



ICMPD

International Centre for
Migration Policy Development



Adviescommissie voor
Vreemdelingenzaken

Comparative Study on Country of Origin Information Systems

Study on COI Systems in Ten European Countries
and the Potential for Further Improvement
of COI Co-operation

Comparative Study on Country of Origin Information Systems

Study on COI Systems in Ten European Countries and the
Potential for Further Improvement of COI Co-operation

Prepared by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development, Vienna - Austria
Commissioned and funded by Advisory Committee on Aliens Affairs (ACVZ), The Hague – The
Netherlands

International Centre for Migration Policy Development • April 2006

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Comparative Study on Country of Origin Information Systems. Study on COI Systems in Ten European Countries and the Potential for Further Improvement of COI Co-operation. International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), Vienna, 2006

Acknowledgements

This study relies heavily in the information gathered from our contact points in the national administrations of each of the countries included in this report. We are very grateful for their support in answering our comprehensive and detailed questionnaire and also for their patience with our follow-up inquiries. A list of collaborators is at the end of this report. Without their valuable contributions, this project could not have been implemented. The responsibility for any remaining inaccuracies and omissions rests solely with the authors.

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Prepared by the
International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), Vienna

Commissioned by the
Advisory Committee on Aliens Affairs (ACVZ), The Hague - The Netherlands, 2006

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Printed and bound in the Czech Republic by OstWest Media

ISBN: 3-900411-28-X

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Foreword

In January 2006, the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) in Vienna was contracted by the Dutch Advisory Committee on Aliens Affairs (ACVZ, an official independent committee embedded in the Aliens Act 2000) to carry out a comparative study on Country of Origin Information (COI) systems. The objective of this study is to provide a comparative analysis of the setup and functioning of COI systems in ten European countries (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom) and to identify the potentials and obstacles for strengthening European COI co-operation. The report was finalised in April 2006.

The very timing of this comparative study reflects the growing awareness at national and European levels of the opportunities and difficulties associated with enhanced European co-operation on COI. The systematic collection of COI is one of the core competences of any asylum system. Effective harmonisation in the field of asylum policy and practice has therefore to include COI. Over the course of the last few months the debate across Europe on how to strengthen practical co-operation in the field of COI has gathered momentum, not least due to the proposals put forward in a February 2006 Communication from the European Commission on the same subject. Thus, the comparative study on hand is published just at the right time. By providing the necessary in-depth information and comparative analysis required for informed decision making, it provides a valuable benchmarking instrument for policy makers at the national level for improving their own COI systems and a basis for moving COI co-operation forward at the European level.

In order to be able to carry out this study within the short period of time available, a competent project team was assembled at ICMPD and a lot of external support has been enlisted. For data collection, a detailed and comprehensive questionnaire was sent to the responsible Heads of COI Units in the ten countries. Furthermore, a special workshop on COI co-operation was held at ICMPD in Vienna in March 2006, which was attended by the Heads of COI Units or their representatives and yielded a lot of information and new insights. Finally, the comparative study was written by Brigitte Suter (Project Manager) in co-operation with Michael Jandl (Project Coordinator) and with the assistance of Veronika Bilger, Liz Pühr and Tomas Urubek.

As mentioned, this study relies heavily on the information and inputs gathered from our contact points in the national COI units by way of a detailed questionnaire designed to collect comparable information as well as through the contributions of the COI staff members present in our special workshop. We are very grateful for the support of all the COI units, who invested a lot of time in assisting us, and also for their patience with our follow-up inquiries. A list of contributors is at the end of this report. Without their valuable inputs, this project could not have been implemented. We hope that they will find the systematic overviews and insights of this comparative report also useful for their own work.

Gottfried Zürcher
Director General, ICMPD

Executive Summary

The subject of this study is the structure and functioning of country of origin information (COI) systems in ten European countries. The objective is to identify and analyse differences and similarities in the setup and functioning of COI systems and to understand the potentials and obstacles for strengthening European COI co-operation.

All states represented in this study have a unit that is particularly responsible for collecting country of origin information. Five of these COI units are under the respective Ministries of Interior, three under the respective Ministries of Foreign Affairs, two under the Ministries of Justice and one under the Ministry of Refugee, Immigration and Integration Affairs.

The primary scope of all COI units is information needed for processing asylum requests. Accordingly, the 1st and 2nd instance of the asylum procedure are the main users of their material. In addition, return, resettlement, and general migration issues are also increasingly addressed. Some COI units have also started to process information on integration, medical issues, the Dublin procedure and personal identity.

The number of staff employed in the COI units varies considerably between countries, depending among other things on whether or not the COI unit includes its own library and documentation centre. Typically, COI units have between 10 and 25 staff members, while the largest COI unit (Germany) has as many as 100 staff members.

There is a noticeable difference between countries regarding the access to COI products granted to the public. Half the countries grant complete access to all or most of their products to the general public over their websites. In the other countries, COI products are handled more restrictively but are often shared with other co-operating countries on a systematic or on a case-by-case basis.

In most countries, the main products produced by the COI units are still regular or ad-hoc country reports on the top countries of origin of asylum applicants. In many cases such country reports can be very comprehensive and are updated once or twice a year. Other important products include shorter topical fact sheets, answers to specific information requests, fact-finding reports and general legal and statistical material. Annually, between hundred and hundred-fifty country reports, several hundred fact sheets and several thousand single case requests are processed altogether among the countries covered by this study, predominantly in the official language(s) of the country producing them.

Generally, COI units do not provide policy recommendations. However, many COI units are involved in the preparation of such recommendations in some way and may be asked for advice in the preparation and formulation of country specific asylum policies by the responsible services.

In collecting relevant information in countries of origin, most COI units make use of their respective embassies and, in some cases, special liaison officers. Furthermore, staff from international and local NGOs, academic experts, lawyers of confidence, human rights activists, journalists, leaders of ethnic and religious minorities and others are frequently contacted.

Almost all countries carry out regular fact-finding missions to important countries of origin, sometimes in co-operation with other countries.

As secondary sources, a lot of media databases, websites, articles and other electronic databases are used. Reports from intergovernmental organisations and human rights NGOs are also important sources, as are the COI products of other European and non-European (US and Canada) states.

Almost every country has written guidelines on how to quote sources. In some countries all the primary and secondary sources must be revealed and accessible to the users of the COI products, while in others the rules are less stringent. All countries have established procedures of how to verify the independence and reliability of the sources used (e.g. cross-checking, pattern matching, etc.), how to deal with outdated information, and how to assess comprehensiveness, topicality, objectivity, transparency and accuracy of reports – even if these procedures are not always spelled out in written guidelines.

Most of the countries have formal control systems in place that guarantee the quality of COI products. These include cross reading of the reports by other staff members, the head of the unit or by external experts. Three countries have established a formal advisory panel for their COI systems, while all COI units take feedback from the users of their products into account.

Many European countries already have an intensive exchange of COI information with each other. However, rather than being systematically structured, this exchange is largely based on personal networks of trusted contacts, like when COI staff members meet in international co-operation fora (e.g. Eurasil, IGC, GDISC, A8, Nordic Group).

As stated by the COI units of all countries covered by this study, strengthening European co-operation on COI has multiple advantages (synergies, complementarities, cost-savings, policy harmonisation, etc.) but also a few risks (time-consuming, loss of flexibility, increased bureaucracy, etc.). As this study shows, realising the potential of COI co-operation necessitates a constructive approach in dealing with several obstacles (e.g. language barriers, quality standards, sourcing guidelines, content focus, confidentiality issues, etc.).

In a special workshop on European COI co-operation that was part of this project, the following co-operation models were identified as the most promising: common fact-finding missions; a division of production of COI among clusters of like-minded states; a common portal to already existing databases with openly accessible COI products; and designated focal points in each COI unit that are answerable to information requests from other countries. Nevertheless, there was also widespread agreement that the production of states' own COI information cannot totally be outsourced.

Introduction

Subject, Scope and Methodology of the Study

The subject of this study is the structure and functioning of country of origin information (COI) systems in ten European countries. These countries are Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. The objective of the study is to identify and analyze differences and similarities in the setup and functioning of the ten COI units and to become aware of the potentials and obstacles for strengthening European COI co-operation.

For data collection, a detailed and comprehensive questionnaire on areas such as structure, tasks, technical aspects, sources, matters of confidentiality, quality and control and co-operation in the field of COI was designed in order to reveal clear and comparable answers. The questionnaire was sent out (in German, French and English) to the responsible Heads of Units in the respective countries.

Furthermore, at a special workshop on COIS held at the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) in March 2006 in Vienna, the Heads of Units or their representatives had the chance to verify the results of the questionnaire, add and comment on the data provided by them and others, and discuss issues of improved co-operation in an informal setting.

Additional information was collected and included to complement the data extracted from the questionnaires and the workshop to fill certain gaps in the research. This concerns in particular the larger context on the harmonization of EU asylum systems, the Hague Programme, past efforts at COI co-operation and asylum data.

The study is divided into two parts. In part one, different aspects are comparatively described and presented in comparative overview tables. Part two consists of the respective country chapters and includes a more thorough description of the COI units examined. Finally, an annex contains relevant data and overview tables.

Both the comparative chapter and the individual country studies largely follow a similar structure. While part one follows the setup of the comparative tables and analyses similarities and differences between systems, part two largely follows the logical order of the questionnaire.

It should be noted that this report is a comparative overview of the functioning and structure of country of origin information systems and is not commenting on the quality and merits of the different systems. Furthermore, the study does not provide any recommendations other than those coming directly from participating COI representatives.

Background

Country of origin information (COI) is crucial to both decisions makers and asylum seekers. In the asylum process, COI is the main instrument for decision makers to determine whether a well-founded fear as spelled out in the 1951 Geneva Convention and its 1967 Protocol has

been established. It is therefore of uttermost importance that the country information prepared by the COI units in the receiving countries is accurate, reliable, up-to-date, impartial and objective in order to guarantee a fair and credible examination of the applicant's claim. The information needed for the asylum procedure is general country information and topical information (e.g. marriage practices, prison system, etc.) as well as case-specific information.

From the mid-1980s, European States have started to improve their COI systems due to the considerable increase in the number of asylum seekers. Obviously, the structure and functioning of the different COI units vary, even though steps have been taken to cooperate at a bi-lateral, multi-lateral and regional level to exchange information and hold common training sessions. Inter-governmental sharing of COI dates back until at least the end of the 1980s.¹ As the UNHCR observes in a recent study on COI², a lot of publicly available COI is collected and provided by non-governmental and international organizations on a variety of countries and topics (e.g. on *ecoi.net* and UNHCR's *Refworld*). However, as the UNHCR³ noted, although governments have increasingly started to collect, store, analyze and disseminate COI, little effort has been concentrated on an inter-governmental system of processing COI.

Interestingly enough, today, two years later, some efforts on the bi-lateral and multi-lateral level towards an inter-governmental system of gathering, storing and distributing such information can be detected. The German COI unit IZAM, for example, maintains an extensive database on COI to which many European partner authorities already have access. Furthermore, common fact-finding missions (e.g. Denmark with the UK, Finland and Norway, France with Belgium and Switzerland) are occasionally conducted, which also include common analysis and drafting of the report. However, despite all these efforts, there remains work to be done in order to meet the goals set out in the Hague Programme of November 2004.⁴

With the Hague Programme, the creation of a Common European Asylum System has entered its second phase. The joint processing (compiling, assessing and applying) of COI is one of the main objectives of the Hague Programme, a goal that is set to be implemented by 2010. This should result not only in a further harmonization of European asylum systems; it should also help the respective asylum administrations (the COI units) to prevent duplications, to enable burden sharing and to more effectively administer costs.

While the advantages stemming from improved co-operation cannot be denied, it has to be noted that there still exist obstacles to improved co-operation between the countries concerned. As will be explained below, these include language and legal issues, different needs and focuses, quality standards, confidentiality issues.

¹ E.g. the IGC workshop on COI in Dardagny in 1989

² UNHCR, 2004: *Country of Origin Information: Towards Enhanced International Co-operation*. UNHCR, Geneva

³ *ibid.*

⁴ The European Council, 2004: *The Hague Programme – Strengthening freedom, security and justice in the European Union*. Brussels, 13 December 2004. Document N° 16054/04, JAI 559

In this study, a special focus has been placed on the issue of improved co-operation in the field of COI. Advantages and disadvantages of further co-operation have been crystallised and while all country representatives acknowledged the need for more co-operation, a certain scepticism towards the full implementation of the goals and instruments pursued on the European level became apparent.

Existing research

During the past five years, several studies, training sessions and conferences on the issue of COI have been conducted and organised. The conferences have either been organised by states multi-laterally, through NGOs or inter-governmental associations or in the framework of co-operation at the EU level. Valuable and comprehensive research has been conducted and published by actors such as the UK Home Office in 2003⁵ or the UNHCR in 2004⁶. Other actors, such as the Austrian Red Cross (ACCORD) in coordination with other European NGO and co-funded by the European Refugee Fund provided a comprehensive COI Training Manual⁷ for training purposes.

The International Centre for Migration Policy Development has been involved in facilitating European COI co-operation already at an early stage. In 2002, a seminar in Prague was organised which aimed at training the relevant officials in the (then) EU Candidate States on the possibilities and practices with regard to COI. A conference publication was produced thereafter⁸.

Furthermore, in 2004, ICMPD produced a comparative COI study⁹ on behalf of the Advisory Panel on Country Information (APCI) of the United Kingdom. While the current study builds upon the networks and expertise accumulated during earlier work, it goes beyond previous studies both in content and number of countries covered. It aims to provide a comprehensive, yet easily accessible reference source for the growing number of individuals and institutions with an interest in COI co-operation in Europe.

⁵ Gelsthorpe, Verity, and Morgan Beverly, et al 2003: *Country of Origin Information, a User and Content Evaluation*. Home Office Research, Development and Statistics Directorate

⁶ UNHCR, 2004: *Country of Origin Information: Towards Enhanced International Co-operation*. UNHCR, Geneva

⁷ Austrian Red Cross/ACCORD, 2004: *COI Training Manual. COI Network and Training*. ACCORD, Vienna. Accessible at: <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendoc.pdf?tbl=RSDLEGAL&id=42ad40184>

⁸ ICMPD, 2002: *Practical Guide to the Effective Gathering and Usage of Country of Origin Information*. ICMPD, Vienna

⁹ ICMPD, 2004: *The Structure and Functioning of Country of Origin Information Systems: A Comparative Overview of Six Countries*. ICMPD, Vienna

1. Overview and Comparative Analysis

1.1 Institutional Setup of COI Systems

All states represented in this study have a unit that is particularly responsible for collecting country of origin information. In **Austria**, it is the State Documentation Unit at the Federal Asylum Office (BAA); in **Belgium**, it is the Documentation and Research Unit CEDOCA which belongs to the independent office of the Commissioner-General for Refugees (CGRS); in **Denmark**, it is the Documentation and Project Office, which is a part of the Asylum and Visa Department of the Danish Immigration Service (DIS); in **Finland**, the Country Information Unit, which is a subunit of the Legal and Country Information Unit within the Directorate of Immigration (UVI), is responsible for the collection of COI; in **France**, it is the Documentation and Research Service, which is part of the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless (OFPRA); in **Germany**, it is the Information Centre Asylum and Migration (IZAM) within the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF); in **Switzerland**, it is the independent Section for Migration and Country Analyses (MILA), which is attached to the Directorate for Asylum Procedure of the Federal Office for Migration (BFM); and in **the UK**, it is the Country of Origin Information Service, a unit within the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND). **The Netherlands** has two specific units set up to collect country of origin information. One is the Asylum and Migration Affairs Division, which is part of the Department of Movement of People, Migration and Aliens Affairs (DPV), subordinated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The second COI unit is the Country and Language Information Unit at Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND), which is subordinated to the Minister of Immigration and Integration, which in turn belongs to the Ministry of Justice. Finally, in **Sweden**, the Migration Board is in transformation. As of 31 March 2006, a new COI unit has been established in the Division for Administration and International Issues.

Five of these COI units are under the respective Ministries of Interior. Three are under the respective Ministries of Foreign Affairs, two under the Ministries of Justice and one under the Ministry of Refugees, Immigration and Integration Affairs.

1.2 Scope and Responsibilities of the COI Units

The primary scope of all COI units is information needed for processing asylum requests. This is directly reflected in the choice of countries of origin covered by reports (see Annex for comparison tables). In addition, return, resettlement, and general migration issues are also increasingly addressed. In **Denmark** and **Finland**, the COI units noted growing numbers of inquiries by local government officials concerning integration issues. Such questions may address the role of women or the education system in particular countries.

In **Belgium**, the scope of the COI unit CEDOCA will probably be extended by autumn 2006 to include medical information, as it is deemed necessary to provide this information with the introduction of the subsidiary protection status. The **Austrian** COI unit collects information concerning the Dublin procedures in other countries, while the **Swedish** COI unit also investigates the identity of applicants.

	Austria	Belgium	Denmark	Finland	France	Germany	Netherlands	Sweden	Switzerland	UK
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1. Comparative Table on Structures of COIS

Particular unit	State documentation unit, at Federal Asylum Office (BAA)	Documentation and research unit CEDOCA. Belongs to Commissioner General for Refugees (CGRS)	Documentation and Project Office. Part of Asylum and Visa Department of Danish Immigration Service (DIS)	Country Information unit is a subunit of the Legal and Country Information Unit, within the Directorate of Immigration (UVI)	Documentation and Research Service. Part of the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA)	Information Centre Asylum and Migration (IZAM), within the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF)	1. Asylum and Migration Affairs Division. Part of the DPV ¹⁰ 2. IND Country and Language Information Unit at IND ¹¹	A new unit has been constituted at by 31 March 2006, located at the Swedish Migration Board	Section for Migration and Country Analyses (MILA), independent section, attached to the Directorate for Asylum Procedure of the Federal Office for Migration (BFM)	Country of Origin Information Service is a unit within the Immigration & Nationality Directorate (IND)
Respective Ministry	Ministry of Interior	Ministry of Interior	Ministry of Refugee, Immigration and Integration Affairs	Ministry of Interior	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Ministry of Interior	1. Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2. Ministry of Justice	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Ministry for Justice and Police (EJPD)	Ministry of Home Affairs
Scope	Asylum, information on Dublin procedure in other countries	Asylum. From autumn 2006 onwards also subsidiary protection	Whole range of decision making. Also return, other states' policies and practices. Integration	Asylum, migration, documents, resettlement, return, integration	Asylum. General country of origin information. Topical information, e.g. FGM, marriage customs, etc	Right to asylum, refugee protection, migration, integration, return, and migration research	Asylum, policy development on migration/development, return of irregulars, resettlement, durable solutions	Asylum, return procedure, investigations of identity of applicants	Asylum, migration, documents, resettlement, return	Asylum related matters, i.e. human rights, generalised background information on countries

¹⁰ Department of Movement of People, Migration and Aliens Affairs

¹¹ Immigration and Naturalization Service

	Austria	Belgium	Denmark	Finland	France	Germany	Netherlands	Sweden	Switzerland	UK
Number of staff	12 (9 case-workers, 3 administrative staff)	48 (30 researchers, 3 staff, 15 administrative staff)	8 (6 members, 1 head of office and 1 desk officer)	10 (1 head of unit, 6 researchers, 1 information officers, 2 administrative staff)	13 (1 Head of unit, 1 deputy head, 8 researchers, 3 administrative staff)	100 (30 country/topic researcher, 60 documentation officers, 10 administrative staff)	1. Between 16 and 18 2. 17 (11 Country Desk Officers, 3 Senior Country Desk Officers, 1 Head of Office, 2 administrative staff)	Proposed to be 12 (excluding library)	21 (excluding library)	25
Users	Asylum authorities at 1 st and 2 nd instance. Also, asylum lawyers, public law courts, UNHCR, ECHR, ECJ, etc have free access to database	Case and policy officers of CGRS, immigration department and Appeals Board. Also: Federal Police, Ministry of Foreign Affairs CEDOCA works only for government and is not accessible for lawyers, refugees, public	Case workers at DIS, case workers at Ministry of Refugee, Immigration and Integration Affairs, 2 nd instance, Danish Aliens Police, some NGOs and local governments	Caseworkers (asylum, immigration, naturalization and return), policy makers for asylum, and also appeal bodies, gov. officials, Helsinki Administrative court, Supreme Administrative Court	OFPRA staff (case workers, decision makers). 2 nd instance: Researchers and actors of the Geopolitical Centre of the Appeal instance (CRR)	BAMF staff. Also, 1600 administrative judges, 2 nd instance, intl. ministries and other authorities have access to database MILo. Electronic case law database publicly available through private company	Ministry of Justice, Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND), courts, asylum lawyers, NGOs, policy makers, caseworkers. The reports are publicly available	Main target group: 1 st instance workers. However, all information has been made publicly accessible at website	BFM staff, caseworkers, the Minister, appeal instance, civil registry offices, cantonal authorities, Swiss Federal Administration, a.o. National Security Authorities	Everyone involved in the asylum decision-making process, such as 1 st instance, 2 nd instance, return case workers, asylum policy makers, ministers, MPs, NGOs and legal advisers
Public access	Partly. Cost of 60 Euro, required by law	Generally no, but on demand to researchers, and other authorities	Yes, through website	On demand: Public versions of reports are available for anyone having a relevant cause for it	No	Public information on MILo website. And through private company. (costs)	1. Yes, on MFA website 2. IND: No	Yes, through website	Restricted	Yes, through website

1.3 Number of Staff

The number of staff employed in the COI units varies considerably between the countries. One factor influencing the number of staff indicated is the library, which is not always located at the COI unit. In **Germany**, for example, there are a total of 100 staff members employed. 30 of these are country researchers, and 10 administrative staff, while 60 of them are charged with documentation and library work. In contrast, **Denmark** has the COI unit with the smallest number of staff employed: 6 country officers, 1 head of office and 1 desk officer. In **Belgium**, there are 48 staff members employed, 30 of them researchers. This unit has its own library and the 15 administrative staff are, amongst others, responsible for its maintenance. The number of staff in the COI units in **Austria, Finland, France, the Netherlands (DPV), Sweden, Switzerland** and **the UK** varies between 11 and 25.

1.4 Users of COI Products

In all countries, the 1st and 2nd instance of the asylum procedure are the main users of the COI material. A particular case is presented by **France**, where the 3rd instance (Supreme Court) does not use the products compiled by the COI unit. In **Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands (DPV), Sweden** (from 31 March) and the **UK**, all information is publicly available on the website. The **Belgian** COI unit works exclusively for the government; information for asylum lawyers is therefore only available for case-related issues. The same applies to **Germany** where lawyers have to apply for access to case related information.

Other users often include the police (**Denmark, Switzerland**), relevant ministries and members of parliament (**UK**).

1.5 Public Access to COI Material

Five countries (**Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the UK**) have all or most of the COI products stored on their website. In **Austria**, website access comes at a cost of € 60 as required by law. The public part of the website mostly contains background reports taken from *ecoi.net*. Most of the internally produced material is restricted.

In **Belgium** and **Finland**, COI is sometimes made available to anyone (researchers, etc.) having a relevant cause for using it. In **Germany**, some collected country information from NGOs and IGOs, as well as case law and literature are publicly available on their website as well as through the private company *juris GmbH*. Reports compiled by IZAM itself or by other partner authorities are partly also accessible to the public, as long as they are not classified as restricted or for internal use only. **Switzerland** restricts most of its reports and other products. The few products that are accessible on their website have a lower level of details and usually do not contain any conclusions or prognoses.

1.6 Products of the COI Units

Annually, there are between hundred and hundred-fifty country reports produced among the countries participating in the study, in addition to several hundred fact sheets and several thousand single case request. Five countries (**Austria, Germany, the Netherlands (DPV)**,

Sweden and the UK produce up to 20 regular country reports on the top countries of origin of asylum applicants. In **Austria**, they are updated every six months, in the **UK**, they are published every year at the end of April and then at the end of October. The UK produces several regular products upon request: COI reports once a year for countries designated for certain “Non-Suspensive Appeal” (NSA) fast track processing, if those countries do not already fall within the top 20 mentioned above; country reports upon request; fact sheets called “COI Key Documents” that are prepared for countries with at least 120 asylum applications (previous year), on which no country reports have been done. The United Kingdom COI Service also produces fact sheets upon request. There are two products to distinguish: a) “COI Bulletins” are comprehensive reports on a specific issue or issues in relation to a particular country, prepared for the attention of all case workers etc., and b) “COI Requests” that are being produced constantly in response to ad hoc requests for information.

In **Denmark**, the main product is the fact-finding reports, of which around six to eight are produced per year. In **Switzerland**, the main product compiled on a regular basis is the Focus “Documents and Exit”, which is made on approximately 30 countries per year. In addition, short analyses (“Foci”) are produced upon request. **Germany**, in addition to the above mentioned regular country reports, also produces other country-related reports and subject papers upon request: the so-called “Information” and “Short Information”. “Information” papers can be up to several hundred pages, while “Short Information” sheets are usually only a few pages. Both **Belgium** and **Finland** solely produce material on request. Subject-related briefings and country reports are both products that involve specialised research on a particular topic. Furthermore, **Belgium** answers about 5,000 single case requests per year, while **Finland** answers around 300 such requests. In **France**, country reports and chronologies are produced both on a regular and on an ad hoc basis.

