

## EXAMINING THE DECISIVE FACTORS IN RETURN DECISIONS AMONG ASYLUM SEEKERS: EVIDENCE FROM THE UK

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### Introduction

There is considerable interest among policy makers and researchers to find out ways of rehabilitation and naturalization of asylum seekers especially in the context of Western developed countries. The UK and other European countries have endeavoured to give a credible response to the concern regarding the increased number of asylum applications. This has brought about considerable improvements in the policy and practice regarding asylum seekers and associated regulations. The reforms have focused primarily on asylum determination process, pre-entry controls, and support and integration policies. However, the general perception prevails that the asylum policies in Europe are ineffective in returning refugees as well as reducing the economic burden on the host countries. This tempts the researcher to examine the underlying factors vital in return migration of asylum seekers in the UK from the perspective of refugees.

A significant number of policy-makers and researchers apparently believe that asylum seekers are economic migrants who arrive in the UK mostly through illegal means and remain hidden for an indefinite period. As a consequence, there is increased concern about the growing burden of asylum seekers on the European economy. This additional human overload impacts on sectors such as education, health and the job industry.<sup>1</sup> In response to the greater need for support services, the UK officials filter refugees upon arrival and offer them basic humanitarian and legal support. In this regard, the EU has setup a common asylum policy under which asylum applicants in one member state do not have to reapply in another member country. This common policy of asylum under the EU umbrella began with the Dublin Convention in 1990. Early policies on asylum in West Europe were first implemented in the early 1950's with the signing of the Geneva Convention on the status of Refugees.

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<sup>1</sup> H. Crawley, *Chance or Choice? Understanding why Asylum Seekers come to the UK* (UK: Refugee Council, 2010).

Asylum is the legal protection accorded by the host government to a person who can demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a specific social group.<sup>2</sup> In the case of the UK, asylum seekers are generally put into a detention centre where the decision to return or settlement is made within six months. New applicants now go through the fast-track mechanism where the decision becomes a matter of few days or weeks. Owing to the high living standards in the UK and other attractions, asylum seekers are keen to settle in the UK. Government and policy makers, however, focus on policies of forced or voluntary return. Around 20,000-25,000 new applications are made every year out of which 62% cases are rejected. However, the UK is the fourth largest receiving country in Europe after Germany, France, Sweden and Turkey. Media has been depicting the UK as a virtual haven for asylum seekers. Based on the proposals of policy-makers, officials have been adopting several ways of removal, deportation and refusal at entry points. Research shows that this does not stop migration into the UK. What is required is a blend of policies for the safe and just return of asylum seekers to their homelands and sharing of the socio-economic burden with the home countries.

It is now high time to review asylum policies by looking at routine data on asylum seekers and refugees to fill information gaps for policy-makers, stakeholders, researchers and local authorities. A review of the recent British policy of voluntary removal is therefore essential so that the factors contributing to return are highlighted. This research is one such endeavour aimed at examining the nature and effectiveness of return policies in the UK and also empirically identifying the most pertinent factors encouraging and/or discouraging return migration to home countries. It provides an overview of asylum policies and practices in Europe and the broader issue of asylum seeking across the globe. An empirical approach has been adopted to evaluate the British policy of Assisted Voluntary Return. The paper is organized as follows: A section reviewing existing literature on the state of world asylum and the European perspective on asylum. This is followed by a section on the methodological approach adopted in this paper. Next, the policies of Assisted Voluntary Return in the UK are

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<sup>2</sup> P. Aspinall and C. Watters, "Refugees and Asylum Seekers: A Review from an Equality and Human Rights Perspective", *Equality and Human Rights Commission Research Report 52*, University of Kent, 2010.

assessed. The last section highlights the factors necessary for encouraging/discouraging return migration in the UK. The paper ends with a brief conclusion.

### **Literature review**

#### ***World asylum at a glance***

The two world wars of the twentieth century brought countless miseries to the world. There were not only mass scale human casualties but also millions of people were displaced to new and alien places. This practice of onward migration, refugee and asylum seeking continued in the aftermath of the Second World War. For various reasons people have been forced to move to safer geographical locations, fleeing their homelands, in search of refuge and asylum. The international community and governments are providing assistance for resettlement of a substantial number of refugees and asylum seekers. However, as Judge has pointed out, with an increase in refugees and asylum-seekers more problems have emerged.<sup>3</sup> This has prompted policy-makers, the UN and governments to devise international laws regarding refugees and asylum seekers.

The UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951 is one such important development. Commonly known as the Refugees Convention it is the first international agreement to cover the most important aspects of refugees' lives. This convention provided the first generally accepted definition of refugee. As mentioned earlier, a refugee is someone who owing to a well-founded fear of persecution, is outside his or her country of normal residence and is unable or unwilling to return to it.<sup>4</sup> The convention enjoins that the refugee should be given the same kind of treatment as that enjoyed by other foreign nationals in a given country. Hatton points out that the convention also requires signatory states to apply international human rights standards and agreements for refugees and confers on them other specific rights.<sup>5</sup> While these provisions restrict states from sending back refugees to countries in which they fear persecution (non-refoulement), they ensure that refugees have freedom of

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<sup>3</sup> B. E. M. Judge, "Asylum Seekers and the European Union: Past, Present and Future", *International Journal of Human Rights* 8, no.2 (2004): 159-174.

<sup>4</sup> See Article 32 of the 1951 Refugee Convention.

<sup>5</sup> T. J. Hatton, "The Rise and Fall of Asylum: What Happened and Why?", *The Economic Journal* 119 (2009): 183-213.

movement, and the right to be issued an identity and travel document.<sup>6</sup> These and other such rights were further enhanced in 1967 by the adoption of a Protocol to the Refugee Convention.

Raghallaigh has highlighted the fact that there are other relevant human rights treaties, declarations and instruments in addition to the Refugee Convention that protect refugees and asylum seekers through similar provisions.<sup>7</sup> For example, Article 3 of the UN Convention against Torture asserts that no government shall forcibly return a person to another state where there are substantial fears of his/her being threatened and subjected to torture<sup>8</sup>. Similar principles have been adopted in the 1961 UN Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. Judge points out that considering such international standards of welfare, the environment in the destination countries has proved to be quite favourable to the bulk of refugees and asylum seekers especially in the last few decades.<sup>9</sup>

As estimated by the UNHCR Statistical Yearbook, the number of refugees worldwide has multiplied by a factor of eleven since the early 1970's – from about 3 million to 33.9 million. The UNHCR has presented the following breakup of the refugee population in 2010: 10.55 million refugees, 837,500 asylum seekers and 197,600 refugees who were repatriated during the year.<sup>10</sup> Crawley has pointed out that the mass influx of refugees suggests that a considerable number of refugees present themselves as asylum seekers by lodging a formal application or claim. It should be noted that every asylum seeker can be called a refugee but not every refugee can be considered an asylum seeker.<sup>11</sup> With the onslaught of globalization and the proliferation of conflicts, the refugee problem continues to grow. On account of conflicts and foreign occupation, both the developed and

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<sup>6</sup> K. B. Harpviken, "Split Return: Transnational Household Strategies in Afghan Repatriation", *International Migration* 52 (2014): 57–71.

<sup>7</sup> M. N. Raghallaigh, "The Causes of Mistrust amongst Asylum Seekers and Refugees: Insights from Research with Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Minors Living in the Republic of Ireland", *Journal of Refugee Studies* 27, no.1 (2014): 82-100.

<sup>8</sup> Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. Entry into force, 10 December 1984. Available at <http://untreaty.un.org/cod/avl/ha/catcidtp/catcidtp.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Judge, "Asylum Seekers and the European Union".

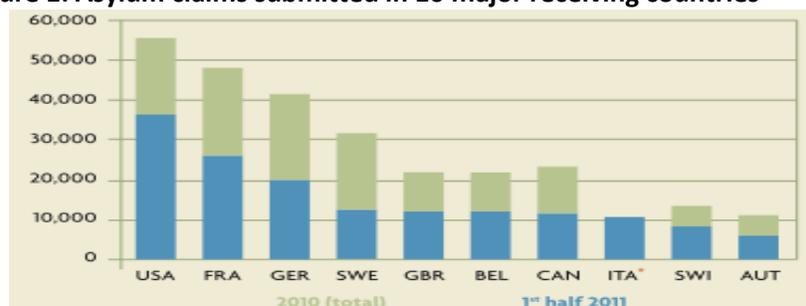
<sup>10</sup> UN High Commissioner for Refugees, *Statistical Yearbook: Ten Years of Statistics*, Geneva, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> Hetal Crawley, "Coping with Destitution: Survival and Livelihood Strategies of Refused Asylum Seekers Living in the UK", *OXFAM Research Report*, Swansea University, 2011.

developing world have witnessed an increasing number of asylum seekers in recent years. Attempts have been made to divide the burden between the source and the destination countries.

