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Policy challenges of the new diasporas: migrant networks and their impact on asylum flows and regimes

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Introduction

“Why are you here in Europe?” I asked. “How many Tamils there in Europe?” he replied. “About 24,000,” I answered. “Then there are about 24,000 reasons why I am here.”¹

As the Transnational Communities Programme observed in a recent workshop programme, “a growing body of social scientific research demonstrates numerous new ways in which contemporary global migrants remain intensely connected to their places of origin, to co-nationals or co-ethnics across nation-state borders, and indeed across the world.”²

While this analytical perspective has been applied quite extensively to other groups of migrants, few scholars have sought to examine the extent to which refugees and asylum seekers maintain such a worldwide web of relationships. Indeed, the academic discourse on refugees, not to mention the practical efforts made on their behalf by UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations, continue to be informed by the assumption of a rigid separation between the exile’s ‘country of origin’ and ‘country of asylum’. Transnational notions such as globalization, diasporas and social networks have been slow to find their way into the literature, reflecting the longstanding division (both intellectually and institutionally) between the field of ‘refugee studies’ and the study of international migration.³

Refugees and the new migrant diasporas

In numerical terms, refugees, exiles and asylum seekers constitute a significant component of the new migrant diasporas.⁴ According to some estimates, roughly one in three of the 100 to 120 million people currently living outside their country of birth can be considered as refugees.⁵ In political terms, refugees and asylum seekers have arguably assumed an even greater significance, a development which derives from the growing perception that they represent a threat to national security and that they undermine the sovereign right of states to control the admission of foreign nationals onto their territory. Such attitudes have been particularly pronounced in the countries of Western Europe, where immigration from other regions of the world has generally

¹ Christopher McDowell, *A Tamil Asylum Diaspora: Sri Lankan Migration, Settlement and Politics in Switzerland*, Berghahn Books, Oxford, 1997, p. 19.

² Programme of a workshop on ‘Policy challenges of the new migrant diasporas’, Chatham House, London, 22-23 April 1999.

³ Interestingly, the intellectual causes and consequences of this division have never been fully explored. The recent work of scholars such as Cohen, Koser, McDowell, Wahlbeck and Van Hear, cited in this paper, attest to the fact that the gap between refugee and migration studies is finally being bridged.

⁴ For a discussion of the ‘new’ dimensions of international migration, see the introductory chapter in Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen (eds), *Migration, Diasporas and Transnationalism*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, 1999.

⁵ Demetrios Papademetriou, ‘Migration’, *Foreign Policy*, no 109, 1997-98, p. 18.

(albeit unsuccessfully) been discouraged since the economic recession of the early 1970s.

According to UNHCR statistics, up to 250,000 people with refugee status have been admitted to Western Europe through organized resettlement programmes since the late 1970s. The vast majority of this number originated from Indo-China and were granted permanent residence in France, Germany, the UK and other states in the region. The Indo-Chinese programmes came to an effective end in the mid-1980s, however, and the number of recognized refugees resettled in Western Europe from first asylum countries in other parts of the world has been very modest during the current decade.

The decline in the scale of resettlement has been more than matched by the growth in the number of asylum seekers submitting applications for refugee status in Western Europe - some 4.4 million in the past ten years. These figures do not, however, include the large number of Bosnians who were granted temporary asylum *en masse* during the conflict in former Yugoslavia. Nor do they take account of the fact that many people who might have previously submitted a claim to refugee status now seem to enter and remain in Western Europe on a clandestine basis, rather than presenting themselves to the authorities and running the risk of detention and deportation.