1.7 Other Products of the COI Units

The portfolio of further products varies considerably between the countries studied. **Austria, Finland, Switzerland and the UK**, for example, provide statistical material, while training on database use is provided in **Belgium and Switzerland**. Training on specific country information is provided in **Belgium, Switzerland and the UK**. **Switzerland** also produces an “Early Warning” paper (“Führungscockpit”) in which consolidation and analyses of statistics are provided. **France** has a collection of written, acoustic and visual material, which includes radio and TV broadcasts. In **Germany**, the COI unit maintains a Central Reference Desk (IVS), which provides additional information to caseworkers, appeal lawyers and European partner authorities upon request.

1.8 Languages

Basically every country produces its material in the respective official language. In **Belgium** the reports are written in French or Dutch, in **Switzerland** in German or French, depending on the mother tongue of the country officer. In **Denmark**, reports on joint fact-finding missions (for example, with the UK) are written in English. In **Germany**, some documents of importance, including analysis documents upon request, are translated into English. In addition, also medical information already stored in MILo will be translated into English so that international partners can access it as well. It is also planned to add an abstract in English to already existing leading decisions of the Supreme Court, so that non-German speaking users can decide whether they would like to translate the document. The regular report on

	Austria	Belgium	Denmark	Finland	France	Germany	Netherlands	Sweden	Switzerland	UK
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2. Comparative Table on Products of the COI units

Products	Austria	Belgium	Denmark	Finland	France	Germany	Netherlands	Sweden	Switzerland	UK
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Regular country reports on the 15-20 most important asylum countries, update every 6 months, or when the situation in country changes - Reports requested for single cases - Comments on the most important claims 	<p>Upon request:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Country reports (rare) - Specialised research on topic, “briefings”, around 70 a year - Chronology on events, ca. 4 per year - FFM reports, min. 2 per year - Single case answers or answers for a certain profile, around 5,000 per year 	<p>Upon request:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fact-finding reports, ca. 6-8 a year - Fact sheets, more than 100 a year 	<p>Upon request:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Country foci, 5-10 a year - Thematic reports, 3-5 a year - Country reports, rarely - Case-by-case answers to country information requests, ca. 600 a year 	<p>Regular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Country reports and chronology (ca. 20 per year) - Orientation sheets - Basis documents - Press reviews (over 200 per year) <p>Upon request (ca. 700 a year):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Country reports - Fact sheets (Chronology, Press reviews) - Single cases requests - Information sheets on new acquisitions (12 per year) 	<p>Regular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 22 comprehensive “Online loose-leaf-collection“ (“Online Loseblattwerke“), determined by number of applicants, up to several hundred pages <p>Upon request:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fact sheets “briefing notes”, weekly - Around 250 country-related reports and subject papers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 32-36 country reports (“Amtsberichten”); containing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Regular reports - Formal reports on specific questions and - Short-term COI reports on special requests Also: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reports on individual asylum cases 	<p>Regular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Country reports planned for main countries of origin (number dependent on resources) <p>Upon request:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reports for support of return procedure and identity investigation - Other products: not decided yet 	<p>Regular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focus “Document and Exit”; standardised country reports, ca. 33 a year - Country introduction sites (Intranet, links), ca. 26 a year, updated twice a year <p>Upon request:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Short analyses (“Foci”) on specific topics, ca. 120-130 a year 	<p>Regular:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - COI Reports for top 20 countries of origin twice a year - COI Reports once a year for certain Non-Suspensive Appeals (NSA) - Fact sheets; COI Key Documents for countries with at least 120 applications, ca. 10 a year <p>Upon request:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Country reports - Fact sheets; a) COI Bulletin, ca. 10 a year and b) COI Requests, 400 a year

	Austria	Belgium	Denmark	Finland	France	Germany	Netherlands	Sweden	Switzerland	UK
Other products	- Statistic material upon request	-Library - Documentary intranet - Language analyses - Daily press review - Thematic video-sessions - Conferences on COI - Country specific training - Training on use of doc. intranet - Newsletter Africa, ca. 30 a year	- Collect all relevant general data of relevance for the decision making process - Lectures and other oral information	- Literature, legal documents, statistical analysis - Local data packages (Nigeria, Somalia) - Data and analysis in the Tellus database	- Collection of written, acoustic and visual material: legal documents, studies, articles, films, radio broadcasts, maps, conferences	- Public information is made available on request to interested parties, e.g. universities - The Central Reference Desk provides caseworkers and appeal lawyers with information. - Also other interested parties can ask for information - Library - Database MILo	No (IND COI unit produces other material, e.g. fact sheets upon request)	- Collection of links to the international agreements that are needed in the procedure - Collection of links to relevant documents in support of the decision making process	- “Early Warning”: consolidation and analyses of statistics - Vocational training for case workers - Medical information - Short briefings for BFM Directorate and Department for Asylum Procedure - Clearing of identity documents ¹²	- Texts of legal acts, HR related statistics - Fact-finding mission - Providing COI to policy makers - Contributing to training of use of COI in decision making process - Detailed population profiles and statistics ¹³
Languages	German	Dutch or French (quotes in English)	Danish, English for joint FFM ¹⁴	Finnish, sometimes English	French (sources often in other lang.)	German, some info translated into English	Dutch	Swedish, sometimes English	German or French	English
Electronic Database	Yes	Documentary intranet. Access for intl. partners 2007	Yes	Database Tellus	Yes	Database MILo ¹⁵	1. MFA: website 2. IND: own internal database	Database Lifos, accessible via website	Database Artis ¹⁶	Small internal one for case-workers. All information on website

¹² Also: Preparatory discussions with new embassy staff, maintenance of database, training on database, CIREFI-reporting

¹³ Also: Checking accuracy of COI content in Minister's letters, commenting on expert witness reports

¹⁴ FFM=Fact-finding mission

¹⁵ Migration-Information-Logistics

¹⁶ Asylum retrieval and Information System

1.9 Electronic Databases

In **Austria**, there is a database publicly available on the Internet. It contains a public part, with mostly documents from other public sources, and a restricted part. In **Belgium**, the documentary intranet is not public, but access may be extended to other international partner authorities by the end of 2006. In **Denmark**, all fact-finding mission reports are available on the Internet. **France** has an electronic database that is, however, only accessible for staff. In **Finland**, information is stored in the internally accessible database Tellus, while **Germany** maintains the database MILo (Migration-Information-Logistics). This database is very extensive and contains a comprehensive country documentation part (50,300 documents), case law documents (18,900 documents), documentation from literature (44,500 documents) and media documentation (950,000 news agency reports and 242,000 media news items). About 1,600 administrative judges, the 2nd instance, international ministries and around 20 partner authorities have access to this database. **The Netherlands (DPV)** does not have a database, but all their reports are publicly available on the Internet, while the COI unit at IND maintains an internal database only. In **Sweden**, the database Lifos has been made public since 31 March 2006. It contains own reports in Swedish as well as many reports of partner authorities, IGOs and NGOs, mostly in English. **Switzerland** maintains the database Atris that stands for “Asylum retrieval and Information system” (31,000 documents on 81 countries, 94,000 inquiries every year, 70 users a day). **The UK** only maintains a small database for internal use, which contains basically links to the main public reports. All their own reports are stored on the public website.

1.10 From COI to Policy Recommendations

None of the COI units provide policy recommendations. However, many COI units are involved in the preparation of such recommendations in some way. In **Belgium**, the Commissioner-General in consultation with the head of caseworkers provides the recommendations. The Belgian COI unit may be asked for advice in this process. In **Finland**, the Legal Unit, the other subunit of the Legal and Country Information Unit, is providing recommendations based on the material produced by the COI unit. The **Danish** COI unit only presents the statements from the sources, and, as a strict rule, never makes conclusions in the reports. In contrast, the **Swiss** COI unit draws conclusions on the general situation in a country, but never on single cases. MILA also presents possible consequences of an event for Switzerland and the BFM, makes prognosis on influxes to be expected and can suggest decisions through a special request form. In **Germany**, the COI unit does not make policy conclusions either, however, the unit can use standard text models to suggest decisions applicable to a certain country of origin.

	Austria	Belgium	Denmark	Finland	France	Germany	Netherlands	Sweden	Switzerland	UK
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3. Comparative Table on Policy Recommendations

Provision of Policy Recommendations	No	No (Commissioner General in consultation with head of caseworkers, COI unit may be asked for advice)	No	No. The Legal Service subunit provides them	No	No	No	No Earlier cases in database and through formal internal Country Networks until 31 March	No.	No
Translation into asylum policy	- (New unit, not all information available yet)	Commissioner General in consultation with head of caseworkers, COI unit may be asked for advice	COI together with applicant claim main basis for decision making. Concrete decisions are translated into policy/ practices, discussions between heads of Asylum and Visa Dep.	Help legal service to prepare policy papers	-	-	Minister of Alien Affairs and Integration in consultation with the MFA	COI, analysed by country specialists, is provided as a part of basis for policy making process to the directors	Executive level of BFM decides on concrete measures in close co-operation with MILA	Ministers
Formulation of country specific asylum policy	-	Commissioner General or Director of Immigration Department	The Director of DIS and the Heads of Offices of the Asylum and Visa Department	Asylum Unit and Legal and Country Information Unit, together, with Director General	Influenced by: the OFPRA Admin. Board, its Directorate, the Head of OFPRA divisions	-	Minister of Immigration and Integration, preparation by Asylum and Migration Affairs Division	The Director General of the Migration Board	The Directorate for Asylum Procedures. Sometimes also the Directorate of BFM or the government	The Country Specific Asylum Policy Team (CSAPT)

In **Belgium**, the COI service can be asked for advice when the Commissioner-General and the head of caseworkers translate COI into asylum policies. In **Denmark**, concrete decisions (based upon the applicant's claim and the COI material) are translated into policies and practices by discussions between the heads of the Asylum and Visa Department. In **Finland**, the Legal Service is responsible for the translation into asylum policy, while the COI unit may be asked to assist in the preparation of the policies. In **the Netherlands**, the Minister of Immigration and Integration decides upon asylum policy in consultation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In **Sweden**, the Directorate of the Swedish Migration Board is responsible for asylum policies; COI material forms an important basis in the determination of the policies. In **Switzerland**, the executive level of the BFM decides upon concrete measures in close cooperation with the COI unit MILA, and in **the UK**, the translation of COI into asylum policy is the task of the ministers.

In **Belgium**, the formulation of country specific asylum policies is done by the Commissioner-General of CGRS or the Director of the Immigration Department. This is done in **Denmark** by the Director of the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) and the heads of divisions of the Asylum and Visa Department. In **Finland**, it is the joint task of the Asylum Unit and the Legal and Country Information Unit, sometimes also in coordination with the Director General. In **France**, the formulation of country specific asylum policies is influenced by the OFPRA Administration Board, its directorate and the Head of the OFPRA divisions. In the **Netherlands**, the formulations are prepared by the COI unit, however, the final decision is taken by the Minister of Immigration and Integration. In **Sweden**, this task has so far been executed by the Director General of the Migration Board. In **Switzerland**, the Directorate for Asylum Procedures is responsible for the formulation of country specific asylum policies. Sometimes, also the Directorate of BFM or the government is involved. Until 2005, **the UK** COI office determined country specific asylum policies. However, in January 2005, the unit was split into two subunits. Now, the Country Specific Asylum Policy Team (CSAPT) formulates these policies.

1.11 Procedures of Information Gathering

The primary institutions in the country of origin directly involved in gathering information in all the countries are the respective embassies. Five countries (**Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany and Switzerland**) furthermore have liaison officers posted in e.g. Kabul, Baghdad, Ankara, Moscow and Pristina. Out of these, only a few have the gathering of asylum-related information as their main task, the others have an expertise in a different field but collect information nevertheless. Further, in all countries NGOs and external experts from universities, lawyers of confidence, etc. are involved in the information gathering process.

In all countries, the institutions directly involved in gathering information in the receiving countries are the COI units and the respective country officers. In addition, **Austria, Finland, and France** enlist external experts from universities, other research bodies, and the media. This is the case in **Belgium** and in **Switzerland** as well, however, here the network of contacts cooperates on a voluntary, unpaid basis. In **Denmark**, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Refugees, Immigration and Integration are involved, while in **Germany**, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and external experts are commissioned with the gathering of COI. In **Sweden**, up to 31 March 2006, the Swedish Migration Board, the unit for International Cooperation, the Divisions for Asylum, Permits and Citizenship, the

	Austria	Belgium	Denmark	Finland	France	Germany	Netherlands	Sweden	Switzerland	UK
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4. Comparative Table on Information Gathering

Institutions in country of origin directly involved in gathering information	Austrian embassies, liaison officers, NGOs, other think tanks (universities, etc) if needed	Network of contacts: Belgian embassies, NGOs, universities, etc.	Danish repres., sometimes UNHCR and other UN inst., intl. humanit. orgs., local human rights orgs., other resource persons, such as lawyers, academics	Embassies, sometimes police or border guard liaisons, foreign research bodies, IOs and NGOs	Embassies, NGOs, IOs, independent experts, actors of the political sphere	Embassies and liaison officers	Embassies, NGOs	Swedish embassies through MFA, also UNHCR	Embassy staff, and NGOs, liaison officers	British embassies, NGOs
Institutions in receiving country directly involved in gathering information	External experts, COI unit	Researchers of COI unit, network of contacts, universities, etc.	COI unit, MFA, Ministry of Refugee, Immigration and Integration	COI unit, courts, other ministries, researchers, independent experts, universities, research bodies, journalists	COI unit, independent experts, case workers, NGOs, IOs	COI unit through database MLo. Additionally, MFA or external experts	COI unit	Until 31/3: Swedish Migration Board ¹⁷ , MFA, National Forensic Laboratory, National Criminal Police, Aliens Appeal Board	Researchers of COI unit, network of contacts, universities, etc.	COI Service
Institutions in receiving country responsible for gathering information	Federal Asylum Office (BAA)	COI unit as part of independent Office of the CRGS	MFA, Ministry of Refugees, Immigration and Integration, DIS	COI unit, MFA, Ministry of Labour	Documentation and Research Service of OFPRA and CRR, MFA	BAMF	COI unit of MFA, and COI unit at IND	Swedish Migration Board, MFA, Appeal Board ¹⁸	The Section MILA	COI Service

¹⁷ Unit of International Co-operation, Divisions for Asylum, Permits and Citizenship

¹⁸ Until 31 March 2006

	Austria	Belgium	Denmark	Finland	France	Germany	Netherlands	Sweden	Switzerland	UK
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5. Comparative Table on Sources

	Primary Sources									
Fact-finding missions	Planned for Nigeria and Kosovo in 2006	3 planned for 2006. Not systematically, only if there is a need	6-8 each year, when needs arise, often conducted together with another state	Sporadically (1-2 a year if needed)	1 in 2004, 2 in 2005	None	Ca. 6-8 per year. FFM are some-times used, but no fixed timetable	Had resources for FFM. No budget for new unit yet	A country is visited every 2-3 years, 4-5 countries each year, (12 FFM in 2004/05, depending on number of applications	Yes, 12 between 2001 and 2004, (4 conducted with Danish COI unit)
Others	-	Embassy, contact persons from political orgs, NGOs, human rights orgs. Journalists, local government	Intl. Humanitarian orgs., Danish and foreign embassies, gov. agencies, local human rights groups, local bar associations, leaders of ethnic/religious minorities, lawyers, academics, UN and IOM officers	Information provided by Embassies and liaisons, own decisions, court decisions, local NGOs, local experts, resettlement projects	Embassies, NGOs, IGOs, independent experts, actors of the political sphere in exile	Contacts of embassy staff and liaison officers with local NGOs, and local attorneys of confidence, IGOs (IOM, etc)	-	-	Embassy reports, experts from universities, media correspondents, Diaspora, evaluation of asylum records of admitted refugees	-
	Secondary Sources									
Info. by other countries	See Comparative Table on COI Co-operation									
Media	BBC, APA, national media in countries of origin, allafrika.com, IRIN news, Economist Intelligence Unit, BBC, RFE, Global IDP Project, Jane's, IFES Election Guide, Keesings, Factiva, databases of newspapers and news agencies, European databases, Lexis-Nexis, Ecol.net, Refworld, Intl. Crisis Web									
External Experts	Academics, government institutions, media	From universities, media, etc. (unpaid)	Academics and NGOs in country of origin (budget)	Universities, researchers, journalists. (budget)	Researchers from universities	Researchers, etc.	From universities, media, etc.	Only for seminars, training	For presentations: media, MFA, universities	No
IGOs	UNHCR, EU, UN, UNDP, UNHCHR, IOM, ICRC, OSCE, WHO, OCHA, UNICEF, etc.									
NGOs	ACCORD, AI, HRW, Freedom House, Global Witness, ECRE, FIDH, local NGOs, MSF, RSF, CPJ, USCR, IHC, Save the Children, GfbV, MSF									

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Forensic Laboratory, the Criminal Police and the Aliens Appeal Board were involved. It is not clear yet, how this will be arranged from April 2006 on. The institutions in the country of origin, which are politically and otherwise responsible for the collection of COI in all countries are – with the exception of **Austria** and **Germany** – the respective embassies. Institutions in destination countries that are politically or otherwise responsible for the gathering of information are in all countries either the COI units itself or the respective supraordinated migration office. In **Denmark**, **Finland**, **France** and **Sweden**, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also bears ultimate responsibility for the gathering of information.

1.12 Sources

Almost all countries use fact-finding missions for gaining access to primary sources when the need for additional information arises. **Denmark** often conducts fact-finding missions together with other states (often the **UK**, sometimes Norway, **Finland**) as the outcome of the report is conceived more neutral. All other countries conduct between two and six fact-finding missions per year, with the exception of **Germany** that normally does not conduct any. In **Sweden** it had – by the time of drafting – not yet been decided yet whether fact-finding missions were a part of the future budget or not.

In order to obtain primary information – either when on mission or in the home country – usually the respective embassies, NGOs, liaison officers, international organisations, human rights organisations and lawyers of confidence are contacted. Most often the countries are obliged to contact the local government as well. This is unavoidable when it comes to the issuing of visas, and has proven to be useful when information is needed on state institutions and regulations, such as the prison system, exit rules, or visa requirements. However, utmost caution is applied for the safety of the applicant: no case-related information is disclosed to the authorities in the countries of origin. **The UK** uses embassy reports only as background information. **France** also uses actors of the political sphere in exile as informants.

As secondary sources, many media databases, websites, articles and other electronic databases are used. Examples are BBC, APA, AFP, Factiva/Reuters, LexisNexis, ecoi.net, allafrika.com, and IRIN News. Furthermore, when language barriers can be overcome, local media from countries of origin are used as well. The **Belgian** CEDOCA has staff members with Arab and Russian skills, while in **Austria** some staff members also have a command of Russian. In many cases external experts are contacted. Usually they come from universities, the media or other research bodies. In **Belgium** and **Switzerland**, these experts are contacted on a voluntary, unpaid basis. However, experience shows that in this case, answers to specific questions cannot always be expected to be forthcoming. To overcome this problem, **Finland** has a budget for external experts. **Sweden** and **the UK** use external experts only for trainings and seminars.

Reports from inter-governmental organisations that are often used include those from relevant UN bodies (mostly UNHCR, also UNHCHR, UNDP and UNICEF), OSCE, WHO, ICRC, and reports by the EU and the Council of Europe. Also, many topical reports from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are used, among them Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Freedom House, ECRE, Médecins sans Frontières, Save the Children, FIDH and the International Helsinki Committee.

	Austria	Belgium	Denmark	Finland	France	Germany	Netherlands	Sweden	Switzerland	UK
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6. Comparative Table on Guidelines

Guidelines for quoting sources	Not yet finished, but basically the internationally acknowledged guidelines	Written guidelines, based on general academic criteria	If source does not want to be quoted, another formulation is used, for instance “a Western Embassy”	The usual scientific guidelines for quoting (written)	Yes. Written guidelines on principle rules and on research in the Internet	The usual scientific guidelines for quoting	Written guidelines. Verifiability is important	Written guidelines	Completeness, unambiguousness. Confidential information can only be quoted with place and date ¹⁹	E.g. name and date of source in text, quotations to be totally accurate ²⁰
Guidelines for independence and reliability	The topicality and reliability of the source is examined in a report before it is being used	Cross checking, experience with the source. Each source has to be checked by two other sources if possible	Sources are recommended by reliable other sources, such as embassies, international humanitarian organizations, other EU states	Peer discussions among researchers, in the future updateable lists of used and credible sources	Written guidelines on principle rules: a.o. variety of sources to verify information, agenda and target group	Efforts put into supporting one information by several sources to guarantee verifiability	Criteria are confidential	Search for different sources to establish reliability	Completeness, unambiguousness. Confidential reports can only be quoted with place and date (data protection)	Coherence with other sources, agenda of the source, information-gathering resources of the org., reputation of the source
Guidelines for outdated information	Should not be older than 6 months	No formal criteria. Task of researcher at COI unit to update information	No	No	-	Outdated when no longer reflecting the situation	Information is considered outdated if it no longer reflects the situation	Usability of information is taken into consideration as soon new information is added	Information is considered outdated after 2 years ²¹	More recent version of a particular source supersedes earlier editions, also ²²
Guidelines for comprehensiveness, topicality and objectivity	Acknowledged COI standards, training manual of ACCORD/	Yes	No written rules, common sense: Quote the sources as precisely as possible. COI	Guideline paper on ethics of COI research	Written rules of deontology, reading and cross reading by other staff members	Guidelines in handbook on quality	Confidential	No official written guidelines. However, usually several	Handbook where guidelines are outlined on matters such as structure, style,	Currently being updated

¹⁹ Data protection

²⁰ Furthermore: Include all relevant content

²¹ As long as it has not been proven that it is still valid

²² Furthermore: Documents older than 2 years should only be retained if they contain information not available in more recent documents

	Austria	Belgium	Denmark	Finland	France	Germany	Netherlands	Sweden	Switzerland	UK
	UNHCR		office never makes conclusion. Quotes only statements from sources					sources are contacted/ used, and different opinions are taken into account	grammar, source criticism, layout, etc.	
Guidelines for transparency and accuracy	- (No fixed guidelines yet, as unit just started)	Everything is sourced, relevant extracts of information are in annexes, the answer document contains a “road book” where information on consulted sources is listed	Sources are consulted when drafting to be sure a statement is correct	Based on expertise and judgement of individual researchers and accepted by Head of Country Information	Verification of the reliability of sources, diversification of sources, overlapping (pattern matching), detailed enumeration of sources ²³	Guidelines in handbook on quality	Facts are verified whenever possible. Procedure is not open to external scrutiny Guidelines: confidential	By providing all public information used on the Internet	In handbook a wide array of solutions is presented to possible problems concerning the gathering of info	All source documents are readily available to users
Relevant (confidential) information that is difficult to verify info	Every source is scrutinized, confidentiality is safeguarded	Confidential information is only used as background information, as a starting point to find public sources ²⁴	Must normally be confirmed by other sources in order to be used as decision making basis	Effort put into finding same information from another source. Otherwise, high class of conf. source to be assured	Telephone contact to contact person on site or experts. If possible, pattern matching	Confidential information is not used anymore since not useful for asylum procedure ²⁵	Confidential	All information used in asylum cases is presented to applicant and their legal represent. ²⁶	Source critically examined. Range of tools: emulation of data, change of roles and perspectives ²⁷	Would not include any information if the source material could not be made available to the public

²³ Also, list of (most of) the sources/documents used to case worker

²⁴ Confidential information is useless since it cannot be used in the case procedures

²⁵ Sometimes confidential reports are rewritten in order to be used in asylum procedure

²⁶ If confidential information is used, it is so indicated

²⁷ Also, schematisation/visualisation, use of illustrations, ranking, pattern matching, scenarios best-case-worst-case, multi-tooling, contextualisation

Every country furthermore uses information from the USA, the so-called US State Department Human Rights Reports, as they are seen to be very detailed and informative, and to contain information that is otherwise not available.

1.13 Guidelines

Almost every country has written guidelines on how to quote sources. In a general sense, these are usually the commonly used academic rules of quoting. When it comes to the quoting of confidential sources, the countries have different approaches. In **Denmark**, e.g., if a source wishes to remain anonymous, another formulation is chosen, such as “a Western embassy” or the like. In **Sweden**, the restricted source is presented to the caseworkers, but for anyone else it is quoted as an “embassy source”. **The UK** can use the embassy reports only as background information, as mentioned above, and quotes neither confidential nor restricted information. In **Switzerland**, confidential sources, like the National Intelligence Service or the military, are protected by indicating that the source stems from BFM. Lawyers of confidence are usually quoted as an “embassy source”. In some countries, however, the court is provided with the names upon requests.

