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Unaccompanied minor asylum seekers in the Netherlands: choice or chance?

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Cahier

De reeks Cahier omvat de rapporten van onderzoek dat door en in opdracht van het WODC is verricht.

Opname in de reeks betekent niet dat de inhoud van de rapporten het standpunt van de Minister van Justitie en Veiligheid weergeeft.

Preface

Worldwide, many migrants leave their countries in search of safety and international protection. In 2015, the number of asylum seekers in Europe reached a peak. Among them were unaccompanied minor asylum seekers (UMAs). The current study aimed to investigate how and why UMAs who sought protection in the Netherlands during that year, ended up here.

Different people and organisations have contributed to our study. We would like to thank the Nidos Foundation (in particular Elsbeth Faber and Gerrit Tigelaar) and the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA; in particular Johan van der Have and Jasper Arens) for their cooperation in compiling a pool population of potential respondents; the many guardians and mentors who assisted in approaching the minors for the interviews; and the Nidos Foundation staff members who participated in the focus groups. Furthermore we would like to acknowledge the cultural mediators of the Nidos Foundation who assisted in approaching and talking to our Eritrean respondents; the Research and Analysis Department of the Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Service for providing us with registration data; Erik van Kampen of the Migration Cooperation Department of the Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security for sharing his expertise; Labyrinth (especially Levi Smulders) and its interviewers for conducting the interviews with Syrian UMAs; and WODC colleagues Roberto Aidala, Elise Beenackers and Lisette van Lierop for their contributions in different phases of the research and report finalization. Last but not least: our deepest appreciation to all youngsters who told us their stories openly. Without their time, effort and narratives, this study would not have been possible.

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The researchers

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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 nationalities¹, but in these years Eritrean minors constituted the largest group.

¹ 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 siblings² 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

² 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.

1 Introduction

In 2015 a record number of over 1.2 million first time asylum seekers applied for protection in the member states of the European Union.³ The most important countries of origin were Syria (29%), Afghanistan (14%), and Iraq (10%). Among the asylum seekers were unaccompanied minors. In this year, the number of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers (UMAs)⁴ that sought protection in Europe almost quadrupled compared to a year earlier (over 96,000 in 2015 vs. approximately 23,000 in 2014). They mainly came from Afghanistan (51%), Syria (16%), and Eritrea (6%). The growing number of children traveling without a parent or guardian was one of the serious concerns mentioned in the Data Brief by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNICEF in November 2015.

In 2015, the Netherlands also encountered a large inflow of asylum seekers: 59,100 applications for asylum,⁵ with a strong growth of the number of first time applications and applications for family reunification in comparison to 2014.⁶ In total 18,630 asylum seekers were minors, of whom 20% arrived unaccompanied by an adult.⁷ With 3,859, this number was almost four times as high as in 2014 (3,859 vs. 984). Mirroring the major countries of origin for Europe as a whole, they mostly came from Syria (38%) and Eritrea (32%), followed by Afghanistan (14%) (IND, 2015).⁸

The question as to why asylum seekers end up in a specific country – which has long puzzled researchers, politicians and civil servants – becomes particularly pertinent ‘at times of high influx’ (Brekke & Aarset, 2009, p. 9), such as in 2015. The purpose of the present research is to provide more insight into the migration motives of the large number of UMAs who arrived in the Netherlands in 2015, their reasons for ending up in the Netherlands, and their expectations regarding this country, about which little is known so far.

1.1 Research questions and research methods

1.1.1 Research questions

The questions which will be answered in this study are:

- 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 <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/7203832/3-04032016-AP-EN.pdf>

⁴ An unaccompanied minor asylum seeker is a minor who arrives from a third country without parents or another adult relative, and applies for asylum.

⁵ First time applications, subsequent applications and applications by family members of refugees (EMN, 2016).

⁶ Respectively from 21,810 to 43,090, and from 5,360 to 13,850 (EMN, 2016).

⁷ Out of the asylum seekers aged 16 and 17 even more than half arrived alone (www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2016/26/een-op-vijf-minderjarige-asielzoekers-alleenstaand).

⁸ In 2016 the number of applications by UMAs more than halved compared to 2015 (to 1,707 applications). Eritrea (45%), Syria and Afghanistan (each 11%) were the top three countries of origin in that year (IND, 2016).

- 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?
 - a Did they have relatives or acquaintances in the Netherlands? If yes, whom?
 - b Did they have information about the Netherlands before they arrived?
 - c If yes, what information did they have before they left their country of origin, what information did they receive during their journey, and from whom?
- 5 Did they have certain expectations regarding the Netherlands? If yes, what were they and where 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?

1.1.2 Research methods

The study was mainly of a qualitative nature, but we also used quantitative registrations in order to sketch out the composition of the target group.

- 1 The first research question was answered on the basis of register data by Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union, as well as a short survey among the National Contact Points of the European Migration Network (NCP EMN).
- 2 In order to answer research question 2, we used register data from the electronic database StatLine from Statistics Netherlands (CBS), and different publications from among others the IND and the Dutch Council for Refugees.
- 3 Research questions 3 through 8 were answered on the basis of interviews with UMAs and six focus groups with experts from the Nidos Foundation, the national family guardian organization which fulfils the guardianship task for unaccompanied minor foreigners.
- 4 In order to answer research question 8, we additionally used register data from the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND).

The study focused on UMAs from the top three nationalities in the 2015 cohort in the Netherlands: Syria, Eritrea, and Afghanistan (who together account for 84% of the total influx of UMAs in 2015). The register data and focus groups concerned the 2015 cohort in general, in order to be able to place the interview results in a broader context.

1.1.3 The interviews with UMAs

Target population of respondents

The target population of respondents consisted of Syrian, Eritrean, and Afghan UMAs in the 2015 cohort who were between 14 and 17 years old at the time of arrival in the Netherlands. We decided not to interview younger age groups because of the sensitivity of the research topics. Furthermore, in order to increase the reliability of the answers, and to avoid possible confusion with interviews and decision making by the Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND), we decided to interview only UMAs whose asylum procedure was completed.

In the 2015 cohort, acceptance rates of asylum applications by UMAs differ according to origin. While an overwhelming majority of the applications by Syrian and Eritrean girls and boys were granted (96% and 98% respectively, source IND: reference date August 2017, calculations by WODC), this was not the case for Afghan minors.

The majority of their applications were rejected, with a much lower acceptance rate for boys, who made up 95% of the 2015 cohort of Afghan UMAs, than for girls (32%

vs 77%, source IND; reference date August 2017, calculations by WODC). Mirroring the acceptance rates, we decided to approach only those Syrian and Eritrean minors whose asylum applications were granted. With regard to Afghan boys whose applications were rejected, we only approached those whose application was rejected at higher appeal, excluding minors who were still awaiting the final outcome of their application.

In the summer of 2017, Nidos and the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (COA) (see further for their respective roles in the accommodation of UMAs during and after the asylum procedure) assisted in composing a pool population of potential respondents. Nidos compiled a pool population of Syrian, Eritrean and Afghan UMAs who had been 14 years or older at arrival in the Netherlands in 2015, whose asylum applications were granted, and who were being accommodated by Nidos or its partners (n=294). Meanwhile, COA provided a list of Afghan male UMAs whose asylum applications had been rejected at higher appeal and who were being accommodated by COA at that time (n=33; reference dates May 2017 and September 2017).

Selection of and cooperation by respondents

The selection of respondents took place step-by-step. Firstly, the Nidos guardians of the UMAs in the pool population were asked to indicate whether the UMA concerned was capable of taking part in the study. According to the guardians that was not the case for more than one in three potential respondents. Named reasons were: the minor is too traumatized/has psychological problems (e.g. under treatment, difficulty to talk about him/herself, stressed or risk of being stressed due to the topics of the interview, regularly angry, difficult to approach, addicted and does not function well). Among Afghan boys whose asylum applications were rejected, the proportion that was considered to be ineligible for the interview was even higher: almost one in two. For them, in addition to the reasons stated above, factors related to deportation also played a role: they had left the accommodation with unknown destination, were deported or detained to be deported.

The resulting pool of potential respondents consisted of 171 UMAs (97 Eritrean, 37 Syrian, 37 Afghan – including 14 boys whose asylum application was rejected at higher appeal. Our aim was to interview between 10 and 15 minors of each nationality.

Most interviewees were selected by stratified random sampling – striving for similar proportions with regard to age and sex as in the total cohort – from the resulting pool of 171 potential respondents. Although UMAs whose asylum application is accepted are randomly accommodated in different regions in the Netherlands (Nidos, personal information), we strived for a countrywide distribution of the respondents in order to avoid that potential respondents would influence each other.⁹

In consultation with their guardians it was decided how to approach the minors concerned. Some were approached by their guardian, some by their mentor from the reception facility where they lived, and some who were 18 years of age or older by that time, directly by the researchers.

⁹ We had indeed such an experience when a minor who had refused to participate in the research due to trust issues, persuaded a number of fellow countrymen who were living in the same town not to take part in the research. Some of them withdrew at the last moment, by calling us in the presence of that minor or letting him talk to us on their behalf.