Determining how many of the refugees and asylum seekers described above remain in Western Europe is by no means an easy task. On one hand, little data is available concerning the number of refugees who eventually return to their country of origin or who leave their country of asylum in order to take up residence in another state. On the other hand, our knowledge is very limited with regard to the ultimate fate of those asylum seekers whose claims to refugee status are rejected. Between 1991 and 1995, for example, around 22 per cent of the 2.4 million asylum applicants in Western Europe were granted refugee status or given some other kind of residence permit. But what happened to the remaining 78 per cent - some 1.8 million people? There is a broad consensus that only a small proportion were formally deported or chose to move on voluntarily. The majority, it is thought, remained in the country where they had unsuccessfully sought asylum, whether illegally or on some other basis.⁶

Legal categories and social networks

Turning to the question of social networks within the new diasporas, it is tempting to treat refugees as a special and separate case. Tempting for two reasons: because recognized refugees and registered asylum applicants both enjoy a specific legal status that sets them apart from other migrants; and because of the longstanding belief that refugees share a particular psychology and orientation towards their homeland, derived from the involuntary nature of their departure. While such legal and psychological considerations may be important in other contexts, it is the contention of this paper that asylum seekers, refugees and 'refugee networks' should be considered not in isolation but as an integral part of the new migrant diasporas.

⁶ Sharon Stanton Russell, 'International migration: global trends and national responses', *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1996, p. 6.

As UNHCR has stated elsewhere, “migration and refugee flows were for many years regarded as discrete phenomena, and the task of distinguishing refugees from ordinary migrants did not present any serious difficulties to states.”⁷ But it has now become increasingly difficult to make a clear distinction between ‘voluntary’ and ‘involuntary’ population movements, between people who are fleeing from threats to their life and those wanting to escape poverty and social injustice. “Today, more than ever, refugees are part of a complex migratory phenomenon, in which political, ethnic, economic, environmental and human rights factors combine and lead to population movements.”⁸ A recent UN report on international migration makes a similar point in somewhat different language. “Many people,” it suggests, “are prompted to leave their own country by a mixture of fears, hopes and aspirations which can be very difficult, if not impossible, to unravel.”⁹

It should also be noted that many of the refugees in Western Europe inhabit a heterogeneous social universe, living alongside compatriots and co-ethnics who are part of a broader diaspora or transnational community, but who are not necessarily refugees. Between 1994 and 1997, the largest number of asylum seekers in Western Europe originated from Bosnia and other parts of former Yugoslavia, Turkey, Romania, Iraq, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan. Significantly, most of these countries have substantial numbers of their citizens living in Western Europe, not only as refugee and asylum seekers, but also under a variety of other legal statuses. In terms of social networks, therefore, it is almost certainly more profitable to focus on such communities as a whole, rather than on those people who have been recognized as refugees.¹⁰

This latter assertion is supported by the neglected fact that a substantial proportion (exact figures are not available) of the asylum applications received by the Western European states are submitted by people who have already been resident in the country for some time, whether as a student, businessperson, diplomat, visitor, migrant worker or illegal immigrant. When such individuals become ‘asylum seekers’ or ‘refugees’, they evidently do not enter or establish an entirely new realm of social networks, either locally or globally.

Finally, it should be noted that the global networks and transnational communities of which refugees are part, rarely (if ever) consist solely of refugees. In fact, those networks, linking together people of the same family, community, ethnic group or country, are far more likely to incorporate a variety of different migrant categories.

⁷ ‘Managing migration in the wider Europe’, paper submitted by UNHCR to a seminar on Managing Migration in the Wider Europe, Strasbourg, 12-13 October 1998.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *Technical Symposium on International Migration and Development, The Hague, 29 June - 3 July 1998*, UNFPA, New York, 1989, p. 70.

¹⁰ This is the approach pursued by one of the projects of the Transnational Communities Research Programme: ‘Diaspora politics of immigrants and refugees from Turkey, residing in Germany, the Netherlands, UK and Denmark’. For further details, see <http://www.transcomm.ox.ac.uk/wwwroot/eva_ostergaard.htm>. It is also the approach that informs much of the recent work on diasporas and transnational communities. See, for example, Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: an Introduction*, UCL Press, London, 1997.

A Sudanese asylum seeker in the UK, to give a hypothetical example, may well be part of an extended social network that incorporates Sudanese migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, illegal Sudanese immigrants in the Netherlands, US citizens of Sudanese origin, other Sudanese who are present in the UK, as well as Sudanese in their own country. Indeed, as the following section of this paper suggests, people from other regions of the world have found it increasingly difficult to gain admission to Western Europe unless they have been able to activate such networks.

