

## **Factors influencing asylum destination choice: A review of the evidence**

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### ***Introduction***

Nearly 90% of the world's refugees can be found in developing countries (UNHCR, 2015). A small fraction seek sanctuary in Europe. Since the late 1990s there has been a steadily growing interest amongst policymakers and researchers into the reasons why asylum seekers choose to make an application for asylum in one country over another, both within Europe and beyond. On the part of national policymakers, particularly in Europe, this interest is related to efforts to reduce the numbers of applications for asylum received through the implementation of policy measures at the national level. These policy measures are therefore based upon a set of assumptions about what motivates forced migrants in general, as well as the extent to which they are able to act upon these motivations, over and above the wider contexts which produce displacement patterns.

Academics who research asylum migration have produced a large body of work on the motivations, aspirations, and journeys of forced migrants. It is therefore generally understood amongst refugee and forced migration scholars that 'forced' and 'voluntary' migration sit at either end of a spectrum, that few migrants fit neatly within either category, and that many move between categories at various points in their migration journey. Legal categories such as 'asylum seeker', 'refugee' and 'citizen', as well as definitions of 'persecution' and 'refugeehood' change over time and in different locations. The 'asylum-migration nexus' is a term used to describe the interaction between motivations to flee persecution, and those relating to starting a new life elsewhere, as well as for understanding the mixed flows of migrants fleeing the same country but with different recourse to legal protection (Castles, 2003; Middleton, 2005; Betts, 2009; Zimmermann, 2011). This body of work is all about acknowledging complexity and finding new ways to conceptualise it.

At the same time, academics researching labour migration in economics have long been working with the push/pull theory of migration. This is a theory emerging from neoclassical economics and it makes sense of migration patterns by looking at wage differentials and labour surplus/demand models. Push/pull theories work on the basis that people are 'rational'



economic actors who pursue migration journeys because of either individual or family needs or desires for greater income (see Radu and Straubhaar, 2012 for an overview). Push/pull theory has, however, been expanded to different groups of migrants in an attempt to simplify our understanding migration, in contrast with the approaches mentioned above which look for complexity. Within this framework, factors that influence decision making can be divided into two groups: push factors motivate migrants to leave a place, and pull factors attract them to another area (Massey et al., 1988). In the case of forced migrants this often translates in to push factors relating to violent conflict and pull factors relating to some combination of economic gain, safety and security. There is an assumption built in to this theory, then, that migrants have the ability to exercise their migration plans without significant obstacles, which does not always (or often) reflect the fragmented journeys of forced migrants.

The policy approach taken in relation to asylum seekers coming to the UK draws heavily on the push/pull theory of migration, and more heavily on the economic pull than the political push. What we are left with is an underpinning theory of migration which focuses solely on ideas borrowed from economic models of labour migration. Within this framework, there is an assumed risk that the economic incentives which pull asylum seekers to the UK are so strong that economic migrants will use asylum as a way to bypass normal immigration controls. Such unjustified claimants, it is argued, jeopardize the integrity of the asylum system. The logical policy approach then becomes one of decreasing the economic rights of asylum seekers.

The push/pull model is not necessarily appropriate for furthering our understanding of forced migration patterns and processes. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that one half of this model –the economic pull- dominates policymaking on asylum in the UK and beyond. In this working paper we explore the evidence available to test the claim that it is economic motivations which ‘pull’<sup>i</sup> asylum applicants. We have undertaken a systematic review of research undertaken since 1997 looking at the factors determining asylum seeker’s destination choice. Asylum seekers are not found to respond to pull factors in a rational way as predicted by the push/pull model. The research on push and pull factors finds that asylum seekers decisions are not dictated by economic gain, nor are they influenced by policies that restrict their economic rights. Factors that attract asylum seekers to particular countries tend to be vary significantly both between countries and for different nationalities of asylum seeker. Broadly, we can say that the presence of other migrants from one’s country of origin (social networks), as well as the destination’s reputation, language and colonial past are likely to contribute most to a country’s popularity. We would suggest, therefore, that policy might be better informed by theories that look for complexity than those that look for simplicity.

In the following sections we review in turn the available evidence on the role of source country conditions (push factors), reception conditions (pull factors), and then look at a range of important factors which are not captured by the push/pull model but which researchers have found to be important in determining destination choice. In the conclusion we bring the findings



of the review together and make some assessments about the utility of focussing on economic pull factors in making asylum policy decisions.

