

## When the Journey Begins at the Destination

WHAT DO ASYLUM SEEKERS KNOW about their destination? DR KHALID KOSEK, a geographer and associate dean and head of the New Issues in Security Programme at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, explains.

The main purpose of introducing more restrictive asylum policies – from stronger border enforcement, through limiting welfare payments, to detention – is to reduce the number of asylum seekers arriving in the country. Around the world – including in Australia – significant funding, resources, and political capital are expended on such policies to achieve this goal.

A good deal of research, however, suggests that these policies may be based on a flawed assumption, which means that they will not work, and are ultimately a waste of time and money. This assumption is that asylum seekers know about policies in destination countries, and thus will make the decision not to go there once more restrictive policies are introduced. But do they? And will they?

A survey conducted by the author and colleagues among asylum seekers in the UK in 2005, that included respondents from Afghanistan as well as several other countries, found that most had little knowledge of the UK other than general impressions. Many had heard of Princess Diana and David Beckham, but most certainly did not appear to understand how the asylum or welfare system worked.

The study identified five reasons for limited

knowledge among the respondents. First, few had family or friends in the UK; and for many migrants these are the most important source of information about conditions in other countries. Second, in some cases they had been provided misleading or false information, including in many cases by family members. Pride, or embarrassment, may encourage asylum seekers to mislead friends or family at home about their circumstances.

Third, many had departed their country in a rush; people fleeing for their lives rarely have time to undertake detailed research. Fourth, some were poorly educated and did not speak English. Finally, some had not actually chosen their destination, with this decision being made on their behalf by family members. All of these factors are likely to be relevant for some of the boat arrivals in Australia today.

In response to these sorts of gaps in knowledge, many governments, including the Australian government, invest significant resources in information campaigns in important origin countries, explaining not just how the asylum and migration system work, but also the risks of trying to enter without authorisation.

But research also demonstrates that these campaigns can also be ineffective. One reason is that governments and international organisations are simply not trusted by the people they are trying to reach. This may not be as a result of mistrust of a specific government in a particular country, but a more general mistrust of authority in general, arising from personal experiences in countries where corruption is rife and the rule of law poor.

Another reason is that dissemination strategies are often ill-conceived, for example not reaching beyond the capital city, or being prepared in only a limited number of local languages, or focusing on public spaces that may be inaccessible for example to women in certain societies. A final reason is that information is quickly out of date, especially when, as has been the case in Australia this year, asylum policies change rapidly.

Even if asylum seekers do find out about restrictive asylum policies in their intended destination, will this be enough to deter them? Again research suggests that there are a number of other variables that are just as significant as government policy in determining the choice of destination by asylum seekers. In Europe these include geographical proximity and pre-existing colonial, trade, or linguistic linkages, which are of less relevance in the Australian context. Another factor, which is of direct relevance, is the role of social networks, referring to the presence in potential destination countries of family, friends, and co-nationals or co-ethnics.

In practical terms, social networks provide information, lend would-be migrants money for their journeys, and can help with immediate challenges upon



Sydney Airport. PHOTO: LIBRARYMOOK/2010

arrival like overcoming language and cultural barriers, and finding accommodation and work. There is clear research evidence that once momentum develops around social networks, it is hard for policies to stop that momentum. Another important variable in explaining why asylum seekers go to particular places is the role of smugglers. One of the reasons people pay smugglers is to organise their trip for them, from escaping their home country, through surviving in transit, to getting into a destination country. In which case a more important question than whether restrictive asylum policies deter asylum seekers is whether they deter smugglers from delivering people to particular destinations.

Sometimes smugglers are only paid once they have delivered their clients to countries where they can gain physical access to the territory, enter the asylum system, stand a good chance of being able to remain (legally or illegally) in the country, and find opportunities to work. In such cases restrictive policies may well make smugglers rethink targeting a particular destination. But in other situations, where for example smugglers are paid in full upfront before departure, they have little incentive other perhaps than pride, honour, or establishing

a business reputation, for selecting between destinations. The suspension of processing for new Afghan or Sri Lankan asylum seekers in Australian territories was an irrelevance for the smuggler dispatching them there, as long as he had already been paid and could avoid personally being caught or penalised.

Finally, in reality asylum seekers go to countries not because of the leniency or otherwise of asylum policies, but because they perceive those countries as fair, decent, and safe.

Of course there are examples where border enforcement has reduced the number of asylum seekers arriving in particular countries, and where well-designed information campaigns appear to have had an impact. But normally this has been where these policies are part of a more comprehensive approach that includes combating migrant smuggling and human trafficking, and contributing directly towards peace and security in the countries asylum seekers are fleeing in the first place.

If a government's intention is to stop asylum seekers – and that is in itself an intention that requires closer scrutiny – then assuming that restrictive policies will make this happen is short-sighted and unrealistic. **R**