

The Quest for 'Truth'

A Qualitative Research into the Use of Country of Origin Information in the Dutch Asylum System

By Knarik Arakel



Radboud Universiteit



The Quest for 'Truth'

A Qualitative Research into the Use of Country of Origin
Information in the Dutch Asylum System

Knarik Arakel
Student number 1014478
Supervised by Prof. Dr Henk van Houtum
Second reader: Rodrigo Bueno Lacy

Master Thesis – Human Geography
Specialisation 'Globalisation, Migration & Development'
Radboud University Nijmegen
July 8th, 2020



Radboud Universiteit



Preface

In front of you lies my master thesis '*The Quest for 'Truth': A Qualitative Research into the Use of Country of Origin Information in the Dutch Asylum System*'. It was a very long process, and I often thought it would never come to an end. And yet, this is the end of a long period in which a lot has happened and a lot has changed.

First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor Henk van Houtum for his patience, feedback and for guiding me in the right direction. Whenever I lost my motivation or didn't know how to proceed, he encouraged me to continue.

I would also like to thank the consultants Hans, Marije, Laurence and Hiske of the Country Information team of the Dutch Council for Refugees for their guidance and feedback during my one-year internship. I learned a lot in that year about asylum procedures in the Netherlands and how important country information can be in the lives of asylum seekers.

I would also like to thank the IND for having an interview with me and for their critical feedback. I would also like to thank asylum lawyer Andrea Pool for having an interview with me and providing interesting information and insights.

Finally, I would like to thank my family and friends for their endless support and encouragement to keep going, no matter how difficult it was. Special thanks to my husband Hajk for his support during this entire process and for always believing in me.

Knarik Arakel

July 8, 2020

Table of contents

<u>PREFACE</u>	- 4 -
<u>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</u>	- 7 -
<u>CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION</u>	- 9 -
1.1 AIM OF THE RESEARCH AND RESEARCH QUESTION (S)	- 10 -
1.2 RELEVANCE OF THE RESEARCH	- 12 -
1.3 THESIS STRUCTURE	- 13 -
<u>CHAPTER 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK</u>	- 14 -
2.1. WORLDWIDE MIGRATION	- 14 -
2.2 ASYLUM PROCEDURES IN THE NETHERLANDS.....	- 17 -
2.3 PURPOSE OF COUNTRY OF ORIGIN INFORMATION (COI).....	- 20 -
2.4 COI SOURCES.....	- 22 -
2.5 ROLE OF COI IN ASYLUM DECISION-MAKING	- 26 -
2.6 BUREAUCRACY OF TRUTH	- 27 -
<u>CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY</u>	- 31 -
3.1 RESEARCH METHODS.....	- 31 -
3.2 INTERNSHIP AND DATA COLLECTION	- 33 -
3.3 INTERVIEWS.....	- 37 -
3.4 DATA ANALYSIS	- 39 -
<u>CHAPTER 4. RESEARCH RESULTS: SEARCHING AND USING COI</u>	- 43 -
4.1 STRUCTURE OF THE LETTERS	- 43 -
4.2 SEARCH FOR INFORMATION AND USE OF SOURCES	- 44 -
4.3 COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN AND REASONS TO FLEE.....	- 47 -
4.4 THE COI LETTERS	- 48 -
<u>CHAPTER 5. USE OF COI BY AN ASYLUM LAWYER</u>	- 72 -
5.1 USE OF COI	- 72 -
5.2 SENSITIVITIES/ISSUES WITH COI	- 74 -
5.3 ROLE OF COI IN THE DECISION-MAKING	- 77 -
<u>CHAPTER 6. USE OF COI BY THE IND</u>	- 78 -
6.1 COI-UNITS OF THE IND	- 78 -
6.2 USE OF COI BY THE IND	- 79 -
6.3 SENSITIVITIES/ISSUES WHEN USING COI	- 81 -
6.4 ROLE OF COI IN THE DECISION-MAKING	- 83 -
<u>CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION</u>	- 84 -
7.1 USE OF COI BY DIFFERENT ACTORS	- 84 -
7.2 REFLECTION	- 87 -
7.3 RECOMMENDATIONS	- 88 -
<u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u>	- 89 -

APPENDICES - 96 -
APPENDIX 1 LIST OF QUESTIONS INTERVIEW ASYLUM LAWYER..... - 97 -
APPENDIX 2 LIST OF QUESTIONS INTERVIEW IND..... - 98 -
APPENDIX 3 TRANSCRIPTION INTERVIEW ASYLUM LAWYER - 100 -

List of Abbreviations

AC	Aanmeldcentrum Schiphol Austrian Centre for Country of Origin & Asylum Research and
ACCORD	Documentation
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CBS	Central Agency for Statistics
COI	Country of Origin Information
COL	Centraal Opvanglocatie
DCR	Dutch Council for Refugees
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
EASO	European Asylum Support Office
ECRE	European Council on Refugees and Exiles
EMN	European Migration Network
EU	European Union
Eurodac	European Dactyloscopy
FGM	Female Genital Circumcision
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICG	International Crisis Group
ICMPD	The International Centre for Migration Policy Development
IGO	Intergovernmental organization International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex
ILGA	Association
IND	Immigration and Naturalization Service
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IRB	Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada
IRIN	Integrated Regional Information Networks
IS	Islamitic state
KAR	Kurdish Autonomous Region
KML	Keyhole Markup Language - Geographic information system
LA	Los Angeles
LGBT	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender
LGBTI	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex
LTTE	Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam
MRG	Minority Rights Group International
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NOS	Dutch public broadcasting
NPS	Naval Postgraduate School
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
POL	Proces Opvanglocatie
RIC	Regional Information Center
SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
TOELT	Team Research Expertise Country and Language
UK	United Kingdom

UN	United Nations
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Fund
US	United States
USDOS	United States Department of State
VIS	Visa Information System
WHO	World Health Organisation

Chapter 1. Introduction

“Verifying refugees’ stories: why is it so difficult?” That is the title of an article by The Guardian from November 2016 (Nianias, 2016). The article addresses the issues related to processing applications and verifying the stories of refugees. The refugee crisis has increased the pressure on countries to receive more refugees. However, this also increases the pressure on finding the truth of asylum seekers. How can it be determined who is a ‘real’ refugee and who is not? This research examines how the stories of refugees are verified and how the ‘truth’ is found.

In the UN 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee is defined as *“someone who has well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it”* (UNHCR, 2010). However, ‘fear’ is subjective and therefore it is required that this fear is well-founded. Asylum applicants must demonstrate that they are at risk for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a particular social group. To demonstrate such risks, there must be Country of Origin Information (COI) (Gibb & Good, 2013). COI is information about the human right situation as well as the security situation in a country or origin. This fear of asylum seekers also concerns the future, because it involves risks that they can face in the future. According to Gibb & Good (2013), *“decisions on refugee status are always risk assessments”*. Asylum seekers must prove that they are at risk in the country of origin. Therefore, they have to tell their story and provide supporting documents.

However, sometimes the only evidence asylum seekers have, are their past experiences of prosecution. It is then up to the authorities to determine whether they believe the story of an asylum seeker or not. According to Gibb & Good (2013), the credibility of an asylum seeker's story is twofold. First, their story has to be

internally consistent, which means that there are no remarkable contradictions and confusions over dates and places. Second, their story has to be externally consistent, meaning that their story must match the available information about their country or situation. COI is once again used to verify the story of an asylum seeker. COI plays an important role in European asylum systems (Van der Kist, Dijkstra & De Goede, 2019). It is stated in the UNHCR Handbook (1992, paragraph 42) that *“the applicant's statements cannot, however, be considered in the abstract, and must be viewed in the context of the relevant background situation. A knowledge of conditions in the applicant's country of origin – while not a primary objective – is an important element in assessing the applicant's credibility”*. The future of asylum seekers is therefore in the hands of policymakers and judges and COI plays a role in the decision-making. They have the power to decide which facts they consider important to determine whether someone is at risk or not and if he or she is granted refugee status.

During a one-year internship at the Country Information team of the Dutch Council for Refugees, research was conducted into how country of origin information is searched and how that information is used to verify the stories of asylum seekers.

1.1 Aim of the research and research question (s)

The aim of this research is to examine and understand how COI is searched for and how the information is used by different actors in asylum procedures in order to verify the stories of asylum seekers. That is why the following research question will be answered:

How is Country of Origin Information used to assess whether an asylum seeker's statements are plausible in the Dutch asylum system?

In order to answer this, the research question is divided into three sub-questions:

1. How is country of origin information sought and collected by COI units?

This section examines which country of origin questions COI units receive, how information is searched and which sources are used.

2. How is country of origin information used by asylum lawyers to support their clients?

Through an interview with an asylum lawyer, attempts are made to answer how asylum lawyers make use of COI units in practice and how they use COI to support their clients.

3. How is country of origin information used by the IND to make asylum decisions?

An interview was also conducted for this question, but this time with a hearing- and decision officer at the Integration and Naturalization Service (IND) in order to understand how they use COI in the decision-making of asylum applications.

To be able to answer these questions, an alternative qualitative research method has been applied called 'participant observation'. I did an internship for a year at the Country Information team of the Dutch Council for Refugees where questions about countries of origin are being answered. For an entire year, I answered questions by searching and collecting COI and writing letters to asylum lawyers and legal counsellors of the Dutch Council for Refugees. In the methodology chapter I will discuss in more detail how I have collected and analysed data.

1.2 Relevance of the research

Scientific relevance

Over the years, country-of-origin information (COI) has become an important element of European asylum systems (Van der Kist et al., 2019). COI mainly serves to support decisions and assessments regarding asylum seekers and refugees. There are many documents on how to use COI, which sources to consult and what role COI plays in asylum decision-making. This research is scientifically relevant, because the use of COI is being studied in a different way, namely by analysing in detail letters containing COI, written for asylum lawyers to support their clients. This research goes deeper into which sources are used, how information is searched, what information is used and eventually how the statements of asylum seekers are verified. This information is discussed in detail on the basis of examples.

Societal relevance

Migration has a global impact and has major social consequences for a society. For various reasons, people seek refuge in other countries and apply for asylum there. According to CBS (Dutch Central Agency for Statistics), in 2019, more people migrated to the Netherlands than they left the country. The migration balance was 109166 people. This trend can also be seen in the years before and we can speak of a significant increase in the recent years (CBS, 2020). Asylum seekers all have their own reasons to flee from their country of origin. By means of COI it can be determined which statements are plausible.

However, there are sensitivities when using COI, because it determines whether a person is granted refugee status or not. COI must therefore be used correctly so that asylum seekers have a fair chance of obtaining refugee status. This research is therefore also socially relevant because the use of COI has consequences for both asylum seekers and society. It determines who can and cannot stay.

1.3 Thesis structure

This thesis aims to examine and understand how COI is used to verify the stories of asylum seekers by describing and analyzing how the truth is sought in asylum cases. In order to do this, a theoretical framework and methodology are comprehensively set out before outlining and analysing the results. After this first chapter the theoretical framework will follow, in which the different concepts and theories are discussed regarding migration, asylum and COI. In the third chapter the methodology is constructed, outlining the different phases of this research from collecting data to qualitative data analysis. Here is explained how the research is executed and why these particular methods were chosen. Subsequently the results are presented in the fourth chapter, where COI letters are thoroughly studied and analyzed in order to understand how COI is sought and how the information is used. In the fifth chapter the use of COI by an asylum lawyer is described by discussing how they use COI to support their clients, which issues / sensitivities there are with regard to COI, and the role of COI in de decision-making from the point of view of the asylum lawyer. The sixth chapter discusses how the IND uses COI to make asylum related decisions by examining the COI-units of the Integration and Naturalization Service (IND), the use of COI by de IND and the issues and/or the sensitivities with regard to COI. Finally, conclusions, recommendations and reflections will be outlined in the last chapter of the thesis.

Chapter 2. Theoretical framework

This chapter will discuss the different concepts and theories regarding migration, the asylum procedures in the Netherlands and country of origin information (COI). Furthermore, the controversial 'truth' in asylum and the correlation between asylum and bureaucracy are discussed.

2.1. Worldwide migration

Human migration has existed since the beginning of human history. Although migration offers opportunities to migrants, societies and States, it is also posing political and policy challenges (IOM, 2017). In 2019, there were approximately 272 million international migrants globally. However, there are many more internal migrants (740 million in 2009). There were 25.9 million refugees and 3.5 million asylum seekers worldwide by the end of 2018. The number of refugees has never been so high (IOM, 2019).

Europe experienced in 2015 a large increase in refugees, which became known as the 'refugee crisis'. More than 330000 asylum seekers were granted protection status in 2015 by the Member States of the EU. Compared to 2014, this was an increase of 72%. Most of these asylum seekers who received protection status in 2015 came from Syria (166100), Eritrea (27600) and Iraq (23700) (Eurostat, 2016). The Mediterranean Sea played a major role in the arrival of the migrants, as about 1 million people crossed the sea to reach Europe (Dahlvik, 2018). Unresolved or renewed conflicts were the main causes of the large numbers of refugees and asylum seekers. The top 10 countries where the most refugees came from at the end of 2018 were: the Syrian Arab Republic, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar, Somalia, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, Eritrea and Burundi (IOM, 2019). Most of the refugees (approximately 6.7 million) came from the Syrian Arab Republic due to the ongoing conflict. Afghanistan is the second country where most of the refugees come from, at approximately 2.7 million. The reason is violence and instability that has been going on for more than 30 years (IOM, 2019). The third largest origin

country of refugees was South Sudan. The reason so many people have fled the country is the major outbreak of violence in 2016, which resulted in 2.3 million South Sudanese refugees in 2018 (IOM, 2019). In 2018, Turkey was again the country with the most refugees (3.7 million), of which 3.6 million were Syrians (IOM, 2019). Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Islamic Republic of Iran, Uganda, Sudan, Germany, Bangladesh and Ethiopia are the 10 host countries with the most refugees in 2018 (IOM, 2019).

In recent years, there has been a lot of pressure on migration channels. Due to this pressure, illegal migration has increased. Since the lifting of border controls at the internal borders in the European Union, the external border controls of the European Union have been tightened. This tightening of the external borders is described by critics as “Fortress Europe” (Van Houtum & Lucassen, 2016). The Netherlands has also received many refugees and asylum seekers in recent years. The number of asylum seekers has increased from less than 5% in 2012 to almost 20% in 2016 (CBS, 2018). Currently, between 200.000 and 250.000 refugees live in the Netherlands. Most of them come from Syria, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iraq, Iran and Turkey (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2019).

What started as a peaceful civil uprising against the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, turned into a civil war between the government forces and the opposition rebels. However, the war has become more complicated and intense *“due to the interference of global and regional powers as well as Islamic Jihadists in the imbroglio”* (Khan & Khan, 2017). Hundreds of thousands of people have died as a result of this civil war and millions have fled to other countries. The country is now divided into three areas: areas which are under control of Assad, areas which are under control of the Kurds and areas which are under control of armed groups in the province of Idlib (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2019). Part of the northwestern territory is controlled by Turkey. There are no longer areas under IS control, but the terrorist group is still present in various parts of the country (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2019).

Afghanistan has been at war for more than 30 years (IOM, 2019). After the 9/11 attacks, US troops were deployed to Afghanistan to destroy Al Qaida training camps. The Taliban government was driven out, but the Taliban was not definitively defeated (VluchtelingenWerk, 2019). The security situation is increasingly deteriorating, especially after many international troops have withdrawn from the country. There is still much fighting in large parts of the country, mainly in the east and south. The Taliban is also advancing and gaining more and more control over certain districts. In addition to the Taliban, IS has recently also started operating in the country and the organization is trying to conquer territories (VluchtelingenWerk, Nederland, 2019). As a result, many Afghans have fled their country.

Eritreans have many reasons to flee their country, but the main reasons are the oppressive regime, poverty and a lack of livelihood opportunities (Horwood & Hooper, 2016). In addition, the country is very closed and isolated from the outside world. The compulsory and long national service, which is 18 months but can be as long as 10 years, is another reason for many to flee (Horwood & Hooper, 2016). Eritreans cannot criticize the government and opponents are detained. In addition, Eritreans cannot simply leave the country, they must obtain permission from the authorities by applying for an exit visa. However, in practice almost no one is issued an exit visa (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2019).

Iraq's history has been tumultuous of a long time. The country had a violent dictatorship and was at war with Iran and Kuwait (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2019). After President Saddam Hussein was impeached in 2003, major contradictions arose between Shiite and Sunni Muslims. This led to a civil war and later the rise of IS. Although IS no longer has control over Iraqi territories, it is not yet completely defeated. Many Iraqis are fleeing the country because many human rights are violated and because IS often carries out attacks (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2019). There are also many Kurds fleeing because the Central Iraqi government has taken control of a number of areas under Kurdish rule.

Iran became an Islamic Republic in 1979, after a revolution broke out and the Shah was deposed (VluchtelingenWerk, 2019). The country continues to have a poor human rights situation. Certain groups of people are at great risk in the country, such as opponents, converts and homosexuals. In addition, many human rights are violated, because there are many assaults, disappearances, arrests, torture and convictions (Amnesty International, 2019). There are also restrictions on freedom of the press and freedom of expression and criticism of the government is punished (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2019).