## **1. Source country conditions (push factors)**

### *1.1 Violence*

Research studies consistently find violent conflict to be the single biggest predictor of refugee migration. This is true of studies of single countries (Vogler and Rotte, 2000), all European states (Hatton, 2004; Neumayer 2005; Hatton, 2009) and in all parts of the world (Schmeidl, 1997; Davenport et al., 2003; Moore and Shellman, 2004; Moore and Shellman, 2007). In contrast to the claim that asylum seekers today are less likely to be 'genuine' refugees than those in the past, studies included in this review demonstrate the link between refugee migration and persecution in data from the 1970s to the present day. The types of regime and violent conflict that cause refugee flight are well documented. Genocide, political violence and civil war, especially civil wars that involve foreign military intervention and inter-state war account for the vast majority of refugee migration (Schmeidl, 1997, Davenport et al., 2003; Moore and Shellman, 2004). Persistent conflicts lasting many years create more refugees (Davenport et al., 2000).

These findings are buttressed further still by qualitative research (Robinson and Sergott, 2002; Day & White, 2002; Thomas et al., 2003; Crawley, 2010; Valenta & Thorshaug, 2012; Liebling et al., 2014). Thomas et al. (2003) reviewed case files and interviewed 100 randomly selected unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC). Some form of violence was the primary reason for flight in almost all cases. The most common reason for flight was death or persecution of family member (37 out of 100 interviewees). A large Home office funded study of 65 asylum seekers found most had fled from persecution (Robinson and Sergott, 2002).

What we know then is that across multiple studies over two decades violence is found to be the key push factor for asylum seekers who eventually make their way to a Western country, suggesting that the problem of 'bogus' applicants is unlikely to be a widespread problem.

### *1.2 Economic opportunity*

The question of whether asylum seekers are economically motivated has generated a lot of attention; every study included in this review investigates one or more of these economic factors. Studies have tried to find a link between refugee migration and economic conditions in destination countries, including wealth per capita, legal rights to take employment, and the unemployment rate.

#### *1.2.1. Wealth per capita*

Global studies conclude that poverty does not cause asylum migration (Schmeidl, 1997, Davenport et al., 2003; Moore and Shellman, 2004; Moore and Shellman, 2007). In the absence



of violent conflict, there is no relationship between asylum migration and economic development (Schmeidl, 1997). Asylum seekers primarily flee from persecution, not from poverty -violent conflict causes refugee migration regardless of a country's wealth (Schmeidl, 1997). Violent conflict is reported to lead to less refugee migration in wealthier countries (Schmeidl, 1997; Davenport et al, 2003); it may be that poverty acts as a catalyst for refugee flight since survival strategies are limited (Schmeidl, 1997). This corroborates the more complex 'asylum-migration nexus' theory of forced migration. Nevertheless, most refugees flee to neighbouring countries in the developing world, where wages are low. Wealthier countries tend to be further away from conflict zones, and attract fewer asylum seekers (Moore and Shellman, 2007; Schmeidl, 1997). Refugees do show a preference for wealthier countries, but only those that have a shared border (Moore and Shellman, 2007).

Scholars disagree about the effect of economic conditions on the distribution of asylum seekers in Europe. It seems likely that GDP has a marginal effect on applications (Hatton, 2004; Neumayer, 2005; Hatton, 2009; Keogh, 2014). This effect is observed between countries in the EU, but not within countries over time. This would be consistent with a view of asylum seekers as having quite a crude picture of destination countries, rather than a precise appreciation of economic performance indicators (Neumayer, 2004).

### *1.2.2. Unemployment rates*

The findings of research into the effect of unemployment rates is inconclusive as the studies that have been undertaken find varying and contradictory results. Some find that when the unemployment rate increases, numbers of asylum applications decrease (Hatton, 2004), others find no correlation (Neumayer, 2004). Current thinking is that European countries are rather heterogeneous with respect to the effect of unemployment on application shares (Toshkov, 2013). Country level analysis has found 3

that in Sweden, the Netherlands, the UK and Ireland high unemployment is associated with a decrease in applications. However, in Hungary, Lithuania, and Portugal the effect is an increase in applications (Toshkov, 2013). It is possible that the effects may have cancelled each other out in previous analysis at the EU level (namely, Hatton, 2004; Neumayer, 2004). The effect of unemployment rates is deeply connected to a range of other factors that vary from country to country. These include formal labour market access, the size of the informal economy, and the presence of social networks to report on the availability or otherwise of work.

