Asylum Migration: Implications for Countries of Origin

Khalid Koser and Nicholas Van Hear

Introduction

There is a substantial literature on the implications for countries of origin of voluntary migration. In broad terms, there are three main approaches. One considers the effects of the absence of migrants, with a particular focus on the concept of ‘brain drain’, whereby the educated and skilled dominate outmigration (for example, Adepoju, 1991). Another considers the ways that migrants continue to interact with their country of origin from abroad, with a focus on economic remittances (for example, Lim, 1992). The third approach considers the potential benefits of return migration for countries of origin (for example, Diatta and Mbow, 1999).

In contrast, there has been little serious thought about the implications for countries of origin of involuntary migration. There are several reasons for this. One reason is lack of data: for example there is no systematic information on the skills and educational background of refugees, so it is impossible to assess to what extent the educated or skilled are disproportionately represented. A further reason is bias. Research and policy have overwhelmingly focused on the impacts of refugees on their country of asylum, with little consideration, for example, of the impacts of the absence of sometimes significant proportions of population on countries of origin. More broadly, research and policy have tended to frame refugees as ‘problems’ rather than considering their potential. For example, it is only recently that research, some of which is reviewed in this chapter, has shown how refugees can and do remit substantial amounts of money to their countries of origin. Still less is there work on the influence on their countries of origin of refugees who left their homeland more than a generation ago, except perhaps in terms in political lobbying (for example, Hungarians who fled Hungary in 1956, Czechs who fled after 1968, Chileans who fled in the 1970s and so on). Such work might give us clues as to the longer-term influence of refugees and asylum seekers on their homelands.
Implications for Countries of Origin

There is growing consensus among scholars that the distinctions between voluntary and involuntary migrants are not always as sharp as has often been assumed (for example, Koser, 1997; Van Hear, 1998), and this lends conceptual validity to a chapter that asks to what extent and how refugees should be incorporated in a field of study that has traditionally been the domain of economic migrants. There are also policy reasons for asking to what extent asylum seekers and refugees can make contributions to their countries of origin. First, their numbers appear to be increasing relative to other kinds of migrant. Second, as ‘durable solutions’ become increasingly elusive, many are staying outside their countries of origin for increasing lengths of time, and even after the end of conflict in the homeland. In these circumstances, it is important to consider to what extent and how involuntary migrants can contribute to post-conflict reconstruction and, in the longer term, development of the homeland.

The purpose of this chapter is to synthesize what is known about the influence of asylum migration on countries of origin. It combines an analysis of data, a review of the literature and empirical examples from our own research. In structure the chapter follows the logic of the ‘refugee cycle’. We consider the effects of the absence of refugees on countries of origin, focusing on the scale of movements, the characteristics of refugees, where they go and their length of time in exile. We review the evidence about the influence of asylum seekers and refugees on their country of origin from exile, then we consider the implications for countries of origin of the return of asylum seekers and refugees. The conclusion acknowledges the limited state of current knowledge and draws out some policy implications.

The effects of exodus

Properly to understand the effect of the absence of refugees on their countries of origin would require detailed analysis of the scale of refugee flows, the characteristics of the refugees and how long they stay away. Data inadequacies greatly limit the extent to which such analysis is possible.

Scrutiny of the ratio of refugees to the total population in their countries of origin for the ten largest refugee populations in 2001–02 shows that refugee flows can deprive countries of a significant proportion of their population (see Koser and Van Hear, 2003). Thus an estimated one in seven Afghans, one in ten Bosnians, one in eleven Eritreans and one in thirteen Burundians lived outside their country as refugees in 2001–02. The implications of such significant proportions really depend on the demographic, economic and social characteristics of the refugees, and how their profile compares with that of the population remaining at home. In other words, are refugee flows depopulating particular sections of the society or undermining particular sections of the economy? Appropriate data to assess this simply do not exist on a systematic level. For example, UNHCR collates basic