In the summer of 2016, a coup attempt was made in Turkey (Al Jazeera, 2017). After this failed coup attempt, the (alleged) supporters of Fethullah Gülen (Gülenists) became the target of purges (Al Jazeera, 2017). However, they were not the only ones to be prosecuted, because shortly afterwards all political opponents ran the risk of being prosecuted (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2019). In addition, journalists, human rights defenders, social media users and people who criticize the regime are also at risk of prosecution by the Turkish government. The number of asylum applications in the Netherlands has therefore increased considerably since 2016 and in 2018, 1301 Turks applied for asylum in the Netherlands (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2019).

2.2 Asylum procedures in the Netherlands

Asylum application

Applying for asylum in the Netherlands starts with the registration on Dutch territory (Ter Apel) or at the border (Schiphol Airport) and it is a requirement that everyone reports to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND) (DCR & ECRE, 2020; Rijksoverheid, 2020). People who wish to apply for asylum, but who come from outside the Schengen zone by boat or plane, are not allowed and they are detained (Rijksoverheid, 2020). They must submit their asylum application before entering Dutch territory. This is done at the Application Centre at Schiphol (*Aanmeldcentrum Schiphol, AC*). People who want to apply for asylum and who have entered by land must go directly to Ter Apel. The Central Reception Centre

(*Centraal Opvanglocatie, COL*) is located there and asylum seekers can register. When this is complete, asylum seekers are taken to a Process Reception Centre (*Proces Opvanglocatie, POL*) (DCR & ECRE, 2020). The activities at the Central Reception Centre takes three days. In these three days, the asylum seeker must perform a number of actions such as filling in an asylum application form and provide fingerprints. In addition, an extensive interview is conducted with the asylum seeker. This interview is aimed at obtaining information about the identity of the person, the route he or she has traveled, family members and which profession he or she practices in the country of origin. Finally, information is requested from the Visa Information System (VIS) and Eurodac. This is done to determine which country should handle the application (DCR & ECRE, 2020).

Five Tracks policy

When asylum seekers submit an application in Ter Apel, the IND handles these asylum cases according to a ‘Five Tracks’ policy (DCR & ECRE, 2020). This means that asylum seekers are transferred to one of those five tracks in the procedure. However, it depends on their case to which track they are transferred.

Track 1	With this track, it is clear that the application falls under the Dublin Regulation. The application is processed very quickly and there is no rest and preparation period (DCR & ECRE, 2020; Thränhardt, 2016).
Track 2	This track deals with fast procedures involving asylum seekers from safe countries. Cases in which people have already received protection in other countries are also assessed in this track. Here, too, there is no rest and preparation period (DCR & ECRE, 2020; Thränhardt, 2016).
Track 3	Asylum applications that have a high probability of being assessed positively are dealt with in this track. Syrians and Eritreans are examples of this. However, this track has still not been applied (DCR

	& ECRE, 2020; Thränhardt, 2016).
Track 4	The regular applications last 8 days and are handled in track 4. This procedure can be extended by 6, 8 or 14 days (DCR & ECRE, 2020; Thränhardt, 2016).
Track 5	This track is for procedures that require more research into a person's identity or nationality which could not be traced in track 3. This track has also not been applied yet (DCR & ECRE, 2020; Thränhardt, 2016).

Rest and preparation period

Asylum seekers in tracks 3, 4 and 5 have a rest and preparation period of at least six days (currently this only applies to track 4, because the other tracks have not been applied yet). This starts as soon as the asylum seeker submits the application form signed. This period is intended to allow asylum seekers to rest and recover from the stress and the long journey they have travelled, but also to prepare for their asylum procedure (*Algemene asielprocedure*). In practice, this procedure usually takes eight days and is called the 'short asylum procedure'. However, this procedure can be extended if there is not enough time for an assessment (DCR & ECRE, 2020). Sometimes the IND cannot take a decision during this period, due to time constraints. In that case, the application ends up in the extended asylum procedure (*Verlengde asielprocedure*). The procedure will then be extended by six months, in which a decision must be made. However, sometimes even more time is needed. In that case, an additional nine months will be added and then three months (DCR & ECRE, 2020). Although the Netherlands has one asylum status, it can be obtained on two grounds: “*refugee status (A-status) and subsidiary protection (B-status)*” (DCR & ECRE, 2020).

Appeal

In the case of a negative decision on an asylum application, an appeal can be lodged at the Regional Court for tracks 1, 2 and 4 within a week after the decision (DCR & ECRE, 2020). In most cases, expulsion is postponed. However, this does not apply to tracks 1 and 2 and sometimes also to cases in track 4. Expulsion of asylum seekers can therefore already take place before a decision has been taken. In order to prevent this, a provisional measure can be requested. With the extended asylum procedure, the asylum seeker has 1 or 4 weeks to appeal. However, how much time the asylum seeker has depends on the grounds on which he or she was rejected. Both in the short asylum procedure and in the extended asylum procedure, asylum seekers are entitled to accommodation in the period of their appeal (DCR & ECRE, 2020).

2.3 Purpose of Country of Origin Information (COI)

Every asylum seeker must provide evidence in order to get international protection and in order to obtain it, they must state their reason(s) for fleeing. COI is crucial in asylum cases, because it helps to put that evidence into context. Furthermore, COI is used to identify the potential risks that an asylum seeker may face if he or she is sent back (Vogelaar, 2017). It is impossible to know exactly what the situation is in a country, but the use of COI can make it clearer what the motives are for people to flee their country. According to the report by the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin & Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD) (ACCORD, 2013), *“COI supports legal advisors and persons making decisions on international protection in their evaluation of: the human rights and security situation, the political situation and the legal framework, cultural aspects and societal attitudes, the humanitarian and economic situation, events and incidents as well as the geography in claimants’ countries of origin (or in the case of stateless people, countries of former habitual residence) or countries of transit.”* By using information about the past and current situation in a country, policymakers and decision makers can identify possible future risks (Vogelaar, 2017). Hathaway and

Foster (2014) state that it is of great importance that a decision maker takes all relevant COI into consideration and that he or she remains neutral at all times. Since every asylum case is different and each individual has a different story and thus provides different evidence, the decision maker must also attach importance to that information, as it can demonstrate that the person is at real risk in the country of origin. Because it is necessary to determine whether someone has well-founded fear of being prosecuted in the future on return, the relevant COI should be based mainly on the current situation and less on historical events (Hathaway & Foster, 2014). If the relevant COI has other results than the evidence provided by the applicant, he or she will be given the opportunity to respond to these results. The purpose of COI is not to determine whether a person is eligible for international protection or not, but to determine what possible future risks that person is facing in the country of origin at return. According to Vogelaar (2017), COI must be placed next to the evidence that the applicant has submitted in order to decide whether the applicant is at real risk when he or she is sent back. When the evidence provided by the applicant is considered insufficiently credible, the decision maker may decide that the COI is more convincing than the evidence of an applicant and that the person is not at real risk in the country of origin and therefore will not receive international protection. COI is produced by all European countries, but there are differences in research practices and organizational structures (Van der Kist, Dijstelbloem & De Goede, 2019). Small countries with few resources often have COI services where a number of designated experts conduct briefly online research. Nowadays, little use is made of COI services. Countries with large numbers of asylum seekers such as Germany, France and the Netherlands often have extensive and specialized COI units with people who are experts in certain countries (Van der Kist, Dijstelbloem & De Goede, 2019).

Examples of such COI units in the Netherlands are the 'Country Information' team that is part of the Expertise department of the Dutch Council for Refugees and the COI unit of the Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service which is called 'Office for Country Information and Language Analysis' (EMN, 2014). The activities of

these units consist of collecting recent COI and making reports accessible to asylum seekers and decision makers. Decision makers can then assess an asylum case by means of COI reports about a particular country (Vogelaar, 2017).

It is not the task of COI units to give policy recommendations, but many of them do play a role in the formation of those recommendations (ICMPD, 2006). The role of COI in Belgium for example, is to provide advice when the Commissioner-General develops policy. In Denmark, no conclusive statements are ever made in reports by the COI unit. In the Netherlands, the Minister of Immigration and Integration is the one who decides on asylum policy. However, the Minister of Foreign Affairs is involved in this process. The COI unit in the Netherlands helps to formulate asylum policies (ICMPD, 2006)

2.4 COI sources

Definition of source

In a report of ACCORD (2013), it is stated that sources are persons or institutions that produce information. A report by the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) (2012) goes a step further and states that the term 'source' can have different meanings. Its meaning depends on the context in which the term is used. According to the EASO (2012) report, there are five different definitions of 'source':

- *"A source is a person or institution producing information."*
- *"A primary source is a person or institution closely or directly related to (i.e. having first-hand information of) an event, fact or matter."*
- *"An original source is the person or institution who documents the event, fact or matter for the first time. The original source can also be the primary source."*
- *"A secondary source is the person or institution who/which produces the information documented by the original source."*
- *"Sources of information are, for example: reports, written press, TV programmes, radio, journals, books, position, papers, published statistics, maps, blogs, networking sites."*

However, the report by ACCORD (2013) only mentions two types of sources, namely primary and secondary. It is stated that original sources are in practice the same as primary sources. It is also mentioned that problems can arise when secondary sources cite other sources. Examples of such problems may be misquoting or translating incorrectly. It is therefore important to retrieve the information from the primary source (ACCORD, 2013).

Primary and secondary sources

Fact-finding missions are used to obtain primary information and most countries go on these missions (ICMPD, 2006). These are missions where a team goes to other countries (countries of origin) to conduct interviews with people who have participated or were witnesses of certain events (ACCORD, 2013; Van der Kist et al., 2019). However, it is sometimes not possible to go on a mission to a certain country, because of the security situation in that country. Information is obtained by contacting, among others, NGO's, embassies and human rights organisations (ICMPD, 2006). Although fact-finding missions are often very expensive and time-consuming, they do provide the most information. Furthermore, researchers have the possibility to meet with experts and obtain information from primary sources. However, the collected information in fact-finding missions must also be evaluated examined, just like all the other COI sources (ACCORD, 2013).

Secondary sources include websites and articles. In addition, media and electronic databases are also used. Important secondary sources are for example Factiva/Reuters, ecoi.net, Refworld.org, IRIN News, LexisNexis and BBC (ICMPD, 2006). In some cases, local media is used from countries of origin and contact is sought with external experts. These experts work at universities, in the media and research institutions.

Types of sources

According to the ACCORD (2013) report, there are five types of sources that produce information: international and intergovernmental organisations (IGO), governmental organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGO's) and other

civil society organisations, media and academia. An EASO (2018) report adds four more sources to the list: judicial organisations, legislative and administrative bodies, non-IT-based sources and specialized sources. It is important to mention that these sources have their own agenda, so the reports and articles are written from a certain perspective. The sources are described in more detail below.

- “International and intergovernmental organisations (IGO)”
Publications from these sources include “*periodic reports, position papers on certain specific situations, findings of special rapporteurs or human rights experts, background information and much more for many countries of origin*” (EASO, 2018). Examples of such organisations are the UNHCR, Council of Europe, UNICEF and WHO (ICMPD, 2006; EASO, 2018).
- “Governmental organisations”
These are organisations that release a variety of COI. These publications discuss the situations in different countries of origin. An example of such an organisation is the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (EASO, 2018).
- “Non-governmental organisations (NGO’s)”
International NGOs publish reports and papers. These usually deal with specific situations in countries of origin. Examples of these NGO’s are Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Freedom House. There are also smaller NGO’s that work at national and local level. These NGO’s report on their own country (EASO, 2018).
- “Media sources”
These sources are important because they often contain the latest daily updates on certain situations in countries. Major media sources include BBC, Reuters, The Washington Post and New York Times (EASO, 2018).
- “Academic sources”
Information is also often produced by colleges and universities. This information relates to their specific area of interest or expertise. It is also sometimes possible to contact the expert of these universities and colleges.

They can provide answers to specific questions that are difficult to find in written sources (EASO, 2018).

- “Judicial organisations”

National courts also sometimes participate in fact-finding missions. Subsequently, reports are published after these missions (EASO, 2018).

- “*Legislative and administrative bodies*”

Texts of national laws and regulations are published by parliaments or ministries. This is done in countries of origin (EASO, 2018).

- “Non-IT-based sources”

These are, for example, magazines, maps and hardcopy books. These types of sources are also very important. However, this type of source also includes documents from conferences and seminars (EASO, 2018).

- “Specialised sources”

These are specialised sources that contain more in-depth information than ordinary reports. This can be useful for certain topics that are less focused or not specialised enough (EASO, 2018).

COI-criteria

The use of COI in decision-making can have consequences on people's lives. It is therefore important that the people dealing with COI use or assess the information correctly (ACCORD, 2013). The procedures for granting international protection are different in each country. However, all countries require COI to assess asylum claims. Therefore, COI must meet a number of criteria in order to make sure that the asylum procedures are conducted fairly and efficiently.

There are a number of quality criteria that COI must meet and these criteria are based on a number of principles regarding the use of COI. These criteria and principles must ensure that as much as possible objectivity is achieved. In the report, ACCORD (2013) lists four criteria that COI must meet:

- “Relevance” (COI must be relevant when questions have been asked to make decisions about international protection)

- “Reliability and balance” (COI sources must be reliable and different sources must be used for balance)
- “Accuracy and currency” (information must be correct and valid at the moment of decision-making)
- “Transparency and traceability” (reference to COI must be done correctly so that the reader can verify the information and the reader must be able to trace the information back to the original source)

The ACCORD (2013) report also lists the four principles for the use of COI:

- “Neutrality and impartiality” (the search and use of COI must be neutral and people or bodies providing COI must be impartial)
- “Equality of arms as regards access to information” (both asylum seekers and decision-makers should have equal access to COI)
- “Using public information” (COI must be publicly available to everyone to ensure fair procedures)
- “Data protection” (applicant's personal data must be protected)

2.5 Role of COI in asylum decision-making

The UNHCR Handbook (1992) states that there is need for COI in the refugee status determination. It is stated that the statements of the applicant must be evaluated, by comparing them to background information about the country of origin. To do this, information is required about the situation in the country of origin. The credibility of the applicant can be assessed by using information about the situation in the country of origin (UNHCR, 1992).

Van der Kist et al. (2019) have explored the connection between COI and asylum decision-making. Almost all European countries have COI units and these countries have recognized that COI is of great importance in asylum decision-making (Van der Kist et al., 2019; Storey, 2003). COI is used to support state decisions about certain specific populations, as well as assessing individual applications for refugee status (Van der Kist et al., 2019). According to the article, COI lies between research

and policy decisions, it is a compromise between social sciences and the creation of policy knowledge. COI aims to support decisions on granting refugee status. Van der Kist et al. (2019) state that “ *the circulation of COI-information thus takes place in the shadow of decision-making: it is always already geared toward supporting and enabling asylum adjudication*’.

Tsangarides (2010) also indicates the importance of COI in decision making. COI can map out the political, legal, social and human rights situation in countries. This information is then used to make decisions about the possible risks asylum seekers may face at return. In addition, COI is also used to assess the credibility and plausibility of individual applications. Gibb & Good (2013) state in their article that “*COI is thus crucial in almost every asylum claim*”. In their view, decision-makers and immigration judges make decisions based on their preference for certain relevant facts that they include in their decision-making. As a result, many asylum applications therefore depend on the preference those decision-makers and immigration judges give to certain facts from COI (Gibb & Good, 2013).

There are a number of factors related to COI that can adversely affect asylum decision-making or the assessment of individual refugee status determination. Confirmation or refutation of facts can be difficult in some specific asylum cases, because the available COI is too general (UNHCR, 2013). In some cases, specific information is not available. In addition, specific information can also be difficult to access or there is a shortage of time and resources to search for relevant COI. Furthermore, there is often no specific or relevant information available about certain social groups (UNHCR, 2013). It can be difficult in such cases to determine what the situation is for those social groups and how they are treated in the country of origin. According to the report of Tsangarides (2010), COI is in practice “*poorly used and underused*”, despite the fact that COI is very important in refugee status determination.

2.6 Bureaucracy of truth

When asylum seekers submit their application, they have to tell their story: why they fled their country of origin and what risks they might face when they are sent

back. From the beginning of the asylum procedure, a process is started to verify their stories, to find the 'truth'. But, what is 'truth'? How is determined what is true, or who determines it? The concept of 'truth' and asylum are very closely related, because it has to be decided whether the evidence is the truth or the asylum seeker's story, to grant refugee status or not. COI plays a major role in finding 'the truth'.

Fassin (2013) states that there is a general assumption that is accepted by different actors, namely that there is *"a definitive truth about asylum seekers."* This truth is determined by what happened in the past and what can happen in the future. Truth in this context is whether someone has been prosecuted in the past and whether they are at risk in the future. These statements by an asylum seeker can be assessed by information that is available. According to Fassin (2013), truth is created by doing research; truth is determined by institutions who decide what is true and what is not. Throughout the investigation, errors or contradictions are sought in the asylum seeker's story. If the story does not meet certain standards, suspicion arises. According to Fassin (2013), the process of finding the truth changes to detecting lies.

