



SUMMARY

VERWEY Instituut  
JONKER

# THE INFLUENCE OF ASYLUM POLICY ON MIGRATION TO THE NETHERLANDS

Scientific insights into migration drivers

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# Summary

## Background and research question

In the social debate on asylum migration, regularly a connection is assumed between the provision of facilities to asylum migrants and the number of asylum migrants coming to the Netherlands. The WODC has commissioned the Verwey-Jonker Institute to provide insight into the latest scientific knowledge on the factors that play a role in the migration process of asylum migrants, including their own decisions. Based on recent scientific research, the study aimed to provide insights into how asylum migrants 'choose' a destination country, particularly the Netherlands. What can be said about the influence of asylum policy on the choice of a destination country, and the Netherlands in particular?

To answer this question, we have formulated the following sub-questions:

1. What is known in scientific sources about the extent to which drivers<sup>1</sup> play a role in choosing a destination country?
2. What is known in scientific sources about:
  - 2a. The knowledge asylum migrants have about the asylum policy in destination countries and about important aspects of life after the asylum procedure. (such as job and housing opportunities, and access to healthcare) and;
  - 2b. The way in which this knowledge influences decisions about migration?

<sup>1</sup> With the term migration drivers, we mean the factors that may influence migration, such as asylum migration. See section 1.3 in the report for a more detailed explanation.

3. What can be said, based on scientific sources, about the extent to which different aspects of asylum policies and post-asylum procedure opportunities in destination countries play a role in the choice of the destination country? These include border controls, admission criteria, reception facilities and opportunities after the asylum procedure, including those on the labour market.
4. In relation to sub-questions 1 to 3, what is known about the influence of background characteristics such as age, country of origin, et cetera? What is known about the group of unaccompanied minors?
5. Based on existing scientific research, is it possible to determine whether specific policy measures in the Netherlands affect the influx of asylum migrants?

## Demarcation and research method

The focus of the study is on the process that causes asylum migrants to come to a specific destination country, in particular to the Netherlands. It concerns both decision-making by the asylum migrant him- or herself and other influences that partly determine where a person ends up. From the scientific literature, several factors (drivers) are known to play a role in the decision to leave a country and migrate to another. We distinguish 9 main drivers, which include a total of 25 sub-drivers that interact with each other. They are not static but change over time. The migration process is very complex. Importantly, the decision to flee and the choices of a particular flight route and destination country are not made at one moment in time. The choice of the destination country can take form in several places and may change during the migration process. On top of that, coincidence can also influence where an asylum migrant eventually seeks asylum. Migration drivers can also vary between groups and individuals. Think of differences in socio-economic class, gender, religion, and sexuality.

The research approach we used consists of two parts. Firstly, we conducted a brief literature review, complementing the comprehensive 2015 literature study carried out by Maastricht University (Kuschminder et al., 2015), commissioned by the WODC. This study looked at the formation of migration decisions, with a specific focus on the factors involved in choosing the Netherlands. Secondly, the preliminary results of the literature review were presented to a select group of scholars in an expert meeting.

## Conclusions

We will successively answer the research questions posed and will conclude with a brief overarching consideration.

During the study, the information in the literature on the background characteristics of asylum migrants turned out to be rather limited. As a result, we did not reach substantive conclusions for sub-question 4. When we did have information on background characteristics, we included it integrally in the answers to the other sub-questions.

### Question 1

*What is known in scientific sources about the extent to which migration drivers play a role in choosing a destination country?*

*Nine drivers directly, indirectly and coherently influence processes of asylum migration.* Based on the literature, we distinguish the following nine groups of drivers that influence processes of asylum migration (these are explained further in chapter 2 in the report):

- Demographic drivers
- Economic drivers
- Environmental drivers
- Human development drivers
- Politico-institutional drivers (which include the asylum policy)
- Security drivers
- Supra-national drivers
- Socio-cultural drivers
- Individual drivers

### **Security has the greatest influence**

The nine drivers directly, indirectly and coherently influence asylum migration processes. Due to the many factors and their interdependence, asylum migration is often a long and complex journey. Moreover, during the migration process, the influence of the drivers can change. Depending on the stage of the migration process, certain drivers may be more or less important.