Austria guarantees topicality and reliability of the sources by examining them before use. Most countries indicated that they cross-check the information by different sources and corroborate the information. **Belgium** and **the UK** also indicated that the past experience they had with a source and the reputation of a source plays an important role. **France** and **Switzerland** stated that they check the political or general agenda of the source and the target group to which this particular information has been directed. **Denmark** relies on sources that have been recommended by other reliable sources, such as embassies, international humanitarian organisations, etc.

As these elaborate measures to verify the quality and reliability of COI sources indicate, a problem can arise when caseworkers themselves sometimes search for information on the Internet. In such a case it can happen that the reliability, independence and quality of the source is no more substantiated.

A further issue to be tackled by COI units is the question as to when information becomes outdated. Four countries do not have any specific guidelines on this. In **Austria**, however, information is considered outdated after 6 months (according to a decision by the 2nd instance), in **Switzerland** after 2 years as long as it has not been proven that it is still valid. In **the UK**, documents older than 2 years should only be used if they contain information that is not available in more recent documents. In **Belgium** it is the researchers’ task to decide upon the topicality of the information, while in **Germany** and in **the Netherlands**, information is considered outdated when it no longer reflects the current situation.

Seven countries (**Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Switzerland** and **the UK**) have written guidelines for comprehensiveness, topicality and objectivity. In **Denmark**, these guidelines are not written down, rather the COI office relies on the common sense of its researchers. **Sweden** does not have written guidelines either, but it makes an effort to state different opinions and avoids making its own conclusions.

In all countries, measures are taken to guarantee transparency and accuracy of the information finding process. In **Belgium**, e.g., COI documents contain a so-called „road book“ where all

information on consulted sources are listed, and also **France** makes an enumeration of (most of) the sources used in the products. In **Denmark**, the sources are consulted when drafting to make sure that the information quoted is correct. **Sweden** and **the UK** present all source information on their websites. In **Germany** and in **Switzerland**, guidelines are written down in the respective handbooks.

Relevant confidential information that is difficult to verify is subject to different procedures in each country. In **Austria**, every source is scrutinised, and confidentiality is safeguarded. In **Belgium, Germany** and **the UK**, confidential information can only be used as background information. In **Belgium**, confidential information (from military or national intelligence services) can only be used as a starting point for further information gathering. Confidential information is never presented to the caseworkers. In **Germany**, confidential material cannot be used in the asylum procedure, sometimes confidential reports are rewritten and the sources are cited as “BAMF”. **Denmark** only uses information of sources that can normally be confirmed by other sources, and also **Finland, France** and **Switzerland** put efforts into finding the same information from other sources. **Switzerland**, furthermore, has a whole range of tools to critically examine the sources.

1.14 Quality and Control

Most of the countries have control systems that include cross-reading of the reports by other staff members and/or the head of the unit. **Austria** also maintains regular consultations with decision makers and intensive co-operation with the Red Cross/ACCORD network. Furthermore, sources are frequently reviewed. In **Denmark** it is considered most important to make all reports publicly available and take all feedback into account that is directed to the Immigration Service. Three countries (**Austria, Germany** and **the UK**) have a formal advisory panel. In **Austria**, it is the “Staatendokumentationsbeirat” (State Documentation Council), in **Germany**, the “Expertenforum” (Forum of Experts) and in **the UK**, the Advisory Panel on Country Information (APCI). These bodies are usually made up of experts, such as lawyers, researchers, and representatives from state administration, churches and local groups or the UNHCR, that deal with migration on a professional level. Tasks of these formal monitoring bodies include to review COI material and provide advice about the content of it, as well as advice about sources and methods of research. Also, **Sweden** had a formal monitoring body until 31 March, the so-called Reference Group, with internal staff representatives from the production team, the system administration and the decision makers.

Feedback is taken into account by all countries. **Belgium** maintains close contact with the caseworkers and the head of department and takes feedback into account on a daily basis. In **Denmark**, the COI unit would in theory draft a new report if serious criticism occurs. In **Finland**, feedback was, amongst others, collected by a qualitative questionnaire on the services provided by the COI unit. This has proven to be a handy tool and may be repeated regularly. In **the Netherlands**, feedback is channelled through the IND COI unit that then prepares the terms of reference for the next COI reports. The COI unit MILA in **Switzerland** considers feedback from caseworkers regarding length, level of details and presentation. However, the content and analyses made in the report are not subject to change as any possible prejudicial expectations of caseworkers regarding contents should not be met. In **the UK**, the User Group, which consists of senior officials from the asylum case working unit and other internal units, meets every second month and often provides additional feedback.

	Austria	Belgium	Denmark	Finland	France	Germany	Netherlands	Sweden	Switzerland	UK
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7. Comparative Table on Quality Control Systems

Control Systems	Yes. Regular consultation with decision makers, co-operation planned with UNHCR ²⁸	Yes. Internal quality check and quality check by head of case workers unit	All COI reports are public and anyone ²⁹ is free to direct criticism at the DIS	Yes. Peer check, check by head of country information, feedback from caseworkers	Yes. Cross-reading by the Deputy Head of the COI unit	Cross reading by staff and head of unit	Confidential	Working on the issue; the different roles and tasks are not yet clear	Yes Quality assurance system 1 and 2 (QSS1, 2) ³⁰	Yes Drafts are checked by author, line manager and one of COI Service Management Team ³¹
Formal monitoring body	COI Council (“Staaten dokumentations-beirat”)	No	No	No	No	Forum of experts (“Experten-forum”) ³²	No ³³	Until 31 March: internal Reference Group ³⁴	No	Advisory Panel on Country Information (APCI)
Feedback taken into consideration	Yes	Yes, from caseworkers and Head of Department	If serious criticism arises, a new report will be made	Ad hoc feedback is encouraged. Annual general quality questionnaire	Yes. From all users	Yes, from all users	Feedback from various sources ³⁵	From Reference Group and Country Networks ³⁶	Considers feedback from caseworker ³⁷	Yes, from Users Group which meets every month

²⁸ Also: constant monitoring of provided information, keep a close eye on sources, intensive co-operation with Red Cross/ACCORD

²⁹ Including asylum lawyers, IGOs and NGOs

³⁰ 1) Reports are cross-read by another COI staff with the aim to assure the quality of the content, and 2) the secretariat will cross-read it, with the aim of assuring the formal qualities

³¹ Furthermore, feedback on previous COI is considered and incorporated, drafts of COI Reports are reviewed by the Foreign & Commonwealth office, as well as by senior case-workers prior to publication, drafts are professionally proofread

³² Comprises of lawyers, researchers, judges, and representatives from state administration, churches, local groups, or personnel from the UNHCR that deal with migration and protection of refugees on a professional level

³³ However, in appeal cases, the court will assess the quality of the background reports that the country report is based on

³⁴ Reference Group meets several times a year to discuss the usability of the system, and the content, consists of representatives from the production team, the system administration and the decision makers

³⁵ Feedback is directed to MFA or channelled through the IND COI unit that prepares the term of reference

³⁶ Country Networks: one country expert from the Division for Asylum, a documentation officer of the COI unit, and four other representatives from other spheres of activities

³⁷ Feedback regarding length, details, and presentation. However, the actual content of the reports are not subject to change

1.15 International Co-operation

As became clear during the course of this study, European countries already have an intensive exchange of documents and information with each other. However, rather than being systematically structured, this exchange is based mostly on personal and informal networks between the heads of the respective COI units. Trust is a very important element in this informal network, as well as commitment and behavioural rules. In this regard, it is not so much the question of what a COI unit is able to provide to others, but whether there is the general will to share available information and whether the proper conducts of behaviour are applied. Generally, COI units are very open to share knowledge, experience and information with trusted colleagues. This also concerns the new EU member states with recently established COI units, which are still accumulating experience, and often have fewer resources available.

The Nordic countries **Denmark, Finland and Sweden** meet once or twice a year together with Norway in informal Nordic meetings. The purpose of these meetings is networking and the exchange of information. There is no specific budget for this and costs have to be covered by the general travel budget. On the European Union level, exchange and ways of co-operation are channelled through Eurasil and various ARGO projects. Outside the European Union framework, exchange takes place in the IGC COI group (Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Germany, Finland, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Austria, Spain, the United Kingdom, the United States, Sweden and Switzerland), GDISC (EU 25 plus Accession and Candidate countries, plus Norway, Switzerland, Iceland), and A8 (Belgium, Germany, Netherlands, Switzerland, Sweden, UK).

The main obstacle to international COI co-operation is the fact that for most country information produced the respective official language is used. According to **Germany**, the language problem is the only problematic issue in co-operation on COI. However, other countries have also expressed concerns about the sometimes poor quality of reports compiled by other countries, differences in the formats of the reports and in the perspectives on a specific country. This is why some questions that are specifically interesting for one country are not always answered in reports on the same country/topic prepared by other countries.

The issue of confidentiality versus publicity is also seen as an obstacle towards more co-operation on COI. This is especially crucial in the case of **Denmark, Sweden and the UK** that have to present all their products publicly on their website. They cannot make use of restricted material compiled by other countries, as it cannot be used in asylum decision-making. Apart from this formal obstacle, however, most countries share the opinion that solutions can always be found in dealing with matters of restriction and confidentiality.

When we asked countries what conditions needed to be in place in order to improve international co-operation on COI, many countries referred to common quality standards and a constructive approach for dealing with restricted information and language problems. For example, **Switzerland** specifically mentioned common procedures for the handling of confidential data, as well as competence in the field and a scientific mode of operation. Other countries stressed mainly common guidelines on the production of COI and the translation of products into at least one common language, preferably English. For **Germany** an important criterion is to have a strict separation between the provision and the evaluation of information.

	Austria	Belgium	Denmark	Finland	France	Germany	Netherlands	Sweden	Switzerland	UK
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8. Comparative Table on COI Co-operation

Obstacles to improved COI co-operation	Different languages, lack of willingness of some states to share internally available information	Language problems, quality of reports, lack of staff or time to exchange information in a structural and systematic way	Language of the fact-finding reports. Should be drafted or translated into English	Language problems, question of publicity/confidentiality	Language problems, distinct formats of reports ³⁸	Only problem: the use of the respective official language	Confidentiality issues, specific country focus, focus on certain aspects	Mostly language and legal obstacles	Languages, different quality standards, products are seldom automatically disseminated ³⁹	Language, confidentiality concerns, variation in case profiles/country focus
Conditions for more co-operation	No conditions	Minimum standards on quality, commitment, translation into a common language	Common understanding of COI, mutual interest in certain countries of origin, common working language	Coherent principles on ethics, quality, and training, transparency	Adoption of common methodology, appointment of country experts, composition of common database/common portal	Information should be provided in German, English or French, separation between provision of information and evaluation	Question of confidentiality has to be solved to enable effective co-operation, time frame for COI reports, choice of countries ⁴⁰	All European reports should be translated in at least one language, e.g. English ⁴¹	Competence in the field, Scientific mode of operation, commitment, D, F, E as languages of communication ⁴²	Sharing of material easier through common language
Priority areas included for improved COI co-operation	Common COI standards, translation of documents	Common COI standards, translation of documents	Common COI standards, translation of documents	Common scientific and analysis standards on COI, transl. of documents	Common COI standards, translation of documents	COI standards of high quality, translation of documents of importance ⁴³	Common COI standard, translation of documents	Common COI standard, Translation of documents	Common COI standards, translation of documents (E, F, D)	Common COI standards, translation of documents

³⁸ Also: different status of COI in the process of decision making within different instances, different resources (esp. staff)

³⁹ Also: some questions that are specifically interesting for CH are not answered in the reports, partly different perspectives

⁴⁰ Also: determination of institution to be held accountable by the courts for the contents of COI reports

⁴¹ Try not only to use public information, but also make compilations public to make reports more usable.

⁴² Also: similar application of confidential data, readiness for co-operation and mutual exchange

⁴³ Also: Metadata Standard for database, and common standard for data exchange

All ten countries covered by this study stated that further European co-operation on COI is a desired goal to them. The main reason for strengthening COI co-operation is the common observation that every COI unit has to deal with similar issues and (often expanding) problem areas, but has only limited (and often declining) financial and human resources to deal with them resulting in a situation where it is often not possible to be competent enough in all aspects. At the same time there are not only many gaps but also many overlapping areas, which could be tackled by increased co-operation. Thus, burden sharing, networking and cost effectiveness by combining resources are the main advantages of increased co-operation expected by the countries participating in this study. Furthermore, it was also stated that European co-operation on COI is desirable, as it would contribute to the harmonisation of European asylum policies and would therefore help in combating asylum shopping.

On the other hand, there are also a few disadvantages seen in an expanded co-operation on COI. Apart from the fact that meetings and the preparation for them are time- and money consuming, a possible loss of flexibility and focus could eventually result in slower processes. While there may be a risk of accumulating unbalanced information when taking into account sources in a specific language only there may also be a risk of over-politicising through language rules and political considerations. Above all, countries are concerned about facing an increased bureaucracy, and a remoteness from the needs of the individual users of COI within the states.

1.16 The Way Forward: Options for Improved Co-operation

An important issue addressed by this comparative study is the potential for improved international co-operation on COI. As detailed in previous chapters, international co-operation in this field is nothing new and states are already co-operating on several levels with each other. Moreover, the European Commission⁴⁴ has recently presented its own plan for enhanced COI co-operation, including several practical steps to be taken towards this aim. However, in pursuing international co-operation, countries may have their own goals and concerns. Therefore, we chose a slightly different, bottom-up approach to international co-operation and invited all the countries represented in this study to participate in a workshop in which they could present their own ideas and concerns for strengthening COI co-operation. A number of proposed models were discussed and evaluated by participating COI representatives. Their comments on the most promising co-operation models are summarised in the table below.

44 COM (2006) 67 final: *Communication on strengthened practical co-operation: New Structures, New Approaches: Improving the Quality of Decision Making in the Common European Asylum System*. Brussels, 17.2.2006

9. Proposed Models for Strengthening European COI Co-operation

	AT	BE	DK	FI	FR	DE	NL	SE	CH	UK
Common fact-finding missions	Yes	Yes ⁴⁵	Yes	Yes	Yes	Basically interested ⁴⁶	Yes	Yes	Would be nice	Yes ⁴⁷
Division of provision of COI among EU states	Yes	No	No	Reservations	Yes	Yes ⁴⁸	-	-	No ⁴⁹	No ⁵⁰
Division of provision of COI among like-minded states	Yes	No ⁵¹	No	Reservations	Yes	Yes - (see above)	Yes	Yes	No	No (see above)
European databases with open, fully searchable COI	Yes	No ⁵²	Yes	No	Yes	No ⁵³	Yes (MFA)	Yes ⁵⁴	No	No ⁵⁵
Focal points for information requests	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Already possible at Central Reference Desk	Yes	-	Yes	Yes, shared list of dedicated contact persons

As can be seen from the table, all countries are in favour of common fact-finding missions (FFMs). One advantage from this, according to **Denmark**, is that common FFM reports are seen to be more neutral which in turn increases the credibility of the whole asylum procedure. **Belgium** suggests to let one country do the fact-finding mission alone and collect information for all the other countries as well. **Germany** states that preference still lies with liaison officers and embassy personnel, but a basic interest for fact-finding missions is still there. Also **Switzerland** would welcome more common fact-finding mission – obstacles are seen, however, in the necessary co-ordination work, e.g. for getting visas at the same time, etc, while

⁴⁵ But also: One country could do FFM and collect information for other countries as well

⁴⁶ Preference to assign liaison officers and embassy staff, but basically interested in joint FFM

⁴⁷ But subsequent reports must be made public

⁴⁸ Countries with expertise in the situation of a particular country of origin can take the lead in a European framework. However, own analysis has to be done as well (problem of 2nd and 3rd instance, and airport procedure)

⁴⁹ Has been tried before, does not work in practise

⁵⁰ Countries need to be able to tailor COI to their specific case profiles and any COI material has to conform with the requirements of its users – particularly the courts and appeals tribunals – within each country

⁵¹ Important to have the same access, not relevant whether the countries share the same ideas

⁵² Question: who has access? Common database is not realistic. An Intranet with well-defined products in common and links to other databases is preferable and more realistic

⁵³ Own database needed for security reasons and the access to confidential documents

⁵⁴ Own database needed for security reasons and the access to confidential documents

⁵⁵ Databases are extremely resource intensive (UK operates satisfactorily without a database), but greater accessibility by members states of existing databases preferable

the UK stresses that common fact finding missions only make sense if subsequent reports are made public.

Another proposed model, namely the division of the production of COI among EU states has been met with mixed feelings. **Germany** basically favours this model, and adds that countries with expertise in the situation of a particular country could take the lead in a common EU framework. However, due to 2nd and 3rd instance requirements and the 24-hour airport procedure, Germany still has to do its own analysis as well. **Belgium** is critical towards this model and argues that a COI unit cannot rely only on one report. **Finland** has some reservations towards this model but thinks that it might be possible in some cases. **The UK** argues critically against this model, as every country needs to be able to tailor COI to their specific case profiles. The model that seeks to divide the production of COI among like-minded states does get a slightly more positive response, as **the Netherlands** and **Sweden** also expressed their support for it.

The model of a European database with open, fully searchable COI has five proponents (**Austria, Denmark, France, the Netherlands (DPV), and Sweden**) and five opponents (**Belgium, Finland, Germany, Switzerland and the UK**). **Belgium**, for example, wonders who will have access to the database. Furthermore, Belgium thinks that a common database is unrealistic; an intranet with common well-defined products and links to other databases would be more realistic and preferable. **Germany** argues that the COI unit needs an own database for security reasons and for the storing of confidential data. The **UK** sees the main problem in the extremely resource intensiveness of such a database, and also prefers greater accessibility of already existing databases. On the other hand, a European database with restricted COI is not much appreciated at the moment. For example, the **UK** states that the COI unit cannot accept restricted COI for their decision making process, while **Germany** suggests – for reasons of cost effectiveness – the continuation of already existing, highly developed databases, such as its own MILO.

Switzerland suggests creating a common access point to all already existing European databases through a linguistic Meta search engine. Having a common portal to the already existing databases is also supported by **France**, which also listed the creation of a common database as a long-term goal. Furthermore, **Switzerland** states the necessity of systematic information about planned and finalised products and fact-finding missions, and the systematic exchange of insights gained through fact-finding missions. In addition, Switzerland sees a lack of exchange of expertise; such expert views, analyses and second opinions could be communicated systematically, e.g. in chat rooms or through other modes of communication. Moreover, Switzerland is a proponent of the further development of COI towards COI-Plus, containing prognoses, scenarios, early warning systems, country related knowledge for integration etc.

The idea to have designated focal points in each COI unit that is answerable to information requests from other countries found unanimous support. Going a bit further, **France** even suggests dividing the provision of COI into certain country-specific or topic-related experts' capacities and have designated, geographically specialised, country experts. However, other countries are sceptical towards the appointment of country experts as this raises questions about who is to decide on an expert's knowledge, etc. Other French suggestions are to have one country compiling reports on one country and sharing them with the other countries, and to have several countries co-writing a final report (for fact-finding missions).

All countries agree that national country specific asylum policies should not only be based on national COI information. **Denmark** sees objectivity and reliability better served when national country specific asylum policies are based on material by more than one state. However, there was widespread agreement that the production of a states' own COI information cannot totally be outsourced.

2. Individual Country Chapters

2.1 Austria

Institutional Setup

Article 60 in the new asylum law of 2005 provides for the establishment of a separate documentation unit in the Federal Asylum Office. Thus a unit specialized in COI was established and became effective on 1 January 2006. This documentation unit is located at the first instance of the asylum procedure, the Federal Asylum Office (BAA), which is attached to the Ministry of Interior. Moreover, there is intensive co-operation with the Red Cross/ACCORD network. Presently, nine people are employed in the unit. However, additional employment of another three staff members is planned, so there will be nine country officers and three administrative staff.

The users of the COI material are the asylum authorities. Public law courts can also request information directly from the COI unit. The database of the documentation unit is accessible to the following authorities and persons free of cost: public law courts, Asylum Review Board, UNHCR, ECHR, ECJ. Other interested parties can access the website at a cost of € 60.

Tasks and Activities of the COI Unit

The scope of the COI unit is the collection and scientific preparation of the country of origin information. According to Article 60 in the asylum legislation of 2005, the tasks of the Austrian COI unit involves gathering information relevant for a) examining whether the applicant is subject to well founded fear of persecution, b) judging upon the applicant's credibility, c) and to determine whether a state is a safe country or a safe third country. There are no changes planned for the future, however, a continuous increase of the scope of tasks of the COI unit is to be expected.

The gathered facts are to be collected according to the specific countries. They should be prepared and analysed according to valid scientific standards, and documented in a valid, general format. The documentation has to be checked for facts that might have lost their accuracy, and has to be updated accordingly. Beside the preparation and analysis of COI for the asylum procedure, part of the COI unit's tasks is to do research on the Dublin procedure in other countries, i.e. to research the asylum procedure in other Dublin States, such as conditions of reception, accommodation and benefits of asylum applicants, situation in refugee camps, etc.

Products of the COI Unit

The COI unit produces the following products: a) country reports for the 15 to 20 most important countries of origin, b) statements (no recommendations!) usable for decisions for the most important claims of asylum seekers, and c) answers to requests on single cases.

The COI unit produces regular country reports for the most important countries of origin measured in the number of applications. Among them are also current countries of origin about

which there is a lack of information. For the first three months of 2006, 15 reports on the following countries have been planned: Serbia and Montenegro, Russian Federation, India, Moldavia, Turkey, Georgia, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Mongolia, Bangladesh, Iran, Macedonia, Armenia, China, and Pakistan.

The COI unit also produces reports upon request about specific countries of origin. However, as the unit has only been created in January 2006, no data on these are available. The asylum authorities, such as the management and the caseworkers, can ask for such reports. Typical reasons for requesting such reports are unsatisfactory information, current legislation, changes in the situation of a country of origin and problems occurring in the asylum procedure.

The unit also produces compilations about a specific topic in a country of origin upon request. An example of such an information sheet is “Roma in Kosovo”. Information on request is usually provided upon demand by caseworkers of the BAA, the 2nd instance (UBAS), or the public law courts. According to the legislation of the Administrative Court, the sources must not be older than six months. That is why the reports are updated every half year. If the situation in a country changes rapidly and profoundly, updates can be commissioned earlier.

The documentation unit will initiate the update itself. No general statements according to the time frame of producing COI reports can be made. The time needed depends on the research needed and the current development in the countries of origin. The COI reports are disseminated via email to all units of the organisation, they are also uploaded on the database.

A report usually has between 20 and 35 pages. Specific information provided upon request is not updated regularly, as it covers specific topics based on single cases. However, if needed new information is provided. The usual time frame for producing these fact sheets is two weeks. After completion they are disseminated by email and uploaded on the database. Usually such sheets have between two and ten pages.

The COI unit also provides statistic material upon request on different topics, e.g. on the number of applications in other EU member states. The COI unit has a database, which is accessible at www.staatendokumentation.at. The public part of the database mostly contains documents from ecoi.net, other external sources and also own answers to single case requests. The restricted part of the database exclusively contains internal reports and is only accessible to the actors at the 1st and 2nd instance. Basically everyone can sign up for the public part of the database and access it upon payment of a fee. There are uniform standards when producing country reports and answering requests. The language of the products is German. They are neither translated nor are translations planned in the future.

From COI to Policy Recommendations

The decision makers are responsible for making the legal judgments and the asylum decision. No political recommendations are made.

Any further use of the information in a country report is in the hands of the decision makers.

The Federal Asylum Office is responsible for the formulation of both asylum policy and country specific asylum policies. Any such policy is based on up-to-date country of origin information.

Procedures of Information Gathering and Drafting

The COI unit and the caseworkers of the BAA work in close co-operation in order to determine the questions to be answered in the country reports. The latter provide regular reports on the type of applicants' claims that are submitted most often. The COI unit is responsible for drafting the COI reports. The institutions and government agencies in the country of origin that are directly involved with the gathering of information are the Austrian Embassies, liaison officers, NGOs and think tanks (universities, media etc.). They are contacted if there is a need for their expertise. The institutions directly involved with the gathering of COI in Austria are the COI unit and other experts. The government agency in the reception country that is politically responsible for the gathering of COI is the COI unit of the BAA, which is subordinated to the Ministry of Interior.

Sources Used for Data Collection

As the COI unit was only established on 1st January 2006, no fact-finding missions have been made yet. Nevertheless, at the moment two missions (to Nigeria and Kosovo) are planned for later this year. Usually Austrian Embassies, liaison officers, or other think tanks (universities, organisations) are contacted in the country of origin to get primary information.