Achieving the desired number of respondents was a lengthy process due to for example the tailor-made approach we used, the time consuming process of reaching guardians and mentors as well as non-response. Among the reasons for non-response were: no interest, distrust (by some UMAs as well as mentors), influence of other UMAs who had refused to participate, busy with study or moving house, other things on mind, under too much stress due to family reunification application, just gave birth, no time, change in situation (e.g. psychologically incapable at the moment, placed into detention and may not be approached), or the mentor did not consider the minor 'eligible' for an interview, despite the approval of the legal guardian. In addition, a number of respondents did not react to our phone calls or emails when we first approached them to make an appointment, or even after they had already agreed to participate in the research. Non-response was highest among Eritrean UMAs, followed by Afghan UMAs (63% and 50% respectively). For Syrian UMAs non-response was significantly lower (17%).

Because of the small number of Afghan boys in the pool population whose asylum application was rejected, and high non-response, additional ways of recruiting were employed for this group: social media (Facebook), organizations working with (undocumented) asylum seekers and refugees, different Afghan organizations and personal networks. However, the snowball method proved to be the most successful. Five of our Afghan respondents (four of whom undocumented) were recruited through other Afghan respondents.

The interview procedure

Prior to the interview the UMAs were informed – orally and by letter in Dutch and in the language of the country of origin – about the study and about the topics that would be covered in the interview. If the minor consented to the interview, an appointment was made for an interview at a quiet spot in a reception centre, a public place, at home, or in some cases after family reunification, at the parental home. Then, as well as at the start of the interview, it was stressed that the minor concerned could refrain from answering specific questions at any time. If the minor had no objections the interviews were recorded. This was the case for 31 interviews. In some of these cases the minors asked us not to report specific details they shared with us. This, of course, was respected. The recording was used for transcription purposes, and then destroyed as promised to the respondents.

The interviews with minors from Afghanistan were conducted by a WODC researcher with Afghan roots in a language preferred by the respondent, or in Dutch by one of the other researchers. The interviews with Syrian minors were conducted in Arabic by Labyrinth, a research and consultancy agency with a large multicultural team of trained interviewers. The interviews with minors from Eritrea were conducted by WODC researchers with the help of Eritrean cultural mediators employed by Nidos, who helped to approach the minors, put them at ease during the interviews, and translated where necessary.

During the interviews, the interviewers tried to create a trustworthy, respectful atmosphere. All interview questions were open-ended and had a standard format, but the interviewers were free to adapt their way of questioning to the situation at hand.

As a token of appreciation, at the end of the interview interviewees received a 20 euro gift voucher.

We tried to be careful in formulating our questions and expressly avoided possibly traumatic topics (e.g. route of the journey or experiences with smugglers). However, in some cases the respondents spontaneously talked about these issues, which

was clearly difficult for some. In these and other cases, the interviewers stayed a while after the interviews, talking about different issues.

The interviewees

Nationality, sex, and age

From August 2017 through March 2018 a total of 45 UMAs were interviewed: 16 Afghan, 15 Syrian, and 14 Eritrean respondents, across more than twenty (small) towns or cities in different geographical regions.

A comparison of the respondents' age-sex distribution with that of the 14 years and older Syrian, Eritrean and Afghan UMAs in the 2015 cohort is reported in Table 1.1. In general the age-sex distribution of the respondents reflects that of the cohort population.

Regarding the acceptance rates the research group also reflects the population. As mentioned above, we interviewed only Syrian and Eritrean respondents whose applications had been accepted, and out of the 16 Afghan boys interviewed, about one in three had a positive outcome of his asylum request, while the rest had their application rejected at higher appeal (respectively 5 and 11 respondents). One of the respondents in the latter group had submitted a repeated asylum application (HASA),¹⁰ which had been accepted shortly before the interview, and three were in the HASA procedure or were preparing one at the time of the interview.

Table 1.1 Sex and age distribution of the respondents and the 2015 cohort UMAs per nationality (14 years and older at arrival in the Netherlands)

	Response group	2015 cohort
Syrian	n=15	N=1,170
Sex		
Male	14	91%
Female	1	9%
Age		
14-15 y	7	35%
16-17 y	8	65%
Eritrean	n=14	N=1,185
Sex		
Male	8	70%
Female	6	30%
Age		
14-15 y	5	27%
16-17 y	9	73%
Afghan	n=16	N=475
Sex		
Male	16	97%
Female	-	3%
Age		
14-15 y	5	33%
16-17 y	9	67%

¹⁰ It is always possible to submit a HASA, for example because personal circumstances have changed, or because more information about the country of origin has become available.

Type of accommodation

The respondents were living at different accommodation types at the time of the interview. Sixteen respondents were accommodated by Nidos or its contract partners in small scale residential facilities, thirteen lived independently since reaching the age of 18, nine respondents – the majority Afghan boys whose asylum application had been rejected – were accommodated by COA at a reception centre. Six Syrian respondents were united with their families, of whom four had already found housing and two were staying at a reception centre with their parents waiting for suitable accommodation. Three undocumented Afghan respondents had no permanent place to stay or were living on the streets.

Current education

At the time of the interview, more than half of the respondents were attending an international transition class (*Internationale Schakel Klas, ISK*)¹¹ or had completed it (n=27). Many Afghan respondents were attending the ISK, one had already completed it (but did not yet start further education as he was busy with his HASA-application). Four Afghan respondents who were living undocumented in the Netherlands at the time of the interview had also attended the ISK at some point, but due to their illegal status they could not continue their education. Only two Afghan respondents were enrolled in vocational secondary education (MBO) at the time of the interview. About half of the Eritrean and Syrian respondents were attending general or vocational secondary education (usually in care and services) (VMBO/MBO). Two Syrian respondents were following a higher level of education (respectively higher vocational education and pre-university education).

A few respondents expressed ambitions for their future career, such as being a professional footballer, a medical specialist, an architect, a sales person, a chief cook, or a rapper:

*Through rapping I learn the Dutch language better; I am going to be a famous rapper, in Dutch! (SY)*¹²

1.1.4 The focus groups

In addition to interviews with UMAs, six focus groups took place with Nidos experts who had experience with the 2015 cohort UMAs. The focus groups took place at local Nidos offices, and one of the countries of origin was central to every meeting (two about Syrian, two about Eritrean and two about Afghan UMAs). A total of about 30 Nidos experts participated in the focus groups (guardians, region managers, and employees responsible for the placement of younger or vulnerable UMAs in foster families). The group size varied between four and seven.

The purpose of the focus groups was triangulation, collecting additional data (for example on younger UMAs whom we had not interviewed), as well as to compare the three groups under study.

These sessions were also recorded for transcription purposes, after which the recordings were destroyed.

¹¹ The international transition class (ISK) is meant for all newcomers (including UMAs who are still in the procedure) to ease the transition to the regular Dutch education system. The majority of the lessons (80%) concern the Dutch language. A student may attend up to a maximum of two years of education at an ISK. It is usually offered for the age group from 12 to 18, however, a student who turns 18 during those two years may continue to attend the ISK (VNG & & Platvorm Opnieuw Thuis 2016).

¹² We illustrate our findings with citations from UMAs. In order to guarantee anonymity of the respondents, we end each citation by only referring to the nationality of the UMA concerned (AF, SY, or ER).

1.2 Structure of the report

In the next chapters we will describe the results of our study, starting in Chapter 2 with the inflow of UMAs in Europe and the Netherlands in 2015, as well as the inflow of UMAs in the Netherlands in previous and later years (research questions 1 and 2). Chapter 3 concerns the reasons why the 2015 cohort of UMAs left their home countries, how they ended up in the Netherlands, and possible expectations they had regarding this country (research questions 3 through 5). Chapter 4 concerns satisfaction with life in the Netherlands after completion of the asylum procedure, the extent to which expectations have been met, application for family reunification, and plans with regard to future stay in the Netherlands (research questions 6, 7 and 8). We end with a concluding Chapter 5.

Before turning to the first empirical chapter, we describe the asylum procedure for UMAs and their accommodation during and after the asylum procedure, as well as the recent history and general situation in Syria, Eritrea, and Afghanistan. We conclude this introductory chapter with the theoretical framework we use to interpret our empirical results.

1.3 Asylum procedure, accommodation and family reunification

1.3.1 Asylum procedure

UMAs who need protection can apply for asylum, just like adult asylum seekers. However, because of their age a number of special measures apply. All UMAs are entitled to care, shelter, education, and health care, and under the Dutch Civil Code, every child must have a legal guardian (a parent or a court-appointed guardian). For UMAs who arrive in the Netherlands, Nidos requests the juvenile court to be appointed as a guardian. The guardianship tasks are carried out by individual professionals, youth counsellors employed by Nidos, whom we refer to as (legal) guardians. Unaccompanied children may lodge an asylum application themselves, but in the case of unaccompanied children younger than 12, their legal representative or their guardian has to sign the application form on their behalf.

UMAs whose application is accepted, receive a residence permit for five years, and are then referred to as 'status holders'. During these five years the permit can be withdrawn if the situation in the country of origin improves, and there are no longer reasons to fear for prosecution or inhuman treatment on return. After five years, a status holder is eligible for a more permanent residence permit.

Just as is the case with adults whose application has been rejected, UMAs whose application is rejected have to leave the country, provided that they will be adequately cared for in the country of origin, for instance by relatives or in a children's home.