The security situation in countries of origin, transition countries and countries of settlement has the greatest influence on asylum migrants' choices, on the routes they follow and destinations they travel to. Directly linked to this, we see that hope for a better and secure future plays an important role. Conflict, war, violence, political insecurity, famines, natural disasters, and the lack of sufficient hope for a better life are the central reasons why asylum migrants leave their countries. While travelling and staying in transition countries, security continues to play a major role. Conditions in transition countries, such as (poor) future prospects for the children, but also discrimination and racism towards migrants and an inhumane treatment of refugees, play a role in the choice to want to move on.

### Socio-cultural driver: networks also have a major influence

Throughout the asylum migration process, an important role is played by the socio-cultural driver of networks. Family, friends and other social networks are an important source of information about possible destination countries and migration routes for asylum migrants. Asylum migrants' networks can also provide important social, psychological and practical support.

### Schematic representation of the main drivers in the asylum migration process



-  Security: the main reason for departure and a determining factor for onward migration; no longer plays a direct role in 'choosing' between EU countries.
-  Network: plays an important role continuously, grows along the way through other asylum migrants and local contacts.
-  Economic conditions (poverty/work): play a role in departure. In transition countries, a choice for the EU or an EU country.
-  (Dutch) government policy plays no role when leaving and in (non-EU) transition countries. It is only during the distribution among EU countries that certain aspects of Dutch policy come into play, such as admission criteria and family reunification.

### Other drivers are secondary and more influential only later on in the process

Other drivers, in conjunction, influence the asylum migration process as well, but they are secondary to the security and socio-cultural drivers. Especially later in the asylum migration process and certainly when asylum migrants are already in the EU, drivers such as work opportunities and certain elements of the asylum policy can also have a greater impact than before. In this respect, they mainly influence the journey to certain settlement countries rather than the choice to leave the country of origin. Here, we note that differences in asylum policies between EU countries are relatively small. Figure 1 schematically shows the influence of the main drivers in the different stages of the asylum migration process.

### Question 2

*What is known in scientific sources about the knowledge asylum migrants have about the asylum policy and about the way in which this knowledge influences their decisions about migration?*

### Asylum migrants mainly acquire their knowledge through their network

Asylum migrants' main source of information is their networks. These are their social networks of family members and acquaintances in possible countries of settlement, as well as contacts they acquire during their asylum migration journey. Mobile phones and social media are also important tools to stay in contact with their network and to gather information. The picture is that, as a rule, asylum migrants themselves do not conduct extensive comparative research on asylum policies in different countries. They are mainly informed by their network, which thus determines their knowledge about asylum policies.

### **Asylum migrants are very limited to fairly well informed about asylum policy**

There is no clear picture of the extent to which asylum migrants are knowledgeable about asylum policies in various countries. Sometimes they seem to have only very limited knowledge and are poorly informed.

Others, on the other hand, seem to be reasonably to well informed. During their asylum migration, asylum migrants' knowledge does increase. They seem to have some information about the success rates of their potential asylum applications in different countries. Also, the decision of some families to split up during their flight possibly illustrates that some asylum migrants have knowledge about European asylum policies, including family reunification rights and procedures. A caveat here is that the information asylum migrants have is not always accurate and/or up-to-date. Even when the information is public, access may be limited due to a language barrier or lack of access to online communication tools, among other things.

### **Knowledge about asylum policy has a limited influence on the asylum migration process.**

We do not have an unambiguous picture of the knowledge migrants do or do not have about asylum policies. There also is no clear picture of the extent to which having knowledge of asylum policies in different countries plays a role in the desired settlement in a specific country.