Figure 1 shows that the United States of America was the largest single recipient of new asylum claims in 2011 followed by France, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. In the last few decades, Europe and the areas close to it are also producing refugees; for example, during the Yugoslav crisis there was a mass displacement of populations. Again the dramas unfolding across the Caucasus, triggered a refugee crisis. More than 5 million people submitted requests for refugee status in Western Europe, North America, Japan and Austria in the middle of the 1980s. Parallel to the increased asylum applications in the advanced countries, the third world has received an overwhelming majority of refugees. As per the UNHCR (2010) statistics, the developing countries hosted 80% (i.e. 8.5 million) of the global refugee population. Asia hosted over half of the global refugee population (54%), followed by Africa (23%) and Europe (15%). Among the developing countries, Pakistan hosted the highest number of refugees at the end of 2010 (1.9m). The position of Germany\* as refugee receiving country comes after Pakistan, Iran, Jordan and Syria.<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 1: Asylum claims submitted in 10 major receiving countries**



Source: Adopted from UNHCR (First Half 2011), 11.

### Methodology

A three-tier strategy has been used in this paper to bring methodological

\* Germany has recently become the largest recipient of refugees in the aftermath of the Arab Spring – around 109,600 asylum claims were recorded in 2013. UNHCR, Germany (2014).

<sup>12</sup> UNHCR, *Statistical Yearbook*, 2010.

rigour into the research. Evidence was gathered through an in-depth review of existing literature, semi-structured interviews and few focus-group interviews. Effort was made to extensively review the existing literature that included academic material relating to migrants and asylum seekers in the UK. Academic journals and research reports published both by government and non-governmental organizations since the 1990's were examined. The aim was to review the status of assisted programmes of return migration in the context of the UK and also to study the necessary factors contributing to asylum seekers' decision to live in or leave the UK.

A total of 42 semi-structured interviews and two focus-group interviews were held with asylum seekers whose applications were being processed and were in various stages. The names and addresses of participants were sought from NGO's working to support refugees/migrants and asylum seekers. Serious efforts were made to select participants from the countries of origin from where the biggest number of asylum seekers came. These included Afghanis, Pakistanis, Somalis, Iraqis and Zimbabweans. A good geographic and ethnic mix of participants was ensured. The site of the interviews was mostly the participants' residence in cities such as Liverpool, London and Swansea. Our sample comprised a clear majority of illiterate applicants (90%) with little knowledge of English and dominated by the male gender group (33 out of 42). The research team was well versed in many languages including for example, Urdu for Pakistanis and Indians and Pashto for Afghanis.

The conduct of the interview varied, depending upon the knowledge and willingness of the participant, circumstances under which it took place and several external factors. Respondents were asked a series of questions related to their experiences. They were asked about the status of their asylum application, their life as asylum seeker, reasons/motivations for coming to the UK, and the factors which encouraged or discouraged return migration. Some spoke at length whilst others were more reticent. Around 40% of applications were pending an initial decision while two thirds had been refused for which they were awaiting an appeal decision. Comments about overall asylum life were mixed and complex depending upon several factors guided by a comparison of life in the UK with the source countries. An account of all the issues unveiled are perhaps outside the scope of this article yet a sketch of what were perceived as encouraging and discouraging factors for return migration from Britain is presented in the

following paras. The next section discusses the findings of a review of existing British policies toward asylum seekers, especially the methods which assist return migration.

### **Findings/Results**

#### ***Policies of Assisted Voluntary Return in the UK***

Due to the attractions of life in the UK, the country is among the world's topmost recipient countries of asylum seekers. Table 1 shows the UK as the fifth largest receiving destination for asylum seekers. In response to such an overload, a number of Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) schemes have been introduced in the UK for those who wish to return and resettle in their countries of origin. Of these the Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) is the most common and open to all asylum seekers, including those who have failed to get asylum. In addition, there are some other schemes such as Assisted Voluntary Return of Irregular Migrants (AVRIM) for illegal migrants; and also country specific ones, for instance, those targeted toward Afghanistan which include the Assisted Voluntary Return to Afghanistan Programme (RAP) and European Union Return of Qualified Afghans (EU-RQA). Most of these programmes were previously run by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and now by the Refugee Action (RA) on behalf of the Home Office.<sup>13</sup>