Social networks and asylum migration

The number of asylum seekers (and, more recently it would seem, the number of irregular or clandestine migrants) making their way to Western Europe increased very rapidly after the early 1980s: from less than 100,00 in 1984 to almost 700,000 in 1992. While the level has subsided since that time, the number of new arrivals continues to be high in relation to the early 1980s and has started to rise again. The total for 1998 - around 350,000 - was around 70,000 higher than the figure for 1997.

Some of the factors underlying these statistics are well known: the incidence of persecution, armed conflict and human rights violations in certain parts of the world; the simultaneous presence of migration pressures such as poverty and unemployment; the lifting of emigration restrictions in the former Soviet bloc; the penetration of the international transport, communications and media industries into low and middle-income regions; and the absence of regular migration opportunities, coupled with the continued need for low-wage, low-status labour in the world's wealthier states. But within the refugee discourse, relatively little attention has been given to the role played by social networks in prompting, facilitating, sustaining and directing the movement of asylum seekers and other migrants into Western Europe.¹¹

There are two possible reasons for this lacuna. First, at the political level, the debate on asylum in Western Europe has been a highly polarized one. Governments and politicians have focused on the way in which 'economic migrants' or 'bogus refugees' are cynically 'abusing' asylum procedures. In sharp contrast, asylum advocates and human rights groups have been inclined to present asylum seekers as people who have been 'forced to flee' and whose behaviour is determined solely by the need to escape from an immediate danger. The argument presented here - that even those asylum seekers who merit refugee status have clear preferences in relation to their ultimate destination, and that their migration is often facilitated by means of transnational social networks - does not fit comfortably into either of these simplistic world views.

Second, and in terms of empirical enquiry (both in academic institutions and in operational agencies such as UNHCR), there has been a dearth of research on asylum seekers: how they reach the decision to leave their own country; what information is available to them when they make that decision; the way in which their journey is

¹¹ Those migration specialists who have focused on social networks have declined the opportunity to extend their analysis to the movement of refugees and asylum seekers. See, for example, Douglas Gurak and Fe Caces, 'Migration networks and the shaping of migration systems', in Mary Kritz et al, (eds) *International Migration Systems: a Global Approach*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1992.

financed; the degree to which it is planned with a specific destination in mind;; and the extent to which they had prior contact with that country. Rather than focusing asylum seekers themselves - purposive actors who are obliged to 'negotiate entry' into Western Europe - the refugee discourse has focused far too narrowly on issues of public policy.¹² As a result, the empirical data collected on the migration strategies employed by asylum seekers (and the social networks of which they are part) is highly fragmentary in nature.

The limited number of studies undertaken in this area suggest that transnational social networks perform a number of important functions in the process of asylum migration.

First, those networks act as an important source of *information* to prospective asylum seekers, providing them with details on issues such as transport arrangements, entry requirements, asylum procedures and social welfare benefits, as well as the detention and deportation policies of different destination states. Asylum seekers and other migrants who have access to such data are evidently better placed to negotiate entry into Western Europe than those who do not.

More generally, it has been suggested, the information transmitted through social networks concerning the quality of life in Western Europe and other affluent regions may contribute to the prospective asylum seeker's decision to migrate. As Bimal Ghosh argues, the less accurate such information is, the greater its impact is likely to be: "As a rule, migrants pretend to be better off than they actually are... The information is often transmitted through informal channels, and at each new link in the transmission process, the success story tends to be further magnified, with the result that the distorted information serves as a strong incentive for outmigration."¹³

Second, migrant networks provide a means of mobilizing the *financial resources* required for a person to leave a low or middle-income country and seek asylum in a more prosperous state. While the evidence on this issue is again fragmentary, there are reasons to believe that transnational networks play an increasingly important role in relation to this function.

In earlier years, when the borders of Western Europe were more permeable, the cash that an asylum seeker needed to finance his or her journey could often be met from domestic sources: by the use of savings and the sale of personal possessions, as well as loans from relatives and local money lenders. But with the introduction of more rigorous controls on admission to the region, a highly profitable human trafficking industry has emerged, leading to an appreciable increase in the cost of irregular migration.¹⁴ How have asylum seekers and others been able to raise the large amount of cash needed to pay for their journey? To what extent are these resources mobilized

¹² This phrase is gratefully borrowed from Khalid Koser, 'Negotiating entry into Fortress Europe: the migration strategies of 'spontaneous' asylum seekers', in Phillip Muus (ed), *The Exclusion and Inclusion of Refugees in Contemporary Europe*, ERCOMER, Utrecht, 1997.