Knowledge about possible destination countries arises and develops during the various stages of migration (flight, transit and destination). If asylum migrants may prefer a specific destination country based on information about countries, this does not mean they will actually end up there. Other drivers such as networks have a more significant influence on this. Coincidence also plays an important role in whether or not migrants reach their intended destination. Examples of this include chance encounters with people offering help or pointing out new opportunities, or being stopped in a country on the street by the police without having any valid residence documents.

### **Questions 3 and 5**

*What is the influence of asylum policy and the opportunities after the asylum procedure in countries of settlement on the choices of asylum migrants and their migration process?*

*Based on existing scientific research, can it be determined whether specific policy measures in the Netherlands affect the influx of asylum migrants?*

### **The asylum migrants' freedom of choice of country of residence is relatively limited**

The degree of choice asylum migrants have about the country in which they seek asylum is limited. This is because a number of drivers limit the agency of asylum migrants. Consider, for example, the role of security through which asylum migrants are trying to survive by leaving and/or migrating. At that moment, there is little or no room to weigh up and make a choice. Another example is that even when asylum migrants are afforded more room to look ahead and develop a preference for a country of settlement at a later stage of their migration process, they do not automatically end up there. This partly depends on drivers such as networks, border control infrastructure and financial resources. In practice, therefore, we often see that the preferred country of destination changes during the migration process, depending on the opportunities and impossibilities asylum migrants encounter along the way.

### **Presence of existing social network important reason for further migration to the Netherlands**

Due to the combination of the Dublin Regulation and carrier sanctions, the majority of asylum migrants who want to come to the Netherlands to apply for asylum do not have direct access. They usually cannot come by plane and cannot apply for asylum at a counter outside the Netherlands. When they reach Europe through Italy or Greece, for example, they must continue their migration illegally to reach the Netherlands.

Networks appear to play an important role in the process of onward migration. Several studies show that the main reasons for asylum migrants to choose the Netherlands are the presence of a social network and the opportunity of reuniting with family and/or friends.

### **No unambiguous picture of whether adjustment of the asylum policy affects the number of asylum migrants**

From the literature and the expert meeting, no clear picture emerges about the extent to which adjustments of the asylum policy affect the influx of asylum migrants. Some scientific publications suggest that certain elements of asylum policy in the later stages of the migration process (especially when asylum migrants are already in the EU) may indeed have an impact. These include granting criteria and family reunification rules. However, to what extent this actually influences the choice for and arrival of asylum migrants in the Netherlands remains a question. The drivers of security and networks are more decisive factors than the asylum policy. In comparison to other forms of migration, the major role played by security makes asylum migration the most difficult to influence.

Based on these conclusions, it can therefore not be substantiated that the Dutch asylum policy has a “pulling effect”, if this is to be understood as the attraction of large groups of asylum migrants. Apart from the fact that the “pulling factor” is not a well-defined or scientific concept, the study shows that factors other than the asylum policy have a much greater influence on the arrival of asylum migrants.

### **Within asylum policy, granting criteria and family reunification rules may have the greatest influence**

In summary, we have stated above that it is not clear from the available literature to what extent the asylum policy influences the number of asylum migrants coming to the Netherlands. What is clear, however, is that if the asylum policy does have an impact, it will be especially in the later stages of the asylum process, when asylum migrants are already in the EU, and may have already migrated onward from their country of arrival in the EU.

A number of quantitative studies show a correlation between adjustments to granting criteria and asylum applications. Most influential seem to be the degree of probability of being granted asylum and the possibilities for family reunification. These studies reveal that the number of asylum applications in a particular EU country depends not only on the policy in that particular country, but also on the policy in other (comparable) EU countries. Stricter admission policies in one EU country then lead to more asylum migrants in other EU countries. If other EU countries also adjust their policies, this in turn can lead to a slightly different distribution within the EU. While some studies show an effect, it is important to note that not all studies show this correlation and that it does not change the main driver of asylum migration, that is, (in)security.

### **The influence of factors after the asylum procedure**

For asylum migrants, the appeal of asylum migration, especially later in the process, is partly determined by the general perception of the economy, specifically the possibility of being able to work and earn an income. However, even in this respect, the presence of family and other people from the social network of asylum migrants plays a more decisive role.

