

Country of Origin Information: old problems, modern solutions

Marco Formisano

The current multitude of sources of information paradoxically renders access to good quality Country of Origin Information for refugee status determination procedures quite cumbersome.

In the challenging task of determining the legitimacy of a claim for refugee status, Country of Origin Information (COI) is a key element, complementing the testimonial of the applicant. It may, for example, corroborate or contradict the likelihood of the risk of persecution or help ascertain the relevance and reasonableness of available internal flight or relocation alternatives. Government COI Units will attempt to provide a balanced account of facts but may face a variety of difficulties in accessing relevant COI.

The first issue at stake is the quality of information versus its quantity. Searching the web can produce an almost unworkable amount of information, and finding targeted impartial, authoritative and trustworthy country information may be technically burdensome.

Secondly, one would have to look into a sufficiently large store of information – looking at sources with different mandates, goals and biases – and evaluate them one against the other in order to judge their degree of reliability as proof. This can be a lengthy and resource-intensive process.

Thirdly, the depth of information required for adjudicating cases has significantly increased in recent times. Although a few years ago cases were decided on the basis of information from a country guide book and a few file notes in a dossier, in the era of Twitter and YouTube the thirst for meticulous detail has deepened exponentially.

Lastly, language barriers may pose additional problems, especially if local detailed information is sought. Translations are expensive and online research is limited if the researcher does not know the relevant language. This is where new filtering solutions

are needed and where technology could play a positive role.

Online databases

In order to overcome these problems at least in part, some specialised agencies such as UNHCR and NGOs such as the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD)¹ have developed platforms containing legal, policy, procedural and evidentiary materials to support their decision making. Online documentary repositories such as UNHCR's Refworld (www.refworld.org) and ACCORD's Ecoi.net (www.ecoi.net) permit one-stop-shop access to selected reliable and publicly available COI.

Beside the primary task of carefully evaluating and selecting high-quality documents and making them available on the internet, these particular platforms offer plenty of versatile features, such as:

Daily updates, with an average of 20 to 50 new documents a day. This represents almost 30,000 new information items a year. Weekly personalised alerts on selected countries and/or document types are sent on request, enabling easy monitoring of country updates. At present, they offer access to more than 300,000 documents, covering COI and refugee-related policy, legislation and jurisprudence. This constantly updated information is accessible from anywhere, free of charge.

Easy to use and powerful research and navigation functions: Filters can be used for country, publishers, document types, publication timeframes and languages. Search and spelling suggestions assist when looking, for example, for different spellings of names of political parties, military groups or religious

groups. All these features allow for speedy and effective investigation.

Personalisation features, whereby users can create and organise their own online libraries, saving documents or entire search results. This saves considerable time in retrieving documents and local computer space, as the information is safely stored online.

Versatile Content Management Systems (CMS): Both Refworld and Ecoi.net are fed through a specifically designed CMS that allows for identification, specification and retrievability of each document, allowing for batch imports of hundreds of documents at a time.

Despite the apparent niche clientele of refugee practitioners, these sites have seen considerable traffic of visitors from all over the world. On average, more than 130,000 unique visitors to Refworld access approximately four million pages per month.

RSD Community of Practice

Asylum adjudicators can also benefit from modern technologies in the form of collaborative platforms for the exchange of expertise and knowledge on asylum laws, procedures and COI. More often than not, adjudicators may feel they work in isolation, and in light of UNHCR's scattered operations and the need to bridge different geographical locations, the RSD Community of Practice (RSD CoP) materialised.

Based on a Windows folder system, the CoP enables users to undertake two very simple actions: adding documents to a 'knowledge' database organised according to the agreed themes, and to pose questions in a forum space, by starting 'Discussions' within topics (legal or procedural matters, COI queries, etc). This renders the CoP easy to use, even for the less technically skilled. The system further allows for subscription to selected topics in order to be notified of community



activity. Replies to questions, as well as documents posted, may be accessed directly from the email alert, considerably saving time.

The structure can be modelled very flexibly so that it can be adapted to different and changing communication purposes and classification needs. It also helps prevent the loss of a large amount of tacit or informal knowledge that would otherwise be lost with rotation of duty station and mobility of staff. The CoP is accessible over the internet but has enhanced security features such as high-bit encryption, a log-in requirement and hierarchy of access of users. Rather than functioning through moderators, the community is based on peer-to-peer communication. As a result, the RSD CoP is ultimately an efficient tool for better informed decision making.

Future cooperation and integration

We should look to technology to develop dedicated applications to help reduce workloads, solve impasses and share experiences

by connecting people. Improved online repositories and incremental use of communities of practice would be one way to go.

New tools may be also be explored, such as different ways of accessing COI through interactive maps and satellite imagery that would geocode country evidence, precisely locating security incidents or human rights violations in any corner of the world. Partnerships with news information providers would also complement current capacities.

We should then look into interfaces that would allow communication between existing incompatible systems, in order to overcome duplication and strengthen cooperation in access to and distribution of COI. This will be one of the crucial tasks of the European Asylum Support Office, the EU Agency mandated to provide practical assistance to Member States in implementing the EU Common Asylum System. Integration of existing COI

repositories as well as development of ad hoc communication platforms will contribute to the success of an agency that has to provide services to 27 Member States, in 23 different languages. These same comprehensive solutions will also help other jurisdictions, such as the US, where geographic distances and differences in capacities and approaches between the various offices benefit from harmonised and equal access to COI.

While the basic framework for making asylum decisions remains similar, the means available to those making the decisions have changed. The same technologies that are driving the changes can also be used to push up the quality of the information used for making the decisions.

Marco Formisano (formisan@unhcr.org) is currently Protection Officer in the Comprehensive Solutions Unit of UNHCR (www.unhcr.org).

1. www.roteskreuz.at/i18n/en/organise/accord/