatever western country they fled to as part of a basic humanitarian package.

Very few respondents thought that they might be held in a detention centre. Those who did expected this to be only during the initial period after arrival in the UK. It was striking that for those asylum seekers who had anticipated the possibility of living in a detention centre for several months or even for years, this was not viewed in a negative light, and did not deter people from choosing the UK as a destination. Indeed many had already spent considerable periods of time in refugee camps and had become used to this:

*I was expecting to [spend time in] ... refugee camps or whatever – for quite a while, for one or two years, I was expecting to be kept...in a camp. Not allowed to go out, for one year, two years....*

(Male respondent, Iran)

*I don't know what it's like outside [the detention centre]... but when I compared to the type of life I had there this is better.*

(Male respondent from Sri Lanka who had been imprisoned and tortured by the army and was being held in detention at the time of the interview)

The key exception to this acceptance of being held in detention was the very small minority of respondents who had entered the UK solely to gain work or locate educational opportunities, and had simply used the asylum route to achieve this:

*If you could get work that was reasonably well paid in Romania would you stay there?*

(Researcher)

*Yes – do you think I would risk being caught and being detained [here] if there were better [opportunities there]?*

(Female respondent, Romania)

No evidence was found to suggest that asylum seekers knew of the government's dispersal scheme, although the field research work took place in late 2000 and early in 2001.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this research indicate that expectations relating to welfare benefits and housing did not play a major role in shaping the decision to seek asylum in the UK within the response group. Knowledge of the assistance asylum seekers received was limited and characterised by general expectations rather than information on particular entitlements. The prospect of living on welfare benefits was sometimes seen as inevitable in the period immediately upon arriving in the UK but was generally viewed as highly undesirable in the long term. Most respondents expected to be assisted with initial housing needs but considered this as basic humanitarian provision rather than as a positive attraction. Few people expected to be held in detention centres, but it did not act as a deterrent to those that did. Little evidence was found to suggest that asylum seekers perceived levels of support in the UK to be better than in other countries.

This research examines a number of key issues in the areas of work and education. These include the opportunities and entitlements to work and education that asylum seekers expect when they arrived in the UK, the importance of employment or education to the asylum seeker when s/he migrates, and the extent to which the desire to find work or undertake educational courses plays a part in the decision to claim asylum in the UK.

### **Expectations of asylum seekers' right to work in the UK**

Many respondents did not expect to start working immediately upon arrival in the UK. Some initial period of adjustment to life here was anticipated, possibly with support from the government through welfare benefits. There was also knowledge that restrictions might be placed upon the right of asylum seekers to work in the UK for a time after they arrived, but only two respondents actually knew that asylum seekers were not allowed to undertake paid employment during their first six months in the UK.

In the longer term there was a near universal belief that asylum seekers would be allowed to find work in the UK. Expectations of state support were in many cases quite low, and respondents anticipated that they would have to find work to support themselves and meet living costs. For example, one male respondent from Sri Lanka commented that *"[I]n the long term I thought they would provide me permission to work here, so after that I should be able to take care of myself"*.

### **The importance of finding work**

Most asylum seekers expected that they would have to work. The large majority actively wanted to work and did not wish to live on welfare benefits. As one female respondent from Chile commented, *"[w]e never wanted to be on Social Security, we didn't want to just be doing nothing"*.

Many of the respondents had worked in the country of origin (and acquired skills and had careers there), and wanted to do so again when they arrived in the country where they claimed asylum. Finding a job was important because it enabled people to rebuild their

lives after what had often been traumatic and disruptive experiences. It helped refugees to regain their self-respect and confidence, and to focus upon the future:

*I was lucky – I had the university – it was like a job – I was very busy, learning English, and studying my degree together. I’m not sure how I survived the first year, but I think I spend all the time in books... It’s – when people arrive, and spend years or month without job. I think that destroy the refugees... and then they start thinking about all sort of not very healthy ways of spending their time.*

(Female respondent, Chile)

### **Choosing the UK on the basis of economic opportunities**

In the vast majority of cases employment did not play a dominant role in the decision to undertake migration from the country of origin or the choice of the UK as a destination. However, there were three exceptions to this general finding.