Applicants, adults and UMAs alike, who through no fault of their own cannot leave the Netherlands, are in principle eligible for a specific permit, based on the 'no-fault' (*buiten schuld*) policy. UMAs aged 15 or younger at arrival whose application was rejected, but for whom within three years after their initial application no relatives or adequate reception facilities are available in the country of origin, are also eligible for the 'no fault' policy. However, in general it is very difficult to meet the conditions to be granted such a permit (ACVZ, 2013) and in its 2017 yearly report, Nidos stated that the IND had not yet granted a no-fault permit to any UMA aged 15 years or younger at arrival (Stichting Nidos, 2018).

1.3.2 Accommodation during and after the asylum procedure

According to the Dutch policy with respect to the reception and accommodation of UMAs that applied in 2015, particularly vulnerable children, including all UMAs under the age of 13, were placed in foster care (*opvanggezinnen*), where they stayed until their family reunification, their 18th birthday, or repatriation to the country of origin. Nidos works with so-called 'culture families' (*cultuurgezinnen*), families with a similar cultural, religious, and ethnic background as the UMAs in question. These can be family members, fellow clan or tribe members, or families from a pool of foster families. Culture families act as transitional space (Schippers, 2017) where a child can unite the culture from the country of origin with the new culture.

In 2015, UMAs aged 13 and older were accommodated in 'process reception centres' (*procesopvanglocaties*, POL) of the COA. In principle, they stayed in the POL for seven weeks,¹³ supported by a COA mentor, as well as by their legal guardian, and an immigration lawyer during the asylum procedure. Those between 13 and 15 years old were subsequently housed in small scale units (small living groups for 12 children with 24-hours supervision, or smaller scale living units for three to four more independent UMAs with supervision by a mentor for a couple of hours a day). Nidos was responsible for these units which were located all over the Netherlands, and had contracted youth care organizations for setting up and managing them. Older UMAs were accommodated in COA campuses, usually in the area of regular asylum centres. UMAs recognized as (possible) victims of trafficking in human beings, or considered likely to disappear, were placed in protected reception (*Beschermde Opvang*, BO; this is still the current procedure), where safety has priority and UMAs are made aware of the different possible options: asking for asylum, reporting the crime, or returning to the country of origin.

UMAs who received a residence permit stayed with their foster families, or were transferred from the POL to the small scale Nidos units. UMAs who did not immediately receive a residence permit had to undergo a prolonged asylum procedure. They, as well as UMAs whose applications were denied, were accommodated in small scale COA units (*Kleinschalige Woonvoorzieningen*, KWV).

UMAs who arrived with adult relatives other than their parents, fell (and fall) under Nidos guardianship, but live with these relatives in asylum centres if this is considered to be in the best interest of the child.

In January 2016 a new reception model came into effect, which aims to accommodate young people on a small scale as quickly as possible. In this model Nidos is responsible for the reception of all UMAs up to the age of 15, as well for the reception of all UMAs with a residence permit. After termination of the General Asylum Procedure, UMAs with a permit are transferred from the POL to a foster family or a small scale unit under the responsibility of Nidos, while UMAs with a negative decision or a referral to the extended asylum procedure are placed in a small scale residential facility under the responsibility of COA.

1.3.3 Family reunification

Within three months after their asylum request has been accepted, UMAs can apply for reunification with their parents within a specific reunification policy (*nareisbeleid*; TK 2014-2015, 19637, no. 1904), for which many of the usual requirements for

¹³ This term was not always met: because of the large inflow of UMAs in 2015, some stayed in the POL for over 13 weeks, and placement in emergency reception centers before they could be transferred to a POL could not be avoided (Stichting Nidos, 2016).

family reunification do not apply.¹⁴ 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) – right to respect for private and family life (if the requirements are fulfilled). Relatives must prove their identity and family relationship with the UMA by documents. When documents can not be provided, there is the possibility to prove identity and relationship via a DNA test or a hearing at a Dutch embassy. It can be very difficult to reach a Dutch embassy, especially if there is no Dutch embassy present in the country of origin – as is the case in Eritrea and Syria – and relatives have to travel to an embassy in a neighbouring country. The procedure for family reunification can take a long time in times of high influx, and if documents are not available and traveling is necessary. Once the relatives have arrived in the Netherlands, they receive an asylum permit and they are housed in an asylum seekers centre together with the UMA, preferably in the municipality where the UMA already lives.

1.4 Recent history and general situation in countries of origin

A range of factors may have been at play, resulting in the many UMAs of Syrian, Eritrean, and Afghan origin to leave their countries and seek refuge in other parts of the world. In Chapter 3 we will go into individual motives of our respondents for leaving their country of origin. Below we give a brief description of the recent history and general situation in the three countries on which the study focuses.

1.4.1 Syria

In March 2011, a series of anti-government protests demanding the overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad, as well as the end of the Ba'ath Party rule (which had been in power since 1963), triggered the Syrian crisis (Tyyska, 2017). The brutal response of the security forces deployed by the Assad regime gave rise to a violent reaction which quickly descended into a civil war in which several opposition groups compete for power. The security vacuum that emerged from the conflict allowed terrorist organizations to take over major cities. In 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the head of the Islamic State of Iraq, stormed Syria and branded his jihadist organization as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Since 2011 over 400,000 people have died,¹⁵ and as the civil war continued, the drastic deterioration of the security, political, social, and economic conditions have served as a catalyser and a trigger to migration. Since 2011 over 11 million Syrians have fled (ibid.), mostly to three neighbouring countries: Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. Van Kesteren (2015) describes how the realization that Syria will at the very least be unstable for a while, combined with the lack of socio-economic opportunities in the neighbouring countries led to an increase in the number of migrants heading for Europe. Among them (unaccompanied) children who are extra vulnerable because they run the risk of being recruited by armed groups.¹⁶

1.4.2 Eritrea

Following the retreat of the Italian and later the British colonials, Eritrea was annexed by the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie in 1962. In 1974, colonel Mengistu Haile

¹⁴ For instance, there are no income or integration requirements and no fees have to be paid.

¹⁵ www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl/feiten-cijfers/landen-van-herkomst/syri%C3%AB

¹⁶ Ibid.

Mariam came to power following the overthrow of the Selassie regime. After more than 30 years of armed struggle against the Ethiopian regime, Eritrea won *de facto* independence in 1991 and was officially recognized as a sovereign state by the United Nations in 1993. Between 1998 and 2000 the country was plunged into a border conflict with Ethiopia.¹⁷ Although a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement was signed in 2000, peace in Eritrea has not been fully restored (Smith, 2013). The effects of the thirty years of independence war, the two-year border conflict with Ethiopia, and the rule and dictatorship of the current president Isaias Afwerki have caused a continuous strain on the majority of the population. Criticizing the government is forbidden and opponents are arrested. The mandatory military enrolment, which officially lasts 18 months, can take longer than ten years, while an Eritrean is conscript as a reservist until his fiftieth. For many, this is a reason to flee. The restriction of civil liberties, lack of employment and future opportunities for youth, religious persecution, sexual exploitation, and trafficking are additional factors which have triggered many young Eritreans to leave (Reisen, 2016). In the past decades over 379,000 Eritreans fled their country (UNHCR, 2015).

1.4.3 Afghanistan

The 20th century in Afghanistan was characterized by coups, civil wars and the 1979 Soviet invasion (Stenersen, 2010; Bindu, 2017). Following the collapse of the communist regime in 1992, a coalition of mujahidin parties seized power of Kabul but was unable to maintain it, and this was the start of a civil war. The final phase of this war commenced after the conservative Islamist Taliban seized power and turned Afghanistan into a purely Islamic state (Stenersen, 2010). During the Taliban regime, specific populations were the target of violence, including the Tajiks and the Hazaras. Following the September 11 attacks in the US, the Taliban were ousted by the US-led invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 (ibid.). Despite the establishment of the new constitution in 2004, decades of war, internal conflicts, and political instability have torn the country apart and resulted in oppressing social and economic structures. There is little protection for ethnic minorities and LGTBs, and violence against women and girls is common. Worldwide there are over 2,5 million Afghan refugees.¹⁸ Among them children and youth who not only have limited access to education, but are reportedly being killed, exploited, and ill-treated (Boland, 2010).¹⁹

1.5 Systems approach to migration

As mentioned, the main focus of the current study is to explore why the 2015 cohort of UMAs who came to the Netherlands left their countries (push factors) and how and why they ended up in the Netherlands (pull factors). However, classical push-pull theories alone can not explain current movements of asylum seekers. They explain migration motives mostly through macro-level defined social and economic factors: a number of negative factors at the origin (e.g. low wages, population growth, wars, political repression, environmental disasters) push people away from their country of origin, while positive factors attract migrants to a receiving country (e.g. higher wages, social-economic opportunities, political freedom, safety).

¹⁷ <https://africamonitors.org/2016/05/29/eritrean-unaccompanied-minors-and-human-trafficking>

¹⁸ www.vluchtelingenwerk.nl/feiten-cijfers/landen-van-herkomst/afghanistan

¹⁹ Boys run the risk of being recruited to fight or to become dancing boys. They have to dance for a male public, dressed as girls, and have sexual contact with their 'owner' (ibid.).