¹³ Bimal Ghosh, *Huddled Masses and Uncertain Shores: Insights Into Irregular Migration*, IOM and Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1998, p. 67.

¹⁴ Ernesto Savona *et al*, 'Dynamics of migration and crime in Europe: new patterns of an old nexus', Transcrime Working Paper 8, <<http://www.jus.unitn.it/transcrime/papers/wp8.html>>.

by means of remittances, sent home by members of the diaspora community? And to what extent do the members of migrant networks within Western Europe make direct payments to traffickers and their local agents, so as to finance the journey of their relatives, kin, compatriots and co-ethnics? Additional research on these admittedly sensitive issues would evidently be welcome.

Third, transnational migrant networks can provide the *organizational infrastructure* required for people to move from one part of the world to another, especially when that movement has to be arranged in an irregular or clandestine character. As indicated in the preceding paragraph, there is evidence to suggest that this function is in the process of being appropriated by organized criminal syndicates - another (and in some cases related) form of transnational network, whose growth is also a product of the globalization process.¹⁵ But as Bimal Ghosh reminds us, “trafficking may take the form... of illegal entry through informal modes, supported and facilitated by social networks of migrant’s relatives and countrymen in the sending, receiving and transit countries.”¹⁶

The latter statement certainly holds true with regard to the Sri Lankan Tamils, around 150,000 of whom have sought asylum in Western Europe and North America during the current decade. The origins of that diaspora are to be found in the emigration of Tamil professionals, workers and students in the 1970s and early 1980s, not only to Europe and North America, but also to the Middle East and South-East Asia. This early diaspora provided the social infrastructure required to arrange the departure of asylum seekers following the outbreak of the civil war. As the number of Tamils making their way to Western Europe and North America increased, so that infrastructure grew stronger, thereby facilitating further asylum migration. This sequence of events provides a neat demonstration of the demographic principle identified by Douglas Massey: “once the number of network connections in an origin area reaches a critical level, migration becomes self-perpetuating, because migration itself creates the social structure to sustain it.”¹⁷

How exactly has the Tamil diaspora facilitated the migration of their co-ethnics? Recent studies suggest that members of the Tamil community in the UK and Canada have played an important part in negotiating the transport arrangements and false documentation needed to bring their family members from Sri Lanka. Established Tamil communities in the Middle East and South-East Asia have provided a series of staging posts for prospective asylum seekers who are in transit to the west. And as Christopher McDowell explains, Colombo-based agents, “building on their experience of placing contract workers in the Middle East, switched easily to the asylum routes and opened up the possibility of migration to those Tamils who did not have the overseas contacts...”¹⁸ As the latter quotation suggests, the line between

¹⁵ See Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, Volume III: End of Millennium*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1998, pp. 166 - 180.

¹⁶ Bimal Ghosh, *op cit.*, p. 23.

¹⁷ Douglas Massey, quoted in Nicholas Van Hear, *New Diasporas: the Mass Exodus, Dispersal and Regrouping of Migrant Communities*, UCL Press, London, 1998, p. 259.

¹⁸ Christopher McDowell, *op cit.*, p. 92. See also John Morrison, *The Cost of Survival: the Trafficking of Refugees to the UK*, Refugee Council, London, 1998, pp. 34-35.

network-based migration and the commercial trafficking of migrants is not always an easy one to draw.¹⁹

