

# Summary

## Background, objectives and study design

### *Background*

In Europe, the year 2015 was characterized by a high inflow of asylum seekers, including unaccompanied minor asylum seekers (UMAs), and the Netherlands was no exception. In this year, the number of UMAs who sought protection in Europe almost quadrupled compared to a year earlier (over 96,000 in 2015 vs. approximately 23,000 in 2014). The Netherlands ranked seventh among the destination countries in the EU, with 3,859 UMAs. Similar to the EU total, this number was almost four times higher than in 2014 (984). Also mirroring the situation in Europe, UMAs belonging to the 2015 cohort in the Netherlands came mostly from Syria, Eritrea, and Afghanistan.

### *Objectives and research questions*

The question as to why asylum seekers end up in a specific country becomes particularly interesting at times of sudden high inflow, such as in 2015. The current study aimed to shed light on the push and pull factors that played a role in the flight of the UMAs who arrived in the Netherlands in 2015, to understand the processes through which these minors ultimately ended up in this country, their expectations regarding the intended destination, if any, and their satisfaction with life in the Netherlands – topics about which little is known so far.

The main research questions were:

- 1 What is known about the inflow of UMAs to other European countries in 2015 and about the pull factors which play a role?
- 2 What is the size of the UMA cohort which arrived in the Netherlands in 2015, how is it composed (with regard to country of origin, age, and sex), and in which respects does this composition differ from cohorts in earlier and later years?
- 3 Why did the UMAs who came to the Netherlands leave their home countries?
- 4 Did they 'choose' the Netherlands consciously, and if so, why?
- 5 Did they have certain expectations regarding the Netherlands? If yes, what were they and were they met?
- 6 Are UMAs satisfied with their life in the Netherlands and why (not)?
- 7 What are UMAs' plans for the future with regard to staying in the Netherlands?
- 8 Have they filed a request for family reunification?

### *Study design*

This mainly qualitative study employed various sources of information and research methods to answer the above research questions.

The first research question was answered using data by Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union, as well as a short inquiry among the National Contact Points (NCP) of the European Migration Network (EMN), with the cooperation of the Dutch National Contact Point, Research and Analysis Department of the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND O&A).

To answer the second research question, register data from the electronic database Statline from Statistics Netherlands (CBS), and different publications such as those of the IND and the Dutch Council for Refugees were used.

Research questions 3 through 8 were answered using two different methods:

- 1 Face-to-face interviews with 45 UMAs from the top-3 nationalities of the 2015 cohort in the Netherlands, that is Syrian, Eritrean, and Afghan UMAs, who were 14 years or older at the time of arrival in the country. The respondent group was selected reflecting the age and sex distribution of the respective cohort populations and the acceptance rates for these nationalities.
- 2 Six focus groups with experts (mainly guardians of UMAs, but also region managers or those who are responsible for placing more vulnerable UMAs in foster families) from the Nidos Foundation, the national family guardian organization which fulfils the guardianship task for unaccompanied minor foreigners.

## Results

### *Inflow of the 2015 UMA cohort in other European countries and pull factors*

According to Eurostat, in 2015 95,205 UMAs sought protection in the EU (data extracted on 29/3/2018). This number was about eight times higher than the annual average during the period 2008-2013. One out of two UMAs registered in the EU member states were Afghans, who represented the most numerous nationality of UMAs in about half of the member states, followed by Syrians (16% of the cohort) and Eritreans (6%). An overwhelming majority of the cohort were males (91%), and over two thirds were aged 16 or 17. The youngest age group (younger than 14) accounted for only 10% of the cohort. Sweden received the highest number of UMAs, followed by Germany, Hungary (a major transit country), and Austria. Over three quarters of all applications were registered in these four countries. The inquiry among the NCPs of the EMN revealed that there is hardly any research on the pull factors for the 2015 cohort of UMAs who arrived in the respective European countries.

### *Composition of the 2015 UMA cohort in the Netherlands*

The top-3 nationalities in the 2015 cohort together accounted for 84% of the total influx of UMAs in the Netherlands (Syrian 38%, Eritrean 32%, and Afghan 14%). The majority were boys (83%) and 59% were 16 or 17 years old. The youngest age group (younger than 14) had the lowest share in the cohort (12%). The age and sex distribution of the 2015 cohort of UMAs was generally similar to the cohorts in previous and later years, with boys and the oldest groups dominating. Qua nationality there are some differences, however, when compared to previous peaks: the highest-ever Dutch peak of UMAs in 2000 was dominated by minors from Angola, China, Guinee, and Sierra Leone, while a minor peak in 2009 was dominated by minors from Afghanistan and Somalia. In the 2016 and 2017 cohorts (when there was a radical decline in the total number of UMAs), Syrian, Eritrean, and Afghan minors still formed the top-3 nationalities<sup>1</sup>, but in these years Eritrean minors constituted the largest group.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2017 Moroccan UMAs were among the top-3 nationalities; they formed the third largest group, together with Afghan UMAs.