The list of identified factors can clearly individually influence migration, but the push-pull model is criticized because of its inability to specify the role and interactions of these factors in an explanatory manner (Skeldon, 1990; Bauer & Zimmermann, 1998; Castles, De Haas, & Miller, 2014). It cannot explain why UMAs arriving in Europe end up in particular (north-western) EU countries, which in general do not differ from one another regarding socio-economic opportunities (e.g. safety, education, work) or have in general similar admission policies within the context of the EU (cf. Schoorl et al. 2000).

According to Mabogunje (1970), founder of the migration systems theory, and other scholars (e.g. Fawcett & Arnold, 1987; Boyd, 1989; Fawcett, 1989; Zlotnik, 1992)²⁰ migration flows take place in a system where different regions and countries are connected by different types of relations and linkages (e.g. flows and counter flows of people, goods, services, information), which tend to facilitate further exchange between places and countries, including migration. A migration system may contain more than one subsystem (e.g. respective linkages and relations between origin, transit, and destination). Elements in a system are dependent on one another and changes in particular elements cause changes in other parts of the system (Schoorl et al., 2000).

The systems approach explains migration flows by combining the role of several factors, such as push and pull, social networks, other actors that create linkages between different countries, as well as individual perceptions and aspirations and the interactions between these factors. Migration is considered to be a dynamic process consisting of consecutive events that take place through time, incorporating different underlying mechanisms at macro, meso and micro level:

- Macro level factors: economic, social, cultural, and political conditions in different places that create the context of migration within the system. Examples include, famine, war, historical (postcolonial) ties between countries, language, admission policies and so on.
- Micro level factors: perceptions, expectations and motives of potential migrants, but also those of members of the household to which they belong, and the role of social networks therein. According to Mabogunje (1970) feedback mechanisms and information are crucial elements for the operation of the system. For example, transmission of information about the migrants' reception and situation at the destination back to the place of origin can play a facilitating role in the aspiration of others to migrate to the same place or region (De Haas, 2014). Network members can provide potential migrants with information before the migration, but also en-route (Schoorl et al., 2000). Information by pioneers can diminish certain barriers or risks for potential migrants (e.g. information about the migration route) (cf. Esveldt et al., 1995). Furthermore, social networks may provide (financial) help to support the migration of other family or community members.²¹ Thus, subsequent movements and 'almost-organized' migratory flows are facilitated (De Haas, 2014, p. 32). These flows and exchange of information, ideas and aspirations may lead to a 'culture of migration' along the established paths in the system, in which migration becomes a social norm (Massey et al., 1993, cited in De Haas, 2014, p.33).
- Meso level factors: other actors that have a facilitating role in the operation of the system, i.e. individuals, groups or institutions that mediate between migrants and economic or political institutions of different places, such as those working in the

²⁰ Mabogunje (1970) developed the systems approach for urban-rural migration; the other scholars mentioned applied it to international migration.

²¹ At the same time earlier arrivals may become weary of more new arrivals asking for assistance (e.g. Böcker, 1994).

'migratory industry' who organize migratory movements for a living and/or may also provide information (e.g. travel agents, labour brokers, immigration lawyers, housing agents and human smugglers) (Castles & Miller, 2009).

In short, the systems approach acknowledges the influence of different elements in explaining why migrants end up in a certain country and considers migrants as active agents who apply strategies taking into account different factors in the system. In the remainder of this report, we use this as a framework to interpret our empirical findings.

2 Inflow of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers in Europe and the Netherlands

In this chapter we answer the following research questions:

- What is known about the inflow of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers (UMAs) to other European countries in 2015 and about the pull factors which play a role?
- 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?

In the following paragraphs we first describe the inflow of UMAs in Europe in 2015, as well as the results of a query among the National Contact Points (NCPs) of the European Migration Network regarding pull factors for 2015-cohort of UMAs arriving in these countries. Then we shift our attention to the composition of the 2015 cohort and earlier and later cohorts of UMAs in the Netherlands, with respect to nationality, sex and age.

2.1 2015 cohort of UMAs in EU-countries

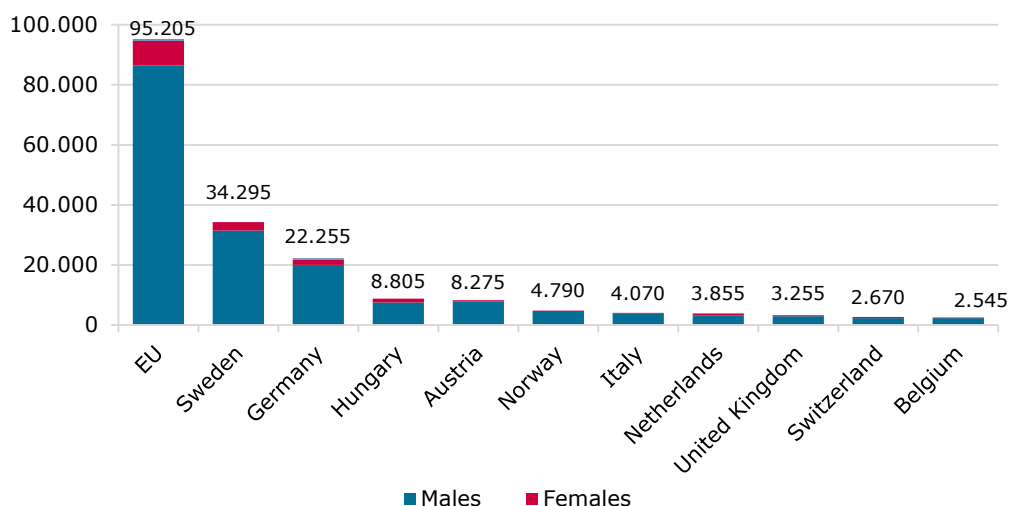
2.1.1 Characteristics of the 2015 cohort UMAs in EU-countries

In 2015 95,205 asylum applicants who were considered to be unaccompanied minors arrived in the EU to seek international protection (Eurostat, extracted on 29/3/2018). This number was about eight times higher than the annual average during the period 2008-2013 (around 12,000 per year). An overwhelming majority of this cohort were males (91%) and over two thirds belonged to the age group 16 to 17 (68%). The youngest age group (younger than 14) accounted for 10% of the cohort. In 2015, 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%) (Eurostat, 2016).

In this year Sweden received the highest number of UMAs seeking protection in the EU (35,250), followed by Germany, Hungary, and Austria. Together these four countries received more than three quarters of all applications (Figure 2.1). The Netherlands ranked seventh among the EU countries with 3,855 registered UMAs, after Norway and Italy, and followed by the United Kingdom, Belgium, and Switzerland.²² Mirroring the general demographics outlined above, the lion's share of these minors were males, and they were mainly in the age group of 16 to 17 on arrival.

²² In 2016 the highest number of UMAs was registered in Germany - almost 36,000, or 57% of all those registered in the EU member states in that year - followed by Italy, Austria, the United Kingdom, Bulgaria, Greece, and Sweden. Figures for 2017 were not yet available for all member states at the time of report writing.

Figure 2.1 Number of UMAs in the EU (including Norway and Switzerland), top-10 destination countries; by sex, 2015 cohort



Source: Eurostat; extracted on 27/3/2018

The composition of nationalities of UMAs who sought protection in 2015 differs among these top-10 destinations in the EU (Table 2.1). UMAs from Afghanistan and Syria were among the top-3 nationalities in almost all top-10 member states, with the exception of Italy, where UMAs mostly from Gambia, Nigeria and Senegal sought refuge. UMAs from Iraq were among the top-3 nationality groups in Germany, Austria, and Belgium, their counterparts from Eritrea in Norway, the UK, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. UMAs from Kosovo, Somalia, and Albania were among the three dominant groups in only one country each, namely Hungary, Sweden, and the UK respectively. Similarly, UMAs from Gambia, Nigeria, and Senegal were uniquely in the top-3 in Italy.

Table 2.1 Distribution of top-3 nationalities of UMAs in top-10 destination countries in the EU (including Norway and Switzerland); 2015 cohort

Nationality of UMAs (top-3)	Top-10 EU-countries							
	Afghanistan	Syria	Iraq	Eritrea	Kosovo	Albania	Gambia Nigeria, Senegal	Somalia
Sweden	•	•						•
Germany	•	•	•					
Hungary	•	•			•			
Austria	•	•	•					
Norway	•	•		•				
Italy							•	
Netherlands	•	•		•				
United Kingdom	•			•		•		
Switzerland	•	•		•				
Belgium	•	•	•					

Source: Eurostat; extracted on 29/3/2017

In order to explore whether UMAs in the 2015 cohort travelled to the same destination countries as their adult countrymen, the top-3 nationalities of UMAs are compared to those of adult asylum seekers in the top-3 destination countries and the Netherlands. The comparison shows that except in Hungary, a major transit country,²³ the top-3 groups of UMAs and adult asylum seekers do not necessarily come from the same origin countries (Table 2.2). In Germany the difference is the most pronounced: although the top-3 contained UMAs as well as adults from Syria, it further consisted of UMAs from Afghanistan and Iraq, and adults from Albania and Kosovo. In the Netherlands the difference is less pronounced: UMAs as well as adult asylum seekers from Syria and Eritrea accounted for more than half of the respective groups seeking protection, but UMAs from Afghanistan made up the third largest group, while Iraq was the third largest origin country among adults.