As secondary information, reports from UK Home Office, BAMF, USDOS are used; further sources include media information (e.g. from BBC, APA, and national media in the country of origin). As external experts, people with expertise on a country are contacted. International organisations, such as (among others) UNHCR, ICMPD, EU and UN, and NGOs, such as ACCORD, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Freedom House are also contacted. The guidelines to follow are still in preparation, but it is planned to follow the international rules of academic quoting.

The COI officers decide on the sources to be used. Concerning independence and reliability of the sources, basically any source can be considered. The topicality and the reliability of the source are examined in a report prior to usage of the source. All other parties have access to the list of sources.

Quality and Control

The Austrian COI unit employs different means of quality assurance. For example, regular consultations by the COI unit with the decision makers are held, constant monitoring of the quality of the provided information is done by having a close eye on the sources, intensive co-operation with the Red Cross/ACCORD, and the COI unit's Council assesses the quality and reliability of products. Co-operation with UNHCR is also planned,

The COI Unit Council ("Staatendokumenationsbeirat") is a formal body within the Ministry of Interior, whose task it is to provide recommendations to the management of the COI unit, relating to the collection of relevant facts for the evaluation of the sources used and the production of analyses. The Ministry of Interior nominates the chairperson and nine members of the Council; all of them have profound professional skills and experience in the field of asylum and migration. At least one of the members should be from the 2nd instance (UBAS) and the UNHCR as well as from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Feedback from any actor within the BAA is taken into consideration when updating reports. Every feedback is analysed in detail and if possible taken into consideration in the next edition. As a matter of principle, information should not be older than six months. However, there are sometimes topics on which new information is simply not available.

Basically the documentation unit follows the internationally acknowledged COI standards to guarantee comprehensiveness, objectivity and topicality of COI products, as they are spelled out for example in the training manual on country of origin documentation of ACCORD/UNHCR. Together with the monitoring of quality described above, the Austrian COI service guarantees comprehensiveness, topicality and objectivity. The unit is aware that absolute topicality and objectivity is difficult to guarantee, but stresses that uttermost caution is paid in the research process to guarantee the quality of the products. The procedures of information gathering and drafting of the reports are not yet sufficiently defined to guarantee transparency and accuracy. Rather the procedures are individually defined, depending on country and kind of report. It has to be stressed that the unit is relatively new, and a clear routine has not yet crystallised. Every source and information, as well as the aim and purpose of the information, are scrutinised extensively. If sources are confidential greatest possible caution will be used to uphold confidentiality.

Restrictions and Confidentiality

Only decision makers on the 1st and 2nd instance have access to complete COI reports and products. After internal discussions it is decided if a particular report will be made available as a whole or in part.

COI in the Appeal Instances

The 2nd instance refers to the generally known COI sources as well as own expert reports. It is not known how the second instance weighs the COI reports of the COI unit, as the unit is newly established. The 2nd instance (UBAS) has access to the same sources as the 1st instance.

Co-operation with other Countries

The Austrian COI unit regularly receives COI from Eurasil member states, such as Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands, both in German and English. Depending of the level of confidentiality, these documents are referred to in country reports and in the decision making process.

The documentation centre, i.e. the country officers, evaluates the information obtained by other countries and decide whether to use it. US Human Rights Reports are often used information sources. The Austrian documentation centre on the other hand provides Germany (and if needed all the other EU member states) with country information in German.

Austria regularly participates in Eurasil meetings at the EU level. The exchange of information usually leads to an improvement of the quality of asylum procedures and the provision of COI. Austria does not co-operate with other countries in the field of COI outside the framework of the EU.

The main obstacle for better co-operation in the field of COI is seen in the use of different official languages. Also, a reluctance of other countries has been noted in sharing internally

available information. Confidentiality is not seen as a hinder for improved co-operation, as no member state is forced to share confidential material. There are no real conditions for co-operation with other European countries; any attempt to co-operate is welcomed as long as it results in improved access to information.

European co-operation in the field of COI is not only a goal, but has nowadays already become a frequent reality. However, with the introduction of a European asylum system, a joint European system of COI is a must. The Austrian COI unit would welcome all suggested models of co-operation, such as joint fact-finding missions, dividing production of COI reports among EU states, dividing production of COI reports among clusters of like-minded countries, European database with a collection of open, fully searchable COI, or a European database with a collection of restricted COI. Also, the Austrian COI unit is a proponent for common COI standards, the translation of documents, and suggests focal points for information requests. Advantages expected from further European co-operation in the field of COI are the improvement of both quantity and quality in the field of COI.

National COI cannot alone suffice to guarantee high quality information. Therefore, COI from other European countries should also be used as a basis for national asylum policies.

2.2 Belgium

Institutional Setup

The Office of the Commissioner-General for Refugees (CGRS) is the most relevant asylum authority. It is headed by a Commissioner General who acts completely neutrally and independently. The CGRS has his own Documentation and Research Unit on COI (CEDOCA). It consists of a library and a research centre. Although the COI unit is part of the CGRS, the unit's staff can also answer questions from the Immigration Department and the Appeal Board. The staff of CEDOCA consists of 48 persons, which includes 30 country researchers, 3 staff, and 15 administrative collaborators.

The government, which means the case and policy officers of CGRS, is the primary user of the material, but also the Immigration Department and the Appeal Board. Other clients can be secondary clients (e.g. Federal Police, Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Refugees, lawyers and the public do not have access to the material that the COI unit produces. However, case related information is always in the file of the case and therefore publicly accessible.

Tasks and Activities of the COI Unit

There is no formal authority to commission the compilation of a new report. The senior caseworkers can ask for reports or the researchers can write reports upon their own initiative. The reason for compiling new reports is primarily the need for information, either general or specific. The researchers' task consists of expanding the existing information about countries of origin and, at the same time, making the information more accessible to the case officers. The case workers must have a thorough knowledge of the situation in the country of origin in order to verify if the asylum applicant qualifies for the refugee status spelled out in the Geneva Convention 1951.

The scope of CEDOCA so far concentrates solely on asylum related matters. However, with the introduction of a subsidiary protection status in October 2006 and the reform of the Asylum procedure (not before 2007), CEDOCA will have more and different tasks. One consequence is that CEDOCA will probably also start to collect medical information about countries of origin.

Products of the COI Unit

CEDOCA does not produce any general country reports, as general information is available through numerous other sources. Also, the caseworkers are specialised on a limited number of countries. Given the complexity of the matter, the members of the research team are specialised on geographic regions. They co-operate closely with the case officers.

Most of the products are solely produced upon demand. Policy and case officers can demand such information material for several reasons, such as new profiles of claims, new events in the country of origin, or a large influx of asylum seekers from a particular country or region. The material includes subject-related briefings, which concentrates on a specific topic and can include up to 100 pages. Further products are chronologies of events (ca. four per year), at least two fact-finding mission reports per year, and around 5,000 single case answers or answers relating to a certain profile.

In 2004/2005, reports and Fact Sheets were produced on the following 19 countries: Angola, Burundi, DR Congo, Guinea, Mauritania, Nigeria, Sudan, Rwanda, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Belarus, Chechnya and Dagestan, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria and Turkey.

The only periodic products are the daily press reviews, some newsflashes, some chronologies and the Newsletter Africa, which is published every second week.

Further products and services include the library, and the documentary intranet that is web-based and presently includes approximately 80,000 documents (including photos and maps). Further, language analyses, daily press reviews, thematic video sessions, conferences on COI, country specific training, and training on the use of the documentary intranet are provided.

Products are written in Dutch or in French, depending on the mother tongue of the country officer. The products are translated into the respective other language. Quotes can be used in English. The documentary Intranet is so far only for internal use. However, at the end of 2006 access might be extended to other international partners.

Daily press reviews are compiled in half a day and disseminated every day around noon. Also the Newsletter Africa is compiled in half a day. Both documents are then disseminated via documentary intranet and/or email. The processing time for subject related briefings, chronologies, fact-finding mission reports and single case requests is usually between one week and three months. Some questions can be answered in a few hours, depending on the subject (vast/small/complex) and the contacts involved. Questions and answers are processed through a decision support database and are stored, together with the other products, in the documentary intranet.

From COI to Policy Recommendations

The Belgian COI unit CEDOCA does not provide any policy recommendations. The Commissioner-General provides these in consultation with the Head of the caseworkers. CEDOCA might be asked for advice on the recommendations. The same team (Commissioner-General in consultation with the Head of the caseworkers) is responsible for translating COI into asylum policy. Also here, CEDOCA may be asked for advice. The formulation of country specific asylum policies is the responsibility of either the Commissioner-General or the Director of the Immigration Department, depending on the subject. The COI unit produces the necessary information for both policy making procedures. CEDOCA also asks other asylum receiving countries for information and policies.

Procedures of Information Gathering and Drafting

In close co-operation with the COI unit, the case- respectively policy officers determine the questions to be answered in a particular product. Other parties are not contacted for support.

The researcher responsible for the particular country drafts the report. The Commissioner-General and a policy officer are authorised to check the final draft of the report prior to its completion.

The institutions directly involved with information gathering in the country of origin are the Belgian Embassies and a network of contacts that include local NGOs, universities, etc. In Belgium itself, the institutions directly involved with information gathering are the COI unit and its researchers, and also a network of contacts. These contacts come from universities and NGOs and provide their support on a voluntary, unpaid basis. The researchers of CEDOCA are

politically and otherwise responsible for the gathering of information in the country of origin as well as in Belgium.

Sources Used for Data Collection

Fact-finding missions are conducted if information is not available through any other source and if there is a direct need for this information. There are about two fact-finding missions conducted a year, although not in a systematic way. For 2006, fact-finding missions are planned for Turkey, Guinea, and DR Congo. Contact persons in the country of origin are the Belgian Embassies, persons from local NGOs, Human Rights organisations, journalists, and the local government. CEDOCA is obliged to contact the local government for fact-finding missions. Often, useful information, e.g. on the prison system, exit regulations or visa procedures, can be obtained. However, no case-related information is presented to the local authorities.

Information from other countries is relevant as secondary sources. These countries are mostly other EU countries, or countries represented in the IGC COI group. Local media from the countries of origin is read (the language skills of the CEDOCA includes French, Arabic, Russian, English), and external experts from universities and the media are consulted on a voluntary, unpaid basis. Information also comes from international organisations and NGOs, such as UNHCR and Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Global Witness etc. One frequently visited Internet database is Factiva.

Guidelines for quoting sources exist in written form (French and Dutch) and represent the common academic standards. It is the researchers' task to determine which sources to consult. In order to guarantee independence and reliability, the sources are cross-checked by two other sources if possible and experience with the source is taken into account. All information is sourced and accessible for government officers (Immigration Department, CGRS, Appeals Commission, etc.), except when there is a security risk. Restrictions are upheld if there is a security risk for the source, if the source demands confidentiality or if the researchers believe that there might be a risk. However, although the name of the source is not disclosed, the source will still be described in generic terms.

Quality and Control

In order to guarantee products of quality, there is both an internal check and a check by the head of the caseworkers unit. There is no formal body to monitor the quality of the COI products. Yet, CEDOCA works in close contact with the caseworkers and the head of departments, and feedback from them is taken into account on a daily basis.

There are no formal criteria in determining when information is outdated. It is each researcher's task to update the information. If a caseworker would like to use an older document, a researcher has to be consulted first in order to check whether the document has to be updated.

CEDOCA has written guidelines concerning comprehensiveness, topicality and objectivity of the products. Furthermore, in order to guarantee transparency and accuracy of the products, all information is sourced, relevant extracts of information are in annexes, and in the answer documents a "road map" is given where information on the sources used is provided. Relevant

information that is confidential and difficult to verify can only be used as background information. CEDOCA never provides confidential data to the caseworkers, as this would violate the law. Restricted information, however, can be used.

Restrictions and Confidentiality

Case officers of the Immigration Department, staff of CGRS, and staff of the appeal instance have complete access to COI products including the restricted parts. As the products are in general only for internal use, information is only provided to refugees and lawyers, and thus made public, when this information is used in the decision.

COI in the Appeal Instance

The 2nd instance uses COI products. In addition, the appeal commission also, with a limited number of staff, produces their own research. Normally, CEDOCA does not use confidential, only restricted, material in a decision. However, upon demand, the court can also have access to confidential material.

Co-operation with Other Countries

Belgium systematically exchanges information with Switzerland, the Netherlands, Germany and France. CEDOCA also accesses published information of the UK and Canada on its respective website. With any other country, information is exchanged upon demand. The documents are received in English, German, French and Dutch. It is up to every researcher to evaluate quality and reliability of the information produced by others. The exchanged information is treated as any other information. Usually the reports made by other countries prove to be very useful and interesting. US Human Right Reports are also used as information sources. At the moment, CEDOCA does not provide any own products to other countries. However, this might change at the end of 2006.

Within the EU, Belgium regularly co-operates through Eurasil. Advantages of this co-operation are the building of networks and the exchange of information. Outside the EU, Belgium co-operates in the IGC COI group and in A8. This co-operation comprises the exchange of information on a regular basis, regular contacts amongst researchers, joint projects (in the framework of ARGO), international workshops on a specific point of interest, and conference calls. The criteria that form the basis of this co-operation are common interest and a motivation to work together.

The obstacles deterring improved co-operation on COI are language problems and sometimes the quality of reports. Also, there is a lack of staff and time in order to systematically exchange information in a structural way. Confidentiality, however, is not seen as a problem, as solutions can always be found. Conditions for further improved co-operation on COI are minimum standards of quality, commitment to co-operation and translation into a common language. It is very important that there is a “give and take”; one-way exchange is not fruitful.

Improved co-operation on COI is desired, especially in order to avoid double work and to ensure quality of the products in the long-term. Advantages of improved co-operation are burden sharing, benchmarking, networking and cost effectiveness. However, the result of improved co-operation might also have negative impacts, such as superficial information, and unbalanced information – especially if only English sources are used.

Common fact-finding missions is one supported model of co-operation. This could be organized in such a way that one country goes on a fact-finding mission and collects information for other countries as well. However, Belgium is not in favour of the division of provision of COI among EU states or among like-minded states, as it seems unprofessional to only rely on one report. A common portal, with access to all of the already existing national databases on COI is seen to be more realistic and more profitable. Areas that should be included in a model of co-operation are common COI standards, translation of documents and focal points for information requests. National country specific COI should not be the only source of country specific asylum policies.

2.3 Denmark

Institutional Setup

The unit responsible for the provision of COI is the Documentation and Project Office. It is a part of the Asylum and Visa Department of the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) under the Ministry of Refugees, Immigration and Integration Affairs. The legal basis of the COI unit is in the remarks to the Aliens Law and in the directives of the DIS.

Currently there are 6 staff members, a Head of Office, and a desk officer. The users of the unit's products are primarily the caseworkers for asylum, family reunification, visa and work permits at the DIS. The Refugee Board (2nd instance) is also among the users. Furthermore, users include the caseworkers in the Ministry of Refugees, Immigration and Integration Affairs, the Danish Aliens Police, some local governments and some NGOs.

Tasks and Activities of the COI Unit

The authority that commissions the COI reports is the director of the Asylum and Visa Department together with the Head of the COI Office. Such commissioning usually arises when a direct need for a COI report is established in the DIS, the Refugee Board or the Ministry of Refugees, Immigration and Integration Affairs.

The scope of the COI unit is to provide the above-mentioned users with relevant information to be used in all aspects of decision-making on applications from foreigners. Also relevant information on return policy, other states' policies and practices and integration matters, etc., is provided. In fact, more and more information requests concerning integration come from local Danish governments concerning, e.g. questions on primary education in Somalia or the role of women in the Nigerian society.

Another task of the unit is to plead the cases at the Refugee Board (2nd instance) and to prepare decisions with regard to the prolongation of residence permits to refugees. A project unit has been established to handle applications for and implementation of primarily EU projects (ARGO etc). Finally, the office handles the international relations of DIS.

Products of the COI Unit

Denmark does not produce COI material on a regular basis. The COI unit produces about six to eight fact-finding reports a year if a need for information has been detected. In the years 2004/2005, Denmark produced nine fact-finding reports, four of those were joint projects with the UK. The countries considered were Iraq, Iran, Somalia, Afghanistan, Libya, Rwanda, Burundi, Chechnya, and Nigeria.

The time frame for fact-finding missions (FFM) is about two weeks, and then approximately one to two months are needed to produce a report. Usually the COI reports are thereafter disseminated electronically on the website of the DIS. There is no standard size, rather the content and size of such reports can vary between 20 and several 100 pages. FFM reports are accessible at www.udlst.dk.

All users can ask for FFM reports. A typical reason for requesting such reports is the need for information, which cannot be produced by other means than through a fact-finding mission and a subsequent report.

Also factual sheets upon request are produced. Factual sheets and other written information have been made on almost all countries of origin. A wide array of subjects is described in these sheets: from asylum matters, such as persecution risk, to the risk of torture and death penalties, to matters such as family reunification and health service in the countries of origin.

More than 100 products upon request are produced on an annual average. Usually not more than one week is needed to produce such reports/fact sheets upon request. The material is distributed to the person who requested it in an electronic form. Products upon request vary between one to several pages in size and content. Every caseworker can ask for a factual sheet or written information. A typical reason for requesting such a product is the lack of specific information.

The COI unit collects all general data of relevance for the decision making process. Other services of the COI unit include lectures and other oral information. There is an electronic database to which all staff members of the DIS have access. The country reports are not adapted according to the end user. Most of the reports are written in Danish, some of them also in English (e.g. joint FFM reports).

From COI to Policy Recommendations

The COI unit does not provide any policy advice or recommendations. Rather, the 2nd instance (Refugee Board) makes decisions in concrete asylum cases, which are transferred by the Director of the DIS and the Heads of Divisions of the Asylum and Visa Department into policy recommendations and made available to the caseworkers.

Country information provided by the COI office together with the claim of the applicant are the main bases for decision-making. The concrete decisions are then translated into policy/practice through discussions between the Heads of Offices of the Asylum and Visa Department.

The responsible body for transmission of COI into asylum policy making is the Director General of the DIS and the Heads of Offices of the Asylum and Visa Department. The Director General of the DIS and the Heads of Offices of the Asylum and Visa Department are also responsible for the formulation of country specific asylum policies. They use COI material as their main basis of information. The Refugee Board (2nd instance) is the only other party involved in the formulation of country specific asylum policies. Usually, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will not use the COI reports in formulating the foreign policy agenda and the foreign policy, in turn, will not influence asylum policies.

Procedures of Information Gathering and Drafting

As the reports are only compiled upon request a large number of actors have influence on the questions to be answered, namely caseworkers at DIS, the Refugee Board (2nd instance), the Ministry of Refugees, Immigration and Integration and the Aliens Department of the Danish Police. Other parties, such as asylum lawyers, NGOs, local governments, etc., also have the possibility to forward questions to the COI office. This is done through regular meetings between Danish NGOs and the COI office. The staff members of the COI office who

conducted the field mission are responsible for drafting the COI report. Other members of the fact-finding mission can influence the drafting process, and sources in the country of origin are often requested to comment on the draft report. The Director General of the DIS and the Heads of the Asylum and Visa Department have the right and obligation to check the final draft of the report prior to publication.

Institutions in the country of origin that are directly involved in the gathering of COI are the Danish representations and the liaison officers (in Kabul, Baghdad, Ankara) abroad. Sometimes even the UNHCR, other UN agencies, international humanitarian organisations, and local Human Rights organisations are involved. Furthermore, other resource persons, such as lawyers and academics, etc., in the country of origin contribute to the gathering of COI. In Denmark, the COI office is the institution directly involved in the gathering of COI, as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Refugees, Immigration and Integration. The institutions that are (politically) responsible in the country of origin for the gathering of COI are the Danish representations. In Denmark, it is the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Refugees, Immigration and Integration, and the DIS.

Sources Used for Data Collection

Primary sources used to produce COI reports usually stem from international humanitarian organisations, Danish and foreign embassies, government agencies in the countries of origin, local human rights groups, local bar associations, leaders of ethnic and religious minorities, lawyers and other academics, UN and IOM officers. Fact-finding missions are conducted by staff members of the COI unit. Sometimes a decision maker from the relevant DIS office and an employee from a Danish NGO participate. Often the mission is conducted as a joint mission together with another state, for instance Sweden, Norway, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, or Canada, as joint missions are perceived to be more neutral and to add more credibility. Usually the delegation includes two to three persons.

As secondary sources information produced by other countries is used, the Internet and news agencies are frequented and external experts from universities and local NGOs are consulted. Also information from international organisations and NGOs, such as ICRC, UNDP and IOM, as well as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and ECRE are considered. Databases of newspapers and news agencies are searched for information as well. As a rule, the source is always asked if she or he can be quoted by name and position. If not then another formulation is agreed upon, such as “a Western embassy” or “an international humanitarian organisation”. The staff member who conducts the mission is responsible for the determination of the sources consulted. This staff member determines the sources upon the criteria of high credibility.

Independence and reliability of the sources are established by using sources that have been recommended by other trustworthy institutions, such as embassies or international humanitarian organisations, or other EU member states. If the source wants to be anonymous, neither the caseworkers nor the public have access to the list of sources.

Quality and Control

All Danish COI reports are accessible to the public. Lawyers of asylum seekers are free to direct criticism at the reports to DIS or to the Refugee Board. National and international NGOs and international organisations have the possibility to criticise the reports as well. In that way,

possible mistakes will be reported to the DIS. Feedback from a variety of actors is taken into consideration, and – if needed – a new report will be produced. However, in practice this has so far never happened. There is no formal body to monitor the quality of the COI reports. However, the Minister of Refugees, Immigration and Integration and a parliamentary commission are informed of new reports. There are no formal guidelines as to when information is to be considered outdated.

To guarantee comprehensiveness, objectivity and topicality of the reports, the main principle is to quote the sources as precisely as possible. There are no written guidelines, instead, common sense is applied. The COI office never makes any conclusion in the reports nor does it give its own opinion on the subject. Only the statements of the sources are quoted in the reports.

Transparency and accuracy throughout the report are guaranteed through consultation with the sources on the correctness of the interpretation of the information during the drafting process. Sometimes a draft report is presented to important sources as UNHCR, embassies, etc., to ensure the accuracy of the report. Information that is difficult to verify must normally be confirmed by other sources in order for it to be used as a basis for decision-making.

Restrictions and Confidentiality

The complete COI reports and other COI products are public.

COI in the Appeal Instance

The Refugee Board uses the COI reports as a source of information. It basically has the same sources as the DIS, and can furthermore rely on the court appeal by the asylum lawyer. COI material is thereby of high importance. All COI material that is used in a decision is public.

Co-operation with Other Countries

The Danish COI unit receives country information from other EU member states, but also from Norway, Switzerland, Canada, and the USA. Those reports are written in the Nordic languages, English, German, French and Dutch. If the material is public, it is used to supplement the material of the own COI unit. However, confidential or restricted material can only be used as background material. For that reason, matters of confidentiality are seen to be a hindrance for better co-operation on COI. The use of this information is determined by the relevant COI officer. The Danish COI Office also uses the US Human Right Reports as they are regarded to be very useful.

The Danish COI unit also provides information to any country that asks for it. This is often the case with other EU member states, Norway, Canada, and Switzerland. The reports are provided in Nordic languages and English.

Denmark regularly participates in co-operation on COI within the framework of the EU. Eurasil meetings normally provide very useful information not only on COI, but also on other states' asylum policy. The disadvantages of such meetings are that the preparation for meetings and the meetings themselves are rather time-consuming.

Furthermore, Denmark also is involved in co-operation in the IGC COI group, as well as in regular informal meetings with other Nordic countries. This co-operation comprises of

sporadic joint fact-finding missions, the exchange of fact sheets, etc. The basis of this co-operation is the discussion of subjects of mutual interest.

Obstacles for an improved co-operation on COI between European countries are the languages of the fact-finding reports. All relevant fact-finding reports should be translated or even drafted in English. As mentioned above, matters of confidentiality are seen to be a hindrance as well. As some countries consider their reports to be restricted or confidential, they cannot be used as a basis for decision making in Denmark. Conditions that have to be met in order to realise co-operation are mutual interest in certain countries of origin, a common understanding of COI (standards) and a common working language, possibly English. European co-operation in the field of COI is a desired goal, as a common COI will harmonize the asylum policies and thus contribute to combating asylum shopping.

The criteria applied to such co-operation are a common understanding of the standards and objectivity of the COI. Joint fact-finding missions and a European database with a collection of open, fully searchable COI are seen to be models that meet these criteria. As mentioned above common standards of COI, translation of documents and focal points for information requests are to be included in a better model. Advantages of improved co-operation on COI are that common COI will enhance a common asylum policy. Recognised disadvantages are that it will be time-consuming in the beginning and create a need for several international meetings. National country specific asylum policies should not only be based on national COI, as objectivity and reliability of COI will be better ensured when it is a product of more than one state.