**Table 1: Share of top 10 receiving countries of Asylum Seekers in total number of applications 2009-13**

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Germany	7%	11%	11%	13%	18%
United States	11%	13%	15%	15%	14%
France	11%	13%	12	11%	10%
Sweden	6%	9%	7%	9%	9%
Turkey	2%	3%	4%	6%	7%
United Kingdom	8%	6%	6%	6%	5%
Italy	5%	3%	8%	4%	5%
Australia	2%	4%	3%	3%	4%
Switzerland	4%	4%	5%	5%	3%
Hungary	1%	1%	0%	0%	3%

Source: UNHCR Asylum Trends (2013), 13.

<sup>13</sup> Information gathered through the UKBA. See <http://www.bia.homeoffice.gov.uk/aboutus/workingwithus/workingwithasylum/assistedvoluntaryreturn/>.

The strategy of Assisted Voluntary Return offers a potentially cost-effective and humane way of supporting and rehabilitating refugees. There is evidence that a significant number of asylum seekers have a strong desire to return home, particularly expressed at the end of a prevalent conflict and/or the establishment of peace. Multiple factors are involved in the making of the complex decision to return. These factors are hard to disentangle from the individual's perspective and can range from individual experiences and personal preferences to environmental conduciveness. Koser opines that a voluntary decision is typically made after comparing conditions and opportunities in the host country with those in the country of origin.<sup>14</sup> Black et al point out that even when refugees show their intention to return, they may not actually leave the country, in this case the UK and eventually end up as illegal migrants. The study by Black et al attempted to prioritize the different factors that influenced the decision to return in several focus groups hailing from Somalia, Kurdish areas, Afghanistan, Kosovo and Iran. They found security, peace, safety and family support as the most important factors affecting the migrants' decision to return.<sup>15</sup>

In the context of the UK, critics argue that managing the multitude of factors is a complex task to address through AVR policy alone and it must be supported by broad-based policies.<sup>16</sup> The distrust of British AVR programmes and the lack of political, social and economic security in the countries of origin are considered as the main reasons for the slow rate of migrants' return. Nevertheless, through AVR programmes, an increasing percentage of asylum seekers, who have not been granted asylum have been provided the benefit of the package and their removal or voluntarily departure from the UK has been facilitated. Table 2 provides the corresponding data for principal asylum applicants who have been removed or voluntarily departed in the period 2004-2011. The data shows that almost a quarter percentage of failed asylum seekers have been

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<sup>14</sup> K. Koser, "Information and Repatriation", *Journal of Refugee Studies* 10, no.1 (1998): 1-19.

<sup>15</sup> R. Black et al, *Understanding Voluntary Return*, Online Report 50/04, 2004, Sussex Centre for Migration Research, Visit at <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20110220105210/rds.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs04/rdsolr5004.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> D. Thiel and K. Gillan, *Factors Affecting Participation in Assisted Voluntary Return Programmes and Successful Reintegration: A Review of the Evidence* (Home Office, London: 2010. Visit at <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20110218135832/http://rds.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs10/horr29c.pdf>.

removed from the UK through AVR programmes, which signals a steady success of the policy of voluntary return.

**Table 2: Principal asylum applicants removed or departed voluntarily from the UK, 2004–2011<sup>17</sup>**

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010 1 <sup>st</sup> qt.	2011 1 <sup>st</sup> qt.
T. principal asylum applicants removed	12,595	13,730	16,330	12,705	12,040	10,935	2700	2475
T. principal asylum applicants leaving under AVR	2,300	2,905	4,630	2,540	2,455	2,830	865	640
AVR percentage of total asylum applicants removed	18	21	28	21	20	26	32	26

Source: adapted from UK Home Office (2010, 2011)

Thiel and Gillan point out that in comparison to other European countries, the number of AVR's from the UK steadily increased in the period 2001-2005.<sup>18</sup> AVR's from Germany for instance, witnessed a decline in the same period owing to a drop in the numbers returning to Serbia and Montenegro.<sup>19</sup> The British AVR programmes are generally considered effective, nevertheless, the return percentage is still small, though growing when compared to the total number of removals from the UK. Table 3 shows the total number of persons removed or those who have departed voluntarily during the period 2004-2011. The data proves that only a small percentage of the total removals took place through the programmes of AVR. Some examples are 6, 6, 7 and 8 percentages for the years 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010 respectively.