Table 2.2 Top-3 nationalities of UMAs and asylum seekers 18 years and older in top-3 destination EU-countries and the Netherlands; 2015 cohort

UMAs	N	% of total	Adult asylum seekers	N	% of total
Sweden					
1-Afghanistan	22,625	66	1-Syria	33,395	38
2-Syria	3,740	11	2-Iraq	14,200	16
3-Somalia	1,930	6	3-Afghanistan	11,185	13
Total of top-3 nationalities		83	Total of top-3 nationalities		67
Germany					
1-Afghanistan	7,645	34	1-Syria	116,555	38
2-Syria	6,930	31	2-Albania	34,895	12
3-Iraq	1,865	8	3-Kosovo	21,255	7
Total of top-3 nationalities		73	Total of top-3 nationalities		57
Hungary					
1-Afghanistan	4,875	55	1-Syria	44,850	35
2-Syria	2,240	25	2-Afghanistan	30,590	24
3-Kosovo	745	9	3-Kosovo	16,605	13
Total of top-3 nationalities		89	Total of top-3 nationalities		71*
The Netherlands					
1-Syria	1,455	38	1-Syria	14,620	45
2-Eritrea	1,240	32	2-Eritrea	5,665	17
3-Afghanistan	535	14	3-Iraq	2,315	7
Total of top-3 nationalities		84	Total of top-3 nationalities		69

* Due to rounding total percentage less than column totals.

Source: Eurostat, extracted on 11/12/2017; all numbers rounded to nearest 5.

²³ In Hungary, 90% of the applications by UMAs were terminated because the applicants had left for unknown destinations (information from EMN NCP Hungary).

The comparison further discloses that the total percentage of top-3 nationalities of UMAs is higher than that for the top-3 nationalities of adult asylum seekers. For example, in the Netherlands, UMAs from Syria, Eritrea, and Afghanistan together make up 84% of the total 2015 cohort of UMAs, compared to 69% of adult asylum seekers from Syria, Eritrea, and Iraq in the same year. An analysis on the countries of origin shows there is less diversity in the total number of origin countries where UMAs come from compared to adult asylum seekers. Regarding the top-3 receiving countries, the percentages in 2015 are as follows: 54 vs 96 in Sweden, 57 vs 97 in Germany, 22 vs 71 in Hungary, and in the Netherlands 32 vs 77 (source: Eurostat, extracted on 11/12/2017).

When the share of UMAs among all young asylum applicants under the age of 18 is considered, the ranking of the top-10 countries changes considerably. Notably large shares of UMAs among all minor asylum applicants were registered in Italy (57%), Sweden (50%), Norway (49%), and the United Kingdom (38.5%), followed by the Netherlands (36.5%). Surprisingly, in Germany and Hungary, two countries among the top 3 regarding the number of UMAs, a much lower share of UMAs in all minor applicants were recorded (respectively 10% and 19%) (Eurostat, 2016). This implies that some countries are probably less attractive for UMAs than for families arriving with minor asylum seekers (or for their smugglers), and vice versa.

2.1.2 Pull factors for 2015 cohort of UMAs in top 10 EU-countries

The differences above underline the importance of the question why the 2015 cohort of UMAs ended up seeking refuge in different EU-countries. About this, the literature contains hardly any information (yet) with respect to the 2015 cohort of UMAs. Therefore, in the second half of 2017 we carried out an adhoc query among the representatives of the NCPs of the EMN, with the cooperation of EMN NCP in the Netherlands, the Research and Analysis Department of the Immigration and Naturalisation Service. The query included questions about top-3 nationalities in each country and possible information (based on research, registers or the like) on the reasons why the 2015 cohort of UMAs came to Europe in general and specifically to that particular country, and the decision-making concerning the migration of these UMAs. Nine countries reacted to the query, of which six belonged to the top-10 destination countries: Austria, Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Sweden, and the UK.²⁴ The query disclosed that there was no current research about the issues raised with regard to the 2015 cohort. Based on their experience and/or previous information, the EMN NCPs mentioned the following possible reasons for the arrival of the 2015 cohort of UMAs in these countries:

- presence of family members, friends or diaspora (in general in Austria and Sweden, in Belgium with respect to Syrian and Afghan UMAs);
- procedural and protective safeguards in the admission or integration procedures (e.g. provision of a legal representative, possibility of appeal to a negative decision on asylum application) (Austria);
- accommodation in special facilities with special care and education (Austria, Sweden);
- inadequate reception systems and/or legal framework in other EU-countries (Sweden);

²⁴ Croatia, Lithuania and Luxembourg were the other countries that reacted to the query. These countries received hardly any UMAs in 2015 (respectively, 2, 3 and 102).

- longer duration of the asylum procedure or refusal of the asylum application in Germany (Belgium: in 2016 en 2017 UMAs from the 2015 cohort who had previously applied for asylum in Germany arrived to Belgium for these reasons);
- opportunities for education (Afghan UMAs in Belgium);
- arrival by chance (Eritrean UMAs in Belgium, who actually wanted to go to the Netherlands as they thought that they would be more likely to obtain a residence permit there).

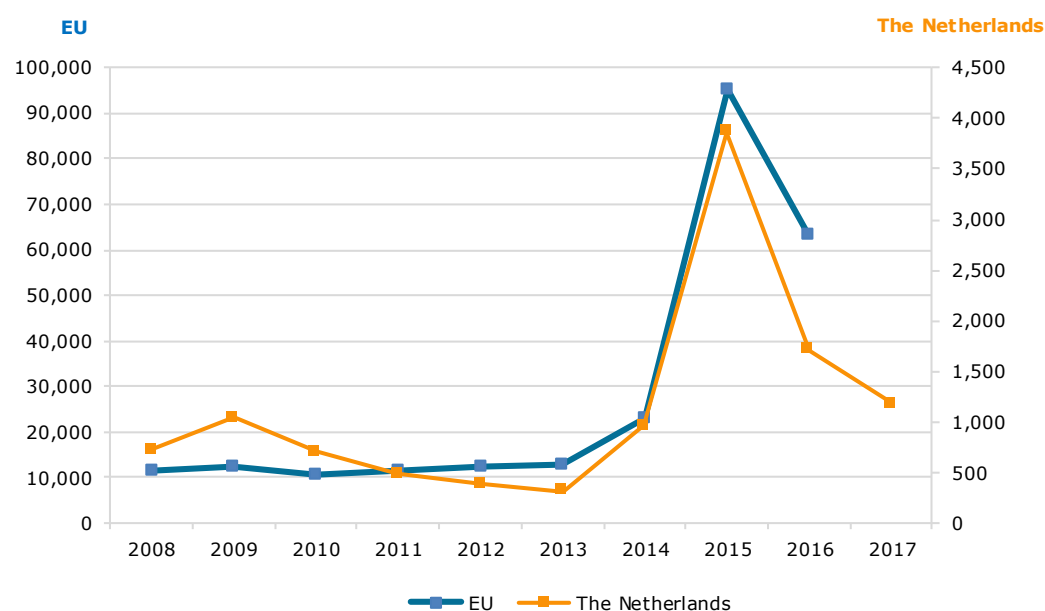
NCPs of Germany, the UK, and Hungary indicated that they did not have any information on these topics regarding the 2015 cohort. According to the Hungarian NCP, about 90% of the applications by this cohort of UMAs were terminated as these minors left for unknown destinations.

The only information on decision-making came from the NCP Austria, and that was based on experience: in general the decision to leave the home country was taken by the UMAs themselves, but often in agreement with their families.

2.2 2015 cohort of UMAs in the Netherlands

In the past ten years, the trend in the number of UMAs seeking protection in the Netherlands was comparable to that in the EU-countries in general (Figure 2.2). In 2009 the country witnessed a substantial increase in the number of UMAs (from 725 in 2008 to 1040 in 2009) which was mainly due to the sharp increase in the number of UMAs from Somalia and Afghanistan (VWN, 2010); in that year, both groups together formed 65% of the cohort (Figure 2.3a). The increase in the total number of UMAs in the Netherlands was significantly higher than the increase in the EU member states in general in the same period (43% vs 4%) (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2 Number of UMAs in the EU and the Netherlands; 2008-2017*



* EU totals excluding Croatia for the period 2008-2011; data for all Member States were not available for 2017 during report writing. The left axis refers to EU-figures, while data for the Netherlands should be interpreted following the axis on the right.

Source: Eurostat; extracted on 29/3/2018

While in 2012 and 2013 there was still a slight increase in the total numbers of UMAs in EU, the number of UMAs in the Netherlands continued to decline and reached a low point in 2013. With a number of 308, they formed less than 2% of the total asylum seekers in that year (VWN, 2014; 2016).

In 2014, the numbers started to increase sharply, with a noticeably high number of UMAs from Eritrea seeking refuge in the Netherlands (54% of the 2014 cohort). UMAs from Syria formed the second largest group (16%). In that year UMAs from Afghanistan accounted for only 3% of the cohort (Figure 2.3b).

