

The EU and asylum: towards strategies to reduce conflict and human rights abuses in countries of origin

by Stephen Castles, Heaven Crawley and Sean Loughna

Most asylum seekers in Europe come from states affected by high levels of violence, oppression and conflict.

Upon arrival, they are often accused of deception by politicians, the press and the public. So far the European Union and its member states have focused on strengthening the borders of Fortress Europe. A new study suggests that they would do better to address the root causes of forced migration: underdevelopment, conflict and impoverishment in countries of origin.

A report from the Institute for Public Policy Research critiques current EU policies to address the phenomenon of illegal and forced migration. It warns that those in need of protection will seek sanctuary in Europe as long as violence and human rights violations go unchecked.

During the 1990s, the top ten countries of origin of asylum seekers were former Yugoslavia, Romania, Turkey, Iraq, Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Sri Lanka, Iran, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The report identifies common 'push factors' in all these states: ethnic/religious discrimination, human rights abuses, civil war and a large proportion of internally displaced people relative to the total population.

Europe's fight against illegal migration has diverted attention from addressing its root causes. Changes in procedures and criteria for asylum determination, such as the introduction of temporary protection regimes (used to ensure those fleeing the Balkan wars went home) and declaring Central European states as 'safe third countries' to which asylum seekers can be returned, have made it more difficult for those genuinely in need

of protection to get asylum, while encouraging smugglers and traffickers.

The authors stress that:

- Flows of forced migrants to Europe are comparatively small when considered against global displacement movements: countries such as Guinea, Iran, Pakistan, Sudan and Tanzania have much greater refugee populations.
- There is evidence that underdevelopment and impoverishment are not direct push factors for forced migration. Rather they create the conditions for weak states, human rights abuse and conflict, which force people to flee.
- Even when fleeing violence or persecution and in need of protection, some asylum seekers have a degree of control over where they go and how they travel.
- Policy makers may aspire to make clear distinctions between economic and forced migrants but the migration-asylum nexus defies simplistic judgement: many migrants have multiple motivations for moving.
- Once a migratory flow is established it may be driven by social networks and chain migration patterns even where policies in relation to asylum seekers change.
- Discrimination against Kurds is a key factor behind the large number of Iranian, Iraqi and Turkish nationals seeking asylum.

The report shows that EU policy makers have been aware of such issues since the early 1990s but have failed to achieve concerted measures by the relevant Directorates-General of the European Commission, and the ministries for justice and home

affairs, foreign affairs, trade and international cooperation within each state. There is an urgent need for common policies to address the root causes of forced migration.

Sustainable reduction of migration flows requires:

- long-term joined-up policies to address issues of conflict prevention and development
- ending arms exports to regimes with poor human rights records and those engaged in internal oppression or violence against their neighbours
- concerted action against illicit trading in diamonds, coltan, cobalt and other commodities which fuel conflicts
- ensuring that the EU's High Level Working Group on Asylum and Migration operates more transparently, values expertise from all policy areas and develops measurable policies and programmes.

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This is a summary of *States of Conflict: Causes and Patterns of Forced Migration to the EU and Policy Responses*, ISBN: 1 86030 216 5, obtainable for £9.95 from the Institute for Public Policy, 30-32 Southampton Street, Covent Garden, London WC2E 7RA, UK. Tel: +44 (0)207 470 6100. Further information is available at www.ippr.org.uk/publications/index.php?book=359