## **2. Reception conditions (pull factors)**

### *2.1 Access to the labour market*

It is very difficult to isolate the effect of labour market access from other policy measures for a variety of reasons, including the fact that restrictions on labour market access tend to be implemented at the same time as a raft of other policy measures. Studies have examined policy



reform in Switzerland (Holzer et al, 2000) and Germany (Vogler and Rotte, 2000), but are not able to separate the effect of work restrictions from other measures, such as increased border controls. Indeed, no research study has found a long term correlation between labour market access and destination choice. The most up to date research concludes that access to work has little, if any, effect on variations in asylum applications (Brekke and Aarset, 2009; Valenta and Thorshaug, 2012; Valenta and Thorshaug, 2013; Valenta et al., 2015). The closest we have found to a proven link is a study by Thielemann (2004), who identified a short term effect on application numbers of opening up the labour market to asylum seekers. The relationship may be contingent on the relative strictness of other potential destination countries and the nationality and language groups of asylum seekers, and for that reason it is unlikely to have a permanent deterrent effect.

Qualitative studies are instructive in gaining a better understanding of the knowledge held by asylum seekers of UK public policy before they arrived. In all of these studies, including one conducted for the Home Office in 2002, asylum seekers have reported having no knowledge of UK public policy, including labour market access and welfare benefits, before arriving (Robinson and Sergott, 2002; Day & White, 2002; Thomas et al., 2003; Gilbert & Koser, 2006; Crawley, 2010; Valenta & Thorshaug, 2012; Liebling et al., 2014). Most, if not all, are from countries without a welfare state, assume they will be expected to work, and report being shocked and confused when they found they would be prevented from doing so (Doyle, 2009; Gilbert, A. and K. Koser, 2006). These studies are mostly small scale, though all studies in a range of locations and with different nationalities report the same findings, adding weight to their conclusions.

## *2.2 Welfare provision*

No research study has found a correlation between welfare provision and destination choice. Asylum applications are not higher in countries which spend a higher proportion of GDP on welfare support (Hatton, 2009). Likewise, applications are not higher in countries that provide asylum seekers with a higher amount of welfare support (Thielemann, 2004). Nor are asylum applicants deterred when a country switches to making payments in vouchers rather than cash (Thielemann, 2004). No other empirical evidence has been identified that isolates the level of welfare spend from other policy variables. However, these findings are corroborated by qualitative evidence pertaining to asylum seeker's lack of awareness of public policies and a widely held belief that they will be expected to support themselves (Robinson and Sergott, 2002; Day & White, 2002; Thomas et al., 2003; Gilbert & Koser, 2006; Crawley, 2010; Valenta & Thorshaug, 2012; Liebling et al., 2014).

## *2.3 Recognition rate*

Once asylum seekers have arrived in Europe one factor identified by a number of researchers as being potentially significant for destination choice within the region is the 'recognition rate' in a destination country -the chance of having one's asylum application granted (Havinga and Böcker, 1999; Holzer, 2000; Hatton, 2004, 2009; Neumayer, 2005; Keogh, 2013; Toshkov, 2014). This can



influence the decision making of asylum seekers where they are able to access this data. Such information however, often obtained through social networks, may or may not be reliable, and is unlikely to include a 'rational' and comprehensive comparison of all EU countries.

### ***3. Adaption costs and information sources***

While the push/pull model dominates political discourse on asylum destination choice, and in the case of pull factors the central focus is on economic criteria, a range of other factors have been found to be of more relevance in understanding patterns of asylum migration to the UK. We focus on three of the most prominent factors in this section.

#### *3.1 Social networks*

Moving to a new country involves risk and uncertainty. Family members or friends who have already moved from one country to another can lower these risks by providing information and support. Because of this, so-called 'migration networks' are commonly believed to act as an important pull factor. Multiple statistical studies have found that asylum seekers are more likely to migrate to countries where there are other migrants from their country of origin (Davenport et al., 2003; Neumayer, 2004; Hatton, 2004; Hatton, 2009; Thiellemann 2004; Moore and Shellman, 2004; Moore and Shellman, 2012; Keogh, 2013). In fact, no studies reviewed here have failed to find a relationship between refugee migration and the size of migrant populations.

Good data on the size of the immigrant population is available in most European countries, and certainly in the UK. Quantitative researchers assume that the size of the migrant population corresponds to the amount of support they provide. This is a fair assumption; nevertheless it is possible that the level of support a community provides is unrelated to its size. In research interviews asylum seekers commonly mention friends, family and acquaintances when asked about destination choice. Whilst some asylum seekers say they were actively helped by a family member or friend, others report far more casual connections, for example, with aid workers (Day and White, 2002). The importance of these casual connections is at odds with the traditional notion of migration networks offering support that lowers the cost of migration. It could be that the news that others have reached a place of safety is enough to reduce the uncertainty that the journey holds (Davenport et al., 2003).

Recent research has revealed that the presence of previous migrants has a varying effect in different destination countries (Toshkov, 2013). The figures suggest there may even be a hump, whereby migration networks stop acting as a pull factor, and start deflecting future asylum applicants, leading to unexpected settlement patterns (Middleton, 2005). Therefore, the relationship between migration networks and asylum applications is clearly complex. Whatever the root cause, we can expect migration networks to continue to exert a large effect on migration flows.