A few decades ago, asylum seekers only had to tell their story; they obtained refugee status on the basis of only that. Nowadays it is very different, because assessing asylum applications takes a long time, is a costly process and is based on bureaucracy (Fassin, 2013). Nowadays investigations are all about finding the truth. This mainly concerns whether the asylum seeker's story is consistent and contains enough details. Asylum seekers' stories are constantly reviewed to find errors or contradictions. This can demonstrate that they are not telling the truth and that they are therefore not eligible for refugee status. An asylum seeker must prove that he or she is at risk in the country of origin and that he or she has valid reasons for fear. The question however, is how an asylum seeker can prove this. How can it be proven that what he or she says really happened? This can in some cases be proven by written documents, but in many cases asylum seekers do not have such documents. Although, according to Fassin (2013), there is an

assumption that the system is fair in the assessment of asylum applications and that the 'false refugee' can be easily recognized, in practice this is much more difficult, because much of the evidence is not necessarily correct.

According to Dahlvik (2018), it is surprising that even though Europe has faced a refugee crisis, so little research has been done into the bureaucracies involved in assessing asylum applications. According to her, there are plenty of documents that give an idealized image, but in practice it is different. Dahlvik (2018) states also that there is a lot of political controversy involved in decision-making in the asylum system.

The controversial relationship between politics and asylum is extensively discussed by Van der Kist, Dijstelbloem & De Goede (2019). In their 2019 article, they analyze the knowledge politics of COI. Particular emphasis is placed on the relationship between knowledge and decision-making. They speak of the "*politics of knowledge in contemporary asylum regimes*", which means that the collecting and processing of COI about the situation in a country is strongly linked to the authority to make decisions about asylum applications. Van der Kist et al. (2019) claim that producing knowledge about countries of origin takes place in the shadow of decision-making, since COI has the task to support decisions on asylum applications. In their opinion, the goal of knowledge production is not to produce facts, but to support asylum decisions.

The knowledge politics of COI explained by Van der Kist et al (2019) correspond with the views of the French philosopher Michel Foucault in his concepts "power-knowledge" and "regime of truth". According to Foucault (1980), human knowledge has an intimate relationship with power. Knowledge that exists at any given time is influenced by that same era's power relations. In addition, power also uses this knowledge. However, knowledge is also reproduced by power by designing it for certain purposes (Foucault, 1980). People can be controlled and excluded because the human sciences have both knowledge and power. If a statement is claimed to be true, a claim for power will be made automatically. This is because truth is produced by power (Foucault, 1980). According to him,

knowledge is created by power and that knowledge is considered to be the truth. Thereafter, political activities are based on that truth. In his book, Foucault states: *'Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true'* (Foucault, 1980). The concept of power knowledge can also be linked to the creation and use of country of origin information. The country of origin information is created by authorities and is accepted as the "truth". That truth is then used to make asylum decisions. In his book *Discipline and Power* (1991), Foucault studies how modern states control their own residents. People can be monitored and disciplined by certain control apparatuses. Because of this discipline, people adhere to the norms, there is normalization. In this respect, COI can also be regarded as a control apparatus. Here too, one can speak of a norm, the norm is that the story will be checked. Because states want to get grip on the migration pressure, the stories of asylum seekers are checked. Anyone who does not meet the standard is considered a suspect. The asylum seeker's story is questioned. There is a chance that stories are created that do not match the reality, but that do meet the standards. As a consequence, subjective stories can arise.

Chapter 3. Methodology

This chapter will first discuss which particular research methods have been chosen and why. In addition, information is given about the Country Information team at the Dutch Council for Refugees and an explanation is given on how the data for the COI letters was collected. Also, additional information is provided on how and with whom interviews were conducted to support certain elements of the study. Finally, this chapter describes how the collected data for this research was analyzed.

3.1 Research methods

The focus of this research is on the COI letters written during the internship at the Dutch Council for Refugees. This research studies how Country of Origin Information is used in the Netherlands in order to verify the stories of asylum seekers. Therefore, it is being examined how COI is used in practice, meaning what country-of-origin questions are being asked, how information is collected, which sources are used, how the country-of-origin questions are being answered and what role these letters eventually play in the asylum decision-making. Also, two interviews were conducted with respondents. These interviews support certain elements from the observations which were made during the research process. They also provide additional in-depth information about how COI is used by other players. These interviews are discussed in detail in section 3.3.

A qualitative method was chosen for this research. The reason behind this choice is that it gives more evidential insight in why certain things are done and what consequences these actions and decisions have on the lives of asylum seekers.

According to Creswell (2007), we use qualitative research because we need to understand complicated problems. In this case, there is a need to understand how the search for 'the truth' takes place in asylum procedures with regard to COI. This is a complex and sensitive issue that needs extensive attention and research.

To be able to answer how COI is used in practice, an alternative qualitative research method has been applied called 'participant observation'. Participant observation is mainly applied in anthropological studies. It is described by Kawulich (2005) as

a process where researchers have the opportunity to study people's activities in a natural environment. In this environment, the researcher has both the role of observer and participant in the activities. DeWalt & DeWalt (2002) provide a more comprehensive definition by stating that participant observation is *"a method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture"*. According to Wolcott (2001), participant observation is one of the most important aspects of fieldwork. By using this method, researchers can collect information and use it in social sciences by recording and analyzing that information (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002).

There are different types of participation. Spradley (1980) lists five types of participation: non-participation, passive participation, moderate participation, active participation and complete participation. In the case of this research, I was a complete participant, because I was completely involved in the situation I was studying. My role as a researcher was both to observe the people and the activities at the Country Information department at the Dutch Council for Refugees, as well as to participate in all those activities by searching for information and writing COI letters. Lincoln & Guba (1985) name the term 'prolonged engagement', which means that when a researcher 'lives' in the context and invests enough time into a research, he or she can achieve certain purposes. The findings are considered more credible and trustworthy when the researcher spends a longer time in the research area. Kawulich (2005) states that *'this prolonged interaction with the community enables the researcher to have more opportunities to observe and participate in a variety of activities over time'*.

There are a few advantages of using the method of participant observation. One is that it gives access to 'backstage culture' (DeMunck & Sobo, 1998). This means that only people who are considered familiar can participate and experience what is actually being hidden from the rest. Another advantage is that it allows to capture events that are unplanned or unexpected (DeMunck & Sobo, 1998).

Although this research is not an ethnographic study of any kind, the qualitative research method 'participant observation' is still applied. As a researcher, I was part of the COI unit for one year, therefore I was both an observer and a participant. During the internship, I answered country-of-origin questions, searched for COI, wrote letters containing COI about a certain country, wrote summaries of important country reports and went to different meetings and specific 'country days' where all kinds of asylum specific- and background information is given about a certain country. I also contributed to the '*A to Z Eritrea document*'. This document provides information about the current admission policy and country information for the most important countries where asylum seekers come from. It is published for Eritrea, Somalia, Iraq, Iran, China, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. The A to Z documents discuss the security situations, the position of special groups and return of asylum seekers for certain countries. For one year, I was part of the setting, but I was also a researcher. By using this type of research method, I was able to gain a very good picture of how COI is used in practice.

3.2 Internship and data collection

Internship

From March 2018 until March 2019 I did my internship at the Country-of-Origin Information team of the Expertise department at the Dutch Council for Refugees (*VluchtelingenWerk Nederland*). The COI unit of the Expertise Department is responsible, among other things, for searching and collecting asylum-relevant country-of-origin information at the request of legal counsellors from the Dutch Council for Refugees and asylum lawyers. The findings of the COI unit investigations aim to substantiate the credibility of the asylum report or the seriousness of a (prosecution) situation in the country of origin. The unit consists of four paid employees and about six volunteers / interns. For one year, I was part of this unit where I wrote many COI letters on various countries and topics in order to answer the country-of-origin questions.

The Helpdesk Country Information of the Dutch Council for Refugees can be contacted for all kinds of questions about countries of origin. This can be about credibility, the position of specific groups or the general security situation in a country or region. About 160 questions are answered each month by Helpdesk consultants. They handle these questions together with the interns and the volunteers. They sort out the questions and have a handling time of approximately one to two weeks, but sometimes there are questions that need immediate action. In some cases, questions are transferred to the Asylum Procedure team if it has more legal than country-of-origin aspects.

An asylum lawyer or legal counsellor at the Dutch Council for Refugees sends a question to the team and the consultants try with the interns to answer that question as clearly and completely as possible. Every volunteer / intern focuses on one region. These regions are:

- Middle East (especially Iraq, Iran, Syria)
- Eastern Europe (especially Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia)
- Asia (especially Afghanistan, China, Sri Lanka)
- West, Central & South Africa (especially Guinea, Sierra Leone, DR Congo, Uganda)
- East Africa (especially Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan)

This means that he / she follows relevant developments regarding a region in the area of country information, asylum policy and case law. The regional specialist first and foremost answers questions about their own region, but also about other regions. The questions that come in, cover a wide range of topics such as human rights, political circumstances, geography, (and) morals and customs. In addition to answering questions, regional specialists occasionally contribute to publications about countries of origin on various Dutch Council for Refugees websites. The consultants and interns/volunteers of Country Information perform the country information research using different methods and techniques. It usually involves searching, studying and analyzing all common sources in the field of human rights

such as: Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, UNHCR, Schweizerische Flüchtlingshilfe, UN reports and UK Home Office. Moreover, the unit has subscriptions to a number of large press databases such as Factiva, which is the online database of the Reuters news agency. This database provides access to press releases and articles from news agencies throughout the world. It also has its own library. For very specific questions, legal counsellors can also go to an extensive network of external experts in various countries (scientists, journalists and employees of development organizations).

At the beginning of the internship, interns and volunteers must first complete a module to learn about asylum procedures in the Netherlands, the Geneva Refugee Convention and other aspects of asylum. In addition, a lot of information is provided about the Country Information department and about the sources used at COI. Before the interns can begin, an explanation is given on types of questions that are handled, which sources to consult, how to use search engines and databases and how to write a COI letter.

Data collection

During the internship, my focus area was Africa, which means that the country-of-origin questions that I dealt with were mainly about African countries, especially Eritrea. However, in that year I answered questions about 44 countries, from all parts of the world. While working with focus areas is more efficient, there is also flexibility to answer questions about other countries. This is especially the case when for example the security situation in a country changes or there is a new influx of refugees from a specific country. There are periods in which the COI unit has to answer many questions because of a spike of asylum seekers from a certain country. Because the specialists who deal with that region cannot handle all the questions in a short time, some questions must be dealt with by specialists from other regions.

Because there are so many countries, the questions that come in are also diverse. This can also be seen in the ten letters studied in this research. For some countries,

the same questions are regularly asked. An example is Afghanistan. When it comes to Afghanistan, the main question that was asked at the time of the internship was information about the general security situation in the country or in certain regions. In Eritrea, this often involves information about compulsory military service, documents or a travel route that someone has traveled. However, the questions that come in, cover a wide range of topics: e.g., questions about female circumcision, sects, human sacrifices, honor killings and witchcraft.

The consultants receive new questions every day. These questions are collected in the operating system of Country Information and are coming from asylum lawyers and legal counsellors of the Dutch Council for Refugees. The questions that need to be handled are then forwarded to volunteers and interns depending on the country or region the question is about. The day begins with the consultants going through the questions that still need to be answered. This can be new questions that have just arrived, or questions that have been received a few days ago. The urgent questions must be answered first. The consultants then look at which questions should be answered by which interns or volunteers. It depends on the country and the time in which the question must be answered. If many questions have been asked about a specific country, several interns/volunteers will work on those letters. Sometimes questions are asked that have more legal aspects. In that case, that question is forwarded to the Asylum Procedure department. On average, two questions are answered in one day by each intern or volunteer. However, this depends on the question or questions asked and the amount of COI that is available. Sometimes it takes several days to answer one question, and this can be for several reasons. The first reason is that the question is too difficult or multiple questions have been asked by the lawyer or legal counsellor. In that case, it will take longer to answer that question or questions. The second reason is that the question needs a different kind of COI, for example Eritrea questions about travel routes. In that case, locations must be found on maps and it must be established whether the asylum seeker can have traveled the route as told. Such questions often take longer to answer. Sometimes there is little or no information available because it concerns

a very specific question and there is a data scarcity regarding that topic. In this case, an email is written to the asylum lawyer or legal counsellor mentioning that unfortunately little or no information has been found in the sources available to the Country Information department. These types of questions are dealt relatively quickly.

When a question is forwarded to a volunteer or intern, it is first discussed with the consultant, to get clear what exactly is being asked and what relevant COI is being requested. The volunteer or intern then starts searching for relevant COI in public sources such as human right reports and country reports issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This is also the case for the COI letters studied in this research. After discussing the question with the consultant and clarifying what was being asked, I began my search for relevant COI. Depending on the question that was asked, I searched the internet for various kinds of information in search engines and databases. When relevant information is found in the available sources, a letter is written to the asylum lawyer or legal counsellor of Dutch Council for Refugees. These letters all have the same format and they are drafted in a specific order. The most important sources must always be mentioned first. The most relevant information is extracted from every source found and a small paragraph is written about it. The source references are being displayed by means of cross-references. The appendixes show the sources with the paragraphs from which the information has been extracted. The letters that are discussed in the results chapter are included in the appendix. An extensive search must be done in order to find the most accurate and relevant information. The questions that come in cover a wide range of topics and countries, so it depends on data availability whether little or much information can be found.

3.3 Interviews

As mentioned before, two interviews have been held in order to support certain elements from observations that were made during the research process. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were used in order to gain an

understanding of how COI is used by asylum lawyers to support their clients and how COI is used by the IND to make decisions about asylum cases. In qualitative interviews, the interviewer asks the participants questions about behaviors, views, attitudes and experiences with regard to certain social phenomena (Boeije, Hart & Hox, 2009). Dunn (2010) describes semi-structured interviews as organized, but at the same time ordered. They are organized because the questions are flexible. Bernard (1998) formulates semi-structured interviews as follows: “...*semi-structured formats facilitate the collection of new information with the flexibility to explore topics in-depth with informants.*” This way of interviewing makes it possible for respondents to bring up issues they feel are important (Longhurst, 2016). Therefore, by using semi-structured in-depth interviews, it was possible to go deeper into certain topics or give respondents the opportunity to provide additional information they felt was also important. Given that asylum is a sensitive subject, open questions were asked to gather more detailed information. The interviews were held with people who are closely involved in asylum cases and decision-making. The first interview was held with an asylum lawyer who frequently requests country-of-origin questions to the Helpdesk of Country Information of the Dutch Council for Refugees in order to support the cases of her clients. The aim was to obtain information about how a lawyer uses COI and how he or she uses this information to support an asylum seeker. The lawyer is most often the one who requests COI for his or her client. He or she is ultimately responsible for submitting the information found on a specific subject or country to the court to assist the client as well as possible. The asylum lawyer for the interview was contacted with the help of Helpdesk employees of Country Information and she agreed to participate in this research. During the internship, I had answered a number of country-of-origin questions for her, so we were familiar with each other's names, but did not meet in person yet.

The second interview was held with a hearing and decision worker at the asylum department of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND) in Zevenaar. The IND assesses all asylum applications in the Netherlands and they ultimately

determine whether an asylum seeker is eligible for refugee status and receives a residence permit in the Netherlands or not. I encountered this person by searching on the internet for hearing and decision workers at the IND. After seeing his profile on LinkedIn, I sent him a text explaining what my intentions were and what my research is about. He agreed on giving an interview. However, he had to consult the request for an interview with his supervisor. After I had received permission to conduct an interview, a number of agreements had to be made. I had to send a research setup, questionnaire and planning to his supervisor in advance, since it obtains sensitive information. They wanted to know in more detail what my research is about and what questions are to be expected. I also had to sign a non-disclosure agreement. Once everything had been approved, we agreed on a date and place for conducting the interview. This took place at the IND office in Zevenaar. The interview with the hearing and decision worker provided more insight into how the IND uses COI.

Because asylum is a sensitive subject in the Netherlands, I chose not to mention the names of the respondents. I asked both the lawyer and the hearing and decision worker if I could record the interview with a recorder so that I could transcribe it as precisely as possible and process it in my research. It was approved by both of them. Unfortunately, I did not get permission from the IND to include the transcript of the interview as an attachment. The transcription of the interview however, is included in the appendix.

3.4 Data analysis

As stated, the data collected in this study are the COI letters written during the internship and the interviews taken from the respondents. These letters can be used to show how COI is used, which sources are used, how they are processed and how the most relevant information is ultimately found to substantiate the credibility of an asylum application or to portray the possible risks (of prosecution) on return to the country of origin. To demonstrate how COI is being used, a selection has been made of ten letters. These ten COI-letters were chosen

because they cover different countries, questions and topics. The ten COI letters chosen are:

1. Eritrea – travel route
2. Afghanistan - security situation in Kunduz (Chardarah district)
3. Afghanistan – position of apostates
4. Venezuela – humanitarian situation
5. Sri Lanka - LTTE family members, single and/or divorced women
6. Nigeria – Black Axe Confraternity
7. The Gambia – FGM in The Gambia and the Mende tribe
8. Iran – position of LGBT-persons
9. Turkey - risks to family members of Gülenists
10. Iraq – honor killings

Some letters concern countries from which many asylum seekers came from at that time, for example Afghanistan and Eritrea. Other letters deal with topics on which many questions were asked, such as the position of LGBT and the position of apostates. Again, other letters show that very specific topics are also dealt with in COI, like for example campus cults in Nigeria and honor killings in Iraq. By handling letters with ten different countries, questions and topics, a clear picture is sketched of how COI is used in practice.