<sup>17</sup> Excludes dependents of asylum seekers.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

**Table 3: Total persons removed or left voluntarily from the UK, (including dependents)**

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011 1 <sup>st</sup> qt.
T. persons removed <sup>20</sup>	61,160	58,215	63,865	63,365	67,980	67,215	57085	14225
Leaving under AVR programmes	2,715	3,655	6,200	4,155	4,295	4,945	4540	875
AVR percentage of total removals	4%	6%	10%	6%	6%	7%	8%	6%

Source: adapted from Home Office (2010, 2011)

Taking into account general migration statistics and the data from the Home Office Research Report 29, it has been observed that fewer countries of origin have received the larger proportion of all AVR returnees from the UK.<sup>22</sup> These countries include Iraq, Albania, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Iran, having received the highest number of returnees in 2004 and 2005. These are not necessarily the countries from where the largest number of asylum applicants originally arrived in the UK. Instead, the top source countries of asylum seekers in the UK are Serbia, Afghanistan, Zimbabwe, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and China. In other words, the list of countries with a higher number of asylum applicants is different from the top receiving countries under the AVR programme. Zimbabweans are giving the highest number of asylum applications to the UK, but it is not receiving corresponding numbers through AVR return programmes. Table 4 displays the data for top 10 home countries of asylum seekers living in UK for the years 2009 and 2010. The

<sup>20</sup> Includes enforced removals, persons departing voluntarily after enforcement action had been initiated against them and persons leaving under AVR programmes run by IOM and/or Refugee Action. Figures since January 2005 include those who it is confirmed have left the UK without informing the immigration authorities.

<sup>21</sup> Persons leaving under Assisted Voluntary Return Programmes run by the International Organization for Migration may include some cases where persons left under the Assisted Voluntary Return for Irregular Migrants Programme (AVRIM) and some cases where enforcement action was initiated.

<sup>22</sup> Thiel and Gillan, *Factors Affecting Participation in Assisted Voluntary Return*.

varying inflow of asylum seekers and their return suggests that several underlying factors are involved in asylum seekers' decision to stay back or return home. Evidence exists showing that a vast number of asylum seekers resist leaving the UK and often try to re-enter the UK through other channels.

**Table 4: Top-10 countries of origin of asylum applicants for the UK**

Origin of Asylum Country	2009	2010
Zimbabwe	7,420	1,910
Afghanistan	3,535	1,835
Islamic Republic of Iran	2,125	2,210
Pakistan	2,035	2,115
Sri Lanka	1,430	1,625
China	1,415	1,215
Eritrea	1,405	760
Somalia	1,080	675
Iraq	990	475
Nigeria	820	1,100

Source: UNHCR Asylum Levels and Trends in Industrialized Countries (2010)

#### **Factors responsible for encouraging/discouraging return migration and AVR uptake**

Employing thematic narrative techniques, several themes have emerged from the interview data which prompted the authors to deliberate further. Similar factors have also been identified in the literature regarding return migration through assistance programmes. The following paras are devoted to describing some of the most facilitating and/or constraining factors for the return of migrants in general and asylum seekers in the UK, in particular. The article first highlights the factors discouraging migrants and (failed) asylum seekers to return home under support programmes. These are as follows:

- Lack of political and/or economic activity in the country of origin.
- Poor social conditions in the country of origin (CoO).
- Family members divided among host and home countries.
- Distrust of AVR programmes.
- Embarrassment regarding return.

Other factors have affected migrants and asylum seekers positively, encouraging them to take the decision to return and join their respective friends and family in home countries. This helps mitigate the burden of asylum by returning asylum seekers to neighbouring and/or source countries from European territories. It may also accelerate the sluggish uptake of AVR policies over the years. Some of these encouraging factors are highlighted below and their distinct roles explained afterwards.

- Desire to reunite with family in home countries.
- Improved political and socio-economic conditions in the country of origin.
- Effective enforcement systems in the host country (the UK).
- Customized programmes (to the country of origin).
- Desire to reclaim property.
- Political commitment or desire to rebuild the home country.
- Provision of reintegration assistance.