In 2015 the number of UMAs quadrupled (from 960 to 3,859) and reached a peak, following the trend in the EU-countries. This increase was also noticeable in the share of UMAs in the total number of asylum seekers (3.2% in 2014 vs 6.6% in 2015) (VWN, 2016). As stated above, an overwhelming majority of the 2015 cohort of UMAs (84%) came from three countries only: Syria, Eritrea and Afghanistan (Figure 2.3c).

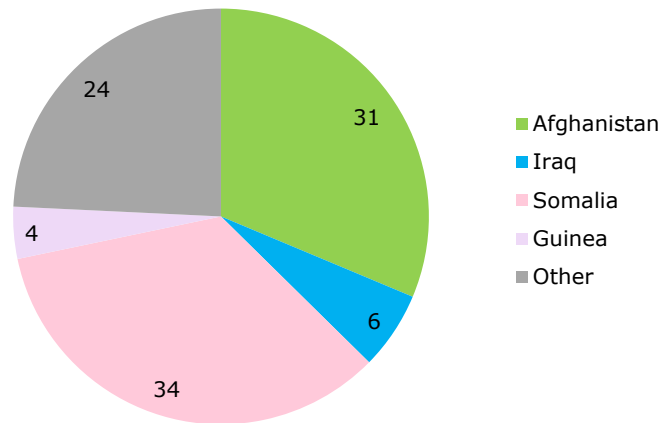
The 2015 peak in the number of UMAs in the Netherlands was not unique. The country witnessed the highest influx of UMAs when in 2000, 6,705 UMAs applied for asylum. The top-4 nationalities in the 2000 UMA cohort were consecutively, Angola, China, Guinee, and Sierra Leone, accounting altogether for 53% of the total UMA cohort (VWN, 2010). In 2002, the inflow of UMAs in the Netherlands halved to 3,232, a level close to the most recent peak in 2015 (VWN, 2010).²⁵ The number of UMAs from the top-4 origin countries dropped significantly in later years due to improvements in the situation at origin, such as the ending of civil wars in Angola, Guinee, and Sierra Leone.

Since 2016 the number of UMAs showed a radical decline (to 1707 in 2016 and to 1181 in 2017) (IND, 2016; 2017). In these last two cohorts, UMAs from Syria, Eritrea and Afghanistan still form the top-3 nationalities, with UMAs from Eritrea in a relative majority (Figures 2.3d and 2.3e). However, in 2017 UMAs with the Moroccan nationality are also among the top-3, forming together with the Afghan UMAs the third largest group.

²⁵ Between 2000 and 2002, the relative share of UMAs was also high (between 15 and 18%) due to a sharper decrease in the total number of asylum seekers compared to that of UMAs (VWN, 2010).

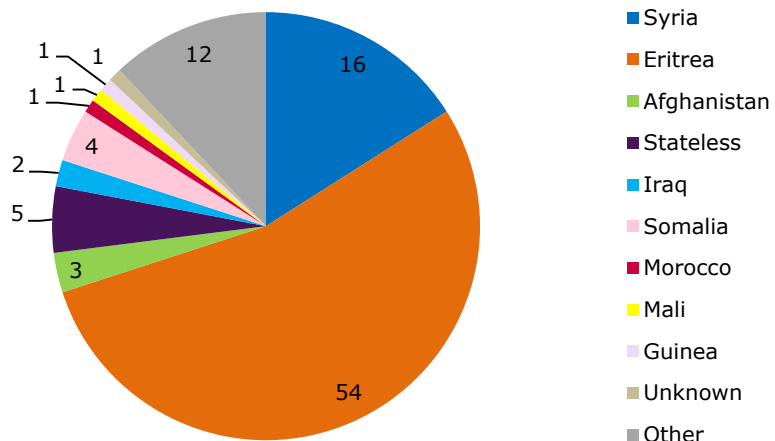
Figure 2.3 Cohorts of UMAs in the Netherlands; by nationality (%) 2009, 2014-2017

a 2009 (n=1,040)



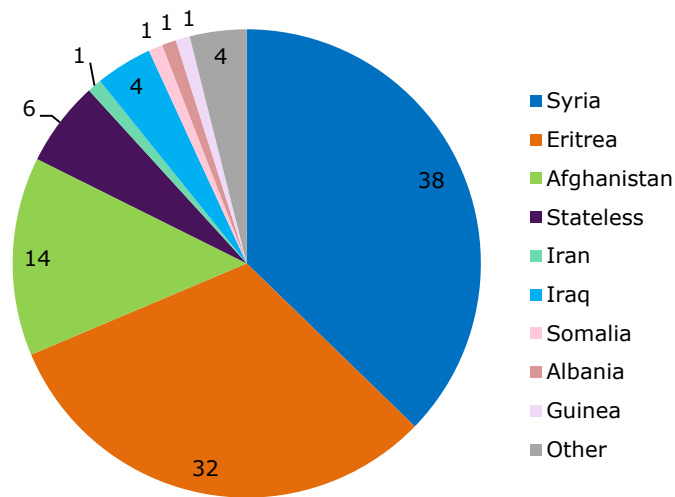
Source: Statistics Netherlands, StatLine; extracted in 2018

b 2014 (n=960)



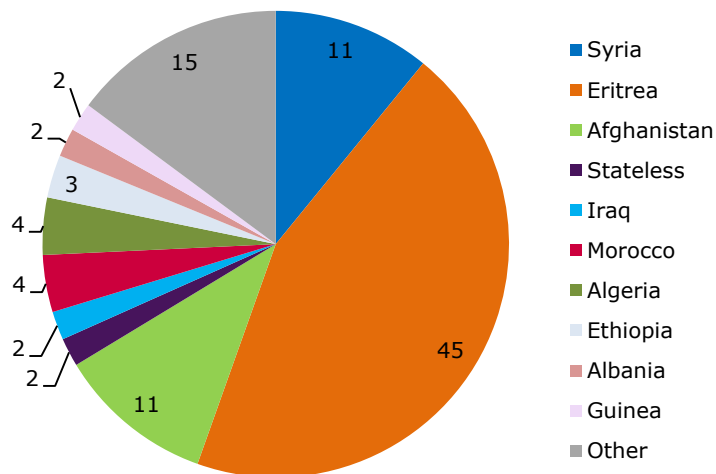
Source: Statistics Netherlands; extracted in 2018

c 2015 (n=3,859)



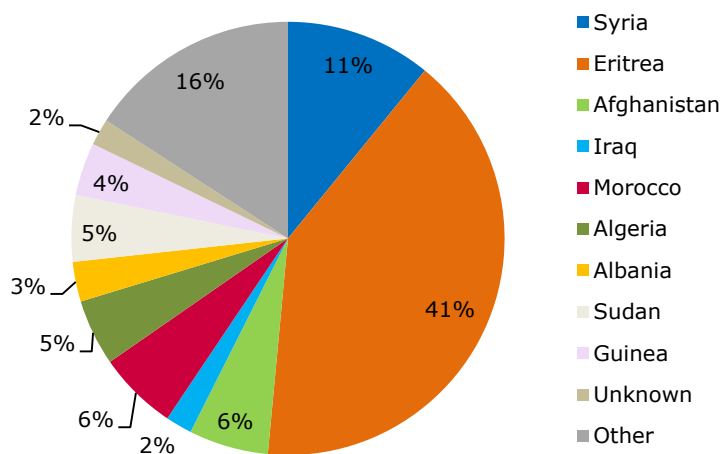
Source: Statistics Netherlands, Statline; extracted in 2018

d 2016 (n=1,705)



Source: Statistics Netherlands, StatLine extracted in 2018; IND (2016), Asylum Trends, December 2016

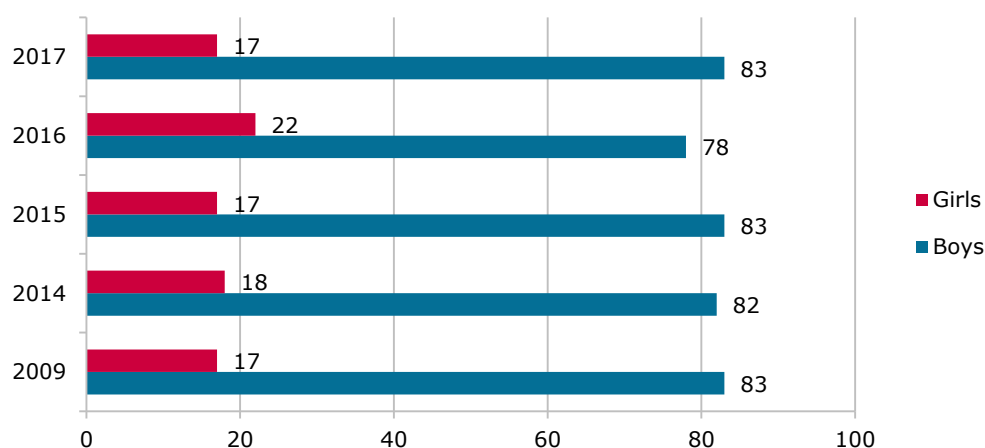
e 2017 (n=1,181)



Source: Statistics Netherlands, extracted in 2018; StatLine; IND (2017), Asylum Trends, December 2017

The majority of the 2015 cohort were boys (83%). Yet, there are some differences in sex distribution according to nationality. While UMAs from Syria and Afghanistan who sought refuge in the Netherlands were predominantly boys (nine out of ten), this was less often the case for their Eritrean counterparts. Three out of ten Eritrean UMAs who arrived in the country were girls (Source: StatLine; extracted in 2017). The share of boys in the 2015 cohort is similar to that in the 2009 and 2014 cohorts, as well as that in the later cohorts, with the exception of the 2016 cohort in which the share of girls is somewhat higher²⁶ (Figure 2.4).