However, it should be explained here how the letters are included in the appendix to avoid confusion. Because the ten COI letters are very long, it was decided to include these letters in a separate document as appendices. This also makes it easier to understand the results chapter, because the letters and the appendices in the letters are constantly referred to. So, there are ten letters and each letter has many appendices. They are therefore appendices in appendices. In order to avoid confusion, a distinction has been made in the reference to the letters. In the results chapter reference is made to Appendix 1, Appendix 2 etc. This refers to the letter in that document. Each country (i.e. each letter) is included as a separate appendix. However, if in a sentence reference is made to Appendix 1 in the letter or Appendix

14 in the letter, this means that reference is made to the appendices in the letter itself.

The in-depth analysis of the letters takes place in chapter 4. The chapter begins with discussing how these letters are structured and which guidelines the country specialists must adhere to. This is done by extensively describing the structure of the letters to understand how these letters are set up. Most letters are very long and almost all have the same structure. It is also important for this research to show how the search for information takes place. That is why section 4.2 describes how the team searches for relevant country information and which sources are used. This will be examined in more detail later in the analysis of the COI letters. Asylum is a very sensitive subject and because sensitive and personal information is shared in the letters about the lawyers or the clients, it has been decided to omit this privacy related information in the letters. The research focuses purely on the country information. Section 4.3 discusses the countries where many asylum seekers come from in the Netherlands and the reasons why people flee and the types of questions that are asked to the Country Information team.

The letters are thoroughly analyzed in section 4.4 by first looking at which questions are asked. What country information has been requested? Each letter starts with a short introduction about the situation in the country in question and the reason for flight. The letters are then analyzed by discussing which topics are covered in the letter, what information has been searched for and which information was found. It also examines which sources have been used and how that information has been processed and which information was ultimately sent to the questioner. The research findings discuss how the most relevant information is sought for each country or topic in order to map the credibility or potential risks for an asylum seeker. In fact, it's about finding out what the truth is, whether the asylum seeker's story is correct. The chapter also discusses what sensitivities and / or difficulties there are in collecting and filtering the information and writing the letter.

The interviews were both recorded with a recorder. These have been precisely transcribed to display the information provided as accurately and completely as possible.

After working out both interviews, the most important paragraphs are extracted and highlighted in the research. From the first interview with the asylum lawyer, information is reported on how the lawyer uses COI to support her client and what role she believes that information plays in the decision-making. The hearing and decision worker provided information in how they use COI and what role that information ultimately plays in the decisions they make about whether an asylum seeker is eligible for refugee status before receiving a residence permit in the Netherlands. These interviews are being discussed in chapter five and six.

Chapter 4. Research results: searching and using COI

This chapter first describes the structure of the COI letters followed by the process of searching for information and using sources. It then examines countries of origin about which questions are asked and reasons why people flee their country. Finally, the ten COI letters are extensively analysed in order to demonstrate how COI is searched and how COI is used to verify the stories of asylum seekers and to find the 'truth'.

4.1 Structure of the letters

The COI-letters written at the Country Information department of the Dutch Council for Refugees almost all have the same structure. The department has a standard format for all COI-letters.

At the beginning of each letter, a number of details must be filled in. First to whom the letter is intended. In most cases this is either a legal counsellor of the Dutch Council for Refugees or an asylum lawyer. Thereafter, the name of the contact person and his or her email address must be filled in (this is often the person who requested COI), followed by the name of the intern or volunteer and the date on which the letter was written. The title of the letter is always the country followed by the subject of the letter. Finally, a characteristic is given. This is the first three letters of the country, followed by the date and the initials of the writer.

There is always a short introduction when writing the letter. This is often a repeat of the question or questions that have been asked, what information has been requested, or which subject(s) the letter will discuss. After the introduction follows the part with the COI that has been found. This section is often divided into several topics that are covered. Each letter starts with first stating the most important or relevant information. This information often comes from important sources such as human right reports or country reports from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Many different sources are used in most letters, therefore the information from each source is mentioned in a separate paragraph. Each source must state the

date of the source and a cross-reference to the correct appendix where the original information can be found.

The appendices are at the end of each letter with the original information from the sources that have been used. It is very important that all information that is mentioned in the letter must also be included in the appendix, so that the reader can trace the original information. It must be possible to check from which source the information was obtained and in what context the original text was written. The sources are often mainly in English, but also in other languages, which means they have to be translated in order to write the letter in Dutch. It is therefore important not to take the original information out of context.

Each appendix has a number and title with the name of the source, the title of the source and the date, with a link to the original source. The sections of information used in the letters should also be included in the appendix. First, the page number is listed where the original text is and then the piece of text from the source. It always differs how much information is provided in the appendix from the original source. Sometimes it is enough to mention only a few sentences of the original source, but most often it is necessary to include, for example, one or more paragraphs so that the information is not taken out of context. In the case of the latter, the part with the information that is being used in the letter is underlined to make it easier to find.

Attempts are made to keep the letters concise with only the most important and relevant information. Sometimes there is a lot of information available about a particular country or topic and in other cases very little, so the length of the letters depends on the amount of information available.

4.2 Search for information and use of sources

As soon as the questions arrive at the consultants, the question is examined to see which country it is and what the question is about, so that it can be sent to the appropriate country specialist to answer. When the question is sent to the country specialist, the consultant and the country specialist go through the question

together to clarify what is being asked and what information is being requested. After this, the search for information begins in order to answer the question.

The Dutch Council for Refugees has an online knowledge centre which is called *'Vluchtweb'*. Vluchtweb contains up to date information in country folders about the main countries of origin. One can find information on asylum policy, country information and case law. There is also background information included about countries (maps, legislation and general information about the country), specific groups and topics (women, conscription, homosexuals). This online knowledge centre is accessible to legal counsellors of the Dutch Council for Refugees and asylum lawyers. Ecol.net is a very important website for all kinds of country information. There are thousands of documents and reports with country information and they are always kept up to date. All new country reports that are issued are placed there and they are all public. Another important country information website is Refworld.org. This website contains country information, legal information and policy documents about most countries. These reports and documents are also public and therefore accessible to everyone. Sometimes there are questions about certain topics that are difficult to answer because no reports have been written about them or because it is very specific. In that case, Google is used to find certain information. Major news websites such as The Guardian, BBC, The New York Times and The Washington Post are often used, as well as small local news websites in certain regions.

There are a number of sources that are very important for country information. The first are the country reports from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These are reports that contain information about the situation in asylum seekers' countries of origin. The political situation and the security and human rights situation are discussed here. Some reports also address the position of certain high-risk groups, such as ethnic minorities, members of opposition parties, women and homosexuals. At the end of these reports, it is stated whether it is justified to return rejected asylum seekers. The IND uses these reports to assess whether an asylum seeker is granted refugee status.

Almost all COI letters show that the first source mentioned are the country reports. This is because the IND primarily bases its assessment of asylum applications on these reports, so these are always the first to be mentioned. It is also important to always use the most recent official report, as they cover the latest developments in the country regarding the political situation and security and human rights situation. However, in addition to the latest country reports, older country reports are also sometimes used, because the new report does not, for example, discuss a subject that was discussed in the previous official report. This can be seen, for example, in the Afghanistan letter on the position of apostates and the Iraq-letter about honour killings.

In addition to the country reports, the reports from international organisations who do research and publish country information are very important, such as the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), the Austrian Center for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD), the UK Home Office, UNHCR, US Department of State, Migrationsverket - Swedish Migration Board and the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB). The letters show that these reports are widely used to reflect the political, security and human rights situation in a country. These organisations write reports on various topics and publish them to the public. Other important sources include reports from human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Freedom House and 28 Too Many. These NGOs mainly publish reports on human rights violations in various countries. For example, 28 Too Many is an important source of FGM, as they publish many reports about FGM in Africa.

Sometimes difficult questions are asked where extra information is needed, or because existing reports do not contain the relevant information. For such cases, there is a database of experts who specialize in specific countries or topics. In that case, an expert will be contacted who can provide more information about a specific topic.

After the letter is finished, it is checked by the consultant and e-mailed to the questioner.

4.3 Countries of origin and reasons to flee

The asylum seekers come from all parts of the world and have all their own story. There are many reasons why people flee their country and apply for asylum in the Netherlands. The wide variety of countries and subjects is evident from the COI letters. Every day dozens of origin questions come in from legal counsellors from the Dutch Council for Refugees or asylum lawyers who ask for information to support their clients. Asylum seekers in the Netherlands come from all regions of the world. The countries where most asylum seekers currently come from and apply for asylum in the Netherlands are Afghanistan, Syria, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq and Turkey. However, origin questions are also sometimes asked about countries that are not often heard about, such as Antigua and Barbuda and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. This shows that all regions in the world are dealing with refugees and migration, even the smallest or most remote countries. The COI-letters discussed here cover the countries of Eritrea, Afghanistan, Iraq, Venezuela, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Gambia, Iran, and Turkey. Most of these countries are, as mentioned before, countries where most asylum seekers in the Netherlands come from.

Asylum seekers have their own reasons for fleeing from their home country. Most countries have multiple issues that make life unbearable for some people or social groups. They have no other choice than to flee their home country. The questions that are being asked daily to Country Information deal with the most diverse subjects. For example, questions arise about escape routes, the sexual orientation of a person, the security situation in a country, certain sects or secret alliances, of opposition members or parties, honour killings and circumcisions of young girls. Quite often questions arise about the position of certain persons or social groups, such as westernized men and women, LGBTI persons, apostates and single mothers. It is then up to Country Information to find the most recent and relevant information and to answer the question as completely as possible. Their task is to find the 'truth'.

4.4 The COI letters

Eritrea – travel route

Tens of thousands of Eritreans leave the country every year. The main reason why Eritreans flee the country is the long national service, poverty, poor living conditions and the accompanying human rights violations (Horwood & Hooper, 2016). Most Eritreans reach Europe by traveling through Ethiopia or Sudan, as these are neighbouring countries (Horwood & Hooper, 2016).

During the initial interview in the asylum procedure, Eritrean asylum seekers are often asked about their travel route. A search for the ‘truth begins at that moment and COI is used to verify their statements. The Eritrea-letter in Appendix 1 contains COI about the travel route of a certain asylum seeker who has fled the country of origin. The letter shows that an extensive search has been done for the verification of his or her statements.

Different tools and sources have been used to map the travel route of the asylum seeker in question. In this case, the lawyer asked if the Country Information team can find certain places and locations in Eritrea. For reasons of privacy and traceability of the asylum seeker, the names of the places and locations have been omitted for this research.

The client has explained in detail at the initial interview about the travel route to the Netherlands. The COI team searches for information by the means of the initial interview. The letter shows that various sources have been used to search for information about the places and locations requested such as Wikipedia, Google Maps, Google Earth and UNHCR. These are mostly secondary sources as mentioned by ICMPD (2016). Because it is rather difficult to find certain small places and locations in Eritrea, the website The Humanitarian Data Exchange (<https://data.humdata.org/>) is used from the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations. This website contains extensive geographical information about Eritrea. It offers on the basis of data from the Eritrean government since 2001 a so-called 'shapefile' with around 4000 places in Eritrea, many of which cannot be found in other sources. The file is not just

readable, but can be converted into a KML-file, which can only be opened in combination with Google Earth. The letter begins by stating which sources have been used to locate certain places and locations in Eritrea. The Humanitarian Data Exchange and Google Maps are mentioned here.

During the initial interview, the client has stated that she comes from a certain village and that there is a church standing on a hill. The most obvious step for this is to use Google Earth, because it immediately gives you an idea of how and where the village is located. With the help of Google Earth, a search has been made for that specific village in Eritrea. Screenshots were taken of these maps and added as an attachment to the letter. The maps show the village from different angles along with the hill which the church stands on (Appendix 1 in the letter). She also gave a description of the village and its surroundings by stating that there are mountains in the area and that the village is at the foot of these mountains. These mountains can be seen even more clearly in Appendix 5 of the letter. The locations and surroundings on these maps correspond to what the client said during the initial interview. In addition, she has mentioned a number of places during that interview that are close to her residence and the distances to these places. For example, she said it is about an hour's walk from her village to school in another place. In the letter, Appendix 3 shows one village in relation to the other. To find out if it really is an hour's walk from her village to the village where the school is, the straight-line distance between these two places was measured using Google Earth. From Appendix 4 in the letter becomes clear that the straight-line distance between her village and the other village is 2,28 kilometres. However, the terrain is mountainous and it will probably take longer to cover the distance.

In addition, the client has made a number of statements about another place where it has been stated that there are a college, two mosques, an indoor market and three churches. Subsequently, a search was made on Google for this place name, because it seems to be a bigger place than the villages mentioned. Therefore, there is a chance that something has been written about that place somewhere. A page was found on the Dutch Wikipedia about this place with all kinds of information

(Appendix 6 in the letter). The locations mentioned by the client during the initial interview, such as the college and the market, have all been found on this Wikipedia page. The information about the locations mentioned by the client is included in appendix 6 of the letter and appendix 7 of the letter contains a zoomed-in map showing the aforementioned market hall and one of the mosques. These statements have therefore been verified by COI.

In the initial interview, it was said by the client that the Belesa River served as an orientation point during the trip to Ethiopia. Information on this river was found in a paper on Researchgate which was presented at the International Conference on Borderscapes (Appendix 8 in the letter). This source was found by searching on Google for the Belesa River. It states that the Belesa River has a number of branches in the border area.

The client also claimed that they reached the border within two days. To find out whether this is possible, the straight-line distance was measured between her village and the Eritrean-Ethiopian border on Google Earth (Appendix 9 in the letter). This distance turned out to be about 33 kilometres.

After crossing the border, according to the client, they were taken to a place near the border. The coordinates of this place were found on the website Geopostcodes.com. This is a postal- and street database with data for 250 countries. This database is often used for certain locations that are otherwise difficult to find. The straight-line distance was also measured between this place and the border. These data can be found in Appendix 10 of the letter.

After a few days, the client was taken to the application centre in another location and then transferred to a camp whose name is mentioned in the initial interview. Information on these centres and camps was found in a UNHCR note on the influx of Eritrean refugees into Ethiopia which is included in Appendix 11 of the letter. This note mentions the same names of assembly centres and registration and reception camps as the client did in the initial interview.

By looking for as many place names, characteristics and distances that the asylum seeker has told, the travel route of someone can be traced. Searching and using as

many different sources as possible increases the chance that the asylum seeker's story can be verified. The COI used in this letter meets the criteria set by ACCORD (2013), because the information that is used is relevant (the correct information has been sought to answer the question), the COI is balanced (different types of sources are used), and the information has been referenced correctly so that the reader can trace the same information (the relevant information found is included in the appendix to the letter). In addition, everyone has access to the information used in this letter and the sources are publicly accessible. Finally, information about places and locations in this particular case has been omitted so that the applicant's personal data is protected.

By using all different sources and databases, the asylum seeker's story can be checked. In some cases, the story is verified, but in other cases the information found may not correspond to the asylum seeker's story. This can be for various reasons: the places and characteristics mentioned cannot be found because of the lack of information, incorrect information may have been given by the asylum seeker because of shock and stress or because the asylum seeker hides the real story and has told a different version.

Afghanistan - security situation in Kunduz (Chardarah district)

Afghanistan is another large country of origin for asylum seekers. The country has been at war for decades and many Afghans are fleeing the country because of conflicts and violence. The general security situation in the country has deteriorated considerably (IOM, 2019).

This Afghanistan-letter discusses the security situation in the Kunduz province and incidents in the Chardarah district. The asylum seeker that comes from this region probably fled to the Netherlands due to the deteriorated security situation. COI has been requested to verify his or her statements. The security situation in Afghanistan, and in particular Kunduz and the Chardarah district, can be represented by means of recent and relevant COI. This letter is included in Appendix 2.

First of all, it should be mentioned that the district "Chardara" has several spellings. For example, the sources that have been found for this letter use the spellings Char Dara, Chardara or Chahar Dara. It is very important, when searching for information, to enter all spellings of that place or name in search systems. It is more likely that more sources and information will be found. This way of searching has been applied for all letters.

This Afghanistan letter is relatively long and contains a lot of information, because the security situation there has been poor for decades. Many reports are written about the situation there. This can also be seen in the large number and variation of sources that have been used.

The letter is divided into four parts and it starts with a short section on the ethnic composition of Kunduz province. Information is included on the ethnic composition to understand why and which groups of people are in conflict with each other and to better understand the situation in Kunduz province. This information was found on the website of Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) and can be found in more detail in Appendix 1 of the letter.