Finally, in addition to information, resources and an organizational infrastructure, transnational social networks provide asylum seekers and irregular migrants with *subsistence and support* (especially employment) when they arrive at their final destination. As Jochen Blaschke concludes in a study of irregular migrants in Germany, “migrant knowledge about possible sources of income and assistance is collective knowledge in networks. Concrete points of access to the labour market are found with the help of friends and acquaintances. The immigrant, and especially the illegal immigrant, is dependent on being embedded in networks.”²⁰ And in many cases, Blaschke observes, the ethnic enterprises which offer work to irregular migrants are themselves transnational in nature, linked by flows of capital, labour and goods to sister enterprises in the country of origin and other European states. Similarly, as Engbersen and van der Leun conclude in their study of undocumented migrants in the Netherlands, “the informal network of family, friends, acquaintances and relatives in the Netherlands as well as in the country of origin... is critical in finding accommodation, financial support, a possible partner and a first introduction to Dutch society.”²¹

Of course, the employment provided through migrant networks is likely to be dirty, might well be dangerous and may even be downright exploitative. But in the context of Western Europe, where asylum seekers have been progressively excluded from formal labour markets and regular social security systems, it can also represent a means of survival. Indeed, the ability of many asylum seekers to eke out a living when their welfare entitlements have been cut, and the consistent reluctance of refugees and refugee claimants to be dispersed from the large cities where ethnic enterprises and community associations are based, provide an indication of the support provided by such local social networks.

At the same time, the limitations and negative dimensions of diaspora communities should be acknowledged. On one hand, as Osten Wahlbeck has pointed out, they should not be expected to provide those services and resources which are more properly the responsibility of government.²² On the other hand, as Nicholas Van Hear has argued, while they may provide their members with subsistence and support, diaspora communities may also be characterized by division, exploitation, repression and even political violence.²³ It is somewhat ironic that UNHCR’s Geneva

¹⁹ As Nicholas Van Hear points out, Albanian traffickers, whose business was initially to organize the migration of fellow Albanians, have since diversified their activities to include a wide range of other nationalities. See Van Hear, *op cit*, p. 259.

²⁰ Jochen Blaschke, ‘Addressing the employment of migrants in an irregular situation: the case of Germany’, paper presented to the Technical Symposium on International Migration and Development, The Hague, 29 June - 3 July 1998, p. 19.

²¹ Godfried Engbersen and Joanne van der Lun, ‘Illegality and criminality: the differential opportunity structure of undocumented immigrants’, in Khalid Koser and Helma Lutz (eds), *The New Migration in Europe: Social Constructions and Social Realities*, Macmillian Press, Basingstoke, 1998, p. 205.

²² Osten Wahlbeck. ‘The Kurdish diaspora in Finland and England’, in Phillip Muus, *op cit*.

²³ Van Hear, *op cit*.

headquarters, where this paper is being written, is currently surrounded by barricades, barbed wire and heavily-armed detachments of the Swiss armed forces. The purpose of such extraordinary precautions? To protect the UN's refugee protection agency from Kurdish refugees!

Some issues arising

This discussion paper suffers from a number of weaknesses. First, it is not based on any original empirical research, and it draws upon the rather limited range of secondary sources available. This deficiency evidently needs to be redressed. An obvious starting point would be to undertake an analysis of the very detailed statistics on asylum applications in Europe, compiled by bodies such as UNHCR and the Intergovernmental Consultations on Asylum, Refugees and Migration Policies in Europe. From these statistics, it should be possible to identify the changing pattern of asylum migration in the region, and, in rather crude terms, the extent to which asylum seekers have submitted claims to refugee status in countries where their compatriots and co-ethnics are present in significant numbers.²⁴ At the same time, case studies of specific national and ethnic groups of asylum migrants - such as those undertaken by Koser and McDowell - would evidently add to our understanding of the issues raised in this paper.²⁵

Second, this paper has consciously set out to highlight the neglected role of transnational social networks in determining the scale and direction of asylum flows into Western Europe. In the process, the role of social networks may well have been exaggerated. And other important variables - visa requirements, transportation links, readmission agreements, refugee recognition rates and the physical permeability of different borders, for example, not to mention the changing pattern of persecution and violence in refugee-producing states - have certainly not been given the attention they deserve.