Figure 2.4 Cohorts of UMAs in the Netherlands; by sex (%), 2009, 2014-2017

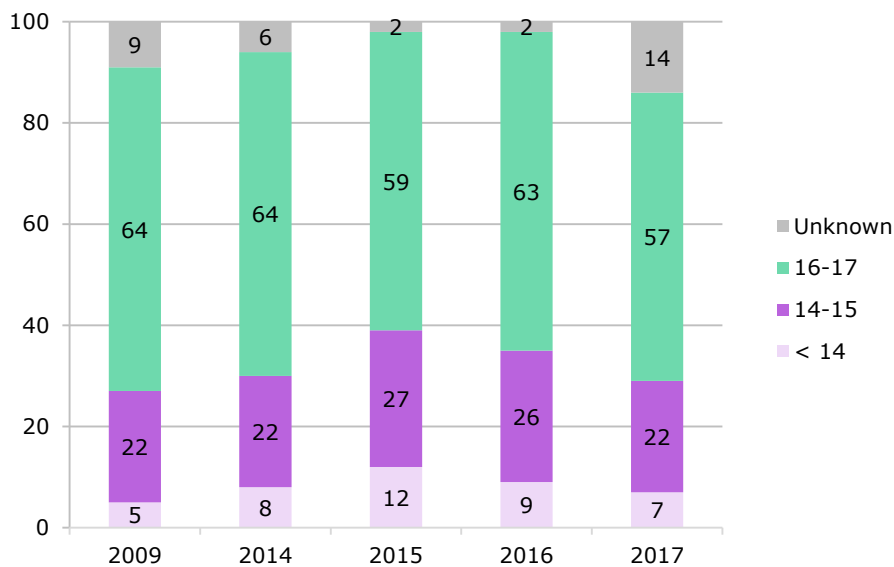


Source: StatLine, extracted in 2018.

²⁶ In the 2016 cohort the share of Syrian and Afghan girls is twice as high as in the 2015-cohort (10% Syrian girls in 2015 vs 20% in 2016 and 5% Afghan girls in 2015 vs 10% Afghan girls in 2016). The share of Eritrean girls is the same in both years (30%) (StatLine, extracted in 2017). In the record peak year 2000 the share of girls was also higher than in 2015 (27% vs 17%) (Olde Monnikhof & Van den Tillaart, 2003).

The 2015 cohort as well as the previous and later cohorts are dominated by UMAs who were 16 or 17 years old at the time of arrival in the Netherlands (Figure 2.5). Still, in 2015, relatively more younger UMAs sought refuge in the Netherlands.²⁷ In 2016 the proportion of older UMAs arriving in the Netherlands increased again, followed by a probable decline in 2017.²⁸

Figure 2.5 Cohort of UMAs in the Netherlands; by age (%), 2009, 2014-2017



Source: StatLine, extracted in 2018

2.3 Conclusion

The year 2015 was characterized by a peak in the number of asylum seekers, including UMAs, in the EU. Sweden, Germany, and Hungary were the top-3 receiving countries for UMAs, followed by Austria, Norway, and Italy. The Netherlands ranked seventh as a destination country (with 3,855 registered UMAs). An overwhelming majority of the 'European' UMAs were males, and over two thirds were 16 or 17 years old. Afghan, Syrian, and Eritrean UMAs formed the top-3 nationalities in the EU in general.

The composition of the Dutch 2015 UMA-cohort showed a similar pattern to that of the EU total with regard to nationality, gender, and age, except for Syrian minors forming the majority of UMAs, followed by Eritreans and Afghans (together 84% of the Dutch cohort). The 2015-Dutch cohort differs qua nationality from two previous peaks (2000 and 2009) that were respectively dominated by inflow of UMAs from Angola, China, Guinea and Sierra Leone, and Afghanistan and Somalia. In later

²⁷ Although the information available for the peak year 2000 is not completely comparable due to the use of different age categories, it can be remarked that the share of the youngest UMAs in the 2015 cohort was probably considerably lower than in 2000 when one out of four UMAs was 14 years or younger (Olde Monnikhof & Van den Tillaart, 2003).

²⁸ We do not know for sure because of the many unknowns regarding age in the 2017 cohort at the time of finalizing this report.

cohorts, in 2016-17, when the number of UMAs declined radically, Syrian, Eritrean and Afghan minors still formed the top-three nationalities. However, in these years Eritrean minors constituted the top nationality while the shares of Syrian and Afghans minors dropped significantly. Regarding the age and sex distribution, the 2015 cohort is in general similar to the cohorts in previous and later years, with boys and the oldest groups dominating the cohorts.

When we turn to the top-10 destination countries within the EU, we see some particularities in the distribution of the 2015-cohort of UMAs in those countries: (1) the composition of the top-3 nationalities differs per country ; (2) the compositions of respective top-3 nationalities of UMAs and adult asylum seekers differ there as well as in the Netherlands; (3) there is less diversity in origin countries of UMAs when compared to their adult counterparts; (4) it seems that some countries are less 'preferred' by UMAs than by families with children. All in all, these findings make it more intriguing to search for the reasons why members of the 2015 cohort of UMAs ended up in particular EU-countries. A literature survey as well as an inquiry among the EMN NCPs revealed that there is little information regarding this issue. According to previous research or experience, presence of family members or diaspora, procedural and protective safeguards in the admission procedures and integration process, special care and educational facilities for minors, disadvantages of the systems of other European countries and arrival by chance seem to play a role. In the following chapter we will explore the reasons why UMAs from top-3 nationalities of the 2015 Dutch-cohort ended up in the Netherlands.

3 Migration to the Netherlands

In this chapter we focus on the migration of unaccompanied minor asylum seekers (UMAs) to the Netherlands and answer the following main research questions:

- Why did the UMAs in the 2015 cohort who came to the Netherlands leave their home countries?
- Did they 'choose' the Netherlands 'consciously'? If so, why?
 - Did they have family members or acquaintances in the Netherlands? If yes, whom?
 - Did they have information about the Netherlands before they arrived here?
 - If yes, what kind of information did they have before they left their country of origin, what kind of information did they receive during their journey, and from whom?
- Did they have certain expectations regarding the Netherlands? If yes, what were they?

In what follows we look at push factors that caused our respondents to leave their countries and the pull factors that led them to come to the Netherlands (mostly macro-level factors), but also processes that played an important role at micro and meso levels to better understand why and how UMAs in the 2015 cohort ended up in the Netherlands: decision-making processes regarding the departure from the country of origin and during the journey, help received before departure and during the journey, the role of social networks, information, perceptions of minors and their families, and role of other parties (especially human smugglers) on the 'choice' of the Netherlands as a destination.

We answer these questions using data from face-to-face interviews with a total of 45 Syrian, Eritrean and Afghan UMAs and six focus groups with legal guardians and other experts of the Nidos Foundation (see Chapter 1 for more information).

3.1 Departure from country of origin: reasons and decision to leave

3.1.1 Push factors: country of origin and third country in the region

In Chapter 1 we presented a brief overview of the situation in the three countries of origin where our respondents come from. Push factors named by the respondents which play at a macro level are coherent with the circumstances described there. For Syrian minors the ongoing war and safety concerns were almost always the sole push factor. According to some Nidos experts these minors were also at risk of being recruited by Islamic State (IS) or other armed groups. In one exceptional case, there seems to be no explicit push factor; this respondent left Syria, to be with his girlfriend whom he had met through social media and who was living in the Netherlands.

Compulsory and possibly indefinite military service, lack of freedom in physical and intellectual sense, unsafety, lack of or poor quality of education, and that 'it is natural that one will leave the country at one point or another as everybody does', were the reasons named by the Eritrean respondents. Nidos experts point out that the mass emigration also has to do with the lack of socio-economic prospects in Eritrea. For Afghan minors, factors at a micro level also play a role. Their reasons to leave the country mostly lie in the personal and/or family sphere. Examples are: per-

ceived immediate threat to the life of the respondent due to rivalries between family members, conflict with parents or others in the community over respondent's sexual or religious orientation, or partner choice (including the possibility of a forced marriage). Other cases involve threat of recruitment by Taliban, violence or perceived threat to respondent's life due to ethnic conflicts, sometimes after an immediate family member had been killed. Four Afghan respondents were born in Iran, or migrated there with their family when they were very young. For these respondents, lack of future prospects or other problems as a result of being undocumented were the main push factors.²⁹

The narratives of our respondents show that it is too simplistic to assume that the flight from the country of origin to the Netherlands consists of one single journey, or that all minors or their families left their countries for Europe without looking for any alternatives. A typical aspect of migration stories of our Syrian and Eritrean respondents is that they first lived in a third country in the region. Half of the Syrian and Eritrean respondents lived in another country for a period ranging from six months to almost five years before heading towards Europe: Syrian respondents in Turkey, Egypt, Lebanon, Yemen or Iraq, and Eritrean respondents in Ethiopia or Sudan. Some respondents lived in more than one country in the region. In cases where the minors stayed in a third country for less than six months, or did not intend to live there for a longer period of time, we considered this stay as a part of the journey from the country of origin to the Netherlands (transit stay). None of our Afghan respondents lived in a third country for six months or longer.