## *Migration to the Netherlands*

### **Push factors**

Major (mostly macro) push factors for the UMAs who were interviewed were unsafe (all respondents), war (Syrian respondents), compulsory, possibly indefinite military service, lack of possibilities for further study, poor quality of education, lack of physical and intellectual freedom (Eritrean respondents), examples of others leaving the country (Eritrean and Syrian respondents), and risks of being recruited by armed groups (Syrian and Afghan respondents). Sometimes micro level factors were reported as a reason to leave the country of origin: personal issues and ethnic violence (especially Afghan respondents). The reasons why minors who first lived in a third country in the region finally headed towards Europe were: feeling unsafe due to hostile attitudes and other negative experiences, lack of future prospects, cultural differences, and examples of others leaving for Europe.

### **Intended destination**

Only a minority of the UMAs in the study, mainly Syrians, considered the Netherlands as a destination at departure. None of the Afghan minors and only a minority of the Eritrean UMAs initially had the intention to come to the Netherlands. They left either with no destination in mind (mainly Afghans), just wanted to end up in Europe (mainly Eritreans), or actually wanted to go to another European country (mainly Afghans). In addition, several Syrian and Eritrean respondents first lived in a third country in the region, mostly with the initial intention to stay there.

### **Decision-making regarding departure**

Family played a central role in the migration decision of the Syrian and Afghan UMAs in the study. While for Afghan minors the decision to flee was predominantly taken by the family with little say of the minors themselves, Syrian interviewees generally initiated the flight themselves, but almost always left in agreement with their families. Many of our respondents received help from parents and/or other family members with preparations and to finance their trip. Eritrean respondents typically fled without informing their parents, but once they were on 'safer' grounds, either in a neighbouring country or in Europe, they sometimes got in touch with their families, who financed their journey, or arranged a smuggler. The influence of family regarding the migration decision is recognized by the Nidos experts; some are under the impression that even Eritrean parents are – secretly – aware of the flight of their children.

### **(Sources of) information and expectations**

Minors whose intended destination before departure was the Netherlands, were mostly well informed about the country, contrary to those who did not see the Netherlands as a potential destination. The former group had social networks in the Netherlands more often (mostly family and friends), who provided them with information about the Netherlands (e.g. freedom, democracy, lack of discrimination), future prospects – education, work and career, and procedures (such as asylum and family reunification). In addition, relatives and friends in other European countries and the Internet (Syrian respondents), as well as other asylum seekers or volunteers in refugee camps (Eritrean respondents), served as sources of information. All these sources seem to have shaped the perceptions of the respondents (and/or their families) regarding the Netherlands, but also other European countries. About half of this group of respondents (almost all Syrian) also considered other European countries as a possible destination. Reasons for not choosing these alternatives were longer procedures, shorter duration of the resi-

dence permit, a longer period needed for naturalization, non-uniform asylum policy, discrimination, a more difficult language to learn, and colder weather. Only a minority of respondents who did *not* consider the Netherlands as a destination at departure had information about the country. This was however limited to some vague positive associations with the Netherlands (e.g. 'small and beautiful', 'many bicycles', 'good football team'). They mostly received information about the Netherlands and other European countries during the journey, specifically once they reached Europe, (e.g. about asylum and family reunification procedures, specific facilities for UMAs, educational opportunities and/or societal values in the Netherlands, 'friendly Dutch government'). Information regularly came from other UMAs or adult asylum seekers, mostly fellow countrymen. Other sources of information were networks of 'comrades', people met by chance, smugglers and the Internet. Social networks in the Netherlands or other European countries were occasionally contacted.

The narratives of our respondents show that the information received, expectations, and reasons for (finally) coming to the Netherlands are intertwined. Minors usually expected to find opportunities to study, work, and build up a career at their final destination, as well as safety, freedom, and to be reunited with their families. For those respondents who did *not* see the Netherlands as an intended destination, expectations regarding family reunification were less pronounced at departure but seem to have developed along the journey based on information they received.

### **Reasons for coming to/ending up in the Netherlands**

Respondents *who intended to come to the Netherlands at departure*, named the following reasons for this (in order of decreasing frequency of mentioning).

- Image/reputation of the Netherlands regarding procedures (easier and shorter asylum and family reunification procedures, longer duration of the residence permit, shorter time to naturalize).
- Image/reputation of the Netherlands regarding future possibilities (e.g. study, work, career).
- Image/reputation of the Netherlands as a society (e.g. freedom, safe, tolerant, free, not racist, democratic).
- Existence of social networks.
- Vague positive associations with the Netherlands and Dutch people (e.g. nice, beautiful (houses), small, country of milk and cheese, good people, moderate weather, good football).
- Image/reputation of the Netherlands regarding facilities for UMAs (good/better accommodation and care, supervision by Nidos).
- Other advantages (e.g. easier language).

*For respondents who left without any destination in mind, just wanted to go to Europe, or were actually planning to go to another European country*, the decision to come to the Netherlands was not always made deliberately; coincidences also played a role (e.g. simply following other peers, border control). For some respondents, actors such as smugglers, or people met by chance in Europe played a key role in the Netherlands being their final destination. The following reasons were named by this group of respondents (in order of decreasing frequency of mentioning).