## Concluding observations

In these closing observations, we will briefly summarise the main conclusions. In doing so, we will provide some additional insights we have gained during this study.

### **Providing security and hope as a solution**

The choice to flee is primarily determined by the security situation in the countries of origin and transition countries. Insecurity, for example due to wars, repression, famines and natural disasters, constitute the primary reason for asylum migrants to flee. For a small proportion of asylum migrants in receiving countries in the region, the lack of security over there and the limited opportunities and hope for a safe and stable future lead to further travel to the EU. Offering hope by improving the security, future prospects and reception in the home country or in the region (outside of the EU) may possibly contribute to reducing the need for asylum migrants to leave their country and region. However, the practice is resistant, and an effect can only be expected if sustainable hope, security, and future prospects do indeed get offered. After all, this has a direct positive influence on the most important driver of people leaving countries of origin or transition countries. Important for this are, more than asylum policy, foreign policy, international economic policy and development cooperation.

### **Distribution issue within the EU: a common issue requires a common solution**

Even after asylum migrants have entered the EU, social contacts and networks continue to largely guide where asylum migrants (want to) go. If a stricter asylum policy has any influence at all, it happens in the later stages of the asylum migration process. This then mainly concerns a distribution issue between countries within the Union. If a stricter asylum policy in an EU country would have an effect, it is most likely, based on the available literature, that this would mainly result in a slight increase in the number of asylum migrants in other EU countries. After all, there is no unequivocal evidence in

the literature that a change in asylum policy leads to a decrease in the number of asylum migrants fleeing their country and region. The influx then moves from one EU country to other EU countries, in other words, a waterbed effect. This interdependence highlights the importance of coordination between EU countries. The need for this coordination is exacerbated by the fact that current EU rules and agreements, including the Dublin Regulation and carrier sanctions, result in asylum migration within the EU as it is now, with much illegal onward migration within the EU.

### **Security and social networks make a settlement country attractive, followed by prosperity and economy**

When asylum migrants flee, the presence of social contacts and a network are the main reasons for them to travel on to the Netherlands. In addition to the presence of networks, the attractiveness of the Netherlands is determined by the general security situation, prosperity, the general (long-term) economic situation and, concretely, the opportunities to be able to work. These aspects do not depend on the asylum policy. Thus, the asylum policy is not among the main factors influencing the arrival of asylum migrants. Based on this conclusion, it cannot be properly substantiated that the Dutch asylum policy has a “pulling effect”, if this is understood as attracting large groups of asylum migrants.

### **Asylum policy in a broader perspective: the risk of unintended negative effects**

Besides the fact that a change in asylum policy has no or a limited impact on a country's influx of asylum migrants, there are other aspects that are important for the wider society. If stricter asylum policies were to succeed in reducing the number of asylum migrants, depending on the method, this might also have an impact on society as a whole. For instance, limiting the possibilities of bringing over family members could act as a deterrent to the arrival of asylum migrants. Apart from the conflict of such a measure with Article 8 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, there is a heavy human price to pay for such a policy by the directly affected asylum migrants and their family members. Living separately in different countries can have a

negative impact on several areas, such as their health, their ability to focus on studies and/or work and, more generally, their ability to integrate and participate in society. This will potentially have negative consequences and may also result in financial costs for society. An important question is, therefore, what the price is of more restrictive family reunification rules, to be paid by the asylum migrants concerned and Dutch society as a whole.

### **International refugee conventions and EU rules**

Internationally, the Netherlands is committed to peace, security and human rights. The Netherlands is also a signatory to relevant international treaties such as the UN Refugee Convention and, within the EU, has helped shape the rules giving asylum seekers the right to asylum. As long as a country is a member of the EU, the EU rules are binding and there is only very limited scope to strongly regulate asylum migration through national asylum policies. In part due to this, the differences in asylum policy between EU countries are relatively small and, compared to other factors, asylum policy has no or only a limited influence on the arrival of asylum migrants in a specific country.



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