Firstly, a number of the respondents had specialist skills, and believed that they would be able to utilise these in the UK. Doctors who held the British medical system in high regard chose the UK partly for this reason (see also Robinson and Carey, 2000):

*In Iraq I knew that Britain is very good at medicine – second after the US. When I was in training as a doctor in my own country we often used English texts books, that had Oxford or Cambridge on them...*

(Male respondent, Iraq)

Secondly, for some respondents additional information about economic prospects in the UK had been gathered during the journey and this had made the UK seem attractive. This was particularly true of Iranians who had passed through Istanbul and who had received information either from agents there or friends already living in the UK.

Thirdly, it was clear that three of the East European respondents had used the asylum route because they thought this was an easier way of gaining entry to the UK to work. They were not in need of protection:

*From what you say of Britain, or what you thought about Britain, it doesn’t sound like a place I would want to visit*

(Researcher)



*I wasn't interested in that, I wasn't interested in the place or the people, I was interested in the money.*

(Male respondent, Romania)

*Apart from the money... what do you like about Britain?*

(Researcher)

*Nothing.*

(Male respondent, Romania)

For those who had left their country of origin with the primary objective of finding work, they had not always done so with a clear, fixed destination in mind. Romanian respondents tended to have a vision of 'the West' as a rich 'dream' rather than perceptions of specific countries. There was little evidence that interviewees had targeted the UK because it was thought to offer better employment opportunities.

### **Knowledge of educational opportunities in the UK**

In total 18 of those interviewed during the fieldwork were in full-time education prior to leaving their country of origin. For these asylum seekers educational opportunities in the UK might have been more important short-term incentives to migrate here than employment opportunities. Most respondents thought that they would be able to undertake educational courses when they arrived in the UK, and that this would significantly alter their life-course. However, knowledge of specific entitlements or courses was found to be very limited.

It was clear however that the UK was seen as a very attractive place to pursue education for two reasons. Firstly, there was a perception among respondents that the education system in the UK has high standards, and secondly, the ability to learn or study through English was appealing. These factors had a direct impact on the decision-making of some of the respondents. For example, when a male respondent from Iran was asked whether he thought that when he came to the UK he would be able to continue with his education, he responded "*yes, that was the main reason I chose Britain*". Another male Iranian respondent said "*My friend, he told me...you can try to learn. You pay no money...the government they support you*". And a third said "*you can learn English at University., you can go college and learn new job*".

## Perceptions of the British education system

Some respondents knew of the high standards achieved within the British education system. Such information was sometimes in the form of general reputations to which the asylum seeker had access. For example a female Romanian commented that *“England has the oldest universities and the best ones. The chance to study a vast area and there are all sorts of options within... various subjects”*.

Knowledge of educational standards and opportunities had also been obtained from people who had spent time in the UK, or were currently living there. One of the female respondents from Somalia was asked what had made her think that the UK could provide good education:

*When I was back home in Somalia a lot of people used to talk about this country...and there was people also who had money who came here and got an education and gone back home. Yes, I was told.*

Respondents living in former British colonies had also sometimes gained direct contact in their own countries with British educational values and systems. Older respondents had been educated in British-style schools, for instance. In Somalia in particular, the influence of British educational practices had to some extent been maintained after independence:

*Even the education [system]... in Somalia was good because a lot of things was imported from Britain. Not the same education system, but a lot of materials that was used here were sent over there... they would learn English as one of the criteria.*

(Female respondent, Somalia)

Such experiences created expectations that the education system in the UK would be similar to that in the country of origin, thus easing the transition to life in a new country, and engendered beliefs about the quality of British education, based upon favourable impressions created in the home country.

## The importance of language

Where respondents spoke English – and even more so where they had undertaken some of their education in English – education and language became intertwined. The combination created a strong motive for choosing the UK in preference to other countries, particularly

where it was too expensive for English-speaking asylum seekers to reach English-speaking North American or Australasian countries. These asylum seekers would immediately be able to apply for a university place but would have had to master a new language first if they went somewhere else. As one male Iranian respondent commented, *“if I went to Germany or Sweden, I don’t know anything about their language and it would take at least three or four years to become fluent...”*

Education was generally most important for those in the 16-24 age bracket, but it was also an important factor for family groups who inevitably focused upon the needs and future welfare of their children. Interviewees had often thought carefully about the long-term future of their children, including their educational opportunities. The ability of their children to speak English or the chance to learn it were sometimes important issues:

*I thought education was the most important thing and especially because of the language, English language, I thought I would be better off.*

(Female respondent, Sri Lanka)

*My boy can go to school and learn English and go to many, many countries...to university.*

(Male respondent, Iran)

## Conclusion

In general terms, this research has found that the levels of knowledge relating to employment opportunities and rights amongst the respondents were low. Finding work was an important issue for the respondents once they had reached a place of safety, come to terms with what had happened to them, and adjusted to life in a new country. Asylum seekers expected to earn a living and finding work offers a purpose in life, a sense of self-respect, and a way of focusing upon the future.