- Image/reputation of the Netherlands regarding procedures.
- Vague positive associations.
- Simply following others.
- Image reputation of the Netherlands regarding future possibilities.
- Image/reputation of the Netherlands as a society.
- Border control.
- Existence of social networks.
- Image/reputation of the Netherlands regarding facilities for UMAs.
- Other advantages (e.g. low number of asylum seekers; friendly government).
- Other reasons (coincidence as a result of people met by chance).

## Life in the Netherlands

### *Satisfaction*

UMAs who participated in our study were generally satisfied with their lives in the Netherlands (e.g. organization of the society, freedom, safety, school, wellbeing, lifestyle) and the way they were/are treated by the Dutch government (e.g. reception, accommodation, opportunities for school, work and receiving money, guardianship, having future perspectives). Some respondents also expressed dissatisfaction (e.g. Dutch health care system, bureaucracy, xenophobia, financial problems, homesickness, lack of opportunities for work or study, rejected family reunion application). Still, in most cases the respondents thought that their expectations were met, and the information they had before arriving in the Netherlands often turned out to be correct. Afghan boys whose asylum application had been rejected formed an important exception, with asylum and safety being the main expectations that had not been met.

Although many respondents mentioned school and education as a source of satisfaction and an expectation which was realized, there were also UMAs who were unhappy, for example with the low level of schooling they were required to attend before they could proceed with education for their aspired occupation.

### *Family reunification*

Registration data from the Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Service (extraction date 31/12/2017; calculations by WODC) show that requests for family reunification with parents and siblings<sup>2</sup> were filed with regard to 87.5% of the Syrian, Eritrean, and Afghan UMAs in the 2015 cohort (9 out of 10 Eritrean and Syrian UMAs, but 6 out of 10 Afghan UMAs). When finalized decisions are considered, the acceptance rates show significant differences between nationalities: 17% of applications by Eritrean and 16% of those by Afghan UMAs were accepted, compared to 82% of those by Syrian UMAs.

Similar to the situation in the cohort population of top-3 nationalities, nearly all of our respondents whose asylum application had been accepted applied for family reunification. In the majority of the cases the application concerned one or both of the parents; about a third indicated that an application had also been filed for their

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<sup>2</sup> Within three months after the granting of their asylum application, UMAs are eligible to apply for reunification with their parents under special conditions (*nareis*). In addition, the UMA's siblings can qualify for a residence permit to stay with their parents on the grounds of Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) (if the requirements are fulfilled).

siblings. At the time of the interview a number of our respondents were reunited with their parents and some were waiting for their arrival after their application was accepted. This was primarily true for Syrian respondents.

Due to impossibility of travelling (safely) within or out of the country of origin, parents changing their minds or disagreements between the parents, not all parents actually came to the Netherlands, even though the application had been submitted or even approved.

Family reunification was an essential issue for the UMAs in our study. The process and/or result of the family reunification application had implications for many aspects of the lives of our respondents. The outcome of the application proved to be important for their general satisfaction with life, but also for their psychological wellbeing, school attendance, and sometimes plans for the future. Similarly, their relationships with mentors and guardians were influenced by whether or not an application for family reunification was successful.

### *Future intentions*

Regardless of the outcome of their asylum application, the majority of UMAs in our study envisioned a future in the Netherlands, at least for the coming ten years. For many of these respondents the main reasons for this were future prospects and/or being adapted to the Dutch language and way of life. About a third of our respondents were unsure where they would live in the future, either because this is something to decide together with their family (in the case of Syrian respondents), or because their situation is so uncertain that they cannot imagine what their future will look like (Afghan respondents with a rejected asylum application). Our findings are in line with the experiences of the guardians, who observe that UMAs who come, come to stay. The fact that these youngsters are planning to stay in the Netherlands for the time being does not mean however that they would encourage other minors to come by themselves as well. Half of the respondents (all Afghan or Eritrean) would advise against this, because of the dangerous journey. On the contrary, a big majority of Syrian respondents would advise other minors to come to the Netherlands, usually for better future prospects.

### **Concluding remarks**

For the majority of our respondents, the Netherlands was *not* the intended destination at departure. Where UMAs did make a deliberate choice to come to the Netherlands, the most common reasons were the image/reputation of the country regarding procedures, and future possibilities. The majority of our respondents who usually had some vague positive associations with the Netherlands at departure, gathered more information during their journey. Some ended up in the Netherlands by coincidence.

UMAs in our research group whose asylum application had been accepted, were generally satisfied with their life in the Netherlands. However, we did not interview UMAs whose legal guardians did not consider them psychologically well enough to take part in the study, and we can not exclude the possibility of socially desirable answers. With respect to the migration stories, we have no reason to suspect that bias might play a role, as most respondents open-heartedly spoke about how and why they ended up in the Netherlands. It is, however, possible that the distribution

of reasons mentioned for ending up in the Netherlands, is different in the total 2015 cohort population.

All in all, it is clear that the UMAs we talked to are eager to build their future in the Netherlands, regardless of whether the decision to come to the Netherlands was deliberate, or a result of circumstances, and regardless of their residence status. However, failed or delayed family reunification influences the wellbeing of these youngsters and might form an obstacle for their integration into Dutch society.