2.4 Finland

Institutional Setup

The COI unit in Finland is an independent decision making agency that is administratively attached to the Ministry of Interior. It is a subunit of the Legal and Country Information Unit within the Directorate of Immigration. Its legal basis is the Aliens Act (310/2004) and the law concerning the Directorate of Immigration (3.2.1995/156). Currently, there are ten staff members: one head of country information, six researchers, one information specialist and two information secretaries. The users of the unit's material are the caseworkers of the asylum, immigration, naturalisation, and return divisions, policy makers for asylum, and appeal bodies at the 2nd and 3rd instance.

Tasks and Activities of the COI unit

The Directorate of Immigration commissions the COI reports when they are needed for the decision making process. The main task of the COI unit is to compile information and produce analyses in support of the caseworkers. The scope of the unit is upon asylum, migration, documents, resettlement, and return matters, as well as medical information, and information on the Dublin procedure. In the past two years, the scope has been extended to include new areas such as strategic and future analysis on immigration matters.

Products of the COI Unit

The Finnish COI unit solely produces material upon request. In 2004/2005, country reports were produced on Nigeria, DR Congo, Somalia, Turkey, and a country focus on Belarus. Caseworkers, the leadership of the directorate, policy makers in the Ministry of Interior and international organisations can demand such reports. The typical reason for requesting such reports is the need for background information for the decision-making process. Other reasons are future strategic work and international co-operation in the field of migration by the Ministry of Interior, the Director General and other directors within the Immigration Department of the Ministry of Interior. However, general country reports are increasingly replaced by shorter country foci (four to six pages).

In 2004/2005, over ten thematic reports were produced upon request, on topics such as military recruitment in Russia, custody-culture and legislation in selected Far Eastern countries, marriage practices in the Balkans, or engagement in Iran. These thematic reports can be requested by the same actors as mentioned above. Usually these sheets are requested as background information in single case decision making, policy making and for international relations.

Annually, there are around six-hundred responses to single questions produced (either on template or as e-mail), as well as between ten and ten country foci, and between three and five thematic reports. The final products are disseminated by e-mail attachment and through some hardcopies for display. Basic responses to single questions usually have one page, country reports ten to twenty pages, country foci four to five pages, and thematic reports five to ten pages. Country reports are not adapted to the end user. All information basically refers to the same objective sources, and scientific, neutral argumentation is pursued in the contents.

The COI unit also collects and provides general data in form of literature, legal documents, and statistical analysis. Other services and products of the COI unit include data and analysis provision in the Tellus database. The staff members of the Directorate of Immigration can access this database. Another product is the local data packages. These are comprehensive compilations on local, specific data, e.g. on significant persons, on prices of goods, places of interest, and samples of bank notes and coins. It contains very detailed data with illustrations. The package may be used in interview situations, as assisting tool for establishing the origin of the applicant. Although gathered from public sources, the packages are considered confidential as a whole. However, if the decision is based on information from the packages, it is so stated. Generally, COI products are produced in Finnish. There are sporadic translations into other languages, such as English and Swedish.

From COI to Policy Recommendations

COI reports are prepared by objective and scientific standards, and the current foreign policy strategy should not essentially guide the fact selection or the argumentation. Political conclusions or recommendations in the single COI products are avoided.

In addition the COI unit collects country information for policy recommendations, and country guidelines for the use of the single caseworkers. These policy recommendations and country guidelines are provided by the Legal Service, which is the other subunit of the Legal and Country Information Unit. There are meetings between the caseworkers and the Legal Service to discuss the policy papers and how to draw conclusions from them. These policy papers are addressed to all bodies involved in the asylum procedure, and presented in a separated document.

Ultimately, the Asylum Unit and the Legal and Country Information Unit together are responsible for the formulation of country specific asylum policies. The COI unit is involved in these processes by providing the background material. Other parties involved in this process are e.g. the courts.

Procedures of Information Gathering and Drafting

The questions to be answered in COI reports and products are determined by caseworkers, policy makers, ministries and other (domestic and foreign) partners, depending on who requests such a product. The researcher alone drafts the report, sometimes also in peer co-operation with colleagues and the Head of Country Information. Caseworkers and decision makers can comment on the country report in the early phase of drafting, while the Head of Country Information is authorised to check the final draft prior to publication.

Finnish embassies, and sometimes the police and border guard liaison staff, foreign research bodies, IOs and NGOs are directly involved in the gathering of COI in the country of origin. In the receiving country, the COI unit, courts, other ministries, researchers, independent experts, universities, research bodies and journalists are directly involved in the gathering of COI. The institutions (politically) responsible in the country of origin are the embassies. In the reception country, the COI unit, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Labour are politically responsible for the gathering of COI.

Sources Used for Data Collection

Information provided by embassies and liaison officers, as well as case decisions, court decisions, and fact-finding missions are primary sources used to produce COI products. Fact-finding missions are conducted if the need arises, around two per year on average. So far, fact-finding missions have been made to Thailand, Kosovo, Somalia, Iran and Turkey. Typically, there is one researcher, sometimes in coordination with other Finnish authorities (Thailand, Kosovo, Turkey), sometimes in coordination with other states (Somalia), or alone (Iran). For primary information embassies, national authorities, NGOs and official of other countries are contacted.

As secondary sources information gathered and produced by Germany, the Netherlands, the USA, the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and the other Nordic countries is used. The Factiva news database, Internet pages and search robots, ecoi.net and IHCHR are frequented. The products of international organisations such as UNHCR, OSCE, and NGOs, such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and others are regularly used. Other secondary sources are expert networks. Experts usually come from universities, research institutions, the media and intergovernmental networks. Anyone who a) has interest in the subject matter, b) pursues an objective picture and analysis, and c) carries out the resulting research in a way that it can be dealt with by other interested and similarly thinking parties, can belong to an expert network.

There is no official list with guidelines; rather the guidelines for quoting sources are up to the judgment of the individual researcher. The determination of the sources consulted is up to the single researcher and the Head of Country Information. The judgment and expertise of the single researcher are the only criteria applied. Peer discussions among researchers, and in future updateable lists of used and credible sources are established to guarantee independence and reliability of the sources. The researchers pursue to produce reports with the highest possible transparency and with complete reference lists. If there is a confidential report, an analogous public report is produced without the confidential sources.

Quality and Control

Quality and reliability of COI products are assessed through peer review, checks by the Head of country information, and also through feedback from caseworkers. Feedback is encouraged concerning all country information. There is also an annual general quality questionnaire about the services of the country information unit. This questionnaire has proven to be very useful to assess progress and quality of the unit's work.

There are no formal criteria for information to be considered outdated. A guideline paper about the ethics of COI research exists, which aims at guaranteeing comprehensiveness, objectivity and topicality of the COI reports. Transparency and accuracy throughout the procedure is based on the expertise and judgment of the individual researcher and is supervised by the Head of country information. There are no clear procedures for handling confidential information that may be highly relevant but difficult to verify. However, some effort is invested into finding the same information from another source. If this is unsuccessful, the quality of the source is used as evaluation criteria.

Restrictions and Confidentiality

The complete reports are accessible for Government officials, decision makers, the Helsinki Administrative Court (2nd instance) and the Supreme Administrative Court (3rd instance). Public versions of theme reports and country foci/reports are available upon demand for anyone having a relevant cause for using them (researchers, academics, etc.). The sources determine the level of confidentiality. Sometimes the Head of country information needs to consult with the originator of a source on an ad hoc basis in order to determine the level of confidentiality of the source.

COI in the Appeal Instance

The appeal courts use all COI products as sources of information. COI analyses are used as a part of their background material. The courts also have access to confidential COI products.

Co-operation with Other Countries

The Finnish COI unit receives COI from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Germany and Switzerland. Single researchers may have additional channels. This country information is transmitted in English, Swedish, Norwegian, German and French. The information obtained by other countries is used as sources in further research. Public information is even used in decision making, e.g. through the Tellus database. The single researchers and the Head of the COI unit determine the use of this information. The Finnish COI Service also uses US State Department Human Rights Reports, as well as country reports from the UK Home Office, as they are rather thorough, well-structured and regularly updated general reports.

In turn, the Finnish COI unit also provides COI material to other countries, mainly to IGC and Eurasil member states, and the unit also answers questions upon request from other countries in a field of Finnish expertise. These fields of special expertise are for example, questions relating to the Kurds, Eastern European Roma, and the general situation in Somalia. Finnish COI material is then distributed, basically in English, and rarely in Swedish.

Finland regularly participates in co-operation fora of the European Union, such as Eurasil meetings. Advantages of such co-operation are networking, coherence of information and analysis.

Also outside the EU framework Finland pursues co-operation, in bodies such as IGC, in co-operation with other Nordic countries, and also through ad hoc co-operation. This kind of co-operation comprises information exchange, networking and personal relations, and also common fact-finding missions. The criteria that form the basis of this co-operation are either a formal long term agreement (IGC and Nordic co-operation), a short term agreement or informal networking. Obstacles for an improved co-operation between European countries on the matter of COI are seen in the question of publicity/confidentiality and language problems. However, it is not impossible to find solutions for using confidential information. Transparency and coherent principles regarding ethics, quality and training are conditions that have to be met in order to realise international co-operation.

Improved European co-operation on COI is seen as a desired goal. The criteria applied to such co-operation are coherence in the quality of analysis, workshops in regular intervals, and further joint fact-finding missions. Even the joint compilation of reports could be considered.

Finland has reservations about a model of dividing the production of COI reports among EU states or among like-minded states. The models of a European database with a collection of open, fully searchable COI, as well as a European database with a collection of restricted COI are not seen as the way of co-operation in the near future. However, Finland is a proponent of the model of a common portal that enables access to all already existing databases. Furthermore, common standards of COI – especially with an emphasis on scientific and analysis standards -, translation of documents and focal points for information requests are areas that should be included in a better model of co-operation on COI. A possible advantage from an improved European co-operation would be more coherent decision making among EU member states.

COI obtained by other countries can be used as a basis for national country specific asylum policies as long as it constitutes an added value tool.

2.5 France

Institutional Setup

The particular unit responsible for the provision of country of origin information is the Documentation and Research Service, which is a part of the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA). OFPRA is subordinated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The particular tasks and activities are not mentioned in any specific text.

Currently there are 13 staff members employed: a Head of Unit, one Deputy Head, eight researchers and three administrative staff. The number of staff was increased in 2005, which indicates that the interest into country of origin information has grown. The users of the COI unit's material are the caseworkers of OFPRA and their supervisors, who validate the decisions taken, and the researchers and agents of the Geopolitical Centre of the Appeal Commission (CRR).

Tasks and Activities of the COI Unit

In France, a number of actors can commission COI reports, namely the Directorate, the heads of the divisions, the caseworkers, and the Documentation and Research Service. The usual reasons for commissioning a report are: re-deployment of staff (new employee, new geographical division), the need to update a certain country or topic, an increase in the number of applicants of a particular country, or the emergence of a new phenomena, such as forced marriages, female genital mutilation.

The scope of the Documentation and Research unit of OFPRA includes asylum, general country of origin information and topical information (e.g. FGM, marriage customs, etc.).

Other tasks include updating the available information on countries of origin, maintaining the database, and disseminating the information to the divisions concerned. The scope and tasks of the COI unit might be subject to changes in the future.

Products of the COI Unit

France produces country reports both regularly and on demand. Both types of reports include the following chapters: maps, general information, chronology, Human Rights, refugees and IDPs, bibliography. One type of these regular reports also consists only of a list of sources for information by themes. These reports generally include two to fifty pages.

In 2004/05, regular country reports and orientation sheets were produced on the following 19 countries: Liberia, Somalia, Djibouti, Rwanda, DR Congo, Congo Brazzaville, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Guinea-Bissau, Gambia, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Sudan, Algeria, Mauritania, Tunisia, and Haiti. Reports have been produced upon re-deployment of staff, when a need for update was noted and when there was an increase in the number of applicants of a particular country. Country reports upon demand were produced on the same 19 countries mentioned above, and in addition also on Colombia, Sierra Leone and Burma.

The Directorate of OFPRA, the heads of the divisions and the caseworkers can ask for such a report.

Also fact sheets are produced regularly and upon demand. These are press reviews, chronologies, or summaries of specific events. The format and the content varies. Due to the limited capacity of the COI unit, the production of these products is restricted. In 2004/05, the following eleven countries were covered on a regular basis as well as upon demand: Rwanda, Haiti, Sierra Leone, Comoros, China, Pakistan Sri Lanka, India, Algeria, Vietnam and Cambodia.

Furthermore, the COI unit collects general information, such as written, visual and acoustic documents that might be of interest to the users. These documents include: judicial/legal documents, studies, articles, films and documentaries, radio broadcasts, maps, and conferences. In addition, also single case requests are answered, summaries of events written and an information sheet is published monthly with the latest information of new acquisitions of books, magazines and reports. The COI unit has an electronic database where all staff members of OFPRA and the 2nd instance (CRR) have access.

For all the products concerned, it is always the Directorate, the heads of divisions and sections and the caseworkers that can request such reports. Reasons for that are any staff changes or the need to update due to a change in the situation of a country of origin. Updates are usually initiated by the Directorate, the heads of divisions and sections, or the caseworkers or the COI unit itself. The timeframe for producing such reports varies between one week and one month. Completed reports are disseminated electronically through the intranet and also dispatched in hard copy. Furthermore, they are stored in the database and mentioned in the monthly information sheet on new acquisitions. The language of the reports is French, but sources can be used and included in other languages, mostly English.

From COI to Policy Recommendations

The Documentation and Research unit of OFPRA does not provide any policy recommendations. These are made by the Directorate of OFPRA and the heads of the divisions. The Directorate of OFPRA and the Administrative Council in consultation with the heads of division are responsible for the formulation of country specific asylum policies. However, due to the complexity of the questions, other actors might be involved as well. The COI material produced might influence measures when determining safe countries of origin or safe other countries, and it might support the qualification of a typology (such as forced marriage, etc.). Other parties are not directly included in the formulation of country specific asylum policies, but OFPRA certainly takes the legal practice of the appeal instances into consideration.

Procedures of Information Gathering and Drafting

The questions to be answered in the COI reports are determined by the caseworkers, the Directorate, the heads of the divisions and sections, and the COI unit itself. Other parties, such as NGOs, cannot influence this process. The responsibility for drafting the reports lies with the country officer, the Head of the COI unit and the Deputy Head of unit. Only the Directorate, the heads of the divisions and sections and the caseworkers can influence this process. The Directorate, the heads of division and section and the caseworkers are authorised to check the final draft prior to publication, while a staff member of the COI unit (usually the Deputy Head of unit) cross-reads it.

The institutions that are directly involved with the gathering of information in the countries of origin are the French embassies, NGOs, international organisations, independent experts, and political actors. In the receiving country, it is the COI unit and its researchers, independent experts, caseworkers, NGOs, and international organisations that are directly involved in this process. The French embassies are politically and otherwise responsible for the gathering of information in the country of origin, while in France itself, it is OFPRA, the 2nd instance (CRR) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that share responsibility.

Sources

France uses fact-finding missions in order to collect primary information. In 2004, such a mission was conducted in the DR Congo, with the head of the COI unit and caseworkers of the Geographical division. Two other fact-finding missions were conducted in 2005 to Bangladesh and Bosnia Herzegovina. Normally, the French embassies are contacted, as well as NGOs, international organisations, independent experts, and political actors. Furthermore, members of political parties in exile are a frequented source.

Secondary information is received from European and Canadian partner authorities and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Internet, different newspapers, and sometimes also TV and radio are used to obtain information. Reports by researchers from universities, international organisations and NGOs, such as UNHCR, ICG, UNHCHR, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and FIDH are checked, and electronic databases, such as LexisNexis, are searched.

There are guidelines on which sources to quote. These are: verifiability, independence, reliability, and objectivity. Of course also the expertise of the source is taken into consideration. It is up to the single researcher in consultation with the supervisor to determine the sources to be consulted. In order to guarantee independence and verifiability of the sources every source is examined thoroughly and the information is cross-checked with other sources. The list of sources is solely disclosed to the caseworkers and the agents and researchers of the 2nd instance.

Quality and Control

The Deputy Head of unit normally cross-reads the reports. A formal monitoring body as it is in place in Austria, the United Kingdom and Germany, does not exist. Feedback from caseworkers, the heads of the divisions and sections as well as the supervisors is taken into account. If any user of the material has any additional knowledge, this will be examined and then added to the reports. There are no written guidelines concerning when information is to be considered outdated.

Procedures to guarantee comprehensiveness, objectivity and topicality are reading and cross-reading by other staff members. In addition, there are written rules of deontology, where it is described how to critically examine the sources. Guidelines concerning transparency and accuracy of the information are upheld by verifying the reliability of sources, by diversification of sources, cross-checking with other sources, by detailed enumeration of the sources, and by compiling a list of (most of) the sources/documents used, that is given to the caseworkers.

If information is highly relevant but difficult to verify, it is attempted to establish telephone contact with the contact persons on site or with experts. If possible, sources are cross-checked. If the source wishes to remain confidential, this it is so specified in the final report.

Restrictions and Confidentiality

All agents of OFPRA and CRR (2nd instance), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the European partner authorities have access to the complete products.

COI in the Appeal Instance

The 2nd instance, CRR, has its own documentation service which firstly has access to the COI reports of the Documentation and Research unit of OFPRA, and which secondly provides own information as well. The 2nd instance has access to confidential material. The 3rd instance, however, the Supreme Court, does not make use of the country information provided by the unit.

Co-operation with Other Countries

The COI unit of OFPRA receives country information mostly from Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, and the Netherlands. The reports are exchanged in the respective languages.

The documents may be consulted by the caseworkers, but no copying of the report is allowed. The information may be used, but quotations have to be made strictly according to a mutual agreement and in the form that the producing COI unit decided upon.

Evaluations of these reports are not made and every researcher determines individually whether information can be used. US State Department Human Rights Reports are also used.

French COI products are provided to Belgium, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Germany, and occasionally also to Spain. The language of these reports is French.

France regularly participates in Eurasil meetings and has been involved in some ARGO projects.

Advantages of these co-operations are the increased exchange on country information and sources between COI units, meetings and exchange with experts, contact with European partners and subsequent co-operation, as well as reflection on methodologies of research and information gathering. No disadvantage is seen in this kind of co-operation.

The French COI unit also co-operates outside the EU framework. Here the co-operation mostly includes Switzerland. This co-operation comprises common fact-finding missions, exchange of information and sources, and evaluation of sources, exchange of reports, exchange of contacts in the country of origin, and common reflection on work methods. The main obstacles in co-operation on COI are language problems, distinct formats of reports, different status of COI in the process of decision making within different instances, and different resources (especially the number of staff). Confidentiality can sometimes be an obstacle.

In general, improved co-operation on COI is desirable, in order to multiply exchanges between the COI units, to co-ordinate initiatives of collecting information, as well as for the harmonisation of methodology of producing reports, diversification of sources, possibility to specialise geographically, and to do common fact-finding missions. A division into expertise among the countries and a harmonisation of the evaluation of the situation in countries of

origin would certainly have an impact on the harmonisation of the decision making process in Europe. The criteria applied to such co-operation are the adoption of a common methodology, the nomination of country experts, the creation of a European database or a common portal and the division of compiling and drafting the reports. Of course, this has to be seen in light of the different means and resources available to the COI units.

The following models of co-operation are regarded useful: common methodology, common fact-finding missions, the division of the production of COI reports among European and among like-minded states. Also, both a common European database that is completely accessible and one that is restricted are welcomed as possible models of further co-operation. Common COI standards, translation of documents, and a focal point for information requests are areas to be included in these models of further co-operation.

Advantages of further co-operation are seen in the potential improvement of the quality of the products and a division of the workload. In this context, it would be useful to multiply the exchanges between the COI units, and to co-ordinate initiatives of collecting information. No disadvantages are associated with these frameworks of co-operation. Country specific asylum policy should not only be based on national COI. Other sources, as varied as possible, should also be used.

2.6 Germany

Institutional Setup

The particular unit responsible for the provision of COI in Germany is the Information Centre for Asylum and Migration (IZAM). It is a unit within the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) that is subordinated to the Ministry of Interior. There are about 100 employees at the IZAM. Thereof, about 30 are researchers of the country (or on specific topics), the integration and the migration research groups. Furthermore, administrative staff accounts for about ten staff, and about 60 are documentation officers and librarians.

The users of the IZAM are primarily the BAMF staff. Moreover, 1,600 administrative judges, the 2nd instance, international ministries and other authorities have access to the database MILO. Also the public has access to some part of the documents stored in MILO. Electronic case law database is publicly available, against payment of a fee, through the private company *juris GmbH*.

Tasks and Activities of the COI Unit

The IZAM acts upon its own initiative in compiling new country reports; no authority commissions these. The scope of IZAM is mainly the right to asylum, the protection of refugees, migration, integration, return, and migration research. The issues of migration, integration and return have been added to the scope of the unit in 2004 through the new law on immigration.

Products of the COI Unit

The core of the IZAM is the database MILO (Migration-Information-Logistics). The database contains a comprehensive country documentation part (50,300 documents), case law documents (18,900 documents), documentation from literature (44,500 documents) and media documentation (950,000 news agency reports and 242,000 media news), and can be accessed at: www.milo.bamf.de.

Upon this basis, the two sections “analysis Islam” and “analysis of non-Islamic countries of origin” compile own publications that exceed the mere scope of research and documentation. These two sections compile the regular electronic “Online loose-leaf-collection” in which topics such as geography, history, state setup, administration of law, economy, political parties and social issues are comprehensively reported about. In 2004/05, the following 22 countries were covered: Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, China, India, Iraq, Iran, Serbia and Montenegro, Cameroon, DR Congo, Lebanon, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestinian Territories, Russian Federation, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Togo, Turkey, Vietnam and Yugoslavia. These countries are selected according to the number of applicants. This “Online loose-leaf-collection” is updated when needed. The update is initiated either at the initiative of the analysis sections or by the Asylum Procedure Operational Control Division. Usually, it takes six weeks to compile such a report. When needed quickly, a report can be compiled within one day. The “Online loose-leaf-collection” is normally stored in the intranet of the BAMF. Updated chapters are additionally disseminated to a limited number of people and also stored

in the database MILO. There is no fixed number of pages; rather the number of pages depends on the desired level of detail. Some “Online loose-leaf-collections” are up to 800 pages. Furthermore, other country-related reports and subject papers are compiled. These documents contain three subcategories of documents, namely the weekly “Briefing Notes”, the “Information” and “Short Information”. The “Briefing Notes” average length is five pages. They contain early warnings addressed to the directorate of BAMF; from there they are sent out to the whole BAMF staff and partner authorities of the BAMF. Papers of the category “Information” (up to hundred pages) and “Short Information” (limited number of pages) are produced upon demand and contain specific information on particular issues. Upon completion they are usually stored in the database MILO and also sent by email to a limited number of recipients. In 2004/05, 255 such country-related reports and other subject papers were compiled. The two analysis sections work at their own initiative. They observe the need of information for potential users and are open to feedback and suggestions.

Several other services are produced by the media documentation: daily press reviews, daily express press reviews, and daily business press reviews, as well as Europe press reviews and Integration press reviews twice a week. Furthermore, there is a monthly press review on Turkey. Another product is the “Findings of the Federal Office”, which contains selected issues of the liaison staff reports.

Other products of the COI unit include the Central Reference Desk that provides information to caseworkers and appeal lawyers. This is information that goes beyond the material that can be found in the database MILO. Also other interested parties can ask for information. Furthermore, the library of IZAM can be counted as one of the biggest libraries specialised in the field. The library collects monographs, journals, theses, grey literature, and the government publications in the area of asylum and aliens law, refugee law, migration, integration, and human rights both in German and in other languages. Furthermore, extensive literature on single countries of origin with a focus on political, religious, judicial, cultural and economic conditions is provided. The library further produces a list of new library material, information on journal articles and current contents every month. Bibliographies are produced on an irregular basis.

As mentioned above, the database MILO is very extensive. All staff of BAMF has access. Moreover, 1,600 administrative judges, the 2nd instance, international ministries and other authorities can access the database. IZAM’s products are usually written in German. However, a significant number of documents are stored in MILO either in the original foreign language or in the English translation. For instance, since 2004, in the newer section of the database around 40 percent of the material consists of original documents in English, Dutch and French. Products that are of particular importance are translated into English and are internationally disseminated.

As a new rule, all “Information” and “Short Information” will be translated into English. In addition, also medical information already stored in MILO will be translated into English so that international partners can access it as well. It is also planned to add an abstract in English to already existing leading decisions of the Supreme Court, so that non-German speaking users can decide whether they would like to translate the document. The regular report on German asylum-related court procedures, produced within the Operational Control Division, will also be provided in English.

From COI to Policy Recommendations

IZAM does not provide any policy recommendations. In general, the COI maintains strict political neutrality and leaves any evaluations or conclusions to the users. Policy recommendations are provided by the “Operational Control Division of the Asylum Procedure” (division 42, “Steuerung des Asylverfahrens”) of the BAMF in consultation with the Ministry of Interior, and are based on the information provided by the IZAM (division 41). However, standard text modules are prepared for important countries of origin. No other party is involved in the formulation of country specific asylum policies. Facts taken from COI products are strictly separated from the dominant strategic foreign political agenda.