The second section discusses Taliban control by district in Kunduz. A number of sources have been found here that describe which areas in Kunduz are under Taliban control. The first source to be described is a recent report from the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) (2019). Although the report has been extracted from Vluchtweb, it can also be found on Ecol.net and on Refworld.org, therefore it is available to everyone. The report discusses the security situation in Afghanistan and it contains a lot of information about the districts that are under control of the Taliban. This report is included in Appendix 6 of the letter and contains both important paragraphs and a schedule showing Taliban control in the various districts. This schedule is very clear and shows at a glance the situation in Kunduz. Since there are large sections of text in the appendix, the most important sentences are underlined so that the reader can quickly find the information and read the original text in its context. The schedule in Appendix 6 of the letter shows that 95% of the Chardarah district is under Taliban control, while only 5% is under

government control (EASO, 2019; Appendix 6 in the letter). A map has also been found on The Long War Journal's website showing the Taliban's influence by district. The map shows that Kunduz district has been contested since October 2016 (The Long War Journal, 2019; Appendix 3 in the letter). The source in Appendix 2 of the letter from Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) provides the same information, namely that Kunduz is contested.

The third section discusses the security situation in Kunduz. It is immediately noticeable that much information has been found about the situation in that region. It is therefore important to select the latest and most relevant information. The information comes from sources such as country reports from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and reports from EASO, ACCORD, UNAMA and Landinfo. These are both primary and secondary sources (ACCORD, 2013).

First two country reports are discussed from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The one report is from 2019 (Appendix 4 in the letter) and the other from 2018 (Appendix 11 in the letter). These two sources provide information about the security situation in Kunduz. Both reports are extracted from Vluchtweb, because these country reports are always placed there by the Dutch Council for Refugees so employees can easily find them. However, these country reports are also always available on the website of the Dutch National Government (*Rijksoverheid*). Furthermore, information was found in an EASO report on the guidelines for assessing asylum applications from Afghans. Here, EASO (2019; Appendix 5 in the letter) concludes that *“mere presence in the area would not be sufficient to establish a real risk of serious harm under Article 15(c) QD in the province of Kunduz, however, indiscriminate violence reaches a high level, and, accordingly, a lower level of individual elements is required to show substantial grounds for believing that a civilian, returned to the territory, would face a real risk of serious harm within the meaning of Article 15(c) QD”*. The rest of the sources also state that the Taliban controls a number of districts and that attacks are frequent in the province (Appendix 8, 13, 14, 16 in the letter).

Finally, in the last section incidents are discussed in Kunduz province in general and more specifically in Chardarah district. Mainly news reports have been used as sources for this part. This is because many news reports are published when an attack has been committed somewhere. For example, information has been extracted from news channels such as Tolonews, Pahjwok News, Sputnik News Service, RFE / RL and BBC. As soon as major attacks are committed, this is often reported worldwide in news reports, which is why it is important to search for incidents in news reports as well. This last section discusses a number of incidents that have occurred in Kunduz Province and Chardarah District.

This letter is a good example of how to find and use COI correctly. Many different types of sources have been found, such as reports, news items and articles. In addition, the appendices contain many maps and diagrams that show the situation clearly and quickly. By using and referencing many different, relevant and recent information, the credibility of the information found is strengthened and the ACCORD criteria and principles are met.

Afghanistan – position of apostates

The poor security situation is not the only reason for Afghans to flee the country as there are a number of groups of people who are at extra risk, such as apostates and converts. These people are at great risk, because according to Sharia, blasphemy and apostasy are punishable by death (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2019). The second Afghanistan-letter (Appendix 3) addresses the position of apostates, converts and atheists. In this case, information has been requested to support the story of an Afghan who has fled the country because he or she has converted or is an apostate. Therefore, information is sought on the position of converts and / or atheists in Afghanistan. The letter first gives information on apostasy and atheism and then continues to discuss cases of persecution of blasphemy / criticism of Islam and cases of persecution of converts to Christianity / openly expressing their conversion.

The letter begins by stating that information has also been included on the prosecution of converts and blasphemers, as this overlaps with the information on the position of atheists. It is also mentioned at the beginning that no information has been found about apostates or converts who openly expressed their beliefs and were not prosecuted for this.

Based on the questions asked or the information found, the letter is divided into three sections. The first section discusses apostasy and atheism in Afghanistan. After a search on the internet it turned out that a lot of information is available about this topic and that is evident from the many sources that have been used. A selection has been made of the most recent and relevant sources.

When a country report from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs is available about a country, that country report will be discussed first in the letter. At the time, the most recent one was from 2019. The country report states that blasphemy and apostasy by Muslims is punishable by death and that they also run the risk of mistreatment and persecution if they deviate from religious or social norms (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019; Appendix 1 in the letter). Information was also found in UNHCR and EASO guidelines. The EASO guidelines (EASO Country Guidance) on Afghanistan serve as a guideline with minimum standards for European decisions on asylum policy. These guidelines state that apostates have legitimate fears of being prosecuted in Afghanistan (EASO, 2018; Appendix 5 in the letter). The US Department of State regularly publishes reports on religious freedom in various countries. This is an important report when it comes to the position of apostates or converts and. Therefore, these reports are always used for information on these subjects. In 2017, for example, a report was published for Afghanistan, which also states that conversion is punishable by death and that it is done for men by beheading and for women by sentencing to life imprisonment. (USDOS, 2017; Appendix 6 in the letter). However, the same source says that in the past two years there have been no reports of people prosecuted for apostasy or blasphemy. However, Appendix 7 of the letter describes a number of cases in which people have been prosecuted and abused by the government for apostasy or

blasphemy. Some sources contradict each other, as is the case here. That is why it is important to include as many different sources as possible in the letter, to prevent a one-sided picture. As said in the ACCORD report (2013), different sources must be used so that there is balance and so that the situation can be presented as it really is.

Another source not yet mentioned here is expert emails. The Dutch Council for Refugees has a database of experts in various fields and subjects worldwide who are available to provide additional information on complex origin questions. The help of an Afghanistan expert was requested for this letter. However, his name has been made unrecognizable in this research for privacy reasons. The correspondence with this expert can be read in Appendix 13 of the letter. For this asylum case, the Dutch Council for Refugees requested him to write an expert report about the position of apostates and converts in Afghanistan. The purpose of this report is to provide additional specialised information.

The second section of the letter discusses cases where people have been prosecuted for blasphemy or criticism of Islam. The 2016 country report discusses the murder of Farkhunda Malikzada in 2015 who was falsely accused of burning the Koran and was publicly killed in Kabul (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2016; Appendix 2 in the letter). Some of the other sources also discuss the murder of Malikzada, such as the Afghan Analysts Network (Appendix 14 in the letter), the Freedom of Thought report by the International Humanist and Ethical Union (Appendix 8 in the letter), The New York Times (Appendix 15 in the letter) and LA Times (Appendix 9 in the letter). The 2017 EASO report (Appendix 7 in the letter) lists a number of cases in which people have been arrested and convicted of blasphemy. The other sources also contain examples of convictions and arrests. By including such examples of violence, convictions and arrest, it can be demonstrated that these people are really at risk at return to Afghanistan.

The last section deals with cases of prosecution of converts to Christianity and Christians who are persecuted in Afghanistan. It is important to understand to what extent people are being prosecuted for being converts or Christians in

Afghanistan in order to assess whether they are at risk when they return. The country report from 2016 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Appendix 2 in the letter) states that during the reporting period no cases were known of people who have received the death penalty for being a convert. However, the social attitude towards these people is very hostile and they must practice their faith in secret. The same is also reported in other sources in the letter, namely that Christians cannot freely practice their faith, because they are at risk of being abused, murdered, arrested. All of the above information suggests that converts and apostates in Afghanistan are at great risk of prosecution, arrest and murder.

Relevant information was also extensively searched for in this letter about the position of converts, apostates and atheists. A wide variety of sources have been used and these have been carefully selected. Reference has been made correctly and the original sources are clearly included in the appendix so that the reader can find the information.

Venezuela – humanitarian situation

Venezuela is a country where the humanitarian situation has deteriorated dramatically, which also has major implications for the security situation (HRW, 2019). The country is facing a humanitarian crisis due to severe food and medicine shortages (Freedom House, 2019). Many people flee from the poor living conditions in the country and apply for asylum in other countries, including the Netherlands.

The COI requested in this case is to support an asylum seeker from Venezuela who has applied for asylum in the Netherlands because of the deteriorated humanitarian situation in the country of origin. The letter in Appendix 4 discusses the humanitarian situation in the country and the role of the government.

The letter is divided into three sections based on the COI that has been found. The first section discusses the UNHCR general guidelines on the security and humanitarian situation, the second section discusses the humanitarian situation and food shortages and the last section discusses the role of the government. The

COI that has been found has identified these as the main topics addressed in sources. These topics are also the most relevant to answer the question on the humanitarian situation in Venezuela. Notable about this letter is that it is a relatively long letter with a lot of information and sources. However, this makes it possible to better understand the situation in the country.

In the first part, a Guidance Note from the UNHCR (2019; Appendix 1 in the letter) provides general guidelines for dealing with Venezuelan refugees. The UNHCR calls on states not to deport refugees to Venezuela because the security and humanitarian situation in the country has deteriorated. The UNHCR states that Venezuelans who are not eligible for refugee status in Member States should in some cases receive subsidiary protection. This is for the cases where there are substantial reasons to believe that they are at risk when returning to Venezuela (2019; Appendix 1 in the letter). The most important parts from the guidance note and the link to the source are included in Appendix 1 of the letter so that the reader can easily find the information and the source. By including this information in the attachment to the letter, the search and use of COI is transparent and traceable (ACCORD, 2013).

The second part discusses the humanitarian situation and food shortages in the country.

The information in this section comes from sources such as NGO's (Human Rights Watch, Freedom House, Amnesty International, International Crisis Group), international and intergovernmental organisations (OHCHR) and media sources (NOS, Al Jazeera, BBC, Volkskrant, The Guardian). The appendices in the letter show that the various sources were found in various websites and databases. For example, almost all reports have been found in the Ecol.net database and the media sources all come from their own website. When a certain source is relatively long and contains a lot of information, the main parts from that source that have been covered in the letter are underlined in the appendix so that the reader can find those pieces more easily. The sources in the second section state that there is a humanitarian crisis due to severe shortages of food and medicines (Human Rights

Watch, 2019; Appendix 5 in the letter). In addition, there is high hyperinflation and crime in Venezuela (Freedom House, 2019; Appendix 6 in the letter). Due to the lack of medicines, diseases spread quickly and many people die both at home and in hospitals (ICG, Appendix 8 in the letter). The political situation in Venezuela is also discussed, as there are many conflicts between the Maduro government and the opposition (NOS, Appendix 2 in the letter).

Lastly, the role of the government is discussed. It is stated that President Maduro refuses humanitarian aid by violently blocking food and medical imports (Márquez, 2019; Appendix 7 in the letter). Furthermore, another source reports that the President denies that the country is in a humanitarian crisis (IRIN, 2019; Appendix 10 in the letter).

The search for and use of COI has been done extensively in this letter. Many different sources have been found, all of which contain relevant information to answer the question about the country of origin. An attempt has been made to meet the criteria and principles drafted by ACCORD (2013) as much as possible. This information shows that the situation in Venezuela is critical and that refugees, especially members of opposition parties, are at great risk at return.

Sri Lanka - LTTE family members, single and/or divorced women

The political situation has been unstable in Sri Lanka for decades. The Tamil Tigers, aka Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE), have fought for independence since the 1970s (Al Jazeera, 2007). Even now that the battle has been over for some time, the situation in the country has not improved much. The Sri Lanka letter in Appendix 5 addresses the risks to former Tamil members and their relatives upon return. In addition, information was requested about the position of single / divorced women in Sri Lanka.

Sometimes it is difficult to find specific information about a particular topic or country. This letter is an example of that. The asylum lawyer had requested information about the position of divorced women, but at the beginning of the letter it is stated that no information has been found specifically about this topic. In addition, reference is made to "frequently asked questions Sri Lanka - risks for

Tamils upon return". This is a document prepared by the Dutch Council for Refugees and it contains the most frequently asked questions about the subject and all of which are answered in that document. This document is available on *Vluchtweb*, which is only accessible to the Dutch Council for Refugees legal counsellors and asylum lawyers.

The letter is divided into two sections: the first section discusses the risks for family members of former LTTE fighters and the second section discusses the position of single (Tamil) women. Relatively much information has been found about the position of family members of former LTTE fighters. The sources with relevant information that have been found consist of country reports (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), human rights reports (Amnesty International) and government documents (USDOS). First, it was examined whether there is any information about the LTTE in the country report for Sri Lanka. In this case, there was indeed information about the LTTE, but the last country report dates from 2014. This means that there were few developments in the following years, therefore no new country report was published. However, this also means that the information from the 2014 country report is still up to date. The country report (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014; Appendix 1 in the letter) states that there are regular arbitrary arrests and detentions, including of family members and colleagues of former LTTE members. It is also said that widows of former LTTE fighters are followed by the authorities and require a permit to work or leave their residential area (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014; Appendix 1 in the letter).

After that, a recent human rights report from USDOS (2019) is discussed. In that report, it is said that Tamils are still discriminated in various areas and that they are monitored and harassed by security services. Alleged or former LTTE members are particularly targeted (USDOS, 2019; Appendix 2 in the letter). This information is addressed in the report under the heading "National / Racial / Ethnic Minorities" and that paragraph is included in the appendix of the letter with key information underlined. Furthermore, other human rights reports are mentioned such as Amnesty International, Freedom from Torture and Human Rights Watch and all

these sources also mention the same, namely that family members of LTTE members are at risk in Sri Lanka.

In addition, information was also requested about the position of divorced women in Sri Lanka, but since no information is available on this specific group, information has been included in the letter on the position of single women in general. Here too, the country report from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is first mentioned, which contains a paragraph about single women in Sri Lanka. In addition, information has been found in human rights reports such as Freedom House, Amnesty International and Fokus Women stating that single women are at high risk of being rejected by the community. There is a stigma on single women, especially widows. They struggle to get housing and they are very vulnerable to sexual violence and intimidation.

The asylum lawyer can demonstrate with all this information that family members of former LTTE fighters and single women are at high risk in Sri Lanka.

Nigeria – Black Axe Confraternity

In the COI letter about Nigeria, an asylum lawyer requested information about the Black Axe Confraternity, which is a brotherhood that originated at the University of Benin. The results of the information that has been found on this subject are included in Appendix 6. Based on the information that has been found, the letter is divided into four sections: Black Axe Confraternity in Nigeria, Black Axe Confraternity outside of Nigeria, human trafficking and government protection.

As always, it is investigated whether there is a country report available and if there is any information in that country report. However, no information was found in this case, therefore the search for recent and relevant information continued for reports and other documents that contain information about this brotherhood. The letter begins with general information about the Black Axe Confraternity, because probably not many people know this brotherhood. The information was obtained from a number of different sources, such as the Department of Foreign Affairs and

Trade (DFAT), EASO, Vice, The Fund for Peace and Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB).

A country report by DFAT (2018; Appendix 1 in the letter) states that such confraternities became increasingly violent in the 1970s and 1980s and have been operating like criminal gangs for decades. They are also called 'campus cults'. Many students are recruited by these cults and if they refuse, they risk threats, intimidation and sometimes violence. This also applies to people who want to leave the cult. According to the report, there is often violence between different campus cults with deaths as a result of the violence. In addition, The Black Axe is involved in many criminal activities such as murder, drug trafficking and human smuggling. The other sources mentioned provide approximately the same information, namely that the cults are very dangerous and that violence, murder, kidnapping and rape are common within these cults.

The second section discusses the influence and activities of the cult outside of Nigeria. Information is cited here from sources such as Reuters, Vice and ACCORD. These sources show that the influence of the cult is also significant outside Nigeria and that they continue their criminal activities in other countries. For example, Reuters (2018; Appendix 8 in the letter) states that the Black Axe is also active in Africa, North America, Europe and Asia.

The next section is about the role of the cult in human trafficking. Information about this was found from two important reports, namely EASO and the USDOS. Because it was already mentioned in several sources that the cult is involved in human trafficking, the information has been discussed here in two short paragraphs.

The last section discusses whether individuals can get government protection against these cults. This is always an important point that needs to be handled carefully, as it can affect the assessment of the case. When asylum seekers can obtain protection from the government in the country of origin, sometimes they are more likely to be sent back. It is therefore important to find as much recent information about this as possible. In this case, a number of sources have been

found that state whether or not individuals can receive government protection, such as a 2015 country report (Appendix 10 in the letter), the aforementioned EASO report (Appendix 2 in the letter) and the Vice article (Appendix 3). These sources state that although the Nigerian constitution forbids such societies, many of these cults still exist in the country. They also state that there is no information available about individuals seeking government protection against these cults.

Sometimes people apply for asylum in the Netherlands when they have refused to join the Black Axe Confraternity or because they just wanted to leave the cult. They claim to have been threatened, intimidated or attacked. This letter shows that they are at risk of return and therefore, this letter can be used to support the asylum seeker's case.

