Choice or circumstance: The UK as the location of asylum applications by Bosnian and Somali refugees

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Abstract

Questions concerning why asylum seekers make their applications in particular countries rather than others have not been fully researched. Some explanation can be found via aggregate migration theories, but there is a need to consider the circumstances of individual movers. Respondents here were drawn from amongst Bosnian and Somali refugees in northern England. The interviews showed that asylum movement is of a variety of types, with two stage migration commonly involved – firstly immediate flight to a neighbouring haven, and secondly on to a more permanent place of settlement. Very few respondents had any real choice in where they ended up. Instead, family circumstances, cultural connections, and the actions of a variety of institutions produced scenarios in which there was generally no alternative to the actual destination arrived at. It is suggested that a mix of individual level and institutional explanations is needed to understand patterns of asylum destinations.

Introduction

The movement of refugees from a place of original residence to a location of short- or long-term resettlement constitutes a form of international migration. Yet certain of the features of international migration are generally not thought to be present in such movement. In particular, the decision-making power of the individual migrants, and their ability to weigh up alternative migration (and non-migration) scenarios, is generally held to be weak or non-existent. Refugee movers are thus conceptualised as being ‘forced migrants’ (Boyle et al., 1998, p. 180) who are forced to move by ‘push’ factors. As the perception of a ‘refugee crisis’ (Castles and Miller, 1993, p. 84) has grown over recent years, strong ‘pull’ factors from potential destinations have generally been seen as non-existent as individual countries have tightened up both on their rhetoric and on their regulations concerning the receipt of refugees. Certainly at various times quota systems have been negotiated at an international level, distributing eligible refugees between a series of countries in agreed numbers, but the general recent trend has been for states to view refugee arrivals as potentially troublesome in a number of respects – economically, politically and socially.

Nevertheless, the number of people leaving their homes claiming a fear of persecution has increased over the last thirty years, and particularly during the 1990s. United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) sources indicate 11.7 million refugees world-wide in January 2000, with a further 10.6 million people of concern to the organisation as currently seeking asylum, as returnees, or as internally-displaced without crossing international frontiers (UNHCR, 2000). In 1980 the refugee total had stood at 8.2 millions (Castles and Miller, 1993, p. 84). Europe has been a particular destination for these increasing flows. Between 1983 and 1989 European countries received 1.31 million asylum applications at an average of 187,000 per year (Hovy, 1993, p. 210). Between 1990 and 1999 asylum applications totalled 4.28 million, with an annual average of 428,000 (UNHCR web site), although with marked variability from year to year.

The distribution of refugees around Europe has been far from even. A number of explanations for this can be put forward, involving both large-scale institutional factors and issues and opportunities available to individual movers. The contention of this paper is that, as in all population migration, outcomes are the result of a combination of these structural and individual explanations. The nature of the balance between institutional controls, formal state policies, migrant aspirations, pre-existing migration systems, migration channels and other factors is complex. The objective of this paper is to consider the interaction between structural and individual determinants of refugee destinations through the consideration of the influences at work, both at the Europe-wide level and in case studies that make use of evidence gathered by intensive in-depth interview with two groups of refugee populations in Britain in the mid-1990s.

Throughout the paper the primary focus is on asylum-seekers, defined as those who are in the process of negotiating refugee status. The prime sources of statistical information (government departments in individual countries, and the UNHCR itself) provide much more detailed information on those who are in this position, whilst those who have been granted refugee status tend over time to slip into the general population and cease to be the subject of separate counting. Nevertheless, in the case study material the distinction between different legal categories is shown not to be completely clear-cut, with vagueness in the minds of some respondents about their actual status.
Asylum-seeker destinations in Europe

The distribution of asylum applications around Europe is difficult to explain in terms of established migration theories. Such theories might be used to set up a variety of hypotheses about the relationships between asylum-seeker origin and destination (in terms of the country in which an asylum application is filed). Each of these hypotheses, when confronted with the available data, has deficiencies.