Procedures of Information Gathering and Drafting

It is usually the end user who decides upon the questions to be answered in the report. The analysis sections have full responsibility on the compiling and drafting of the products. IZAM is a mere information and analysis unit and complies with strict political neutrality. Other parties do not have the right to check the final draft prior to publication. At the moment, the BAMF has liaison officers at six different German representations abroad. They and the German embassies are directly involved in the process of information gathering in the country of origin. If necessary, they contact local NGOs or a local lawyer of confidence to gain information in single cases.

The institution in Germany directly involved with gathering information is the COI unit IZAM with its extensive database MILO. In case some questions cannot be answered, BAMF would contact the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or independent experts for further information or advice. BAMF is the sole institution responsible for the process of information gathering, in Germany and abroad.

Sources Used for Data Collection

IZAM does not differentiate between primary and secondary sources. Many sources can be found in the database MILO. Normally Germany does not deploy fact-finding missions, but rather use the German embassies and the liaison officers to check for information. They, in turn, might get information from local NGOs and lawyers of confidence. Usually, local authorities are not contacted in order not to jeopardize the safety of the applicant. In cases where local governments have to be contacted, case related details are strictly withheld. Germany uses the German Press Agency dpa as a source, as well as national and international newspapers and the Internet. Ecol.net, juris and Beck-online are often frequented on the Internet. External experts are found through universities and the media. International organisations, such as UN organisations, and NGOs, such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and GfbV (Society for endangered people), etc. are contacted in order to obtain information.

The COI unit uses the usual academic guidelines of quoting sources. As the information provided by IZAM is strictly neutral, objective and academic, nobody can determine which sources to consult for a report. In order to guarantee independence and reliability of the sources, efforts are put into supporting one information by several sources to guarantee verifiability. Facts that serve to estimate the reliability and independence of the source are added in the reports if available. Information of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has its own

significance because of delivering information directly from the countries of origin. If a source has to be treated as confidential, the whole publication as such will be for internal use only. The publication can then only be transmitted to authorities and courts.

Quality and Control

Reports and other material produced are always cross read by other staff members, by the Head of Unit and the Head of IZAM. The COI unit also has an advisory body, the forum of experts (“Expertenforum”) which consists of experts, such as lawyers, researchers, judges, and representatives from state administration, churches, local groups, or from UNHCR, that deal with migration and protection of refugees on a professional level. IZAM encourages feedback from users and includes it in its further work. Information is outdated when it no longer reflects the situation. Other than this, there are no official guidelines.

Guidelines to guarantee comprehensiveness, objectivity and topicality as well as accuracy and transparency of the COI products are written down in the Handbook on Quality. Information that is highly relevant but difficult to verify is, as are all other sources, compared with information from other sources and verified if possible.

Restrictions and Confidentiality

All staff of BAMF, as well as national and foreign authorities and judges have access to the complete products of IZAM. Asylum lawyers have access to specific case-related documents, including the classified material. Through the private company juris GmbH anyone can get access to the jurisdiction of previous cases. Products are classified when a source wishes to remain anonymous. Furthermore, a report is classified when it contains information that touches upon security matters, as well as when it contains a catalogue of features to identify foreigners without any valid identity documents.

COI in the Appeal Instance

The 2nd instance has access to all products compiled by IZAM including the classified material. 1,600 administrative judges have access to the database MILO, the Internet and the library of the court. For further information, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as independent experts are contacted in order to supply evidence.

Co-operation with Other Countries

Germany regularly receives country of origin information products from, among others, Belgium, United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Switzerland. Usually these products come in the respective official languages, such as English, French, Dutch and German. These reports are normally stored in the database MILO and treated as equal to the own reports – an evaluation of the products is not made. US State Department Human Rights Reports are also used as a source of equal importance, and highly appreciated due to their comprehensive detail.

The German COI products are basically available for all countries upon request. Twenty European countries already have access to the database MILO. Germany participates regularly in Eurasil meetings. Advantages of these meetings are cost efficiency through synergy effects, and the enhancement of the information spectrum.

Outside the EU level, Germany is a member state of the IGC COI group and has, furthermore, extensive bilateral co-operation with Switzerland. BAMF is generally very interested in further co-operation.

The only real obstacle to improved co-operation is seen in the use of the different official languages. This is why IZAM has begun to translate certain products into English. At the same time, BAMF aims at improving the foreign language skills of its staff. One condition that should be met in order to improve co-operation on COI is to draft or to translate all information into either German, French or English. Communication between the COI units should be possible in either German or English. Another condition that should be met is the strict separation of the provision of information and evaluation of it.

Improved co-operation on COI is a desired goal. BAMF is interested in comprehensive documentation and analysis of the existing knowledge on countries of origin, especially on countries of origin that do not appear as the main countries of origin in Germany.

Germany would participate in common fact-finding mission – even if BAMF still sees the involvement of liaison officers as more effective.

The models of dividing the provision of COI among EU states or among like-minded states is considered desirable, especially when countries with a special focus can take the lead in that topic/country/region. However, due to the national judicial administration and the need to act fast in the 24-hour limitation to asylum claims on airports, own analysis still has to be done as well. Due to security reasons and the access to classified documents, national databases cannot cease to exist. From the perspective of economic efficiency, it would be advisable to continue with already developed and proven systems, such as the database MILO.

Common COI standards are very important for future co-operation on COI. However, these common guidelines must not consist of the lowest common denominator, everybody should strive to attain high quality standards. On the other hand, these quality standards must not be binding with regard to evaluation and implementation in the asylum procedure. Translations of documents are of paramount importance in a model of improved co-operation on COI. A focal point of information is also of high importance as it is crucial to require information complementary to the electronic and written information on offer. The German Central Reference Desk already now works free of charge with requests from European partner authorities.

European COI serves equally with national COI as a basis for the formulation of national country specific asylum policies. However, national information cannot completely be outsourced.

2.7 The Netherlands

Institutional Setup

In the Netherlands, the provision of country of origin information is divided between the Country and Language Information Unit (CLIU) of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND) and the Asylum and Migration Affairs Division (DPV/AM), which is a part of the Department of Movement of People, Migration and Aliens Affairs (DPV). This is one of a total of eleven policy departments of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. There have not been any changes in this setup in the past years nor are there any planned for the near future. The DPV COI unit is accountable to the MFA. The general country reports of the COI unit of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are used by policy makers, by the appeal court, caseworkers and decision makers of the IND, and by asylum lawyers. However, due to their public availability, everyone (including NGOs) has access to them. Around 16 to 18 staff members are directly employed by the Asylum and Migration Affairs Division (DPV/AM).

COI is also provided by the Country and Language Information unit, which has a subunit each for COI information and for language analysis. This IND COI unit is part of the Collective Centre Knowledge, Advice, and Development of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND), which in turn is a separate department within the Ministry of Justice. The users of the unit's material are in principle all IND caseworkers (decision makers and interviewers) in both 1st and 2nd instance, and in litigation (e.g. legal representatives). 17 staff members are employed in the CLIU; 11 Country Desk Officers, three Senior Country Desk Officers, one Head of Office and two administrative employees. In addition, 16 documentation officers are placed at four Regional Information Centres. They are engaged in the COI process, however not directly employed by the unit.

Tasks and Activities of the COI Unit

The Minister of Immigration and Integration, which is politically responsible for the formulating of policies on admission, reception and expulsion of asylum seekers, commissions the country reports of the DPV COI unit. The Minister does not have a ministry of his own, but is assisted by officials of the Ministry of Justice. The direct reason of commissioning new country reports is the Minister's need for information for the decision making process coupled with the interest in political developments in countries of origin that may result in an influx of asylum seekers in the Netherlands.

The scope of the Dutch Asylum and Migration Affairs Division (DPV/AM) is e.g. to compile general country of origin information. The unit broadened its scope in the past two years to include policy developments in the field of migration and development, as well as the return of persons without a legal status, resettlement, protection in the region, and durable solutions for refugees.

The COI unit of the IND collects information on all aspects of the immigration process, such as asylum, regular immigration (i.e. family reunion, student and labour permits, etc.), naturalisation and return. The IND COI unit also coordinates the drafting of the terms of reference for the general country reports of the DPV COI unit of the Ministry of Foreign

Affairs. Further, the IND COI unit also coordinates and requests research into the circumstances of individual asylum seekers. The research itself is then conducted by the Asylum and Migration Affairs Division (DPV/AM). There is intensive contact between the two COI units in order to facilitate a smooth workflow.

Products of the COI Unit

The COI unit of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs produces the so-called *ambtsberichten*, which can appear in different forms: as a regular country report, as a formal reports on specific subjects, or as a short-term COI report on demand. Further, reports on individual asylum cases are produced upon demand.

In 2004, there were 34 *ambtsberichten* produced. The countries that were covered were Afghanistan, Angola, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Burundi, China, Congo Brazzaville, DR Congo, Cuba, Eritrea, Georgia, Iraq, Iran, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Liberia, Nepal, Pakistan, Serbia and Montenegro, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, and Syria. The country reports on Angola, Burundi, DR Congo, Liberia, Somalia, and Sudan have been updated once (after six months), the country report for Iraq has been updated twice (June, December).

In 2005, there were 45 *ambtsberichten* produced. The countries included Afghanistan, Burundi, Colombia, DR Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iran, Ivory Coast, Kosovo, Northern Caucasus, Turkey, Nigeria, China, Iraq, Serbia and Montenegro, Liberia, Nepal, Somalia, Syria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Somalia, Sudan, Georgia, Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Russian Federation, and Angola. 4 of them were thematic (Trafficking in humans: Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Russia). Country reports of 11 countries have been updated (Afghanistan, Burundi, DR Congo, Eritrea, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Northern Caucasus, Iran, Colombia, Sudan, Turkey), two thereof even twice (Afghanistan, Burundi).

The selection criteria for choosing these countries were the requests of the Minister of Immigration and Integration concerning the interest in influx and political events. However, the production of country reports is subject to the available capacities of the COI unit. The Minister of Immigration and Integration can also demand country reports upon request at the instigation of parliament, policy makers and/or caseworkers. This may happen on the basis of sudden changes in the political situation of a country or as a result of a sudden upsurge in the number of asylum seekers from a particular country.

The DPV COI unit produces between 32 and 36 country reports on an annual average. Planning for the reports is made at the beginning of each year by the Minister for Immigration and Integration and the MFA. For the year 2006, 36 reports are planned. Some (eight) of these reports are updated every half a year. It should, however, be noted that these are all comprehensive reports and not merely updates. These eight updates are produced according to a schedule. Also, updates can be requested when there are sudden changes of a situation in a country of origin/a specific country. (An unexpected update will have consequences for the COI reports scheduled). The updates are requested by the Minister for Immigration and Integration, and originally initiated by caseworkers and/or parliament.

The time frame for producing regular reports is about four months including one month of preparation. After completion the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Minister for Immigration and Integration aim at publishing the report within 30 days on the website of the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs (www.minbz.nl, *links: actueel – ambtsberichten*). The language of publication is solely Dutch.

The Asylum and Migration Affairs Division (DPV/AM) does not collect and provide general data, such as statistics, literature, nor does it provide any other services except the ones mentioned above. Further, the DPV COI unit does not have an own electronic database.

All the reports, however, are made available to the public on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, after being assessed by the Minister for Immigration and Integration and after being approved by Parliament. Some hard copies are even sent out to various stakeholders, including Human Rights organisations.

Fact sheets are produced by the IND COI unit. They are produced solely on demand and are only for internal IND use. The fact sheets focus on specific topics, e.g. the specific position of ethnic and religious minorities, legal matters, political parties, chronologies, etc. They do not have a specific time frame for production. The usual size of a fact sheet is max. 10 pages, thematic factual COI sheets are between 10 and 100 pages. Once a year, all IND units are invited to comment on the planning of the reports done by the Country Information and Languages unit e.g. concerning updates. The products of the IND COI unit are stored in the electronic database Quest, which is accessible via the intranet site. As mentioned before, these products are only available for Immigration Service employees, and they cannot be quoted.

From COI to Policy Recommendations

The Asylum and Migration Affairs Division (DPV/AM) collects the information and drafts the report, which is then provided to the Minister of Immigration and Integration. The unit does however not provide any policy recommendations. These are prepared by the Directorate General of International Affairs and Aliens Affairs for the Minister of Immigration and Integration, which is a Directorate in the Ministry of Justice. Subsequently, the asylum policy making is the responsibility of the Minister for Immigration and Integration in consultation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (und subject to Cabinet approval). Only after that, the report is made publicly available. Country specific asylum policies are formulated by the Minister of Immigration and Integration who considers the DPV COI report to be the most important formal document in the process. Other parties, such as embassies, courts, caseworkers, NGOs etc, are not directly involved in this process.

Procedures of Information Gathering and Drafting

The questions to be answered in the COI reports are formally determined by the Minister of Immigration and Integration. The terms of reference, however, are collected and prepared by the COI unit of the IND on the basis of inputs of various IND units. Other parties, such as caseworkers, NGOs, policy makers can have an influence in the terms of reference.

The drafting of the *ambtsberichten* is the responsibility of the respective country officer in the Asylum and Migration Affairs Division. The final draft version is checked prior to publication by the officials of the IND COI unit and other IND officials who contributed to the terms of reference. At the end, the Ministry of Justice reviews whether the final draft is in accordance with the terms of reference prepared, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reviews whether its suggestions have been incorporated in the text.

In the country of origin, the Dutch embassies and local NGOs are directly involved in the gathering of country of origin information. Some sources they use are kept confidential. In the Netherlands itself only the COI unit is directly involved in the information gathering process. The Dutch Embassies in the countries of origin and the DPV COI unit of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Netherlands are politically responsible for this process.

Sources Used For Data Collection

The Asylum and Migration Affairs Division uses the primary sources available through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Generally, fact-finding missions are conducted by one or two officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accompanied by Dutch embassy staff in the country. For the production of fact sheets the IND COI unit uses a large number of open sources, but does not carry out fact-finding missions.

Secondary sources include country assessments by other (EU) countries, the European Commission, Internet, reports by international organisations such as the European Union and the UNHCR, as well as reports by NGOs, such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Global Witness, and reports by the UN Secretary General.

Verifiability is a very important issue when it comes to using sources. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is responsible for the sources to be consulted. There are criteria for establishing independence and reliability, but they are confidential. The list of sources consulted is not accessible for all interested parties. The criteria applied for the determination of confidentiality of the sources depends on the vulnerability on the sources concerned.

Quality and Control

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs does have control systems in place to assess the quality and reliability of the COI products. However, these are confidential. There is no formal body to monitor the quality of the COI products. If an appeal is made, the ultimate decision on the quality is taken by the court that can enact a check on the background papers used for the reports. These background papers are then treated as confidential. Feedback from various sorts, such as from decision makers and policy makers, is directed either to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or channelled through the IND COI unit that prepares the terms of reference or updates.

Products are considered outdated if the material no longer reflects the actual situation in the country concerned. No formal guidelines for this exist. A number of guidelines are confidential. One of them is the guideline to guarantee comprehensiveness, objectivity and topicality of the reports. Another is the guideline of how to handle information that may be highly relevant but difficult to obtain. Also, the question how to deal with the tension between verifiability and relevance if the information can only be obtained confidentially could not be answered in detail, as these procedures are confidential. Verifiability is in all aspects of outmost importance.

Restrictions and Confidentiality

Complete COI reports by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are – as a rule - available to the general public, as soon as the parliament is informed. In other words, all actors have access to the complete DPV COI reports. IND COI reports are, however, only for internal use.

COI in the Appeal Instance

The appeal court in the Netherlands use COI as a formal source. Further, the court relies on sources chosen at its own discretion. The COI report weighs heavily in court in relation to other sources, and the court has access to the complete list of sources.

Co-operation with other Countries

As COI products of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are available to the general public, obviously they are available for COI units of other countries. All the reports are published in Dutch. The Netherlands also receives country reports from most of the other European countries in the respective official languages. This information is used as a public source and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs determines the use of information of these products. The Netherlands also uses the Human Rights Reports of the US State Department, since they are appreciated for being very comprehensive.

The Netherlands regularly participates in co-operation in the framework of the European Union (such as Eurasil). An advantage of this co-operation is the mutual exchange of information on respective national policy changes. Outside the framework of the European Union, the IND COI unit also participates in the IGC COI group and in A8.

Obstacles for improved co-operation on COI are country specific focus and the focus on certain aspects that differ between European countries. Matters of confidentiality are also seen to be a hindrance for improved co-operation. Conditions for further co-operation on COI are therefore to resolve the question of confidentiality, and agree on a common time frame for COI reports and the choice of countries. If common COI is to be produced in the future, the question as to which institution can be held accountable by the courts for the content of the COI reports has to be solved.

Further co-operation is definitively a desired goal, especially in light of European harmonisation of migration and asylum policies. Transparency and verifiability are criteria that should be applied to such co-operation. Possible models of co-operation are common fact finding missions, the division of production of COI reports among clusters of like-minded states, and a European database with a collection of open, fully searchable COI. Furthermore, common COI standards and the translation of documents are areas that should be included in such models.

Advantages from European co-operation on COI are reduced costs through combined resources; perhaps even coordinating policies regarding asylum and migration. There should be few disadvantages from these models of co-operation, except for increased time and money spent on meetings and co-ordination efforts. The loss of flexibility and focus could also be a negative effect of increased co-operation.

Non-national COI is already being used to determine country specific asylum policies. However, national COI cannot be outsourced in this regard.

2.8 Sweden

The Swedish Migration Board is in a state of transition. As of 31 March 2006, the appeal instance has been transformed into a court procedure and at the same time the system has been opened up to the public for greater transparency. Also a new COI unit has been founded, whose responsibilities were not yet decided at the time of drafting this study. Along with this transformation, a budget cut was implemented. Profound changes in the setup of the Migration Board in general and the Documentation Service in particular are foreseen.

Institutional Setup

A new unit for documentation has been established in the Swedish Migration Board as of 31 March 2006. It is located in the Swedish Migration Board and belongs to the Division for Administration and International Issues. In the past the work was carried out in several divisions. The new COI unit will have around 12 employees. The main target group for the service will be the caseworkers at the first instance. The whole COI information has been made public on the Migration Board's website as of 31 March to any interested party; see www.migrationsverket.se/lifos.

Tasks and Activities of the COI Unit

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the authority to commission the COI reports through the Swedish Migration Board. The scope of the COI unit is primarily to provide information for the asylum and return procedure, to support the decision makers and litigation officers at the 1st and 2nd instance in their tasks. However, other areas, such as citizenship, residence permits, and settlement, will certainly profit from this information as well. The COI unit will also contribute to the investigation of the applicants' identity by way of information.

Products of the COI Unit

After 31 March 2006, it is planned to produce 15 country reports on the top 15 asylum countries regularly every year. However, this may change, as the final details have not been established yet. All reports will be disseminated electronically and appear on the website. Content, outline and size have not been decided yet.

In 2004/05, country reports were made for Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia and Montenegro. Country reports upon request are generally not produced, except for support for the return procedure and identification investigations. Any senior official can ask for research. Reasons for demanding research are often the amount of applications and lack of information. It is not decided yet whether the new documentation unit will produce other products. The COI unit will furthermore collect links to the international treaties and materials that are needed in the asylum procedure.

The Swedish COI unit maintains a COI database with a collection of own information and links to external publications on current information in the field of COI. Most of the information will be publicly available on the Migration Board's website though a small restricted number of products will not be disclosed. In Sweden, there are differences in drawing up country reports, depending on whether the report is used by asylum case decision-

makers or whether it is used for formulating country specific asylum policies. For policy making, much broader information is needed, while decision makers need more detailed information. The reports are usually written in Swedish. No other translations are planned for the future.

From COI to Policy Recommendations

Up to now the COI unit provides policy advice and recommendations through formal networks and in their database. These formal country networks are composed of one country expert from the Division for Asylum, a documentation officer of the COI unit, and four decision makers. Currently, there are nine such networks (e.g. on Iraq, the Balkans, Iran, Afghanistan, etc.). The recommendations are directed to the Directorate of the Board, the decision makers as well as the caseworkers. Until 31 March 2006, policy recommendations were presented at meetings, in workshops, and in the database as papers and analyses of decisions. In the future, the recommendations will be presented in the Migration Board's manual for migration cases.

Up until 31 March 2006, the tasks of information gathering and drafting of the reports was not separated from the task of providing policy recommendations. In future, policy recommendations or guidance to caseworkers is the responsibility of the Legal Unit. The new COI unit will only have to compile, analyse, and present current, relevant and reliable information in support of the decision making process. Now, COI is analysed by the country specialists of the Expert Group that belongs to the Division for Asylum. This analysis is then provided as part of the basis for the policy making process to the Directorate.

Country specialists are responsible for the transmission of COI into asylum policy making. The Director General is responsible for the formulation of country specific asylum policies, for which COI material is a very important factor. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs provides the Migration Board with an overview of the human rights situation in different countries. The formulation of country specific asylum policies taken - based on COI - are usually not different from the dominant strategic foreign policy.

Procedures of Information Gathering and Drafting

The questions to be answered in every report will be determined by a standard form for the content. The country specialist however has the possibility to put special focus on situations in each country. When the documentation service collects information for the products, the special need for information of the asylum procedure will always be considered. From 31 March, the system will be public and there will probably be new groups using the information. There is no formal co-operation with other interested parties in this part of the information gathering procedure. Contents and information probably have to be discussed in a formal way with external users in the future. The drafting of the COI report is the responsibility of a country officer of the COI unit, in co-operation with a country specialist. Caseworkers and decision makers in each network (e.g. Balkans, Iraq, Afghanistan, etc.) are reference persons in the drafting process. Prior to completion each division must give the final approval before a report can be published.

The government agencies in the country of origin that are directly involved in the gathering of information are the Swedish embassies that transfer the information gathered to the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs. Also the UNHCR is directly involved with the gathering through the service of notification of new products.

Until now, the agencies directly involved in the gathering of COI in the receiving countries in Sweden were the Swedish Migration Board, the Unit for International Co-operation, the Divisions for Asylum, Permits and Citizenship, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Forensic Laboratory, the National Criminal Police and the Aliens Appeal Board. The agencies in the country of origin that are politically and otherwise responsible for the gathering of COI are the embassies, while in Sweden itself it is the Migration Board, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Aliens Appeal Board (until 31 March 2006).

Sources Used for Data Collection

As primary sources, the Swedish COI unit has made use of fact-finding missions. Until now, the Swedish Migration Board has had resources for these missions; however, it is unclear if this will continue, as, at the time of drafting this study, the new unit did not yet have a budget. So far, the frequency has been according to need, normally involving four people. The fact-finding missions have been conducted in co-operation with staff from the Aliens Appeal Board. Normally, the Swedish embassy in the country of origin has been contacted to provide primary information. In some cases, also the UNHCR was contacted for information.

The Swedish documentation unit used the following secondary sources: reports by the US Department of State, fact-finding reports from the Danish Immigration Service, the Home Office (UK), CEDOCA (Belgium), BFM, (Switzerland) and BAMF (Germany). The media used is BBC and AFP. The Swedish documentation unit also gathers information from international organisations such as the UNHCR, OSCE, ICRC, WHO, and from NGOs, such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the International Crisis Group. Also databases such as ecoinet, refworld, Amnesty International, IRIN news, International Crisis Web, MSF, etc are searched. External experts from universities and media are only used for trainings and seminars.

There are written guidelines to be followed when quoting the sources. The list of sources consulted in processing COI is accessible to all interested parties. All sources have to be disclosed if they are used in a decision. However, if embassies use restricted sources, they are referred to as “an embassy source”. The country specialist of the Asylum Division and the country officer of the COI unit are jointly responsible for the determination of the sources consulted. Thereby it is important for the determination that the information is accurate and impartial and that political or economic interests do not influence the content. In order to establish independence and reliability of the sources, the Swedish Migration Board urges its staff to search for information from different sources in order to establish reliability.

Quality and Control

So far, there are no control systems in place to assess quality and reliability of COI products: nonetheless, there are changes planned for the near future. Until now, there is a Reference Group that meets several times a year to discuss the usability of the system and the content. This Reference Group, with representatives from the production team, the system administration and the decision makers, serve as a monitoring body. They discuss and comment on the presentation and the content of the reports. The feedback of this Reference

Group is taken into consideration. Also the formal Country Networks are used to get feedback on the usability of the products and contents.

Concerning outdated information, the usability of information is taken into consideration as soon as new information is added. There are no official guidelines to guarantee comprehensiveness, objectivity and topicality of the products, however, usually several sources are contacted and used, and different opinions are taken into account. Transparency and accuracy are upheld by providing all the information used on the Internet website. At the moment, all information that is used in a case at the 1st instance is presented to the lawyer of the asylum applicant. If an appeal is made, the information is presented to the appeal body. If confidential information is used, it must be presented.