### *3.2 Destination country reputation*

A belief that a destination respects human rights and the rule of law in general is understandably an important consideration for asylum seekers. Qualitative data captures this effect conclusively, with every study included in the review finding that the perception of the destination as a place of safety was important to interviewees (Day and White, 2002; Wijk, 2008; Crawley, 2010; Liebling, 2014; Valenta, 2015).

Reputation is a hard concept to test empirically, and this has led to some spurious statistical results (Neumayer, 2004; Thiellemann, 2004). For example, destinations that spend more on overseas development aid receive more asylum applications (Thiellemann, 2004). Development aid may well improve a country's humanitarian reputation, but it may also facilitate social networks between aid workers from a destination country and future asylum seekers, research has not proven how the relationship works.

At a global level democracies fail to attract asylum seekers. The vast majority of asylum seekers migrate to a neighbouring country, regardless of whether the country is democratic or not (Moore and Shellman, 2003). Because democracies are spatially clustered and tend not to produce forced migrants, asylum seekers are actually far more likely to migrate to countries that are undemocratic. Furthermore, neighbouring countries remain more attractive to asylum seekers than non-neighbouring countries even when the destination is experiencing civil war, or is at war with the country of origin (Moore and Shellman, 2003). This suggests that, globally, most asylum seekers do not have the means to migrate to a country that respects human rights and the rule of law.

### *3.3 Language, culture and colonial ties*

In addition to facilitating the formation of diasporas, Europe's colonial history has created links between countries in the form of language, culture and institutions. Familiarity with language and culture lowers the cost of adapting to a new country. It follows that, on those grounds alone, countries should expect to be more popular with asylum seekers from their former colonies.

Only four of the studies included in the review looked at the link between colonial histories and destination choice. Despite this relatively small sample, the relationship is clear: former colonial relationships influence asylum seekers decisions (Neumayer, 2004; Zetter, 2003; Day and White, 2002; Crawley, 2010). The importance of historic migration patterns, language and colonial legacies has led some commentators to suggest that, regardless of policy changes, some destination countries will always be attractive (Neumayer, 2004).



## ***Conclusion***

Through presenting the findings of research which has investigated both push and pull factors implicated in asylum migration patterns, this review has demonstrated that:

- The 'push' element of the push/pull model of migration is applicable, in simple terms, to forced migrants, but that economic push factors are not significant.
- That the application of the 'pull' element in the push/pull model of labour migration is entirely unsuitable for application in the case of asylum seekers.
- That the pull factors which draw asylum seekers to destination countries (where they are able to exercise choice) are much less often related to public policies and much more often related to such factors as the presence of social networks and histories of colonialism, which do not lend themselves to public policy interventions.

We therefore conclude that the assumptions underpinning asylum policy in the UK, which have a significant impact upon the ability of asylum seekers to exercise their human rights, and to gain sanctuary, are fundamentally flawed. There is insufficient evidence to substantiate the claims made by politicians around economic pull factors. A more sophisticated and complex understanding of forced migration would certainly be more adequate to the task of better understanding asylum flows, but perhaps not to the overarching political aim of decreasing the numbers of asylum applications received, irrespective of international events.

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<sup>i</sup> Eleven of the studies reviewed are qualitative, eighteen of these studies are quantitative, and one used both statistical and interview data. Some of the studies are global, some focus on Europe and some look just at the UK. Search strategy and selection criteria: Scopus , Social Sciences Citation Index , Sociological Abstracts , Worldwide Political Science Abstracts , Directory of Open Access Journals , JSTOR Archival Journals , Science Citation Index Expanded , Taylor & Francis , Informa , SciVerse ScienceDirect , ASSIA: Applied Social Science Index and Abstracts , Oxford Journals (Oxford University Press) , Wiley Online Library, Index (Web of Science) , Sage Publications (CrossRef) , Social Services Abstracts , PILOTS: Published International Literature on Traumatic Stress , SAGE Journals and BMJ Journals were systematically searched for studies of factors that affect refugee flight and destination choice from January 1997 to March 2016. Terms that describe asylum seekers “asylum” “forced migra\*” “refugee” were combined with “push” “pull” “flight” “destination” “choice”. Inclusion criteria included peer review, publication date, data about refugee flight or destination choice and English language. There was no minimum sample size. Multiple studies undertaken by the same researcher using the same dataset were included. 2,007 articles were identified through database searches. Duplicates were removed from the list and summaries reviewed for the remaining articles based on the above inclusion criteria. The final sample consisted of seventeen quantitative and seven qualitative studies.