Education was found to be a stronger influence on the decision to seek asylum in the UK than employment. The reputation that the UK has for high quality education was acquired both through information passed back to the country of origin, and through direct experience of British educational traditions and practices by respondents living in ex-colonial countries. These direct experiences had also created expectations that the British education system would have similarities with that of the country of origin. Asylum seekers also chose to come to the UK because of the chance to study through the medium of English

or to provide their children with the opportunity of learning the language. For some respondents education was important once they arrived in the UK but had not played a major part in their decision to seek asylum here.

This research set out to achieve two main objectives. Firstly, to explore how and why a sample of asylum seekers in the UK had chosen to seek asylum in the UK in preference to other possible destinations. Secondly, to extend this exploration beneath superficial explanations and into the realms of the taken-for-granted world where people's decision-making is guided by values, attitudes and expectations that have been inculcated in them from birth, and about which they may not be consciously aware.

The decisions that asylum seekers make about where to apply for asylum are central to much of the refugee regime. They determine flows, the scale of asylum seeking in individual countries, the socio-demographics of the asylum seeker population in any one country, and the policies that national governments will then have to introduce in order to facilitate successful refugee integration. In this context it is surprising that there has been so little research into how and why asylum seekers make decisions about where to seek asylum. Furthermore, where research has been undertaken, it has largely been with key actors in the 'refugee industry' rather than with asylum seekers themselves.

### **A model of decision-making**

The findings of this research are collapsed into Figure 8.1. This generalised flow diagram attempts to summarise how an asylum seeker decides between alternative destinations, and breaks this decision-making down into its various stages. It also highlights the key variables that shape decision outcomes.

Initially, the potential asylum seeker has to decide how to respond to the situation in their country of origin. Some will remain and adopt coping strategies. Others will avoid the threat by moving within their country of origin. Some will decide to leave the country and seek asylum elsewhere. Given the desire of people to remain near family and friends and to live within a familiar social, cultural and physical environment, push factors need to be particularly strong to overcome the pull of the familiar. For those for whom push factors are overwhelming, a decision will be taken to leave.

For those who decide to leave the country the next decision to be taken is whether to engage an agent to assist with the journey. Agents may assist with local travel and/or

international travel, and they offer a range of services, as described in Chapter 2. They may also be approached directly or through a trusted intermediary (e.g. a family member). The evidence collected during this research suggests that the key variable determining whether an agent is contracted to help with international travel is the availability of resources (i.e. ability to pay).