Restrictions and Confidentiality

Caseworkers at the Migration Board, as well as the staff of the Aliens Appeal Board are the actors with complete access to the COI reports. Anyone at the Migration Board and any interested party may have access to parts of the COI reports after 31 March. However, there will be a small part of restricted material still stored in the old database for internal use only. The new unit will decide upon whether a particular COI report is to be made available to the general public as a whole or in part. The applicable criteria for that is (e.g.) the Swedish security law.

COI in the Appeal Instance

Until now the 2nd instance uses the same information as the first instance. After 31 March, when the appeal instance will be transformed into an appeal court system, the courts may to some extent build up their own support basis. The applicants and their legal advisors will be free to present their own evidence in cases. If a decision of the Swedish Migration Board is based on confidential material, it must be presented to the court.

Co-operation with Other Countries

Sweden regularly exchanges information on COI with other countries. The country receives COI from Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Norway and Finland, in the languages German, French, Dutch, English, Norwegian and Danish. These COI reports are used as information referring to their original source, and used as tools in the process of documentation. Country specialists evaluate the information obtained, while country specialists of the Asylum Division and country officers of the COI unit determine the use of this information. Sweden focuses heavily on human rights issues in its reports, and therefore uses Human Rights Reports from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as US Department of State Human Rights reports; the latter are found to be especially comprehensive.

On the other hand, Sweden has only seldom provided its own COI reports to other countries. One reason for that is the lack of resources. This has changed, as all open reports have been made public after 31 March 2006. The Swedish documentation unit regularly participates on COI in the framework of the European Union. An advantage of this co-operation in official platforms, such as Eurasil, is that these are institutions that may contribute to the harmonisation of asylum policy. Disadvantages of this co-operation are difficulties with translations when exchanging documents.

Other platforms of information exchange outside the framework of EU are the IGC COI group and the A8. The co-operation on this level comprises exchange of documents, and exchange of tools for information management. The outcome of this co-operation is the possibility to learn from each other's both positive and negative experiences.

According to the Swedish documentation unit, the main obstacles for more co-operation between European countries on matter of COI are mostly legal and language-related. Also matters of confidentiality are seen to be a hindrance; especially in the light of the new transparency procedure. Since Sweden is not allowed to classify a document for "internal use", it is difficult to use restricted information from other countries. If all countries would try not only to use public information, but also to make the compilations public, an important condition would be met to realise co-operation. Furthermore, all European reports should be translated in at least one other language, preferably English.

Co-operation between the European documentation units would be a desired goal, as it would contribute to the harmonisation of European asylum policies. The criteria applied to such co-operation should be that all countries involved are able to use the reports publicly. Also, the sources should be generally approved (there should be common guidelines for sources) and the reports should be at least in English.

Joint fact-finding missions, the division of production of COI reports among like-minded countries and a European database with a collection of open, fully searchable COI are models of co-operation that would contribute to the harmonisation of asylum policy in Europe. Common COI standards and translation of documents are areas that have to be included to meet these goals.

A possible advantage that can be expected from improved co-operation on COI is burden sharing. Report production in each country could be concentrated on country reports focusing on the top countries of asylum seekers. No disadvantages are to be expected from this. National country specific asylum policies should not only be based on national COI sources; in the future, European COI could be used as a basis for national asylum policies.

2.9 Switzerland

Institutional Setup

In Switzerland, the COI unit is called section of migration and country analyses (MILA). It is an independent section, which is attached to the Directorate for Asylum Procedure of the Federal Office for Migration (BFM). In the future some changes are planned. In light of the merger of the Federal Office for Refugees (FOR) and the Federal Office of Immigration, Integration and Emigration (IMES) to the Federal Office for Migration (BFM/FOM) on the 1st January 2005, there will be some organizational adaptations following the decrease of asylum applications, the shortening of the budget and reduction of staff positions. However, no details are yet available.

The legal basis for the MILA is stated in the organisational order of the Federal Ministry for Justice and Police (EJPD), Article 12 (4), as well as mentioned in Asylum law articles 41 and 102 and article 34 of the Safe Country regulation. On January 1st, 2006, there were 21 staff positions.

The unit's material is used by the entire staff of the Federal Office for Migration, the Minister of Justice and Police, the appeal instance (Asylum Appeal Commission (ARK)), the civil registry offices, cantonal authorities, the Swiss Federal Administration, and e.g. national security authorities.

Task and Activities of the COI Unit

The COI reports are commissioned by the different directorates or the executive board of the Federal Office for Migration (BFM). Direct reasons for commissioning reports are prevailing crisis- and conflict situations, changes within a country of origin, an increase in asylum applications, the development of asylum policy of the Office, a new profile in the applications, "difficult" cases, VIP cases, matters where the internal security is concerned, parliamentary affairs, Safe Country designations, revocations, etc.

The scope of the COI unit encompasses asylum, migration, documents, resettlement, return and integration issues.

The section MILA therefore has the following responsibilities:

- Research, analyses and transmission of relevant and current information concerning the situation in countries of origin, transit countries and reception countries.
- Transmission of general and specific knowledge on single case decisions: developments and trends of countries of origin, transit countries and reception countries in the area of migration
- Observation of developments in EU and other countries regarding migration policies
- Observation of the international developments in the area of internal security (regarding extremism and terrorism)
- Analyzing and linking/interrelating national and international statistics
- Comparative country studies in the area of migration
- Information about relevant international research
- Initiating and supervising projects in the scope of MILA

International networking for the purpose of gathering information and participating in common projects. In the past two years an additional team was created for dealing with migration analyses/prognosis/research. This new team works alongside with the already existing team that exclusively deals with country information.

Products

MILA defines all value-creating activities as products. Hence, the Swiss COI unit produces the following products:

Regular reports: a) “Country introduction sites”: Standardized country information on the Intranet for internal use only. The information is usually linked to a variety of short and accurate internal and external information. These countries have been selected according to the criteria of complexity of applications, the number of applicants per country and the specific need for information by caseworkers. b) Focus “Documents and Exit”. These reports are produced regularly, and contain information about the most important documents of a specific country, as well as information on how to obtain and use these.

Reports upon request: “Focus”: Short analyses, presentation of the situation in a country, specific thematic issues upon request of the Directorate or the different divisions. These reports upon request can be demanded by the heads of divisions and the members of the BFM directorate. Such reports on thematic issues are usually commissioned when applicants make claims based on these issues, they are of current importance, and crisis and conflict prevail. Foci are produced to very specific questions. Examples of that are: the tsunami and political consequences for Switzerland with regard to migration; or Uzbekistan: consequences of the incidences in Andijan for Europe and Switzerland.

In 2004/05, regular country reports, such as country introduction sites (Intranet Portal) with link to the own database Artis) were produced on the following 26 countries: Algeria, Angola, Armenia, Ethiopia, Belarus, Bosnia, DR Congo, Eritrea, Georgia, Guinea, Iraq, Cameroon, Kosovo, Liberia, Mali, Macedonia, Moldavia, Nigeria, Russian Federation, Serbia and Montenegro, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Togo, and Turkey. These “Introduction Sites” are updated twice a year.

The other regular product, the standardized series “Documents and Exit” were produced on the following 33 countries in 2004/05: Afghanistan, Albania, Algeria, Angola, Armenia, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Belarus, Bosnia, China, Ivory Coast, Georgia, Guinea, Iraq, Iran, Cameroon, DR Congo, Liberia, Libya, Macedonia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russian Federation, Serbia and Montenegro, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Togo, Tunisia, Turkey and Ukraine. These countries have been selected according to the criteria of complexity of applications, the number of applicants per country and the specific need for information by caseworkers. These reports are updated every two years or when relevant parts of the reports become inaccurate. The regular updates are made irrespective of situation in the country. The secretary of the Service Centre, attached to MILA, usually initiates the updates. The average time frame for producing such a report is about seven working days, whereas the actual production time is two to four months. These reports are disseminated on paper, by electronic newsletter, through intranet and on the Artis database (in pdf). Content and regular size of country reports varies. As a rule, however, a “Focus” treats only one specific question/problem at one time and has about 5 pages (excluding notes and illustrations).

In 2004/05, country reports upon request (so called “Foci”, sometimes also “situation updates”) were produced on the following 33 countries: Algeria, Burundi, Ethiopia, Ivory Coast, Eritrea, DR Congo, Cameroon, Liberia, Libya, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sudan, South Africa, Tunisia, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, Iraq, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Syria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Russian Federation, Serbia and Montenegro, Thailand, Turkey, and Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. These reports upon request can be demanded by the heads of divisions and the members of the BFM directorate. Such reports on thematic issues are usually commissioned when applicants make claims based on these issues, when current importance is seen and when crisis and conflict prevail. About 120-130 products (including country reports) are produced upon request every year. Like the regularly produced reports, the time frame for producing such products is about two to four months, and the final reports are disseminated on paper, via electronic newsletter, Intranet and the database.

Other products and services include the so-called “Early Warning” (“Führungscockpit”), which includes consolidation and analyses of data material. Other services include basic and advanced vocational training for case workers, answering specific single requests, maintenance of the database Artis for 81 countries (31,000 documents upload, 94,000 inquiries per year, 70 users per day), Training on Artis, EU-templates (IGC, A8, Eurasil, Schengen-Dublin, bilateral requests, weekly newsletter (right now called “ImPuls”, will, however, be changed soon). In addition to that, MILA holds oral and other presentations, makes summaries of research done, supervises research projects, does Public Relations (publications), reports on CIREFI, analyses documents, collects medical information, holds preparatory discussions with new embassy staff, provides briefings for Executive Board of the BFM and the Directorate for Asylum Procedure, and checks identity documents of asylum seekers that were confiscated by the border control. The COI unit of Switzerland also provides general data upon request.

As mentioned above, the COI unit has its own electronic database, which is accessible to all BFM staff. Staff of the Federal Administration and the cantonal authorities as well as selected European partner authorities may access the database upon request. However, in the latter cases, data protection, source protection and copyright directives have to be taken into account. Also, the licenses are limited as they are expensive. This database is called Artis which stands for Asylum Retrieval and Information System.

Most of the Swiss COI products are restricted for internal use. Only some country reports are public – none of them include conclusions, prognosis, and many details are deleted.

There are differences between the productions of country reports, depending on who the end user is. For example, the publications that are put on the Internet do not have a conclusion or scenario. Products that are directed to the Executive Board of the BFM resemble more of an overview and contain less detail. The Executive Board receives generally more analysis and more prognoses. Products that are used in the process of asylum decision-making generally do include more details and even illustrations. All material produced by MILA is in German or in French. Translations into other languages are not foreseen. However, the BFM is interested in participating in language tool projects (budget permitting).

From COI to Policy Decisions

The MILA does not provide any policy recommendations as such. However, MILA draws conclusions on country situation and credible sources, shows (possible) consequences for

Switzerland and the BFM, paints scenarios, makes prognoses and can suggest decisions through request forms. These conclusions and prognoses are usually presented to the Heads of the Divisions and the Executive Board of the BFM, sometimes even to the Ministry of Justice and Police (EJPD). Policy recommendations are then provided by the Executive Board of BFM.

Every country information usually includes a conclusion (e.g. in the weekly newsletter “ImPuls”), a prognosis or scenario. The Executive Board of the BFM has to decide upon or to request (in close co-operation with MILA) concrete measures of implementation. One possible decision can also be to wait and observe, or to commission MILA to get more information on a certain issue.

The Directorate for Asylum Procedure is responsible for the formulation of country specific asylum policies. Depending on the importance and complexity, this process can involve the Directorate for Asylum Procedure, the Executive Board of BFM, or even the government. MILA is integrated in this process as a provider of facts and analyses. COI material has a major influence on the formulation of country specific asylum policies, as no decision is made without material produced by MILA. When formulating asylum specific country measures, some other parties are involved: basically, principle decisions by the appeal commission ARK are taken into account, as well as UNHCR recommendations, information from NGOs, partner organizations, reports from Swiss embassies, etc. Migration policy is ultimately the responsibility of the ministry of Justice and Police (EJPD) but facts gathered by MILA of course influence the policies.

Procedures of Information Gathering and Drafting

In Switzerland, the commissioner of the reports is the authority that formulates the questions to be answered i.e. the Executive Board of the BFM. Caseworkers, and sometimes also the head of the departments, can influence the preparation of the questions. Information by other parties is used if it proves to be reliable and relevant, but these parties are not directly involved in the process of formulating the questions. The country officers draft the reports. Other parties can only influence the drafting of the report in so far as they have the possibility to influence the terms of reference in the planning phase. Nobody has the right to check the final draft prior to completion. Especially with products that include important conclusions (that later influence recommendations and decision requests forms), the conclusions are only presented to the Executive Board of the BFM.

Typically, country products are a sum of information that has been collected earlier through a wide array of sources. However, sometimes the embassies or NGOs receive an instruction to investigate a situation or to clarify individual issues. Switzerland also has liaison officers stationed in Moscow, Pristina and Ankara. Their task is not primarily asylum related, but they are nevertheless sufficiently competent to be regarded as sources. The institutions that are directly involved in the gathering of COI in the country of reception are primarily the country officers of the COI unit. However, they can also receive support from a network of contacts. These networks include academics that are involved on an unpaid, voluntary basis. If needed also experts from the Swiss Federal Office for Statistics or the Swiss Forum for Migration and Population studies can be contacted. Generally, no other institutions than the Swiss Embassies are politically responsible in the country of origin for the gathering of COI. Agencies such as Swiss embassies, NGOs, UNHCR can be contacted and involved depending on questions and

needs. In Switzerland, the agency/institution that is politically responsible for the gathering of COI is the section MILA itself.

Sources Used For Data Collection

The primary sources used by the Swiss COI unit MILA are reports from embassies, experts from universities, newspaper correspondents, and members of the Diaspora. Asylum dossiers of admitted refugees are also considered as primary sources. Depending on the number of asylum seekers and the need for information, a fact-finding mission is conducted. On the average, four to five countries are visited per year, and a country is visited every two to three years. In 2004 and 2005, fact-finding missions were conducted in Georgia, Togo, Serbia and Montenegro, Belarus, DR Congo, Azerbaijan, Rwanda, Burundi, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Cameroon. Usually one person from the COI unit and one person from the Directorate for Asylum Procedures conduct these missions together. In the country of origin usually NGOs, national authorities and international organisations as well as medical facilities are visited or contacted to gain primary source information. Also contact is made to the Swiss embassies.

As secondary sources, Switzerland uses the reports of the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), the Dutch IND, the Belgian, British and other partner organisations, as well as the reports of the Council of Europe. Newspapers are widely used, and the Internet information source *ecoi.net* is often frequented. External experts are mostly identified through universities, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the media; often these experts are invited to hold lectures. International organisations, such as UNHCR, OSCE, etc. are all frequented in order to collect information, as well as NGOs such as Human Rights Watch and local NGOs in the country of origin. Also, information is found on the database *factiva/Reuters*. Moreover, other sources are consulted, up to three-hundred per country. These sources are minor, country and situation specific sources. For example, they can be gay-websites, a WHO medical list, ferry companies, etc.

Completeness and unambiguousness are very important features when quoting sources. When taking information from the Internet, the date of access has to be stated. Due to data protection reasons, confidential reports can only be quoted with place and data (e.g. Swiss embassy, 2 May 2003). The country officers determine which sources to consult. The criteria applied are written down in the L+L handbook (country information and situation analyses), and comply with the common source criticism of social sciences. All parties involved in the asylum process have access to the list of sources used in reports.

Quality and Control

In Switzerland there are control systems in place to evaluate the quality and reliability of the products. First, reports are cross-read by another COI staff member to assure quality of the content. Second, the secretariat will cross-read it in order to assure the formal qualities. These are so-called quality assuring systems 1 and 2 (QSS1 and QSS2).

Apart from these systems, there is no formal body to monitor the quality of the COI products. MILA tries to consider feedback from case workers regarding length, details, presentation or any other aspect directed at the work they do. However, the actual content of the reports is not

subject to change. If necessary, the outcome of the analysis can be even more elaborated if needed, by providing more sources.

As a rule, the information is considered outdated after two years as long as it has not been proved that it is still valid. There are several guidelines to guarantee comprehensiveness, objectivity and topicality of the COI reports. They are written down in the L+L handbook, chapter 5, where guidelines are outlined to issues, such as the structure of the report, formal matters (style, grammar), source criticism and layout, quality assessment, etc. Accuracy and transparency are upheld by the guidelines spelled out in chapter 6 of the L+L handbook. A wide array of solutions is presented to possible problems concerning the gathering of information.

Highly relevant information that is difficult to verify is – like all the other sources - examined source critically. There is a range of tools for that, such as emulation of data, change of perspectives and roles, schematisation/visualisation, use of illustrations, ranking, pattern matching, best/worst-case scenarios, multi-tooling, contextualisation.

Restrictions and Confidentiality

Staff members of the Swiss Federal Office and the cantonal authorities have complete access to the COI reports produced by MILA. Parts of the “Foci” can be found on the BFM website and are therefore accessible to every interested party. The country officers decide (sometimes in co-operation with the commissioner) whether a report will be available as a whole or only in part. The criteria hereby applied are the possible political explosive nature of content of the report or the confidentiality of the sources. Public reports never contain conclusions and details are cancelled.

COI in the 2nd Instance

The 2nd instance, ARK, uses the databases systematically, and also has access to confidential material. The reports produced by MILA are among the highly relevant sources.

Co-operation with other Countries

The Swiss COI unit receives COI material from basically all EU (Eurasil-) and IGC member states. The reports and products are received in the language of the respective country. This information can be used for own reports (with sources: BAMF, 1/9/2005). The country officers evaluate the COI products of other countries and decide whether and in what way a product is used. Decisive factors for that are the quality of the report and the current need for information. MILA also uses the US Human Rights Reports, however, not without critically checking the sources first. Other EU (Eurasil-) and IGC member states also make use of the information gathered by the Swiss COI unit.

MILA regularly co-operates in COI exchange through EU level platforms, such as Eurasil, IGC COI, IGC Data, GDISC, A8, Mini 8. Advantages of such platforms are considered to be the networking/integration, consolidation, burden sharing, gain of scientific insight, planning of own activities. Different quality standards, array of languages, and different angles/points of departure are seen as disadvantages. Also, the fact that products are seldom provided “automatically”, and that it often remains unknown that another country already did a study on

a particular topic/country also weigh negatively. If products are available, not all the questions that are of interest to the Swiss COI unit are answered.

Usually, co-operation on this level takes place through meetings, telephone conferences, exchange of knowledge, and until now through one common fact-finding mission (to DR Congo together with Belgium and France).

The most important criteria applied in improved co-operation on the European level is “taking and giving”. Commitment by other countries to this co-operation, as well as personal relations of trust is the basis of such co-operation. At this point, the quantity of exchange material available from a country is not of great importance, but the will and the commitment to exchange information is. Matters of confidentiality are not seen as an obstacle to increased co-operation, as solutions can always be found. Conditions for improved co-operation are: scientific mode of operation, similar application of confidential data, readiness for co-operation and mutual exchange (“giving and taking”), commitment, competence in the field, and common languages of communication (German, French or English). European co-operation on COI is a highly desired goal as every European COI unit has to deal with similar problems, but only has limited financial and human resources to handle them. COI units could benefit massively from each other’s knowledge. For example, exchange over a new kind of asylum claims could help a country to be better prepared for this kind of change. COI units cover around 120-130 countries. With the resources available, it is not possible to be competent enough for all countries in all aspects. There are many gaps and many overlapping areas.

The Swiss COI unit would favour common fact-finding missions in a model of increased co-operation. It was noted, though, that these require a lot of time-consuming coordination (visa etc.). Switzerland does, however, not see much practical use in the division of production of COI reports among EU states nor among like-minded countries. However, Switzerland is positive to the idea of a common European database. More exactly, Switzerland does not promote the idea of *one* European database, but of an access to all existing European databases through a common portal. The suggestion is that one should be able to find all reports on one topic or on one country with the help of multilingual Meta search (like in a library where one can see through meta search in which libraries a specific book is available). In a European database, all reports that are on every national database anyway, such as reports by EU bodies or the Council of Europe, would be available. Therefore a European database can only co-exist with the Meta search.

It is also important to spread systematic information about the planned and produced products, as well as on planned fact-finding missions and the insights gained through fact-finding missions. Country experts could develop a systematic mode of communication or exchange (e.g. through chat rooms). Also, uniform criteria of COI quality, methodology and tools should be developed and standardised. For the future, a further development of COI towards COI-Plus should be considered. COI-Plus could include e.g. prognoses, scenarios, migration routes, analyses of documents, early warning systems, and country related knowledge for integration. In an improved model of co-operation the following areas are to be included: common COI standards, translation of documents into German, French or English, focal points of information requests (already mentioned above, except focal point). The advantages to be expected from increased COI are networking/integration, consolidation of insights (standardised praxis), burden sharing, gain of insights, and saving costs. However, on the other hand, processes are expected to be slower, there will be gaps/bridges between the requirements

of one's own unit and those of other European COI units, and there is a risk of over-politicising through language rules and consideration.

National country specific asylum policy should not only be based on national COI sources, rather European COI can serve as information sources for a national asylum policy. The best method is to compare the information gathered by others with the own information on the same topic/country, comparing the content and the source management. This helps to reflect upon the own perspective and supports adjustment.

2.10 The United Kingdom

Institutional Setup

In the United Kingdom the Country of Origin Information Service (COI Service) is responsible for the provision of country of origin information. This unit is located within the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND), which is a part of the Home Office. The mandate is defined as follows: To provide accurate, objective, sourced and up-to-date information on asylum seekers' countries of origin, for use by IND officials involved in the asylum determination process. The number of the staff employed is 25. The users of the unit's material include everyone involved in the asylum decision making process, such as caseworkers at the 1st instance, asylum appeals and judicial reviews at the 2nd instance, return caseworkers, and policy makers for asylum. Also ministers, Members of Parliament, NGOs and legal advisers representing asylum applicants are among the users. The unit's products are accessible to the public on the website: www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/country_reports.html

Tasks and Processes of the COI unit

The Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) of the Home Office is the authority commissioning the COI reports. The direct reason is the need to inform the asylum decision making process.

The scope of the COI unit in the United Kingdom is to provide information on asylum related matters (i.e. human rights), as well as generalised country background information. In the past, the COI unit used to be responsible for country specific asylum policy matters as well. In June 2005, however, there was a split into two completely separated units: the COI service was incorporated into the IND Research & Statistics Directorate, and their function is now limited to the provision of COI, and a "Country Specific Asylum Policy Team" was established within the IND Asylum Policy Directorate to deal with policy matters.

Products

The COI service produces a number of products. "COI Reports" are comprehensive country reports of 100+ pages. They are produced twice a year, in April and in October for the top 20 countries of origin of asylum applicants to the United Kingdom (based on previous year's statistics). In addition, the UK COI unit publishes COI reports once a year for countries designated for certain "Non-Suspensive Appeals" (NSA) fast track process, if those countries do not fall within the top 20 mentioned above.

In October 2005, 20 "COI Reports" were published on the following countries: Afghanistan, Algeria, Bangladesh, China, DR Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, India, Iran, Iraq, Jamaica, Liberia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Turkey, Uganda, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe. Also, country reports have been produced on the following NSA countries: Moldova, South Africa and Sri Lanka.

The COI Service also produces country reports upon request. In 2004/05, these reports were made for Ghana and Mongolia. Any request by an IND user is considered, but may not necessarily be acted upon. Typical reasons for requiring such reports can be the need for a full

country report in order to determine policies, or where caseworkers do not have enough information on a particular country.

Fact sheets are also produced on a regular basis. Fact sheets called “COI Key Documents” are prepared for countries with at least 120 asylum applications (previous year), on which no country reports have been done. There are also certain other countries for which COI is regularly required. “Key Document” reports have been produced for Angola, Bolivia, Colombia, Brazil, Georgia, Ivory Coast, Libya and Ukraine.

The United Kingdom COI Service also produces fact sheets upon request. There are two products to distinguish: a) “COI Bulletins” are comprehensive reports on a specific issue or issues in relation to a particular country, prepared for the attention of all case workers etc. b) “COI Requests” are responses to ad hoc requests for information. “COI Bulletins” have recently been produced for: Countries affected by the Tsunami of December 2004; Chechnya (December 2005 elections); Afghanistan (September 2005 elections); Nepal (State of emergency); Algeria (Referendum); India (fact-finding mission); Iraq (elections); Pakistan (Ahmadis, earthquake); Sri Lanka (Presidential election); Zimbabwe (updates on the general situation). “COI Bulletins” are generally done on the initiative of country officers in the COI Service; they anticipate the need for a bulletin following recent developments in a particular country. Also, senior caseworkers or any other stakeholder can ask for reports. Reasons for information requests are mostly political developments in a country of origin, or any other event, which may affect asylum or return decisions. Normally, a “COI Bulletin” is about four to thirty pages. “COI Requests” are constantly produced in response to ad hoc requests for information; they can be on any country or topic. Usually, asylum caseworkers, appeal or immigration officers place these ad hoc requests. Reasons can be any questions that arise in the examination of a particular asylum case.

