



Asylum seeking and irregular migration

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ABSTRACT

This paper develops a model of optimizing behavior of asylum seekers whose objective is to reach an advanced country. Their personal characteristics and the challenges anticipated along the way determine whether they try to reach the ultimate destination with the aid of human smugglers or by applying for resettlement with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In the current policy environment, individuals who are relatively young, skilled, wealthy, and have access to credit from the family network are found to have a strong incentive to choose the undocumented migration option.

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1. Introduction

Hundreds of thousands of refugees try every year to reach the territory of another country and settle in a more secure environment. In the early 1980s, the number of asylum applications received by the developed countries was in the range of 100,000–200,000 per year. It peaked at 850,000 in 1992, fell back to about 400,000 by 1997, and then rose again to roughly 600,000 in 2001. For 2009, the industrialized nations received a total of 377,000 asylum requests (IOM, 2010). These large and persistent inflows of asylum seekers over the last two decades have become a major public policy issue, triggering significant changes in asylum policies and practices in the advanced countries.¹

Individuals fleeing from conflict and oppression obviously aspire to reach one of the prosperous countries where economic opportunities are relatively more accessible. The vast majority of displaced persons, however, are in temporary refugee camps close to the conflict zone, struggling to make ends meet in a neighboring country with an ambiguous residence status, or internally displaced

within their home country. Only a small minority ends up with Convention refugee status in an advanced country.²

There are two principal ways in which an asylum seeker can reach an advanced country: (a) Relatively quickly, but at a high cost and risk, with the aid of human smugglers and without proper documentation or (b) by applying for resettlement at a UNHCR refugee facility close to the home country. One would expect that the optimal choice between the two options depends on the asylum seeker's socioeconomic status and other personal characteristics, but also on the asylum and immigration policies of the destination countries. For those trying to reach an advanced country without proper documentation, there are numerous obstacles that stand in the way. They include ever tighter border controls, more onerous visa requirements, bilateral repatriation agreements with the transit and source countries, as well as carrier sanctions which make airlines and other transport companies more vigilant with respect to the documentation requirements of their passengers (see Crisp and Dessaegne, 2002). These obstacles translate into high migration costs and the possibility of failure. For someone fleeing from the conflict in Sri Lanka in 2008–2009, for example, the prices for reaching Canada, the UK, and Germany with the aid of human smugglers were \$40,000, \$25,000, and \$20,000, respectively (see Van Hear, 2010, p. 15).

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¹ Hatton (2009) provides an excellent survey of the recent trends and a detailed analysis of the impact of policy responses in the host countries and conditions in the source countries on the flow of asylum applications. See also Holzer et al. (2000), Vink and Meijerink (2003), Hatton (2004), Thielemann (2005) and Neumayer (2004). (Facchini et al., 2006) study the interaction between asylum policies of two host countries in a citizen-candidate setup, where accepting an asylum seeker in one country generates a cross-border externality in the other.

² See Jacobsen (2005) and Hatton (2009). According to the UNHCR (2009), there were 15.2 million refugees worldwide in 2008. Four fifths of the world's refugees are in the developing countries, with the largest number in Pakistan (1.8 million), Syrian Arab Republic (1.1 million), and the Islamic Republic of Iran (980,000). In Sub-Saharan Africa, roughly 70% of the refugees reside in camps.

This paper considers the problem facing a refugee who has reached the safety of a country of first asylum or a UNHCR facility close to the conflict zone. His objective is to attain a higher level of welfare by moving to an advanced country and gaining access to its labor market. The choice is between using the services of human smugglers and then requesting asylum at the destination or applying for resettlement to an advanced country with the aid of the UNHCR. In the case of failure, the fall-back position is that of remaining in the country of first asylum and/or returning to the country of origin when it is safe to do so. The main objective of the paper is to determine how the policies of the host countries interact with the personal characteristics of the refugees in influencing their behavior. I focus here on the various opportunities and obstacles in relation to resettlement, undocumented migration and refugee status recognition. Identifying and comparing the impact of each obstacle and the role of various personal characteristics in shaping the optimal migration strategy is essential to the formulation of asylum and immigration policies that meet the objectives of the host countries.

I must emphasize, however, that this study does not examine the question of the optimal asylum policy. Over the last couple of decades, refugee policies of the major receiving countries can be characterized as having been reactive, rather than based on some well-defined set of objectives, with new obstacles introduced in front of asylum seekers with every major new wave of refugee flows. These obstacles serve not only to discourage asylum seekers from leaving the country of first asylum, but they also divert the flows to other potential destinations. Accordingly, the refugee-policy literature focuses on the optimal ways of sharing the burden among the advanced countries in providing protection to refugees.³ Such an analysis, however, requires a framework that can trace the impact of refugee inflows on the welfare of the host country. That is quite different from the framework of the present study, which is designed to analyze how a given set of policies interacts with the personal characteristics of asylum seekers in shaping their decisions and welfare.