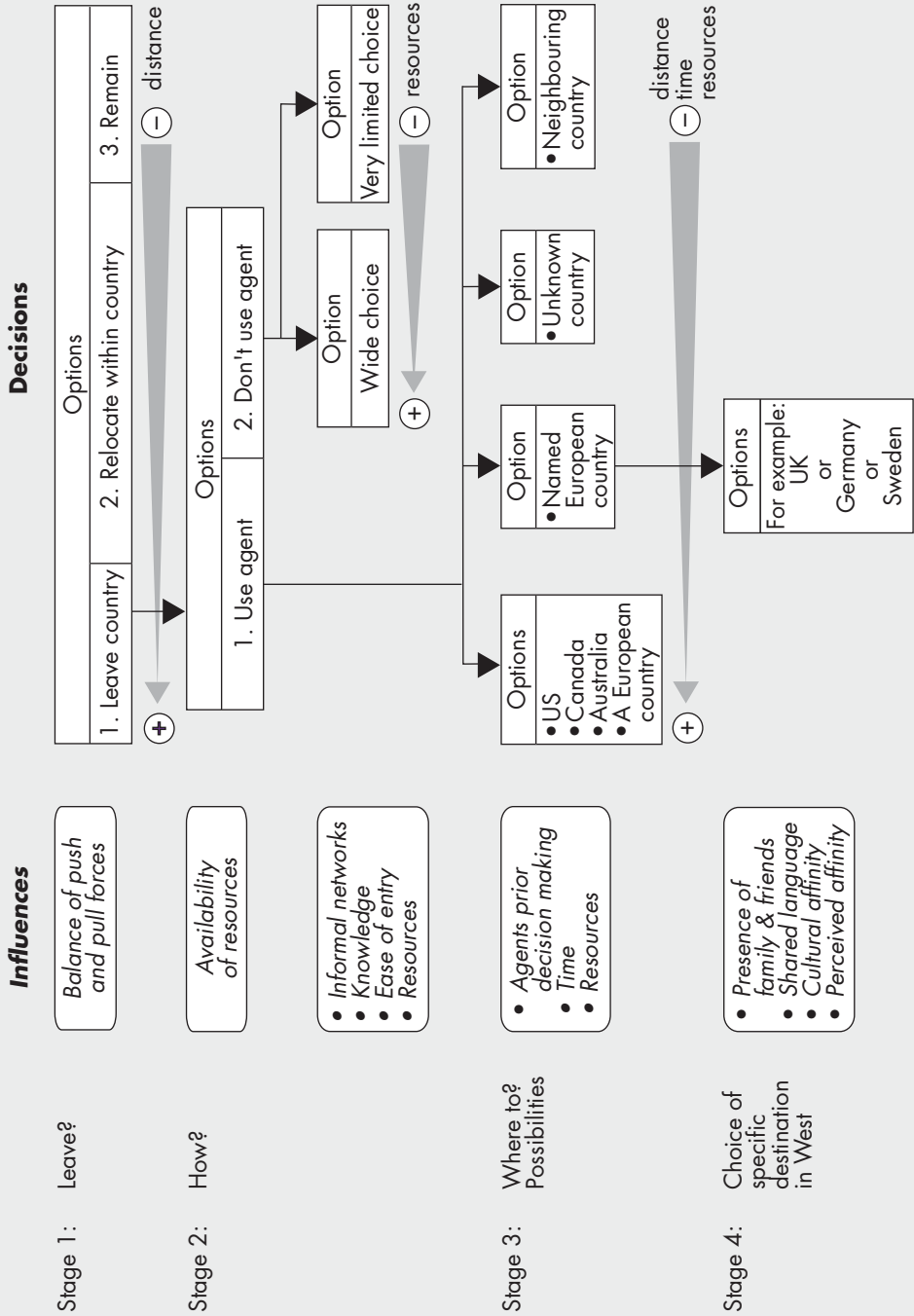
Those who opt not to use an agent, or cannot afford one, will usually then have only a limited range of migration choices. The breadth of choice will be determined by factors such as individual and received knowledge about possible destinations and perceived ease of entry. Key sources of information will be family and friends, especially those who have already left and are now resident in one of the possible destination countries.

Those who opt to contract an agent will be offered a range of possible destination countries which are located at various distances from the country of origin. The extent of the choice and the location of the countries offered depends upon three factors.

The first of these is the prior decision-making of the agent. This did not fall within the remit of the research project but the research surmises that four things will underlie an agent's decision whether or not to offer particular destinations. These are: the ease with which an agent thinks s/he can get asylum seekers into a given country; whether there is a demand for that destination; whether taking people there is profitable; and whether the agent is already connected to migration networks which might provide intelligence, facilities and personnel to assist illegal entry. A combination of these factors will determine whether an agent offers particular destination countries or not.

The second factor determining the degree of choice offered asylum seekers is their access to resources. There will be a continuum, with those who have considerable funds at their disposal being offered more choice than those who do not. At one end of the continuum will be those with very limited funds. They may simply be guided as part of a group across the international border into a neighbouring country. Those with more funds may be offered a single long-distance destination on a take-it or leave-it basis, possibly even without that destination being named. Those asylum seekers who can afford long-haul travel may be offered a limited range of Western European countries. At the other end of the continuum, those with very considerable funds may be able to afford travel and entry to any Western country. In addition, resources may not simply mean money but may also include knowledge of agents and access to them.

**Figure 8.1: A generalised model of asylum seeker decision-making**



The third factor influencing the degree of choice available to asylum seekers is whether their departure from their country of origin is urgent or not. Where time is of the essence, acute asylum seekers may have to take the first country offered to them. Anticipatory asylum seekers may be able to wait for what they perceive as a better offer.