The COI unit also collects and provides general data, for example texts of legal acts, human rights related statistics or detailed population statistics. Other services and products of the COI Service include fact-finding mission reports, comments on expert witness reports which are submitted in support of asylum applications, providing COI to those responsible for determining policy, checking the accuracy of COI content in Ministers’ letters or any other documents, and contributing to the training in using COI in the decision making process. There is only a small internal electronic database for caseworkers which basically includes the same reports as on the IND website.

Between publication dates, significant issues in country reports are sometimes updated in bulletins. Most COI Reports are updated regularly. The initiative for updating comes directly from the COI Service unit. Reports for the top 20 asylum producing countries have to be published by 30 April and 31 October each year, following an undertaking to Parliament. Most annual COI Reports are not subject to specific deadlines. Regular COI Reports are disseminated in a variety of ways: a) on the website, b) in the database for case workers, c) copies of all source documents are sent to caseworking and appeal units in hardcopy.

On an annual average about 20 Key Documents and Bulletins, and 400 COI Requests are produced. Responses to ad hoc requests for COI information are due within five working days. The COI material upon request is disseminated in the following ways: COI Bulletin is disseminated through a) website, b) case workers database, c) copies of all source documents are sent to caseworkers and appeal units in hardcopy. COI Requests are disseminated by email

to the individual who requested the information, and b) a copy goes to the caseworkers' database, with electronic copies of source documents.

The usual size of a COI Bulletin is about four to thirty pages. A COI Request is usually one to five pages. If a country report is requested for policy considerations, it usually follows the same format as the other country reports. The language is English. Translations are neither made nor planned for the future.

From COI to Policy Recommendations

The COI unit does not provide policy advice or recommendations (see above).

All existing COI material is available to policy makers and may also be produced at the request of policy makers. The COI Service also attends some policy strategy meetings when required to contribute with COI. Ministers are ultimately responsible for approving the translation of COI material into asylum policy.

The recommendations are provided by a separate unit, the Country Specific Asylum Policy Team (CSAPT). All their policy decisions are based on up-to-date COI which is provided by the COI Service to CSAPT on request. Other parties can also be indirectly involved in the formulation of country specific asylum policies. Recent court judgments, for instance, are usually taken into account in determining policy, as are views from operational IND colleagues. Embassies or NGOs may be asked to provide additional, more detailed information on a given issue.

The formulation of country specific asylum policies is distinct from foreign policy agendas, though the view of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will be taken into account. Material provided by the COI Service does not contain any government policy or opinion. It is compiled wholly from external sources of information, all of which are clearly identified and made available on request. All COI material is published on the Home Office website, except for COI Requests (for technical reasons) though these are also publicly available.

Procedures of Information Gathering and Drafting

The COI Service is the institution that determines the content of all country reports and bulletins. In the case of COI Requests (ad hoc requests), the questions to be answered are usually determined by a caseworker and approved by a senior caseworker. The other bodies that can influence the preparation of the content are a) the independent Advisory Panel on Country Information (APCI), and b) the Users Group that is composed of senior officials from the asylum case working unit and other internal units, which meets every second month. This process is constituted on a structural basis. The country officers in the COI Service are the ones responsible for drafting the reports. Other parties cannot determine the written content of any reports. NGOs, embassies, etc. may submit additional source material or information – which is then evaluated by COI Service and considered for inclusion. Any source material submitted in this way would then have to be made accessible in the public domain.

The UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) is asked to check the content of the COI Reports (for the top 20 countries) on accuracy prior to publication and to draw the attention of the COI Service to any additional information, which must then be made publicly accessible.

Two senior caseworkers and a senior appeals presenting officer review each COI Report to ensure that it covers the issues currently being raised in asylum applications.

In the country of origin the British Embassy and/or NGOs may be asked to provide additional information on specific issues. In the reception country (United Kingdom) only the COI Service is directly involved with gathering COI. Also only the COI unit is politically responsible for the gathering of COI, while in the countries of origin the embassies have the political responsibility over this issue.

Sources Used for Data Collection

One primary source that the United Kingdom uses is fact-finding missions. Between January 2001 and December 2004, the United Kingdom has undertaken 12 fact-finding missions. Countries visited were Nigeria, Iraq, India, Somalia (Nairobi based), Cameroon, Iraq (Damascus, Amman), Eritrea, Somalia, Rwanda, Croatia, Sri Lanka, and Turkey. Four of these fact-finding missions were joint British-Danish missions (Nigeria, Iraq, Somalia (Nairobi based) and Iraq (Damascus, Amman). Usually one or two staff members of the COI unit visit the country, sometimes in company of one or two members of other IND units or legal advisers. The British Embassy usually helps to arrange visits to NGOs, government officials, etc.

As secondary sources, the UK COI Service uses US State Department Reports, Canadian IRB and fact-finding reports. In the media section, the unit has subscription for the LexisNexis resources, and the Economist Intelligence Unit, and also uses, for example, BBC News and RFE. The UK COI Service does not commission experts witness reports, but does attend seminars and presentations given by external experts. Also international organisations and NGOs are considered as sources of information (for example, UN Treaty Bodies Reports, UNHCR (Refworld), OSCE, OCHA (IRIN News), UN Security Council, UNICEF, WHO, ICRC, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, ICG, MSF, RSF, CPJ, Freedom House, USCR, International Helsinki Committee, Save the Children, FIDH). *ecoi.net* is also frequented. Additional sources include ReliefWeb, Global IDP Project, Europa publications, Jane's, IFES, Election Guide, and Keesings.

There are detailed guidelines on how to quote sources. For example, name and date of sources should be in the body of the text, quotations should be totally accurate and include all relevant content. Each country officer, with guidance from the managers of COI Service, is responsible for the determination of the sources consulted, There is also a 'standard list' of sources, which must be referred to in each country report. This includes many of those listed above.

Several criteria are applied in choosing the sources. To name a few: reference should be made to all principle information sources relevant to a particular issue, more than one source should be quoted whenever possible; original, not secondary sources should be used whenever possible, the "balance" of information should be ensured, and checking for more recent updates is mandatory.

Specific criteria for establishing independence and reliability are among others: check for coherence with other sources, questions on the political or other agenda of the source, the type of source (primary or secondary), the information-gathering resources of the organisation, and the reputation of the source. The list of sources consulted is accessible to all interested parties.

Quality and Control

There are control systems in place to ensure the quality and reliability of the COI products. For example, all drafts are checked by the author, a line manager, and one of the COI Service management team. Comments on previous COI reports, e.g. from UNHCR, are carefully considered and incorporated into updated versions. Furthermore, drafts of COI Reports are reviewed by the Foreign & Commonwealth Office, as well as by senior caseworkers prior to publication. All drafts are professionally proofread.

Furthermore, there is a formal body to monitor the quality of COI reports. The Advisory Panel on Country Information (APCI) is an independent body established in 2003 to consider and make recommendations to the Minister about the content of country information. The panel includes prominent academics in refugee and migration studies, as well as representatives from UNHCR, ICMPD, ICG, IOM, the Refugee Council and other organizations. APCI, in turn, invites comments from NGOs, independent experts and other interested parties. Observers are invited to attend APCI meetings. See: www.apci.org.uk

The terms of reference for the panel are:

- To review and provide advice about the content of COI material produced by the Home Office, to help ensure that this is as accurate, balanced, impartial and up to date as possible.
- To review and provide advice upon sources, methods of research and quality control to help ensure that these support the production of COI material to be as accurate, balanced, impartial and up to date as possible.
- To review and provide advice about the relevance, format and “user-friendliness” of the COI material.

All other feedback is carefully evaluated, irrespective of where it comes from. If a comment is found to be valid, the next report update may be edited to take account of it. The User Group, which consists of senior officials from the asylum case working unit and other internal units, meets every second month and often provides additional feedback.

There are guidelines on when information is to be considered outdated. The following aspects should be taken into account: a more recent version of a particular source supersedes earlier editions, topicality and accuracy of information in an old source document, and justification of the inclusion of information/sources. Further, sources more than two years old should be given particular scrutiny and older source documents should only be retained if they contain information not available in more recent documents.

There are also written guidelines to guarantee comprehensiveness, objectivity and topicality of the COI reports. Transparency and accuracy are guaranteed throughout the whole procedure by making all source documents available to the users. The United Kingdom COI Service does not include any information in a COI report if the source material cannot be made publicly available. For instance, if the relevant information appeared initially as part of a confidential report from an embassy, for example, the Service would ask the embassy if they would be

willing to let them have that particular section in a ‘disclosable’ letter, i.e. in a letter that could be made available in the public domain.

Restrictions and Confidentiality

All reports produced by the COI Service are published and are therefore available to all parties; no reports are confidential nor do they contain confidential sections.

COI in the Appeal Instance

The 2nd instance uses COI Reports as a source of information. The court also takes into consideration any other material submitted by an appellant in support of his/her case. The COI reports are a primary source of reference in asylum appeals.

Co-operation with Other Countries

The COI unit of the United Kingdom exchanges country information with other countries. It receives country information mainly from Denmark and Germany, but also from other member states of IGC COI and A8 groups. This information is received in Danish, German, Dutch and English. Usually the data are only used when in English, and then generally for background information rather than source material, unless it is publicly disclosable. If it seems particularly useful, documents are translated occasionally.

The COI Service evaluates and determines the use of information obtained by other countries. The UK COI Service also uses US Department of State Human Rights Reports as they contain primary (and secondary) information on a broad range of human rights issues. For many countries of origin, this information may not be available via other sources. All United Kingdom produced COI material is published or available on request. COI Reports and Bulletins are also available on Refworld, which is available to the majority of EU Member and Accession States. All reports are written in English.

The United Kingdom is represented in all meetings of Eurasil and most of its workshops. The country also contributes to the briefing provided for discussions in the JLS Council. The advantages of COI co-operation in these frameworks are that networking is effective and helps establish a common view of the situation in a given country of origin. It is also useful to be able to identify COI colleagues who can be approached for advice about countries that may generate only few enquiries to the UK. Presentations by organisations such as ACCORD are helpful in providing a specific overview of conditions in asylum generating countries. Decision-makers benefit from being able to discuss nuances of cases, and the application of COI in making a determination. The disadvantages are that there might be several queries at busy times. Further, some countries of origin discussed are of limited relevance to the United Kingdom.

Outside the EU framework, the British COI unit is a member of IGC COI group and A8. In other words, the United Kingdom exchanges data through IGC with Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and USA. Through the A8 group, the United Kingdom shares information with Belgium, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland. Furthermore, outside the framework of these organisations, there are bilateral relations with all of the

countries above, in particular twinning with Malta. These ways of co-operation comprise, among others, joint fact-finding missions with Denmark. There is an exchange of information and ideas with all IGC and A8 partners, e.g. with the Netherlands on the origin determination system. The UK COI unit provided presentations and workshops at the Decision Making Tools conference in Warsaw. The unit also provided insight and experience to Ireland when the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner (ORAC) was set up, and also to Sweden when the decision was made to modify its COI system.

The criteria for the basis of this co-operation is a shared interest in working together to pool information and ideas and minimize “re-inventing the wheel” (working parallel) on COI. Value for money by sharing expertise and knowledge rather than duplication of efforts.

The obstacles for more co-operation are language issues, confidentiality concerns and the variation of case profiles and country focus. Matters of confidentiality are not seen as a hindrance for co-operation in the field of COI, at least not in terms of discussions. However, the United Kingdom makes all information publicly available and cannot use confidential material in the asylum decision making process. (Confidential material, however, can be used in determining policy).

Increased European co-operation in the field of COI is a highly desired goal. It is useful to establish common standards and sharing of information within confidentiality constraints. The following models are seen to be fruitful: Joint fact-finding missions, but only under the condition that subsequent reports are made public. The division of COI reports among EU states or among like-minded states is questionable, as countries need to be able to tailor COI to their specific case profiles and any COI material has to conform with the requirements of its users – particularly the courts and appeals tribunals – in each respective country. The United Kingdom supports the proposal to undertake a feasibility study to consider whether it would be appropriate to develop a European database with a collection of open, fully searchable COI, as databases are extremely resource intensive. The United Kingdom COI unit operates very satisfactorily without a database. A European database with restricted COI would not be beneficial to the United Kingdom, as the country must not use restricted COI in the decision-making process. However, the United Kingdom is supportive of greater accessibility by member states of already existing databases. Areas to be included in a better model of co-operation are common COI standards, translation of documents and a shared list of dedicated contact persons.

The possible advantages to be expected from European co-operation on COI are efficiency, economy, consistency, and common standards for COI used in all asylum systems. Disadvantages are seen in increased bureaucracy, and the alienation for needs of users within individual states.

National country specific asylum policy should not only be based on national COI as almost all COI is universal, drawing upon a standard list of external sources. The UK material is wholly compiled from external sources. However, it is likely that there will be practical difficulties in relation to alienation from national users’ needs. UK COI already draws upon the widest range of published sources. It is difficult to see how this could be improved or broadened apart from including confidential material, which the British COI unit is unable to use.

Annex

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Top 10 Countries of Origin of Asylum Seekers in 10 European Countries in 2004

	AT	BE	DK	DE	FI	FR	NL	SE	CH	UK	Total of 10	Totals of 36 IC*	10 as min. % of 36	COI reports 04/05 (#)
Serbia and Montenegro	2,841	1,294	788	3,878	772	3,692	395	4,022	1,777		19,459	22,292	87%	4
Russian Federation	6,185	1,361	163	2,767	210	2,919		1,288	505		15,398	30,139	51%	6
Turkey	1,111	561	84	4,136	132	5,172	338		1,154	1,555	14,243	16,228	88%	6
China	663			1,182		3,887	285			2,405	8,422	19,696	43%	6
DR Congo		1,471				4,018				1,780	7,269	9,312	78%	7
Iran		512	140	1,374			450	660		3,975	7,111	10,453	68%	4
Iraq			217	1,290	118		1,043	1,456	631	1,890	6,645	9,984	67%	6
Somalia			154		243		792	905	592	3,270	5,956	9,098	65%	6
Pakistan	575			1,064						3,000	4,639	10,880	43%	5
Algeria						4,008			480		4,488	8,443	53%	4
India	1,842			1,120						1,485	4,447	11,923	37%	
Afghanistan	757		285		164		689	903		1,585	4,383	8,795	50%	5
Bosnia Herzegovina			102			2,600		785			3,487	5,039	69%	
Rep. of Moldova	1,351					2,067					3,418	5,490	62%	
Haiti						2,793					2,793	7,978	35%	
Azerbaijan				1,412			253	1,041			2,706	4,245	64%	
Zimbabwe										2,500	2,500	3,286	76%	
Georgia	1,744								731		2,475	8,941	28%	5
Nigeria	1,825		88						418		2,331	11,656	20%	8
Sri Lanka						2,302					2,302	5,603	41%	5
Vietnam				1,660							1,660	3,630	46%	4
Stateless								1,578			1,578	3,249	49%	
Bulgaria					200			567	624		1,391	n.a.	n.a.	
Slovakia		730			329						1,059	n.a.	n.a.	
Guinea		565							412		977	3,954	25%	
Cameroon		506									506	4,062	12%	5
Armenia		477									477	5,183	9%	4
Rwanda		427									427	n.a.	n.a.	4
Burundi							405				405	n.a.	n.a.	4
FYR Macedonia					280						280	n.a.	n.a.	
Sudan							255				255	3,486	7%	5
Occ. Palestinian Territory			145								145	n.a.	n.a.	
Romania					132						132	2,793	5%	
Total Top 10	18,894	7,904	2,166	19,883	2,580	33,458	4,905	13,205	7,324	23,445	133,764	245,838	54%	
Total per country	24,680	15,360	3,220	35,610	3,650	61,600	9,780	23,160	14,250	40,200	231,510	368,023	63%	
Top 10 as % of Total per country	77%	51%	67%	56%	71%	54%	50%	57%	51%	58%	58%	67%		

Sources: UNHCR, 2004: Asylum Levels and Trends in Industrialized Countries, March 2005

* 36 Industrialised Countries: 24 EU (Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, United Kingdom) plus 12 industrialized non-EU countries (Australia, New Zealand, Japan, United States, Canada, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Croatia, Bulgaria, Iceland, Norway, Romania)

(#) Nr. of States with COI reports 04/05: Only countries where 4 or more of the ten states included here produced COI reports; Note: Angola, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Syria (4 COI reports) not listed

Top 10 Countries of Origin of Asylum Seekers in 10 European Countries in 2005

	AT	BE	DK	DE	FI	FR (1)	NL	SE	CH	UK	Total of 10	Totals 36 IC*	10 as min. % of 36	COI reports 04/05 (#)
Serbia and Montenegro	4.409	1.203	375	4.818	457	3.714	336	2.944	1.506		19.762	21.927	90%	4
Russian Federation	4.362	1.438	119	1.663	233	2.723		1.057	375		11.970	21.451	56%	6
Iraq		903	264	1.895	289		1.620	2.330	468	1.605	9.374	12.498	75%	6
Turkey	1.067			2.767	97	3.481	289		723		8.424	11.626	72%	6
Iran			123	916	79		557	582	291	3.480	6.028	9.191	66%	4
DR Congo		1.272				2.748			262	1.330	5.612	7.292	77%	7
China			71	595		2.446	356			1.760	5.228	18.277	29%	6
Afghanistan	928		173	685	237		902	435		1.775	5.135	7.737	66%	5
Haiti						4.808					4.808	10.533	46%	
Somalia			80		320		1.315		485	2.100	4.300	7.088	61%	6
Rep. of Moldova	1.210					2.010					3.220	4.677	69%	
Bosnia Herzegovina						2.248			301		2.549	4.236	60%	
Pakistan										2.260	2.260	7.753	29%	5
Nigeria	881		55							1.155	2.091	7.903	26%	8
Algeria						1.900					1.900	4.296	44%	4
Eritrea										1.890	1.890	3.977	48%	
Sri Lanka						1.870					1.870	5.461	34%	5
Bulgaria					569			751	461		1.781	3.212	55%	
India	1.530		72								1.602	7.459	21%	
Azerbaijan				839	93			431			1.363	3.201	43%	
Zimbabwe										1.355	1.355	2.474	55%	
Georgia	955								397		1.352	7.064	19%	5
Vietnam				1.212							1.212	2.680	45%	4
Syria				878							878	4.139	21%	4
Burundi							419	427			846		n.a.	4
Stateless								806			806	2.403	34%	
Slovakia		773									773		n.a.	
Armenia		706									706	4.794	15%	4
Guinea		643									643	3.378	19%	
Mongolia	641										641	2.203	29%	
Rwanda		565									565		n.a.	4
Nepal		557									557		n.a.	
Bangladesh	548										548	4.438	12%	
Cameroon		530									530	2.869	18%	5
Libya								451			451		n.a.	
Colombia							342				342	5.370	6%	
Sudan							339				339	3.186	11%	5
FYR Macedonia					191						191		n.a.	
Occ. Palestinian Territory			80								80		n.a.	
Total Top 10	16.531	8.590	1.412	16.268	2.565	27.948	6.475	10.214	5.269	18.710	113.982	224.793	51%	
Total per country	22.470	15.960	2.260	28.910	3.560	50.050	12.350	17.530	10.060	30.460	193.610	306.413	63%	
Top 10 as % of Total per country	74%	54%	62%	56%	72%	56%	52%	58%	52%	61%	59%	73%		

Sources: UNHCR, 2005: Asylum Levels and Trends in Industrialized Countries, March 2006

(1) Top 10 figures for France are from Jan.-Nov. 2005 only, total is UNHCR estimate

* 36 Industrialised Countries: see previous table for list

(#) Nr. of States with COI reports 04/05: Only countries where 4 or more of the ten states included here produced COI reports; Note: Angola, Ivory Coast, Liberia (4 COI reports) not listed

A. Table on most common countries of origin selected for COI reports by five or more receiving countries in 2004/05

	BE	DK	FI	FR	DE	NL	CH	UK
Afghanistan		FF report 04/05			Country report	AB 2004, 2005	“D&E”, Focus	Country Report 05, COI Bulletin
Cameroon	Country report			Country report	Country report	AB 2004	Introduction, “D&E”, Focus	
China			Them. rep (custody culture)	Fact sheet	Country report	AB 2004, 2005	“D&E”, Focus	Country report 05
DR Congo	Country report		Country report 04/05	Country report	Country report	AB 2004 (2), 2005	Introduction, “D&E”, Focus	Country report 05
Georgia	Country report			Country report		AB 2004, 2005	Introduction, “D&E” Focus	“Key Document”
Iraq	Country report	FF report 04/05			Country report	AB 2004 (3), 2005	Introduction, “D&E”, Focus	COI Bulletin
Nigeria	Country report	FF report 04/05	Country report 04/05	Country report	Country report	AB 2005	Introduction, “D&E”	Country report 05
Pakistan				Fact sheet	Country report	AB 2004	“D&E”, Focus	Country report 05, COI Bulletin
Russian Federation	Country report (Ch.,D.)*	FF report 04/05 (Ch.)*			Country report	AB 2005, AB (Northern Caucasus) (2) 05	Introduction, “D&E”, Focus	COI Bulletin (Ch.)*
Somalia		FF report 04/05	Country report 04/05	Country report		AB 2004 (2), 2005	Introduction, “D&E”	Country report 05
Sri Lanka				Fact sheet	Country report	AB 2004	Introduction, “D&E”, Focus	NSA/Country report 05, COI Bulletin
Sudan				Country report	Country report	AB 2004 (2), 2005	Introduction, “D&E”, Focus	Country report 05
Turkey	Country report		Country report 04/05		Country report	AB 2005	Introduction, “D&E”, Focus	Country report 05

* Ch.= Chechnya, D.= Dagestan

B. Table on most common countries of origin selected for COI reports by four receiving countries in 2004/05

	BE	DK	FI	FR	DE	NL	SE	CH	UK
Algeria				Country report, Fact sheet	Country report			Introduction, "D&E", Focus	Country Report 05, COI Bulletin
Angola	Country report					AB 2004 (2), 2005		Introduction, "D &E"	Key Document
Armenia	Country report			Country report		AB 2004		Introduction, "D&E", Focus	
Burundi	Country report	FF report 04/05				AB 2004 (2), 2005		Focus	
Iran		FF report 04/05			Country report	AB 2004, 2005		"D&E"	
Ivory Coast				Country report		AB 2004, 2005		"D&E", Focus	Key Document
Liberia				Country report		AB 2004 (2), 2005		Introduction, "D&E", Focus	Country report 05
Rwanda	Country report	FF report 04/05		Country report, fact sheet				Focus	
Serbia & Montenegro					Country report	AB 2004, 2005	Country report 04/05	Introduction, "D&E", Focus	
Syria	Country report				Country report	AB 2004		"D&E", Focus	
Vietnam			Thematic report (custody culture)	Fact sheet	Country report				Country Report 05

Explanation:

BE: Country report (products upon demand: briefings, chronology of events (ca. 4 per year), **FFM** (ca. 3 a year), between 20 and 100 pages)

DK: Fact finding reports (20-100+ pages)

FI: Country reports (upon request, 10-20 pages), **thematic reports** (5-10 pages)

FR: Country report (regular, upon demand: a) Chapters: maps, general information, chronology, Human Rights, refugees and IDPs, bibliography, or b) list of sources for information by themes, 2-50 pages), **Fact sheet** (regular, upon demand: Press review, Chronology, summary of specific events, format varying)

DE: Country report (“Online loose-leaf collection” - comprehensive country reports, 22 main countries of asylum, may be up to 800 pages, topics like geography, history, state setup, legal sphere, economy, political parties, social issues)

NL: AB = “ambtsberichten” (Country report, 40-100 pages, chapters: country information, human rights situation, migration aspects)

SE: Country report (new system is under construction)

CH: “D&E” = Focus “Documents & Exit” (4 pages with illustrations, description of the most common documents, how to obtain them, and how they are used, updated every 2 years)

Introduction sites (only on Intranet, mostly links, updated every 6 months)

Focus (to current, specific questions for decision makers, ca. 5 pages)

UK: COI Reports (regular: comprehensive country reports of 100+ pages for top 20 countries of origin)

COI Key Documents (upon request: countries with at least 120 applicants a year, ca 20 pages, mostly links, short overview)

COI Bulletins (comprehensive reports on specific issues)

Comparative Study on Country of Origin Information Systems

Study on COI Systems in Ten European Countries and the Potential for Further Improvement of COI Co-operation

The objective of this study is to provide a comparative analysis of the setup and functioning of COI systems in ten European countries and to identify the potentials and obstacles for strengthening European COI co-operation. The report was finalised in April 2006.

The study covers the following countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. The final report contains individual country chapters, a comparative chapter and an executive summary.



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Prepared by the
International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), Vienna

Commissioned and funded by the
Advisory Committee on Aliens Affairs (ACVZ), The Hague - The Netherlands, 2006

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ISBN: 3-900411-28-X