Third, this paper may be read by some as an *apologia* for those governments, politicians and newspapers which claim that the vast majority of asylum seekers in Western Europe are fraudulent. It is not intended as such. Indeed, the paper is based upon the principle that in assessing the claims of prospective refugees, the issues of *means* and *motivation* should be rigorously separated. In simpler terms, an asylum seeker's claim to refugee status is in no way diminished because that person has used the services of a professional trafficker, has crossed an international border by clandestine means, has used false documents, received financial support from a relative who is already living in Western Europe, and has passed through several countries on the way to his or her intended destination. In this context, it is worth recalling that in 1997, almost 25 per cent of the asylum applications considered in Europe (and over 60 per cent in North America) received a positive decision - contradicting

²⁴ A preliminary analysis of the destination countries of asylum seekers from different parts of the world can be found in a paper prepared by Bela Hovy, UNHCR statistician, 'Asylum in Europe: arrivals, stay and gender from a data perspective', Geneva, April 1999.

²⁵ See above, notes 2 and 11. See also Khalid Koser, 'Social networks and the asylum cycle: the case of Iranians in the Netherlands', *International Migration Review*, vol. 31, no. 3, 1997.

the notion that those individuals who seek refugee status in the industrialized states are invariably 'bogus'.

Finally, and contrary to the title of the paper, the analysis presented so far has not given any consideration to the impact which migrant networks have had on asylum regimes in Western Europe. Some thoughts on this issue are consequently required.

When the number of asylum applications in Western Europe began to rise in the early 1980s, the immediate response of states was to introduce what became known as 'restrictive asylum practices'. The list of such practices is long, and the rigour with which they have been applied has intensified in the course of the past 15 years. They include the introduction of visa restrictions and carrier sanctions; the application of the 'safe third country' and 'safe country of origin' concepts; interpretations of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention which exclude the victims of war and people who have been persecuted by non-state actors; the detention and deportation of asylum seekers; and the introduction of readmission agreements which allow refugee claimants to be returned to countries where they have been in transit.

The hypothesis presented here is that by establishing and activating transnational social networks (aided to a considerable extent by new transport and communications technologies) a considerable number of asylum seekers were able to negotiate their way through the many obstacles to entry erected by the states of Western Europe. And the success of those migration strategies was such that governments introduced ever more draconian measures (some of them in contravention of states' international legal obligations) to deter or prevent further arrivals.

The impact of such measures has been described by the author elsewhere.²⁶ They have jeopardized the well-being of asylum seekers and refugees. They have displaced the 'refugee problem' to other parts of the world, most notably Central and Eastern Europe. They have contributed to a global erosion of refugee protection standards. And, as indicated earlier, there is growing evidence to suggest that they have prompted potential asylum seekers and refugees to procure the services of another transnational community: professional traffickers, linked in many instances to organized criminal syndicates.

It is difficult to determine how the restrictive practices of the Western European states, and the efforts of commercial traffickers to circumvent those practices, will influence the pattern of asylum migration in the years to come. A tentative hypothesis (supported by a small amount of empirical evidence) is that potential asylum seekers will be able to exercise less control over their ultimate destination and will therefore find it more difficult to ensure that they gain admission to a country where they can join an established community of compatriots or co-ethnics. As John Salt has pointed out, migration has become a business.²⁷ But in a world where asylum seekers can

²⁶ Jeff Crisp and Nicholas Van Hear, 'Refugee protection and immigration control: addressing the asylum dilemma', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1998.

²⁷ John Salt, 'Migration as a business: the case of trafficking', *International Migration*, vol. 35, no. 4, 1997.

cross the borders of Europe only with the assistance of traffickers, it is a business in which the customer has increasingly little choice.

Responding to the growth of human trafficking constitutes one of the principal policy challenges confronting UNHCR in Europe today. Recognizing the dangers of this phenomenon, both to governments and to migrants themselves, UNHCR has stated that “the traffic in human beings cannot be condoned and its curtailment is absolutely essential.”²⁸ At the same time, the organization argues, “it is essential that any such measures are directed at the unscrupulous individuals and groups making profit out of compelling human needs, and not at their victims.”²⁹ It seems questionable whether this is a sustainable policy position, given the extent to which asylum seekers now rely on professional traffickers to negotiate their way across Europe. Is it not inevitable that measures designed to curtail trafficking will also prevent *bona fide* refugees from gaining access to the asylum procedure?

²⁸ ‘Managing migration in the wider Europe’, *op cit.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*