Once an agent has offered asylum seekers a range of possible destinations, decision-making returns to the individual who has to select a preferred country. This research suggests that individuals take account of six variables when deciding the desirability of different countries and that these variables can be rank ordered. Two variables are important but are effectively taken for granted and simply determine which countries would not be considered. They are:

- Asylum seekers assume that all Western countries are democratic. They therefore take for granted that, if they live in any of these countries, they will have freedom of thought and speech, and that they will be able to live in peace (see Chapter 3).
- All Western countries are also assumed to be modern and affluent (see Chapter 3), and therefore offer opportunities for employment, education, and social advancement (see Chapter 7). They are also thought to offer better life-chances for children. Again, these benefits are assumed to be present in all Western democracies and this simply ensures that this group of countries is preferred (see Chapter 3).

The other four variables are used to select one particular Western country in preference to another. These are:

- The most important factor is whether an asylum seeker has family or friends who already live in one of the countries being offered by an agent. Asylum seekers are drawn to countries where this is the case. Respondents indicated that it was important to know somebody in the new country and that this would aid in their settlement, adjustment and integration (see Chapter 4).
- Where an asylum seeker knows no-one abroad or has relatives in more than one possible destination country, then the evidence suggests that language becomes the next most important factor. Many of the respondents had opted for the UK because they spoke English, because they had some familiarity with English or because they regarded English as a world language, the acquisition of which would increase access to opportunities (see Chapter 3).



- Where an asylum seeker then has the choice of several countries where they have relatives and where their chosen language is also spoken, they will tend to opt for one instead of the other on grounds of cultural affinity. Particularly important to the respondents was the cultural legacy of Empire. Those who had lived in former colonies felt they would understand the UK better, and be understood better there, because of the cultural links forged by imperial occupation (see Chapter 3).
- Finally, for those respondents who still had a choice of possible destination countries when all the above factors had been taken into account, it was found that decisions were taken on the basis of images and perceptions already held, and usually casually acquired. Respondents spoke of images gained from film, music, sport, novels and contact with Britons overseas (see Chapter 3).

It should be noted that since some migrations are complex, and multiple, it is possible that an asylum seeker may have to go through this decision-making cycle more than once. For example, when the Iranian respondents first fled, they had initially to select a country from a list of proximal safe-havens. Many opted for Turkey. After several months in Istanbul they then went through a second decision-making process when trying to decide which country they wished to settle in permanently. This involved a different agent, a different range of possibilities and different selection criteria, but the choice was limited by lack of resources, which precluded very long-distance migration to the US or Canada. People could therefore only choose from a range of Western European countries.

To summarise, this research suggests that asylum seekers initially focus upon the imperative of departure more than the destination to which they will migrate. The range of destinations offered to most is very limited, either because of the intervention of agents or because asylum seekers do not have the resources to travel to many countries. However, within this limited range of options, many asylum seekers are active decision-makers. They are guided more by agents, the presence or absence of family and friends, language, and perceived cultural affinities than by scrutiny of asylum policies or rational evaluation of the welfare benefits on offer. Determining ease of entry was left to the agent and the welfare benefits and economic opportunities were assumed.

## **Implications**

Whilst the nature and methods used in the exploration of asylum seeker decision-making do not lend themselves readily to the production of practical recommendations, it is felt that the

research has the potential to make three significant contributions. Firstly, this report contributes to the evidence-base that can be used by policy makers when devising future policy. While Home Office decision-makers can already draw upon evidence supplied by their own employees (e.g. Immigration Officers), it is important that the 'knowledge pool' is widened to incorporate evidence from independent research which allows asylum seekers to have a voice.

Secondly, the research findings directly challenge some of the views surrounding asylum seeking that have been reported and exacerbated by the popular media. The debate about asylum seeking in the UK has been badly served by some sectors of the popular media. Some daily newspapers have created an impression that the UK is a 'soft touch' being targeted and 'inundated' by 'waves' of carefully calculating asylum seekers who weigh up the welfare benefits on offer in different countries and go to the most generous. Some samples of such irresponsible reporting can be found in the Refugee Council's Press Digest (2001) and include 'Our land is being swamped by a flood of fiddlers stretching our resources – and our patience – to breaking point' (The Sun); 'Hello Mr Sponger. Need any benefits?' (Daily Star); and 'We're too soft here, we take everything that the continent moves on. A good percentage are unlikely to be persecuted back home. We should send the bogus ones back much quicker' (Respondent quoted in Times Magazine).