The Gambia – FGM in The Gambia and the Mende tribe

Female Genital Circumcision (FGM) is a major problem in The Gambia (USDOS, 2017). Many girls and women who apply for asylum in the Netherlands have fled their country, because otherwise they would be circumcised. The letter in Appendix 7 discusses female genital mutilation (FGM) in The Gambia and especially in the Mende tribe. The asylum seeker in question probably fled the country because she was a member of the Mende tribe and was at risk of circumcision. In order to verify the story of the asylum seeker and to determine which risks she might face at return, information was requested about the prevalence of FGM in The Gambia in general and in the Mende tribe in particular and whether persons can obtain protection from the authorities. Furthermore, information is provided about alternative locations for persons at risk of circumcision in The Gambia.

First, FGM is discussed in general in The Gambia and in the Mende tribe specifically. FGM is common in many African countries and a lot of information can be found in human rights reports. The first step is to search for information in these reports. The search for information almost always starts by investigating sources on Ecolnet, because it contains thousands of documents from more than 160 sources

and these sources are regularly updated. Another important database for country information is Refworld.org. This database also contains thousands of documents regarding country information (ICMPD, 2006).

The first source addressed is a December 2016 UK Home Office report on FGM in The Gambia (Appendix 6 in the letter). It states that the prevalence of FGM in the country 75% is and that it differs per ethnic group. According to the UK Home Office (2016), *"each case should therefore be considered individually as the differences vary by region, religion, ethnicity, social group, marriage and level of education."* All of these factors can increase or decrease the risk of FGM. The report provides detailed figures on FGM in the country. The main figures have been filtered and described in the letter. Furthermore, the UK Home Office (2016) states that individuals who are being threatened by non-state actors, cannot simply settle in other parts of the country. From this, it becomes evident that a woman who is at risk of circumcision in one region of the country cannot simply settle in another part of the country to avoid circumcision. This is because circumcision occurs in almost all regions of the country and the prevalence is relatively high. The most relevant paragraphs from the report are included in Appendix 6 of the letter, and the key information discussed in the letter is underlined to be presented clearly for reference.

Another source mentioned is the December 2017 EASO Country of Origin Information Report about The Gambia (Appendix 4 in the letter). This source provides important information about the Mende tribe, as it is said to be the largest ethnic group in the country with 34% of the population. In addition, the FGM percentage is highest for this tribe (96,7%), together with the Serahule tribe (97,8%). This represents that almost all women in the Mende tribe are circumcised. Furthermore, when someone is a member of this tribe and is sent back, she is at high risk of circumcision. The same information is stated in a country report of 28 Too Many (Appendix 7 in the letter). Including multiple different sources in the letter, ensures balance and reliability (ACCORD, 2013).

Subsequently, it is discussed whether women at risk of circumcision can obtain protection from authorities. A number of important sources are cited, such as USDOS, EASO, Freedom House and Human Rights Watch. According to these reports, a law was passed in 2015 banning FGM. One can be fined or sentenced to three years in prison for the execution of female circumcision on a female child (USDOS, 2017; Appendix 1 in the letter). However, different sources state that reducing FGM in The Gambia is difficult, *“because FGM / C is deeply embedded in the Gambian society”* (EASO, 2017; Appendix 4) and because despite the law passed by the government banning FGM, impunity and inadequate law enforcement remain a problem in The Gambia (USDOS, 2017; Appendix 1 in the letter).

However, a number of sources have been found that say that protection from the authorities is possible and it is important to include this information as well. For example, the UK Home Office report states that there are indications that the authorities are prosecuting people who carry out FGM (UK Home Office, 2016; Appendix 6 in the letter). Women's UN Report Network (2016; Appendix 5 in the letter) also reports that a case has been brought to trial after a five-month old baby died from FGM.

Subsequently, the internal relocation is briefly discussed. The same UK Home Office report (2016; Appendix 6 in the letter) is cited as before and it is stated that persons at risk in their home area may also be at risk in another area of the country, because the ethnic groups are very dispersed across the country and are strongly connected to each other. The report therefore recommends that it is important to consider each case very carefully.

Finally, a number of sources are discussed that state that FGM is primarily performed to preserve virginity before marriage (UK Home Office, 2016; 28 Too Many, 2015).

Iran – position of LGBT-persons

The human rights situation in Iran continues to be poor and several groups of people are at risk, such as opponents, converts and homosexuals (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2019). These people face risks to be arrested, convicted, mistreat and tortured (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2019). For this letter, information has been specifically requested about the position of LGBT persons, as the asylum seeker claims to be homosexual and at risk in the country of origin. The country information that has been found first discusses legislation regarding homosexuality continued by prosecution. Finally, the social position of homosexuals in Iran is discussed. This Iran letter is included in Appendix 8.

The letter is divided into three sections and the first section discusses legislation on homosexuality. It is immediately noticeable that there are many different sources and that there is a lot of information available on this topic. It is important to include as much relevant and reliable information as possible in the letter.

The letter begins by first discussing the information from the most recent country report from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In that report from 2019 it is stated that homosexuality is not a criminal offense in Iran, but the performance of sexual acts is (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019; Appendix 1 in the letter). Appendix 1 in the letter shows that there is a lot of information about homosexuality and about the position of LGBTI people in Iran. Although the entire paragraph is included in the appendix, the most important documents in the appendix are underlined. The underlined information is briefly discussed in the letter. Then two older country reports are discussed, one from 2015 and the other from 2013. Both country reports provide approximately the same information as the one from 2019. By including and discussing all three reports, it is demonstrated that the situation in all those years has not changed and that same-sex sexual acts are still a criminal offense in Iran. The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) published a report in 2019 listing law articles related to same-sex sexual acts and the penalties on them (ILGA, 2019; Appendix 5 in the letter). Those relevant schedules have been included in Appendix 5 in the letter. In that

appendix, it can be seen that almost all sexual acts are punishable by 100 lashes or the death penalty. Furthermore, important reports are cited that contain relevant information such as Human Rights Watch, ACCORD, UK Home Office and USDOS. In the appendices of the letter, one can see that all these reports have been found on Ecol.net or Refworld.org. The UK Home Office report (2016; Appendix 8 in the letter) states that LGBT people are highly discriminated in Iran and are almost always prosecuted when they are suspected of homosexuality. Finally, there are a number of sources that provide approximately the same information, namely that having a sexual relationship with someone of the same sex is punishable and that LGBT persons are prosecuted and discriminated on a large scale.

The second part of the letter discusses persecution of LGBT people. Information has been found in other new sources, as well as in sources already discussed in the first section. For example, here is information included about the prosecution of LGBT persons from the aforementioned 2019 country report from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is stated that there are no known cases in the reporting period when people have been convicted or punished for homosexual acts (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2019; Appendix 1 in the letter. Other previously cited sources are also discussed, such as reports from USDOS, Human Rights Watch and ILGA.

Finally, the social position of LGBT persons is discussed in the letter. Here too, the information has been obtained from various sources, both 'old and 'new'. This section examines how they are perceived and treated in society. Sources used in this section include country reports, a USDOS report and CRIN's children's rights report. From these sources, it becomes evident that homosexuality is seen as a disease in Iran and that LGBT persons are at risk of being harmed in the country of origin.

Turkey - risks to family members of Gülenists

Since the failed coup attempt in Turkey in 2016, many Turks apply for asylum in the Netherlands. Followers of the Islamic cleric Fethullah Gülen (also called Gülenists) have fled the country because they are at risk of being prosecuted by the

Turkish government. The family members of Gülenists are also afraid of being prosecuted by the Turkish government (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2019). Therefore, the letter in Appendix 9 addresses the risks to these family members in Turkey. At the beginning of the letter it is mentioned that for the position of (alleged) Gülenists, there is also a document "*Frequently Asked Questions*" available on Vluchtweb for asylum lawyers and legal counsellors of the Dutch Council for Refugees.

Because COI was requested about the possible risks that (family members of) Gülenists may face in Turkey, information was first sought in reports from different organisations. A number of COI reports have been found about the risks to these family members from USDOS, UK Home Office, OHCHR and Amnesty International. The report by Amnesty International (2017; Appendix 14 in the letter) has been found on Ecoi.net, which concerns workers who are fired from the public sector in Turkey. The authorities suspect them to be Gülen-members.

Something that is noticeable in this letter, is that many media sources have been used for COI, such as news reports. Information has been found in both national news sources from Turkey and well-known international news sources. Some of these sources are Vox, 7D News, Ahval News, Turkish Minute and The New York Times. Almost all of these sources report that alleged Gülenists or families of them have been arrested and detained (Appendices 2, 4, 6, 9 in the letter). It is important to include these news items in the letter and discuss those cases, to demonstrate that Gülenist family members are indeed at risk of being arrested and detained in Turkey. News reports also always report the latest news, so it is very important to include those sources in order to represent the situation at that moment in a country.

Important information was also found in the (at the time) most recent USDOS report. The report states that the family members of suspected Gülenists have become targets of the Turkish government and that many people's passports have been cancelled or refused. Secret investigations are also being conducted into suspects' family members. Some family members are fired from their jobs or are

not hired for a government function because their family member is said to have alleged terrorist ties (2019; Appendix 1 in the letter).

Because there was a need for certain COI which was difficult to find in the available sources, a Turkey expert was contacted. He has been asked a number of specific questions that are relevant in this asylum case and he has provided more information about the matter. This is a good example of an academic source. These experts can provide answers to specific questions that are difficult to find in written sources (EASO, 2018).

It becomes evident from the COI that has been found in this letter that (alleged) Gülenists and their family members are at risk of being arrested or prosecuted in Turkey on their return.

Iraq – honour killings

Iraq is a country of instability. War has been going on in the country for decades and human rights violations have been committed. In addition, there is the conflict between the Central Iraqi government and the Kurdish Autonomous Region (KAR). Some of the groups at risk in the country are homosexuals, single women, religious and ethnic minorities, and Sunnis (VluchtelingenWerk, 2019). The last case that is being discussed is honour killings in Iraq. This letter can be found in Appendix 10. The client's lawyer has requested information about honour killings in Iraq in general and also in the Kurdish Autonomous Region (KAR). The letter is divided into two sections. The first section discusses general information about honour killings in Iraq and the second section discusses the possibility of obtaining protection from the government. The information in this letter is used to support the asylum seeker's story and to demonstrate that he or she is at risk to be a victim of an honour killing at return to the country of origin.

In almost all cases, information is first sought in the country reports from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In this case, information was found on the position of women in Iraq in the most recent country report (at the time) from 2018 (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2018; Appendix 1 in the letter). All relevant

information about the position of women in Iraq from the report is included in Appendix 1 of the letter. This report states that women face social, societal and legal limitation and regularly fall victim to honour-related, sexual and domestic violence (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, 2018; Appendix 1 in the letter). In addition, older country reports are also consulted in order to see whether there is relevant information that is not included in the new country reports. In this case, there was more information in the 2016 and 2013 country reports about blood and honour issues than in the 2018 report. Therefore, the country reports from 2016 and 2013 are also addressed in the letter. The 2016 country report (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016; Appendix 2 in the letter) states that honour issues in Iraqi society are resolved through honour killings and in the 2013 report (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013; Appendix 3 in the letter) states that honour killings remain a major problem in Iraq. Furthermore, honour killings are also common in the KAR and it is stated that the violence can consist of corporal punishment as well as murder.

A number of different reports from different years are then cited, such as from Migrationsverket - Swedish Migration Agency, USDOS, Minority Rights Group International and Freedom House. The various sources show that there is a lot of information available about the risks to women in Iraq. These reports discuss the position of women, domestic violence, family-related violence, and honour killings in both Iraq and the KAR. For example, the report by the Migrationsverket - Swedish Migration Agency (2017; Appendix 4 in the letter) states that single women are at greater risk of becoming victims of violence and honour killings than married women. The USDOS report on human rights in Iraq (2018; Appendix 5 in the letter) states that in some cases, families who murdered someone as a result of honour killings allege that the victim committed suicide. A report from the Minority Rights Group International (MRG) states that both men and women face honour killings, although the risk to women is much higher (MRG, 2015; Appendix 7 in the letter). Finally, the Eligibility Guidelines of the UNHCR (2012; Appendix 10 in the

letter) state that some girls or boys are being murdered because they are suspected of certain messages or telephone conversations.

The second part of the letter is about whether people who are at risk of being victim of violence or honour killings in Iraq can be protected by the government. This information is very important, because when it is evident that they cannot be protected by the government, sending them back to the country of origin can be dangerous.

Here too have many different sources been used to provide as much information as possible about government protection. A report by EASO (2018; Appendix 12) demonstrates in paragraph nine about women and children, that violence and murder among women is often not reported to the police because they experience discrimination. It also states that honour killings are hardly penalized for being seen as an "attenuating circumstance" in murder. The country reports also state that there is no effective legal or policy framework in Iraq to prevent violence against women and girls, to protect the victims and to execute the perpetrators (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018; Appendix 1 in the letter). It is further mentioned that the Kurdish authorities cannot provide individual citizens with adequate protection against human rights violations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016; Appendix 2 in the letter). In general, honour killings are not reported or prosecuted by the Iraqi government because they see it as a family issue for which the male relatives are responsible. Often, no investigation is initiated into a person's murder, as police often accept the family's story. Even in the few cases that come to court, the perpetrators get off easily because they receive a light sentence or are not even punished at all (Minority Rights Group, 2015; Appendix 7 in the letter). The rest of the sources provide almost the same information, in all sources it is said that victims receive almost or no protection at all and that perpetrators often go free. The fact that almost all sources say the same thing creates the strong impression that victims will not be protected in Iraq and that they would therefore be at great risk at return.

Chapter 5. Use of COI by an asylum lawyer

This chapter discusses first the use of country-of-origin information by an asylum lawyer in order to support a client. After that, the problems or sensitivities that arise with regard to COI are argued. Finally, the last paragraph discusses the influence of COI on decision-making from the point of view of an asylum lawyer.

5.1 Use of COI

When an asylum seeker applies for asylum and is assigned a lawyer, an initial interview takes place between the client and the lawyer. Usually there are things at this point that may be relevant to investigate. According to the lawyer, it is better to first provide country information yourself before there is an intended decision (*Voornemen*) from the IND, in order to provide the IND with thinking material. The first interview or the detailed interview may show that some things can be substantiated even better so that there is some general information in addition to the statements made by the client. Questions can then be asked to the Dutch Council for Refugees Helpdesk or to a documentalist. After receiving the country information, the lawyer will filter a lot herself. However, that varies per lawyer. Some lawyers simply send the letters as an attachment at the correction and additions or the view, while others read the letter and the sources carefully and make a filter of what is most relevant. According to the lawyer, the IND does not always read the full 20 pages, for example, so the lawyer must extract the specific parts that are relevant. The most relevant and concrete parts are then incorporated into the view (*Zienswijze*). Very occasionally, almost everything in a 20-page report is relevant, in which case the entire report is added as an attachment. The IND responds usually to the view that has been sent by the lawyer and that response often varies. Sometimes the lawyer receives a response that some points will be dropped, or that they have found different information. There are many different ways in which the IND can respond and depending on that reaction, the lawyer looks at whether additional questions can be asked at the Helpdesk or whether he or she is looking for additional information. Therefore, it all depends

on the precise individual case. In some cases, it is clear that it is fixed on country information. In that case, country information is already requested on day one from the Helpdesk. But there are also cases where something is stated in the intended decision by the IND that a lawyer is not prepared for. The lawyer must then be able to switch very quickly.

Country information is not used in all asylum applications, it depends on the story of a client. When a person comes from Syria for example and has relatively few individual aspects, then country information would not make a difference in the decision-making. In this case, there is no need to request country information. However, there are also cases that are so specific, where there is no need to request for country information either, because it is clear that nothing will come out of it. Little use is made of country information for Syrian asylum seekers, but very much for Eritrean asylum seekers. In Eritrean cases, it is often also about the same subjects: illegal exit, military service and obtaining documents. Country information is also widely used for Afghan cases. This mainly concerns the security situation in the country. Sudan is also a country that requires a relatively large amount of information, and in particular about the opposition. However, there are lawyers who deal with other countries, so they ask questions about other countries and other subjects like for example Sri Lanka. But otherwise it is individually determined whether or not country information is necessary.

The lawyer says to a client during an interview: 'I will request information about certain things'. If that information matches what a client has said, then that information is simply forwarded to the IND. But if the information does not match what the client has said, then the lawyer will have a conversation with the client, because then it becomes a difficult situation. In that case, the lawyer thinks up a response together with the client when the IND finds the same information. If the country information found does not match the story of an asylum seeker, the lawyer does not submit that information to the IND, because an asylum lawyer is there to support the client. It is the task of the IND to find exactly that information. Other information must then be sought or the client must provide a clear

explanation. The asylum seekers themselves do not make use of or search for available country information.

5.2 Sensitivities/issues with COI

Sometimes there are country-of-origin questions about which not much information is available. Depending on how relevant the question is, the lawyer can ask if there is an expert who might be able to provide information about it. This is only done with relevant questions, because they may be decisive whether or not to receive protection. However, if it is less relevant, or if it is only a small part of the asylum claim, while there are other points that may or may not be credible, little attention is paid to it. One cannot search for country information in every case.