Analysis here makes use of the aggregate data on 4.28 million asylum applicants in Europe throughout the period 1990–1999, produced by the UNHCR (UNHCR web site). Table 1 indicates the absolute number of asylum-seeker applications, and also shows the principal receiving countries. The predominance of asylum flows from former Yugoslavia and the relative number of asylum seekers from the first two of these states. The remaining two significant source areas lay in Asia (Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India, Vietnam, China and Bangladesh), and in Africa (Somalia, The Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Algeria, Ghana, Angola, Ethiopia, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Togo).

Providing explanations of the patterns shown in Table 1, and of the totality of asylum migration data, is not simple. A first observation is that in absolute terms Germany was the crucial asylum migration destination during the 1990s, and indeed 47% of all asylum applications made in Europe during the decade were made there. The next most significant countries for applications were the UK (9%), the Netherlands (8%) and France (7%). However, it is clear that the Netherlands, with its residential population of around 15 million, received many more asylum applications in relation to its own population size than did either the UK or France, with their populations of around 55 million. As Hovinga and Böcker (1999) have pointed out, there is no simple linear relationship between numbers of asylum seekers and either the population size of a country or its GDP per capita. Certain smaller European countries received many more asylum migrants than larger states. Thus during the 1990s Switzerland (282,670) and Sweden (245,590) received around three times the number of asylum applicants as Italy (89,540) or Spain (83,550).

Part of the explanation for large flows into certain destination countries may relate in part to the perceived nature of asylum policies, with countries such as Switzerland, Germany (at least until the late 1990s), the Netherlands and several Scandinavian countries being perceived as relatively liberal. However, such an interpretation could be countered by the view that for an individual migrant to survive in these relatively strongly regulated societies it is necessary to have some form of status – such as claiming asylum. Elsewhere in Europe, particularly in the South, systems of migration control are poor such that many with a potential claim as asylum seekers do not need to register in such a way and can exist as clandestines within the country. In Portugal, for example, making an asylum claim puts the individual under the eye of the authorities and is accompanied by regulations prohibiting paid employment until the claim is decided, whilst illegal employment in the economy at large is so common that the asylum migrant can retain invisibility (Baganha et al., 1999, p. 114). Although Koser (1998) has shown that clandestinity amongst asylum seekers is possible even in such a regulated system as that of the Netherlands it is far more difficult to survive undetected. Such observations actually place doubt on the UNHCR (and other) data on which materials such as Table 1 are based.

Certain strands of existing migration theory would suggest that asylum migrants should seek out destinations with the greatest potential benefit – for example in terms of economic opportunity or social advancement – either under neo-classical models of wage-rate differentials, or in terms of behavioural or life-style benefits. An alternative explanation along the same lines might relate to refugee migrants seeking out the safest possible country in order to enhance the re-establishment of their ontological security that has been lost during the process of forced movement from a homeland. Were these explanations to be the case, two further (possibly alternative) circumstances would be needed. Firstly, refugee migrants would need detailed comparative information about the opportunities at ‘competing’ destinations. And secondly, in the event of information being available on only one destination, the presence of family members there as both a source of such information and as a support for the future would be of considerable significance.

Certain of the particular concentrations of asylum seekers in various European countries are explicable in terms of other aspects of migration theory such as geographical proximity or through historic and cultural connections (Havinga and Böcker, 1999). Thus the numbers of Albanians registering asylum claims in Italy is explicable on the first such grounds: at 21,300 between 1990 and 1999, Italy was the most important receiving country for Albanian applications, comprising almost one third of all asylum applications made in Italy (admittedly a relatively small total in comparison with elsewhere). Similarly, Finland’s third biggest asylum group (at 2,560) consisted of those from the Russian Federation, partly related to geographical proximity. This is also a plausible explanation for the fact that Austria’s second largest number of asylum applicants in absolute terms (23,070) was from Romania.

Under the heading of historical or cultural connections, certain further asylum-seeker concentrations are explicable. Ex-colonial connections are important in a number of cases – such as the significant flows of Nigerians and Ghanaians to the United Kingdom, or Congolese to Belgium. Linguistic capabilities may also be important here. The UK