The relevant literature suggests that poor political and socio-economic conditions in the home countries have deeply discouraged asylum seekers and failed asylum seekers from repatriating. These might have been the same reasons which originally inspired their migration to the UK.<sup>23</sup> In line with this, the second important factor highlighted is the poor security environment in the home country, Afghanistan, for instance. This factor alone might act as a strong push factor.<sup>24</sup> Some scholars/researchers tend to disagree and contend that a non-conducive home environment plays only a minor role in migrants' decisions.<sup>25</sup> They further posit that the AVR participants' decisions mainly depend on the perceptions of the relative conditions of the host and home countries.

The third most important factor is family concerns. This factor, as Foblets and Vanbeselaere (2005) argue, can override all other factors in the return decision. The desire to join, help and serve family members has been well

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<sup>23</sup> R. Sales, B. Blitz. and L. Marzano, *Afghan Nationals in the UK: Professional Capacity and Views on Return* (London: IOM, 2003).

<sup>24</sup> K. Koser, *The Return and Reintegration of Rejected Asylum Seekers and Irregular Migrants: An Analysis of Government Assisted Return Programmes in Selected European Countries*. (Geneva: IOM, 2001); European Council on Refugees and Exiles, *Increasing Refugee Participation in the Field of Voluntary Return*, Part 1 and 2, (Brussels, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> Black et al., *Understanding Voluntary Return*.

documented in AVR-specific studies and those of general migration. Migrants are naturally most concerned about immediate family members. A typical example includes love for elderly parents. Moreover, the situation gets more complicated when the family is split between host and home countries. In the British VARRP programme, the return of families has been incentivized by making special reintegration assistance available to each family member. In addition to family concerns, there is evidence that the length of stay in the UK is inversely proportional to the desire to return home. The longer the asylum seeker stays in the UK, the less likely he/she is to return home.<sup>26</sup> With the passage of time they become accustomed to the Western lifestyle.<sup>27</sup> The desire to return is thus hampered, particularly when the children of asylum seekers get good education and get accustomed to the local culture. In sum, concern for close family can both encourage and/or discourage the desire to return home.

The embarrassment of return is considered as the fourth pertinent factor when asylum seekers begin pondering seriously about their return and repatriation to home countries. Returning home would most likely be considered as failure by people in the home country, especially where friends or family have contributed to the costs of the original migration. The local people expect demonstrable wealth from a migrant/asylum seeker upon return. Evidence exists that migrants tend to hide failure and avoid facing such embarrassment.<sup>28</sup> British AVR studies examining this factor in detail are scarce but the assumption is that reintegration assistance can play a role in overcoming this barrier to return.<sup>29</sup> The fifth factor that encourages return and thereby enhances the AVR's uptake is an improvement in economic conditions in the country of origin. This factor may often be related to the original cause of migration. For instance, political migrants may want to return home after conditions at home show a marked improvement. Asylum seekers and failed asylum seekers may have mixed attitudes similar to those of the economic and political

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<sup>26</sup> European Council on Refugees and Exiles, *Increasing Refugee Participation in the Field of Voluntary Return*.

<sup>27</sup> Thiel and Gillan, *Factors Affecting Participation*.

<sup>28</sup> R. King, "Generalisations from the History of Return Migration 2000", In B. Ghosh (ed.), *Return Migration: Journey of Hope or Despair?* (Geneva: IOM, 2000).

<sup>29</sup> European Council on Refugees and Exiles, *Increasing Refugee Participation*.

migrants. Favourable political and economic conditions may pull asylum seekers back to their countries of origin.

Some empirical studies have highlighted “the distrust of asylum seekers of AVR programmes” as an important factor that discourages the return plans of failed asylum seekers.<sup>30</sup> A number of asylum seekers who have not succeeded in gaining asylum are suspicious of the government-funded AVR programmes. This suspicion may be increased by the lack of adequate information about the current practices of so-called voluntary removals in the UK. Efforts have been made to lessen the distrust through several approaches. One of the main approaches is the induction of relevant community members in the administration of AVR programmes. This would not only improve the level of trust among migrants but also the AVR uptake.<sup>31</sup> It is necessary to engage more community groups in the running of the programmes to ensure access to services/information to potential asylum seekers. Future research should focus on exploring in depth the various approaches to remove the distrust among asylum seekers.