Thirdly, this research makes a direct contribution to the current general debate about the level and nature of migration to the UK that has been stimulated by government Ministers and also taken up by others (Commission for Racial Equality, 1997; Refugee Council, 1997; Glover et al, 2001; Robinson, 2001). More than this, though, these research findings widen that debate considerably. To date, the discussion has either been about the economic value of labour migration to the UK, or about celebrating ethnic diversity and the achievements of past migrants. Relatively little of a positive nature has yet been said about asylum seeking, which paradoxically continues to be cast by government and the media as a problem, a burden and a cost. The findings that asylum seekers are ordinary people driven by ordinary desires (such as wanting to live in peace in a democracy which allows free speech), suggests the need for a more benign and better-informed debate about this type of migration, to parallel the existing debate about labour migration.

- **1. Background of research participants**

- Country and region of origin. Is the research participant a member of any particular minority group? Does that group suffer from persecution?
- Employment in home country: Education and qualifications at time of leaving home.
- Has the research participant (or members of their family) visited the UK before, and if so why/when?
- When did the research participant arrive in the UK this time?
- Current immigration status in UK.
- If application for refugee status is ongoing, how long has the respondent been waiting for?
- What stage is their application at?

- **2. Circumstances of leaving home**

- What were the key reasons for leaving home?
- Which of these reasons was the most important one?
- Thinking of this main reason only, what were the general 'pre-conditions' and more specific 'triggers' that prompted flight?
- Was the flight 'acute' or 'anticipatory'?
- Was the flight made alone or with others? Who was left behind?
- Was there an established tradition of migration from your home area?

- **3. Choice of destination**

- Which countries did the research participants pass through on their journey to the UK?
- Did research participants choose a particular destination country?
- Did the choice of destination alter during the journey itself?
- Was help sought from facilitators in the country of origin?
- Who was this (i.e. an individual or an organisation)?
- Did such facilitators offer a choice of destination?

- What kind of guidance/advice did they give on possible destinations?
- Did they help with travel documents – i.e. passports?
- Was help sought from facilitators in the UK?
- Did the research participant consider seeking refuge in a neighbouring country, rather than a more distant country like the UK? Which country was this? If this option was not pursued, why was this the case?
- What other countries were considered besides the UK? Why were these countries considered?
- Were they unable to gain entry to them?
- Were some of these other countries rejected as options by asylum seekers themselves?
- What were the reasons for these decisions?
- How does the UK differ from other considered destinations?
- Did research participants intend to settle in the UK, or did they intend a temporary stay?

#### • **4. Images and knowledges**

- How much did they know about the UK before they left their home country?
- What did they know about the UK, and how had they acquired these knowledges?
- What made the UK an attractive destination in relation to:
  - The UK as a country: British films/music. British products. English literature and novels.
  - The British people: As a collective. Prominent figures. Was the UK seen as a multi-ethnic country and was this viewed as a positive attribute?
  - Language: Did the ability of asylum seekers to speak English (or the chance to learn it) influence them?
  - British political traditions.
  - The natural landscape and the built environment.
  - UK climate.
- British history: Colonial links with the country of origin. Did respondents feel that they would be made more welcome because of prior colonial links? Did research participants feel that, as the colonial motherland, the UK had an obligation to receive them?
- Migration: Awareness of previous migration flows to the UK from the country of origin. Presence of family/networks of friends in the UK. Presence of co-ethnics in UK. Contacts with prior migrants.

- Economy: The strength of the pound compared with other Western currencies. Availability of employment. Legal rights of asylum seekers to work in UK. Knowledge of unemployment levels in UK. What kind of job did they expect to have one, and five years after arriving in the UK?
  - Social welfare: Entitlement to welfare benefits. Education. Housing.
  - Knowledge of UK asylum procedures: Ease of entry into the UK (compared to other possible destinations). Detention/reception procedures and facilities. Entitlements during determination procedure. Delays in determination procedures. Likelihood of success in asylum application (compared to other possible destinations).
- **5. Realities in the UK**
    - What are the five main differences between living in the country of origin and living in the UK?
    - How does the UK differ from the destination that the research participant would have most liked to go to?
    - What advice/information are research participants giving friends/relatives at home, and in particular potential asylum seekers? Is the information that they are giving about the UK positive or negative?
  - **6. Acquiring knowledge about the UK**
    - Formal education system at home. Reading books. Popular music. TV, including cable/satellite channels. Watching films on video or at the cinema that portrayed life in the UK. BBC World service/other radio stations. Contact with prior migrants. Advertising. Direct contact with British people. Internet. British Council. World University Service. Trade Unions. Political organisations.



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