In some cases, it is difficult to get the right story from an asylum seeker because they might be in shock, or very closed due to cultural differences. Then there is a chance that their story is not entirely correct, or that they have not told everything that happened. Then there is a chance that the country information found does not correspond to what a client has said. That challenge is present in different ways, with different groups. An example is Eritrea. Eritreans live in a completely different reality, where evidence plays a very different role and therefore there is no awareness of how important documents are or how important statements can be. Such cases require a different approach. A lot of time has to be taken in the preparatory conversations to explain cultural differences. It is important that asylum seekers give as many details as possible, because otherwise there is a chance that they will be rejected. That is why attention is paid to this aspect at every step in the asylum procedure. However, other cultures pose completely different problems, for example an Arab man who has a female employee sitting opposite him. When the female employee asks questions about his wife, about their marriage or problems, that man will probably not tell much to her. Things like that should be discussed with clients in advance, because there is a chance that things like that could cause problems. Those are problems that can arise from a cultural side, but there is also the psychological side where people have experienced

intense things and therefore cannot talk. If that is very clear, then an attempt is made to involve a professional. They must then go to the doctor and that must be substantiated with doctor's statements so that the lawyer can go to the IND in advance to indicate that the client is unable to explain very clearly. The IND must then take this into account.

First of all, it is examined whether the story of an asylum seeker is credible. If the story is not credible, the asylum application may be rejected. If the story is credible, it will be examined whether the asylum seeker runs the risk of prosecution or serious damage in the country of origin. However, it is much more difficult to find out the truth than the risk they run in return to their country of origin. The burden of proof for different things is also different. With a future risk, it is not possible to prove 100 percent that that will actually happen. When it comes to the truth, then it's yes or no, it's the truth or not the truth. It is very dependent on how close you can get to the specific country-of-origin question. For example, a family issue can probably not be substantiated. The truth is therefore much more individual than the risk that someone runs on return. Risk is much more general, because it is possible to look at what is known about comparable cases. It is therefore easier to find out with country information what risk someone runs when returning, than to find out if the story that has been told is the truth.

An appeal is lodged when a negative decision comes from the IND, while the lawyer thinks that the client is at risk on return. A lawyer will then collect even more country information. At present, Afghan cases are very often rejected, but the security situation continues to deteriorate. Many European countries grant permits, but the Netherlands does not. Country-of-origin information can clearly show in which part people are at risk on their return. But often that is not enough to give Afghan asylum seekers permits. Lawyers must therefore collect even more country information and continue until there is enough evidence.

Country-of-origin information plays a major role for a client and that can be both positive and negative. On the one hand, it can be positive when the client tells something and it is actually found in reports. But on the other hand, it can of course

also be very confronting when the client claims that something really happened, but that completely different information is found. Asylum seekers often do not realize that things can be checked and lawyers also warn them about this. For example, many Facebook accounts are checked by the IND. Both individual information and country information is much more available than asylum seekers realize.

The lawyer believes that country information is often very good. Terms of Reference are drawn up for country reports and generally they also adhere to them. They do try to discuss those subjects in the country reports. However, country report writers are not always aware of how their information is used. They do not always realize that one sentence can have major consequences for asylum seekers. The lawyer finds that the Immigration and Refugee Board is a good source because they have very good information. However, they also always display conflicting opinions. So, you have to be very careful with that.

According to the lawyer, the main problems or sensitivities with regard to country information are careful reading and not being selective. According to her, it is important for the IND to be non-selective. They must include all information, but a lawyer is biased. It is not expected from a lawyer that he or she will submit parts that can be used against the client. Lawyers may therefore be selective in sending documents that only show that the story is correct, but the IND is not allowed to do so. They only have to judge. They cannot cut and paste all the negative things out and sometimes they do. That is one of the biggest objections. It is not always realized by the IND. The task of the IND is simply to collect country information, not so much information that shows that a story is not correct, but also the positive things must be involved in an assessment. Country information can be used subjectively according to the lawyer and that is of course a risk sometimes.

5.3 Role of COI in the decision-making

In the case of an intended decision to reject, more country information search cannot make a difference, because the IND itself does not change its decision. There must always be a court or even the Council of State or the European judge who will say that things must be done differently. The country report shows that the situation in Afghanistan, for example, has become worse and that policy is being adjusted. But the IND almost never says that they have done something wrong and that they will do it differently. It is important to continue and then sometimes things can change, but it might take years.

In summary, it can be said that country information makes a big difference in an asylum case and in the decision-making. It is never just country information, neither with rejection nor with acceptance. But it can definitely help, lawyers need to be able to sift the information and present it well. It is important that lawyers do their best to properly collect and submit country information. It is also important that there is more exchange and that information is shared proactively. Then it can certainly make a difference.

Chapter 6. Use of COI by the IND

This chapter provides a description of the COI units of the IND and discusses how hearing and decision workers use country of information. Furthermore, the sensitivities/issues of using COI and the role of COI in asylum decision-making is discussed.

6.1 COI-units of the IND

There are two types of departments that have to do with country of origin information within the Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND). Every IND office that has to do with asylum applications from asylum seekers, Ter Apel, Den Bosch, Zevenaar and Schiphol, has a department and it is called the Regional Information Center (RIC). The most basic questions on country of origin can be issued by asylum officers at the RIC. These are the units at location level. Asylum case officers can send basic questions to the RIC for verification in case of lack of time and resources. However, there are also country-specific issues that are much more detailed and much more complex. To answer questions on these issues, there is a specialized unit in The Hague. This unit is called the 'Team Research Expertise Country and Language' (*Team Onderzoek Expertise Land en Taal*). TOELT consists of a number of regional directorates such as a directorate of Africa, a directorate of North Africa and Middle East, a directorate of Latin America and the directorate of Asia. Each regional directorate consists of a number of country specialists who are mainly concerned with their country or their area, which they are responsible for. The TOELT operates at national scale, serving all asylum employees from Ter Apel to Den Bosch and from Zevenaar to Schiphol.

The people who work at the TOELT-unit are country experts with backgrounds in various fields and they are also in contact with other authorities and institutions that have to do with country-specific information. The people working at the RIC are very internationally oriented and are also very interested in other countries and cultures. Both the TOELT and the RIC consist of people with a fairly diverse background.

The Country of Origin Reports (*Ambtsberichten*) issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have their own department. A deliberate separation has been made in order to make the reports as reliable and objective as possible. However, the writers of these country-of origin reports do receive input from the IND about which countries and what subjects they want information from. The research questions are prepared by TOELT and by asylum officers from the IND. These are called the 'Terms of Reference' (ToR). The Terms of Reference is then submitted to the writer of the country-of-origin report and he or she writes the report, based on all kinds of sources, both written and oral sources.

The country-of-origin reports are mainly written about countries where a lot of asylum seekers come from, such as Eritrea, Syria and Afghanistan. However, there are also asylum seekers from countries where there is less attention and interest on, because fewer asylum seekers come from those countries. In those cases, TOELT also makes use of knowledge from other organisations or COI-departments from other European member states and NGO's. For example, the Norwegians, the Swedes and the Austrians have a very good reputation in the field of COI. Also, Norwegian Refugee Council is also very active in the field of COI and that is certainly closely monitored by TOELT. Even though, the country reports (*Ambtsberichten*) by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are the most important sources for the IND, other sources are also used to answer country-of-origin question.

6.2 Use of COI by the IND

It depends on time, circumstances and knowledge whether an asylum officer searches information himself or asks the RIC or TOELT to answer the country-specific questions. Some asylum officers have more time to search for information, some of them have more knowledge and are in lesser need to reach out to the RIC or TOELT, and others are very interested and try to find information before they reach out to the COI-units. So, it all depends on the asylum officer's frame of reference and the time and the type of case.

The use of COI runs through the entire asylum procedure. When asylum seekers enter the Netherlands, both at Schiphol (by plane) and in Zevenaar and Ter Apel (by land) then they are registered, fingerprints are taken and they receive a V-number (*vreemdelingen-nummer*). After that, the registration interview (*Aanmeldgehoor*) takes place. An asylum seeker is asked about his nationality, identity, his ethnicity, his religion and the place of origin within the country where he claims to come from. That is the first moment where COI is used, because those statements are written down by the asylum case officer and then they are immediately verified by the RIC of Schiphol or by the RIC of Ter Apel. Afterwards, they enter the asylum procedure, where an initial interview (*Eerste gehoor*) takes place. This interview looks back at the registration hearing to ensure that everything is recorded correctly. COI can also be used for this hearing. After the initial interview, the detailed interview (*Nader gehoor*) takes place with the asylum seekers. During the detailed interview, asylum seekers explain why they fled. This phase also contains COI components and is more detailed and more in-depth. Therefore, country-of-origin questions in this phase are mainly asked to TOELT in The Hague. Every interview in the asylum procedure therefore has a COI-dimension.

After the detailed interview, there are always three options:

1. The IND finds that the asylum seeker has made it plausible that he or she is a refugee, and is granted asylum.
2. The IND finds that they need more additional information from the asylum seeker. Then there might be an additional interview (*Aanvullend gehoor*) and the person will be further questioned.
3. The IND finds that the asylum seeker has not made it plausible that he or she is a refugee, therefore there is an intended decision (*Voornemen*) to reject it.

If that intended decision is issued by the IND, then the IND will substantiate why the person has not made it plausible that he or she is a refugee. Then the asylum seeker can submit a view (*Zienswijze*) with the help of the lawyer. This is where the lawyer can submit COI in order to support the asylum seeker's claims. So,

during the entire asylum procedure, from registration to acceptance or rejection, a COI-related moment may arise at every step and country-specific knowledge and expertise are required.

The request of COI goes through the basis registration system 'INDIGO'. Every asylum seeker has a digital file in which questions can be fed. That question ends up in the RIC's work tray or in the TOELT work tray in The Hague. An answer is then placed under that question with a substantiation of various sources. Once that has been completed, the asylum officer receives a notification with a pdf file containing the question with the answer and the substantiation.

6.3 Sensitivities/Issues when using COI

When using COI, it is important that when a certain insight is established with regard to a country-specific topic, that it is supported by preferably a number of different sources. Those sources also need to be as reliable and objective as possible, because some sources could have an activist agenda. For example, a certain human rights organization or interest group could present a certain situation as worryingly as possible, while another source that is much more independent and more objective provides a much more nuanced picture of the same problem. It is important to look very carefully that the information is as objective as possible, supported by different sources. But also, who is the source and with what intent the information has been created and published. This process of selecting and analysing sources is known as 'source assessment' (*bronbeoordeling*).

Sometimes the image is also very fragmented and conflicting and different things are said in different sources. If the image is fragmented, then that is also the answer. It is precisely those countries where asylum seekers come from that the authorities do not act in a uniform way. One civil servant is corrupt, the other is not, one is much more loyal to the ruling party, the other is not and so you get a very crumbling image of practices on the ground. People from the same countries could have very different experiences. If the statements of an asylum seeker fit in with that fragmented image, then there is a good chance that this person will get

the benefit of the doubt. However, it is still very case-dependent, because the IND looks at those cases within the context of the COI that is present. The origin-related stories are integrally weighted in conjunction with his language profile, with his religious profile, and possibly with a working background. Then it is entirely case-dependent whether it works out for the benefit of the asylum seeker or not.

A sensitivity in the use of country-of-origin information is that it can help one asylum seeker with verifying his or her story, and can actually oppose the other asylum seeker because the information does not match his or her statements. An example of this is of a minor Somalian girl who is born in the Netherlands and whose mother has come to the Netherlands. The chance that she will be circumcised on her return is considerable, because roughly 98% of girls in Somalia are being circumcised. Therefore, this girl can be granted a refugee status, a B-status. But, a girl of the same age with the Nigerian nationality who invokes the risk of female circumcision, might be rejected because country-of-origin information shows that the minority of the girls is circumcised in Nigeria and there are also areas where the percentage of female circumcision is even less, or where you can possibly continue to live anonymously without being at risk of serious harm. Country-of-origin information can thus play a major role in the acceptance or rejection of asylum applications.

According to the IND, COI is involved as carefully as possible in the contextualization of an asylum claim. An asylum application consists of a number of relevant elements and COI is involved with every element in an asylum claim. The first element is nationality, identity and origin and COI is already involved in this first element. For example, when a person claims to be a Kurd from Syria, but he speaks the variant of Kurdish that is spoken in Turkey, then you can use COI to substantiate that.

Sometimes there are also complex matters about which little information is available. In such cases an asylum officer will contact his or her senior officer and also the officer of the policy department of the IND. The policy department of the IND is also based in The Hague and these are also subdivided into themes and

regions. For example, if there is a case about the Central African Republic and there is little information available, then a policy officer could be contacted who is responsible for the Central African Republic. Substantial discussions will then take place about how to deal with the situation.

There are also many asylum cases that are sensitive, such as people who claim to be converted to a particular religion or have an LGBTI identity. Such cases can make the assessment of an asylum claim more difficult and therefore the IND has special work instructions for those situations. The statements of the person are in always very important. The person must then in a number of areas with regard to the stated sexual orientation or the stated conversion be able to explain as unambiguously and as coherently as possible.

6.4 Role of COI in the decision-making

In summary, it can be said that the role of country information in decision-making depends very much on the case and the issues raised by an asylum seeker. COI is present in every asylum application, sometimes a bit more and sometimes a bit less. However, it can definitely make a difference depending on the situation. If the statements of an asylum seeker are consistent and they correspond to the COI, then it benefits the asylum seeker. However, if the asylum seeker declares very contradictory, then it can also have negative consequences for this person. Therefore, the role of COI in the decision-making is very case-dependent, but it is present in every application, throughout the entire process.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

The main objective of this research was to examine and understand how COI is used by different actors in asylum procedures in order to verify the stories of asylum seekers. I wrote and analysed COI-letters, and held interviews with people who use COI to answer the research question of this study: *How is COI used to assess whether an asylum seeker's statements are plausible in the Dutch asylum system?*

In order to answer this, I have divided the question into three sub-questions:

- 1. How is country of origin information sought and collected by COI units?*
- 2. How is country of origin information used by asylum lawyers to support their clients?*
- 3. How is country of origin information used by the IND to make asylum decisions?*

By examining these sub-questions, the research question can now be answered. In addition, the research will be reflected and finally recommendations will be made.

7.1 Use of COI by different actors

COI plays an important role in European asylum systems. The Country Information team of the Dutch Council for Refugees answers origin questions of asylum lawyers and legal counsellors from the organization by searching for COI and writing letters with recent and relevant information. In many cases, asylum seekers must prove that they are at risk in their country of origin. This can be confirmed or invalidated by means of COI. Through COI, it can be assessed whether an asylum seeker's statements are plausible as to whether he or she is eligible for refugee status.

The research demonstrates that asylum seekers come from all over the world and they each have their own reasons to flee from their country. Some people have very specific and individual reasons, others more general reasons such as a deteriorated security situation. In many asylum cases, there is a need for COI to verify the story

of an asylum seeker. Because asylum seekers come from different parts of the world and have their own story, the origin questions also differ. There is a wide variety of origin questions that are posed to the Country Information department from the Dutch Council for Refugees. The examination of the COI letters shows that information is searched very carefully. It is not a simple search for information on the internet, but it goes much deeper than that. Most questions of origin are answered in much the same way, namely by looking for information in, for example, reports and news articles. Sometimes more specific and precise information is required as is the case with some Eritrea travel route questions. An extensive letter is written and sent to the lawyer. Attempts are made to find as much recent and relevant information as possible that confirms the asylum seeker's story and various means are used for this. Many different sources are used from all kinds of countries, such as country reports, human rights reports and news articles, but also experts who are specialized in certain countries. Those sources are carefully examined in order to extract the most relevant information.

There are differences in the ways in which asylum lawyers use COI. Some lawyers handle this very carefully and try to go through the letters completely and add more information, but other lawyers send them directly to the IND. It can make a lot of difference to an asylum seeker in how his or her lawyer handles COI, because that information can play a major role in the decisions about the application.

However, there are some shortcomings and/or issues regarding the use of COI. First, there are sometimes contradictions in various sources or a sentence is worded differently. Some reports have conflicting opinions which can have major consequences for asylum seekers. When a case rests heavily on country information and the sources show contradictions, how is it determined which information outweighs the other? And if you have to choose between which information weighs more heavily, is it still objective? This is also due to the intentions and political agendas of certain organisations writing such reports. One source can paint a completely different picture of the situation than the other source. In some cases, this can be positive for asylum seekers, in others negative.

Van der Kist et.al (2019) already said in their article that the creation and use of COI *"takes place in the shadow of decision-making"*. In their view, it is a bureaucracy where country information has the primary purpose of supporting decision-making rather than assessing whether asylum seekers' statements are plausible.