The literature also identified that AVR programmes are more likely to produce high uptakes when the available alternatives to failed asylum seekers are reduced to only a few, basically the option of ‘forced return’.<sup>32</sup> In other words, AVR is most effective when it is accompanied by an effective enforcement system. Until recently, AVR policies have low uptakes, most likely owing to the ease in evading removal by most failed asylum seekers, particularly from India, Pakistan and China who have strong diaspora networks in the UK.<sup>33</sup> The policy of enforced return is in turn directly related to the strength of British agreements with the countries of origin. In addition to enforced removal, reintegration assistance in monetary form to each family member may also act as an incentive to return.<sup>34</sup> Considering the above arguments, one may safely contend that the uniform reintegration assistance may not raise AVR uptake by itself, unless policies are tailored to the needs of individuals

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<sup>30</sup> B. Blitz, R. Sales and L. Marzano, “Non-Voluntary Return? The Politics of Return to Afghanistan”, *Political Studies* 53 (2005):182-200.

<sup>31</sup> M. Foblets and N. Vzanbeselaere, *Executive Summary: Asylum Seekers and Return: A Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis, Observatory for Migrations*, Belgium, 2005.

<sup>32</sup> European Council on Refugees and Exile, 2005.

<sup>33</sup> Thiel and Gillan, *Factors Affecting Participation*.

<sup>34</sup> K. Koser, “Information and Repatriation: The Case of Mozambican Refugees in Malawi”, *Journal of Refugee Studies* 10, no.1 (1997): 1-17.

and/or communities.

### **Conclusion**

This paper examined the current situation of asylum seekers with special reference to the UK. In the aftermath of the Second World War, international migration began to increase at a steady pace. More people from economically and politically unstable countries sought refuge and shelter in advanced countries. Following their footsteps, the less desperate people also left their homelands to improve their economic conditions. This resulted in large-scale migration to countries like the UK, which ultimately forced British policy makers to devise ways of removal and reintegration. Most of the policies and media articles have thus far emphasised ways of refusal and removal of asylum seekers at entry points. Nevertheless, for better results, policies of removal need to be replaced by rehabilitation and reintegration services. There is a genuine need to review existing policies and practices as regards the handling of asylum seekers.

This article provides a review of all assisted programmes in the UK for return migrants and asylum seekers. The findings show that the percentage of people returning home through the Assisted Voluntary Programme (AVR) is growing, however, it is small in comparison to other mechanisms including enforced removals. The data also show that the topmost source countries for asylum seekers in the UK include Zimbabwe, Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan among others. This suggests that the British asylum policies should now give increased attention to the above mentioned source countries for the purpose of the return of migrants. The sluggish uptake of AVR programmes needs to be enhanced with a customized policy for socio-economic well-being. Regarding the promotion of an assisted and amicable return process, the paper empirically identified the most pertinent factors that encourage and/or discourage migrants' decision to return to their countries of origin.

Based on qualitative thematic analysis, several pertinent factors were identified that were important to probable decision by asylum seekers to return home and reunite with family members. These factors are important from the policy perspective as they could provide a basis for prioritizing and channelizing customized policies for each category of migrants. There are factors that discourage migrants to take the decision to return home while others encourage them to re-join families back home. Some of the

discouraging factors include poverty or poor socio-economic conditions in the country of origin, divided family members, and the shame of return. In addition, respondents also expressed distrust of AVR programmes and fear of legal prosecution even if they were willing to leave the UK. On the positive side, some respondents also felt pulled towards their home countries (encouraging factors) for reasons such as family reunion, property reclaim, political and social commitments. The return decision was also influenced by reintegration assistance and effective enforcement of law. In totality, a migrant's final decision is the outcome of a relative assessment of major conducive and constrictive factors both in the destination and source countries.

This research is meant to contribute to the body of knowledge on asylum and the underlying factors in the asylum seeker's decision to return or stay in the host country. While the study focused on the UK and Europe, the findings, such as the decision factors are applicable to asylum seekers in other developed countries such as the United States. Future research could apply some of these findings in similar contexts. Owing to ethnic variations among migrants, research should also take into account the country differences and come up with customized policies according to individual country profiles. Furthermore, looking into return factors will help governments to filter legal migrants from the illegal ones and offer asylum only to the genuine ones. Efforts to highlight key decision factors and the return and reintegration mechanisms, it is hoped, will not only help policy-makers but also academicians working on similar themes. A more nuanced theoretical foundation incorporating for instance, the "disadvantage theory of migrants" is a suggested approach to carry this research further.