The impact of immigration and asylum policies on the behavior of individuals fleeing oppression and seeking a better life in the wealthier countries is only beginning to attract attention in the theoretical literature. The works of [Schaeffer \(2009\)](#) and [Czaika \(2009\)](#) are the first to consider the choice between remaining in a conflict zone, which generates a certain loss of utility, and attempting to reach a foreign country.⁴ I assume, instead, that asylum seekers have already reached a refugee camp or a country of first asylum, so

³ [Hathaway and Neve \(1997\)](#) and [Schuck \(1997\)](#) consider measures whereby asylum seekers in wealthy countries would be transferred to poorer states for refugee status determination processing, along with financial aid to enable the poor states to provide refugees with adequate protection. [Bubb et al. \(2011\)](#) model the current system of refugee protection as a Pareto-improving contract. They show that the screening problem created by economic migrants can lead to stricter refugee status determination procedures, resulting in fewer false positives and more false negatives than is socially optimal. Moreover, the choice of standard of proof can exhibit strategic complementarities in the sense that the more states apply a higher standard, the greater the incentive for other states to adjust their policies in the same direction. They also find that a transfer system along the lines suggested by [Hathaway and Neve \(1997\)](#) and [Schuck \(1997\)](#), whereby wealthy states provide aid to poor states to protect refugees who originally sought asylum in the wealthy states, can be effective in addressing the screening problem through self selection and at the same time offer greater degree of protection to the refugees. See also [Facchini et al. \(2006\)](#) and [Fernández-Huertas Moraga and Rapoport \(2013\)](#).

⁴ An earlier empirical study by [Engel and Ibanez \(2007\)](#) analyzes the conditions that contribute to flight from home in the case of asylum seekers from Colombia. They find that violence and perceptions of insecurity play an important role in motivating displacement, while pointing out that a family unit's landholdings and social capital can work either way, depending on the nature of the security threat. There are a number of empirical studies that focus on the asylum policies of the host countries. These include [Vink and Meijerink \(2003\)](#), [Neumayer \(2005\)](#), [Thielemann \(2005\)](#), and [Hatton \(2009\)](#). See also the very informative descriptive studies on the

that their safety is not an issue. They nonetheless strive to improve their welfare further by attempting to gain access to the labor market of an advanced country. In comparison with earlier studies, my focus on this specific phase of the migration process allows us to consider a richer policy environment in the analysis of an asylum seeker's optimization problem.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 defines the problem facing an asylum seeker. Section 3 compares two principal options available to an individual trying to reach an advanced country: undocumented migration or applying for resettlement at a refugee facility close to the conflict zone. It is found that in the current policy environment, asylum seekers who are relatively young and have large endowments of human capital and financial assets are likely to choose the undocumented-migration option. The sensitivity of that choice to changes in various policies is examined in Section 4. Section 5 concludes the paper with a summary of the main results.

2. Two ways of getting to the destination

The vast majority of asylum seekers don't have relatives in the advanced countries who can host and formally sponsor them. We shall focus only on these cases and assume that there are just two ways to achieve the objective of reaching an advanced country. One is the official asylum-seeking route, which may involve, for example, entering a refugee camp close to the conflict zone, being recognized as a refugee by the UNHCR, and applying for resettlement to an advanced country. It is important to note, however, that only a small proportion of the refugee camp population gets resettled and only a small number of advanced countries take part in the UNHCR resettlement program.⁵ For certain groups of refugees eligible for resettlement programs in the U.S.A., such as the Somali Bantus, Sudanese Southerners, or Mauritanian Fulani, the chances of getting resettled are considerably higher than they are for other groups (see [IRIN, 2005](#)). Iraqi refugees have also benefited from generous resettlement programs. Since 2007 the UNHCR Syria has submitted 38,889 cases of Iraqi refugees to potential host countries. Of that number, 17,293 have departed (see [IRIN, 2010](#)). These are, nonetheless, small numbers in relation to the millions of people living in hundreds of refugee camps around the world.

Another possibility is to try and enter the destination country directly with the aid of human smugglers, but without the necessary visa and other documentation. As it is practically impossible to obtain an entry visa to an advanced country for the purpose of claiming asylum, legal routes are very few and complex. This has resulted in rapid expansion of human smuggling activities for the purpose of transporting both asylum seekers and economic migrants to their desired destination.⁶ According to [Morrison and Crosland \(2001\)](#), the Dutch Immigration Service estimates that 60–70% of their asylum applicants have been smuggled into the country. [Oxfam \(2005\)](#) estimates that 90% of asylum seekers entering Europe did so illegally. If successful in getting to the destination clandestinely, an asylum seeker has the right to apply for asylum and/or try other methods of obtaining a residence permit and eventually permanent residence status. In what follows, we define the

behavior of asylum seekers, such as [Jacobsen \(2005\)](#), [Grabska \(2006\)](#), and [Jansen \(2008\)](#).

⁵ According to the [UNHCR \(2009\)](#), more than 121,000 refugees were referred for resettlement consideration and 65,548 refugees departed to 26 resettlement countries in 2008, with the majority going to the United States. Other states that take up significant numbers of candidates for resettlement every year include Australia, Canada and the Scandinavian countries.

⁶ There is a growing theoretical literature on migrant smuggling. See, e.g., [Friebel and Guriev \(2006\)](#), [Monheim \(2008\)](#), [Tamura \(2010\)](#), [Tamura \(2013\)](#), [Djajić and Vinogradova \(2013\)](#), and [Djajić and Vinogradova \(2014\)](#).

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