Their politics of knowledge becomes visible in, for example, the country reports which are created by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The purpose of these reports, commissioned by the government, is to assess decision-making on asylum and individual applications. However, the content of those reports can sometimes be questionable. For example, the footnotes of the report regularly state that the source is a confidential source. This is not in line with the ACCORD criteria that the source reference must be transparent and traceable. However, based on that information, decisions are made about whether or not asylum seekers can stay and whether they are granted refugee status or other international protection. The country of origin information is created by authorities and is accepted as the "truth". That truth is then used to make asylum decisions.

The control apparatus mentioned by Foucault is also present in the production and use of COI. States are trying to get a grip on migration pressure and this is done by creating knowledge and making decisions based on their self-created knowledge. The stories of asylum seekers are checked and those who do not meet the standards are rejected and returned.

Second, in the entire process of seeking 'the truth' of the asylum seeker, the asylum seeker himself is, as it were, pushed to the background. The asylum seeker's identity disappears, he / she becomes more of an "object". One hears a story, but that story is only a small part of the person. It is unclear who that person is, what he or she actually went through. The stories they tell have to be confirmed, otherwise they might be sent back. From that moment on it is only about verifying their stories. The person behind the story becomes less important. This is partly determined by the fact that the asylum system only searches for information to

confirm the story. This information can in some cases change the lives of those people. But the person behind the story remains unknown.

7.2 Reflection

This study was a bit different from others, because it wasn't simply doing research and collecting data over a period of a few months. It was more of an internship where I worked for a year, by writing COI letters and collecting data at the same time. By having spent a year searching COI, processing, analysing and answering origin questions, I now have a very good idea of how this works in practice in the Dutch asylum system. This research has shown which origin questions are asked, how information is searched, what sources are used, how the information is filtered, how the questions are answered and what role this information ultimately plays in the asylum decision-making.

However, there are two limitations to this study. The first is that it was sometimes difficult to remain objective as a researcher, because the research took place at an organization (Dutch Council for Refugees) that represents the interests of refugees and asylum seekers. As the asylum lawyer also says in the interview, the people who stand up for the interests of asylum seekers and refugees are biased, while the IND must be impartial. The IND must be non-selective and must include all information, while asylum lawyers stand up for their interests and may therefore sometimes withhold parts that can be used against an asylum seeker. It is up to the IND to find that information.

The second limitation is that there is little feedback on how exactly the information we send to legal counsellors or asylum lawyers is used and what role the information ultimately played in the decision-making process of an asylum case. It happens sometimes that a lawyer asks a number of difficult origin questions and that it sometimes takes a few days to gather all the information in order to answer those questions. A lot of time and effort is put into finding as much recent and relevant information as possible to answer the questions as well as possible. However, there is very little feedback on how, for example, a lawyer uses COI

letters to support his or her client. Little is known about what exactly they do with that information afterwards. Do they read it all the way through? Do they cut things out of the letter? Do they select certain pieces? Do they supplement it with other information? Do they discuss the information found with their client? In addition, little is known about what role the information we sent ultimately played in the decision-making process of an asylum seeker. Occasionally we receive feedback from an asylum lawyer if the information found has led to a positive result for an asylum seeker. However, it is often not known to the Country Information team of the Dutch Council for Refugees what has happened to the information and whether the asylum seeker has benefited from the information. Of course, the lawyer can be asked whether the COI that was found has been useful. However, the lawyers rarely send feedback about whether COI has been useful in the asylum seeker's case.

7.3 Recommendations

This research was conducted to find out how COI is used in practice in the Netherlands. However, as mentioned earlier, this research was done at the Dutch Council for Refugees that defends the interests of asylum seekers and refugees. Therefore, the study was conducted from the perspective of the Dutch Council for Refugees. Because the organization is biased, the investigation may produce different results than if the investigation were conducted at another COI unit, for example from the IND. It is therefore recommended to conduct further research into the use of COI by other COI units, to compare if there are differences in the ways in which COI is used by different organizations or actors. By conducting research from a different perspective, a more complete picture can be drawn of the use of COI and its role in decision-making.

Bibliography

- 7D News (2018). *Turkey Detains Wives of Eight Gülen-linked Suspects*.
<https://7dnews.com/news/turkey-detains-wives-of-eight-g-len-linked-suspects>
(accessed on 23 February 2020)
- 28 Too Many (2015). *Country Profile: FGM in The Gambia, March 2015*.
<https://www.refworld.org/docid/58bd52864.html> [accessed 1 June 2020]
- Al Jazeera (2017). *Turkey's failed coup attempt: All you need to know*.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/12/turkey-failed-coup-attempt-161217032345594.html> (accessed on 25 June 2020).
- Al Jazeera (2007). *Timeline of Sri Lanka's civil war*.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2006/11/200852518502681169.html>
(accessed on 23 February 2019).
- Amnesty International (2019). *Iran 2019*.
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/iran/report-iran/> (accessed on 25 June, 2020).
- Amnesty International (2017). *No End in Sight: Purged Public Sector Workers Denied A Future in Turkey*.
https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1400068/1226_1495435618_eur4462722017english.pdf (accessed on 3 July 2020).
- ACCORD - Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (2013). *Researching Country of Origin Information: Training Manual, 2013 Edition*.
- Bernard, H. Russell (Ed.) (1998). *Handbook of methods in cultural anthropology*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press.
- Boeije, H., Hart, H. 't & Hox, J. (2009). *Onderzoeksmethoden*. Den Haag: Boom Lemma uitgevers. 8th Edition.
- CBS (2020). *Hoeveel immigranten komen naar Nederland?*
<https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/dossier/dossier-asiel-migratie-en-integratie/hoeveel-immigranten-komen-naar-nederland-> (accessed on 6 July 2020)
- CBS (2018). *Trends in the Netherlands 2018*. Statistics Netherlands: The Hague.
- COI-CG Working Party (2006). *Judicial Criteria for Assessing Country of Origin Information (COI): A Checklist Paper for 7th Biennial IARLJ World Conference*, Mexico City, 6-9 November 2006

- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among five approaches*. Second Edition. USA: Sage Publications, Inc
- Dahlvik, J. (2017). Asylum as construction work: Theorizing administrative practices. *Migration Studies* 5(3), 369-388.
- Dahlvik, J. (2018). *Inside Asylum Bureaucracy: Organizing Refugee Status Determination in Austria*. Springer Open: Austria.
- DCR - Dutch Council for Refugees & ECRE - European Council on Refugees and Exiles (2020). *Country Report: Netherlands*.
https://www.asylumineurope.org/sites/default/files/report-download/aida_nl_2019update.pdf (accessed on 26 June 2020)
- deMunck, Victor C. & Sobo, Elisa J. (Eds) (1998). *Using methods in the field: a practical introduction and casebook*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- DeWalt, Kathleen M. & DeWalt, Billie R. (2002). *Participant observation: a guide for fieldworkers*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- DFAT – Australian Government – Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2018). *DFAT Country Information Report Nigeria, 9 maart 2018*.
<http://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Documents/country-information-report-nigeria.pdf>
- Dunn, K. (2010). Interviewing. In I. Hay (Ed.), *Qualitative Research Methods in Human Geography* (3rd) (101 – 138). Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- EASO - European Asylum Support Office (2019). *Country Guidance: Afghanistan; Guidance note and common analysis, June 2019*
https://www.easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/Country_Guidance_Afghanistan_2019.pdf (accessed on 4 June 2020)
- EASO – European Asylum Support Office (2019). *Afghanistan – Security situation, June 2019*
https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2010329/Afghanistan_security_situation_2019.pdf (accessed on 4 June 2020)
- EASO – European Asylum Support Office (2018). *Country Guidance: Afghanistan. Guidance note and common analysis, June 2018*.
<https://www.easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/easo-country-guidance-afghanistan-2018.pdf> (accessed on 4 June 2020).
- EASO – European Asylum Support Office (2018). *Country of Origin Information Report: Irak actors of protection*.
https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1453318/1226_1543937843_iraq-actors-of-protection-2018.pdf

EASO – European Asylum Support Office (2017). *The Gambia - Country Focus, December 2017*

https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1419801/90_1513324824_easo-201712-coi-report-gambia.pdf (accessed on 1 June 2020)

EASO - European Asylum Support Office (2012). *EASO Country of Origin Information report methodology*. Luxembourg: European Asylum Support Office.

EMN (European Migration Network) (2014). *Ad-hoc query on searching of COI for asylum procedures*.

Eurostat. (2016). *EU Member States granted protection to more than 330000 asylum seekers in 2015*. Retrieved on February 26 2020 from:

<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7233417/3-20042016-AP-EN.pdf/34c4f5af-eb93-4ecd-984c-577a5271c8c5>.

Fassin, D. (2013). The Precarious Truth of Asylum, *Public Culture* 25(1): 39-63.

Foucault, Michel (1991). *Discipline and Punish*. London: Penguin Books.

Foucault, Michel (1980). Truth and Power. In C. Gordon (Ed.), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (109 – 133). Brighton: Harvester.

Freedom House (2019). *Freedom in the World 2019 - Venezuela*.

<https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2002621.html> (accessed on 5 July 2020).

Gibb, R. & Good, A. (2013). Do the Facts Speak for Themselves? Country of Origin Information in French and British Refugee Status Determination Procedures. *International Journal of Refugee Law* 25(2), pp. 291-322.

Hathaway, James C., & Foster, Michelle (2014). *The Law of Refugee Status*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press. Second Edition.

Horwood, Christopher & Hooper, Kate (2016). *Protection on the Move: Eritrean Refugee Flows through the Greater Horn of Africa*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

HRW – Human Rights Watch (2019). *World Report 2019 – Venezuela*, 17 January 2019 <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2002237.html> (accessed on 5 July 2020).

ICG – International Crisis Group (2019). High Noon over Humanitarian Aid at Venezuela's Border, 22 February 2019.

<https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1458453.html> (accessed on 1 July 2020)

ICMPD (2006). 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. Vienna: 2006.

IOM – International Organization for Migration (2019). *World Migration Report 2020*. IOM

IOM – International Organization for Migration (2017). *World Migration Report 2018*. IOM

IRIN – Integrated Regional Information Network (2019). *As Venezuela's denied crisis deepens, local aid groups shift tactics*.

<http://www.irinnews.org/news-feature/2019/01/17/venezuela-crisis-local-aid-groups-shift-tactics> (accessed on 4 March 2020).

Khan, Hafeez Ullah & Khan, Wasseem (2017). Syria: History, The Civil War and Peace Prospects. *Journal of Political Studies* 24 (2): 587-601.

Kawulich, Barbara B. (2005). Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method. *FQS* 6(2), Art. 43.

Lincoln, Yvonna S. & Guba, Egon G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Lipsky, M. (2010) *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. 30th anniversary expanded edition. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Longhurst (2016). Semi-structured interviews and focus groups. In N. Clifford, M. Cope, T. Gillespie & S. French, *Key methods in geography* (117-132). London: Sage.

Márquez, Humberto (2019). *Repression Stands in the Way of Political Solution to Crisis in Venezuela*.

http://www.ipsnews.net/2019/02/repression-stands-way-political-solution-crisis-venezuela/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=repression-stands-way-political-solution-crisis-venezuela (accessed on 17 June 2020).

Migrationsverket – Swedish Migration Agency (2017). *The Security Situation in Iraq: July 2016-November 2017*.

https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1420556/1226_1514470370_17121801.pdf (accessed on 2 June 2020)

Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken (2019). *Algemeen Ambtsbericht Afghanistan, maart 2019*.

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/ambtsberichten/2019/03/01/algemeen-ambtsbericht-afghanistan> (accessed on 4 June 2020).

Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken (2019). Algemeen Ambtsbericht Iran, 22 maart 2019.

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/ambtsberichten/2019/03/22/algemeen-ambtsbericht-iran>

Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken (2018). *Algemeen Ambtsbericht Irak, april 2018*.

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/ambtsberichten/2018/05/24/algemeen-ambtsbericht-irak> (accessed on 1 June 2020).

Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken (2016). *Algemeen Ambtsbericht Afghanistan, 15 november 2016*.

Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken (2016). *Algemeen Ambtsbericht Irak, november 2016*.

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/ambtsberichten/2016/11/14/algemeen-ambtsbericht-over-irak> (accessed on 1 June 2020).

Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken (2014). *Algemeen Ambtsbericht Sri Lanka, 2 november 2014*.

<https://www.vluchtweb.nl/document/min-buza-sri-lanka-ambtsbericht> (accessed on 7 June 2020).

Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken (2013). *Algemeen Ambtsbericht Irak, december 2013*.

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/ambtsberichten/2013/12/20/algemeen-ambtsbericht-irak> (accessed on 1 June 2020).

MRG – Minority Rights Group International (2015). *The Lost Women in Iraq: Family-based violence during armed conflict*.

http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/1788_1447079735_mrg-report-a4-october-2015-web.pdf (accessed on 2 June 2020).

Nianias, Helen (2016). Verifying refugees' stories: why is it so difficult?

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2016/nov/17/verifying-refugees-stories-why-is-it-so-difficult> (accessed on 23 June 2020)

NOS (2019). *Couppoging Venezuela, gespannen situatie in Caracas*.

<https://nos.nl/artikel/2282685-couppoging-venezuela-gespannen-situatie-in-caracas.html> (accessed on 24 June 2020).

Reuters (2018). *Nigeria's Internet fraudsters zero in on corporate email accounts*.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nigeria-cyber-crime/nigerias-internet-fraudsters-zero-in-on-corporate-email-accounts-idUSKBN1I42BG> (accessed on 4 June 2020).

Rijksoverheid (2020). *Behandeling asielaanvragen*.

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/asielbeleid/procedure-behandeling-asielzoekers> (accessed on 29 June 2020).

Spradley, James P. (1980). *Participant observation*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Steiner, N. (2000). *Arguing about asylum: The complexity of refugee debates in Europe*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Storey, H. (2003). Consistency in refugee decision-making: a judicial perspective.

Refugee Survey Quarterly 32(4), pp. 112-125.

ICMPD (2006). *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*. Vienna: ICMPD

The Long War Journal (2019). *Map of Taliban controlled areas*.
<https://www.longwarjournal.org/mapping-taliban-control-in-afghanistan> (accessed on 4 June 2020).

Thränhardt, Dietrich (2016). *Asylum Procedures in the Netherlands*. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung.

Tsangarides, N. (Ed.) (2010). *The Refugee Roulette: The Role of Country Information in Refugee Status Determination*. Immigration Advisory Group

UK Home Office (2016). *Country Information and Guidance – Iran: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, 27 September 2016*.
<http://www.refworld.org/docid/57ebb91f4.html> (accessed on 3 June 2020).

UK Home Office (2016). *Country Policy and Information Note Gambia: Female genital mutilation (FGM), December 2016*.
https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1355884/1226_1481880225_cpin-gambia-fgm-v1-0-december-2016.pdf (accessed on 31 May 2020)

UNHCR (2019). *Guidance Note on International Protection Considerations for Venezuelans – Update 1, May 2019*.
<https://www.refworld.org/docid/5cd1950f4.html> (accessed on 5 June 2020)

UNHCR (2013). *Beyond Proof. Credibility Assessment in EU Asylum Systems*. Brussels: UNHCR.

UNHCR (2012). *Eligibility Guidelines for Assessing the International Protection Needs of Asylum Seekers from Iraq*.
<http://www.refworld.org/docid/4fc77d522.html> (accessed on 3 June 2020).

UNHCR (2010). *Convention and protocol relating to the status of refugees*. UNHCR

UNHCR (1992). *Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status under the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees*, HCR/IP/4/Eng/REV.1 Reedited, Geneva, January 1992, UNHCR 1979, para. 42.

USDOS – US Department of State (2019). *Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 – Sri Lanka, 13 March 2019*.
<https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2004211.html> (accessed on 24 May 2020).

USDOS – US Department of State (2019). *Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2018 - Turkey, 13 March 2019*.
<https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2004277.html> (accessed on 5 July 2020)

USDOS – US Department of State (2018). *Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2017 - Iraq, 20 April 2018*
<https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1430110.html> (accessed on 2 June 2020)

USDOS – US Department of State (2017). *Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2016 - The Gambia, 3 March 2017*
<https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1395601.html> (accessed on 1 June 2020)

USDOS – US Department of State (2017). *2017 Report on International Religious Freedom - Afghanistan, 29 May 2018*
<https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/1436774.html> (accessed on 4 June 2020)

Van der Kist, J., Dijstelbloem, H. & De Goede, M. (2019). In the Shadow of Asylum Decision-Making: The Knowledge Politics of Country-of-Origin Information. *International Political Sociology* 13, pp. 68-85.

Van Houtum, H. & Lucassen, L. (2016). *Voorbij Fort Europa. Een nieuwe visie op migratie*. 1st Edition. Uitgeverij Atlas Contact: Amsterdam/Antwerpen.

VluchtelingenWerk Nederland (2019). *Herkomstlanden van vluchtelingen*. Retrieved on July 11 2019 from: <https://www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl/feiten-cijfers/herkomstlanden-van-vluchtelingen>.

Vogelaar, F. (2017). The Eligibility Guidelines Examined: The Use of Country of Origin Information by UNHCR. *International Journal of Refugee Law* 29(4), pp. 617-640.

Wolcott, Harry F. (2001). *The art of fieldwork*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.