Almost none of the respondents or their families who first lived in the region, had the intention of migrating to the Netherlands at the time of their departure from the country of origin. For Syrian respondents, the decision to leave Syria for another country in the region was mostly made by the parents, who wanted to leave the war behind. The destination upon departure was almost always that particular country in the region, usually with the intention to make a living there. In one exceptional case the parents had fled with no specific destination in mind, and in one case the family saw the third country in question as a temporary 'shelter' before making the next move to Europe. In another instance, a father had convinced the respondent and his brother to live in a neighbouring country instead of heading for Europe. As opposed to the Syrian respondents, the Eritrean minors fled to neighbouring countries (Ethiopia or Sudan) without their parents. They usually left with no destination in mind, but still many of them initially tried to make a living in these countries. A couple of minors lived in a neighbouring country simply because they wanted to leave Eritrea and had no further plans. Only one minor originally intended to live in Ethiopia. Another minor who was dreaming of coming to the Netherlands since he was a small child as he wanted to be a professional football player, lived in two different countries in the region for an extended period of time before heading for the Netherlands.

Our respondents mentioned issues such as lack of future prospects, among others due to being undocumented, hostile attitudes towards refugees, feeling unsafe as a result of negative experiences, examples of countrymen leaving for Europe, cultural differences and/or intention of family reunification in Europe as reasons to leave the country in the region at a given moment.

²⁹ In the rest of the text, we consider Iran the starting point of their journey to Europe, but Afghanistan to be their country of origin.

3.1.2 Decision to flee

For a majority of the minors in our study (or for their parents) the decision to leave the country was a sudden, hasty decision. This was the case for almost all Afghan respondents, who left the country under panic, after a sudden or escalated conflict or an immediate threat of violence. It is interesting to note that in almost all cases, despite the haste, a smuggler was arranged for the journey by the family, which implies some sort of planning (see also below).

Also about half of the Eritrean and Syrian respondents left their origin countries suddenly. For Syrian minors mostly immediate dangers of the war, such as escalated bombings, and rumours that the situation would get worse, were the cause for sudden departure. A couple of respondents left suddenly with someone else, mostly an adult, who was already about to leave Syria in a few days. For Eritrean minors, leaving the country was an almost impulsive act. There was rarely a plan. While chatting with schoolmates at school, or while herding the cattle in the fields in the company of a friend, the topic of leaving the country would come up, and a, in the words of some respondents 'childish decision' was made to leave Eritrea. Within a few days, sometimes even a few hours, the border with a neighbouring country was crossed.³⁰ One of the respondents explains the reason for the sudden flight:

If you plan something like that, it will never work. We were very young, then either my friend or I would give away to our mothers that we would leave, and one mother would tell it to the other. We didn't want that and therefore left immediately. (ER)³¹

In the few cases where the respondents say that they did plan their departure from the country of origin, the meaning of a 'plan' varied from person to person. For some minors it consisted of parents or close relatives arranging a smuggler (mostly Syrian and Afghan respondents), for others it was a vague notion where friends talked about leaving the country (mostly Eritrean respondents). In a couple of exceptional cases, the Eritrean respondents arranged a smuggler themselves or joined a group which knew the way to the border. Mostly, it was the smuggler who decided the timing of the departure even if the plans were made before:

He said 'we are leaving now' and that was it. (SY)

According to the experiences of some Nidos experts, how hasty or planned the journey is depends on the reasons why minors flee the country. In cases where there is no immediate threat, the journey is planned quite in advance, sometimes even years before. For example, there are cases of Afghan parents who sell their house to finance the journey of their child. So it seems that, even in cases where the Afghan respondents left the country suddenly, there is some kind of preparation by parents to secure the 'passage' to Europe.

With the exception of the Eritrean respondents, family played an important role in the decision to leave the country of origin. Regarding the Afghan minors, in almost all cases this decision was made by (one of the) parents and/or other family members, with hardly any say of the respondents:

³⁰ Many of our respondents were living in areas that were close to the border.

³¹ We illustrate our findings with citations from UMAs. In order to guarantee anonymity of the respondents, we end each citation by only referring to the nationality of the UMA concerned (AF, SY, or ER).

In Afghanistan, it is the elderly who take the final decisions. The youngster of the household has no say in whatever decisions are being taken for them. (AF)

The flight of Syrian minors was always discussed within the family. Regarding the decision-making about departure there are variations in the narratives of the minors. A majority of the Syrian minors stated that, before their departure, their family members who stayed behind also intended to come to Europe, making use of the possibility of family reunification (that was rarely the case for Afghan and Eritrean minors). But the decision to leave was mostly initiated by the respondents and it was also them who took the final decision to flee (regardless of whether the respondent first lived in another country in the region or not). However, these minors only left once the family stood behind their decision. However, it seems that some Syrian parents compromised to cater to the strong wishes of their children to leave for Europe. As mentioned previously, a father had persuaded his two sons who desperately wanted to leave for Europe, to move to a neighbouring country. His fear of losing both his sons during a dangerous journey to Europe was his motivation.

There were also few parents (and in one case the fiancé) initiating the idea of the respondent leaving, mostly with the aim to reunite the family in Europe; occasionally it was the parents who took the final decision too, but in consultation with the respondent:

My role was to whine that I wanted to leave Syria. I am ambitious, I wanted to continue studying. Schools in [...] were closed; we had no life anymore. But in the end the final decision was taken by my parents. They decided that I should leave. (SY)

My father asked me whether I wanted to go to Europe. First, I didn't want to leave, I wanted to stay with my family. But later I agreed; I did want to go to Europe and study, I wanted to build a new future for us. My father and I took the final decision together. (SY)

That some families send their (strongest) children ahead for family reunification purposes, is recognized by almost all Nidos experts. Some Syrian minors even arrive with documents that are already translated, which indicates planning and a clear goal.

In contrast to the Afghan and Syrian minors, almost all of our Eritrean respondents left Eritrea without discussing it with their family. These minors unanimously report that their parents or family would never have allowed them to leave Eritrea because of the dangerous journey to Europe or the fact that according to their parents the children are supposed to stay with their parents.

In a couple of exceptional cases, respondents did receive help from a family member (but not the parents), who bribed soldiers guarding the border. Later on, in the third country in the region or during the journey to Europe, it was however not unusual that minors had contact with their families, to gather money for smugglers and/or information (see below).

Although the experts in our focus groups stress that all minors in our study come from countries with a 'we/us' culture, they seem to have different experiences regarding the influence of the family in migration decision-making, especially in the case of Eritrean minors. According to some, in these cultures it is quite rare that

individuals make such big decisions by themselves without consulting the family members. Others do know about Eritrean minors who indeed left just like that, without telling anything to their families, 'a story which is never heard of for Syrian pupils, who all leave with the consent of their parents'. The fact that Eritrean minors not always live with their parents, as they go into hiding to avoid being enrolled in the army, is given as a possible explanation why these minors might have left without discussing their departure with their families. Other experts have the impression that Eritrean minors do discuss their departure with their family, but keep it secret from everyone as emigration is politically very sensitive and dangerous for everyone involved.

Nidos experts also stress that among UMAs younger than 14 years old at the time of arrival in the Netherlands – a group which we did not speak to – the influence of family in decision-making is almost universal. According to their experience, these younger UMAs are almost always sent ahead by the family for family reunification purposes.

3.2 Help before and during the journey and companions during the journey

Regardless of whether the departure was sudden or planned, the majority of our respondents received help with the preparations for their journey. In line with the above findings, this was the case for all Afghan and almost all Syrian respondents, but for only just a few Eritrean minors. In an exceptional case, a Syrian respondent had worked and saved money for the journey himself.

Commonly, it was the parents who helped the minors, but sometimes other family members such as uncles, aunts, and grandparents, friends, and even a sports coach were involved. The help typically consisted of arranging and/or paying for a smuggler. In addition, family was involved in arranging practical issues: e.g. arranging a passport, and taking care of clothes and medicines. In the case of an Afghan respondent the father accompanied him until the border where he was handed over to a smuggler. Similarly a Syrian mother travelled with her son until the border to ensure his safety in crossing the border.

The narratives of our Eritrean respondents who first lived in a third country in the region make it clear that, even if the departure from the origin country had been sudden and/or impulsive, departure from the third country in the region was almost always planned, by gathering information about different destinations and/or arranging a smuggler. A number of these respondents also received financial help from parents and/or relatives to arrange a smuggler for the continuation of the journey. There are indications that this is also the case for the departure of a few Syrian respondents from the third country in the region where they lived without their parents.³²

The minors' stories reveal that they were in fact not always 'unaccompanied' at the beginning of, and/or during their journey. Only a few Eritrean respondents left Eritrea alone, while others crossed the border to Ethiopia or Sudan mainly in groups of friends/classmates. In some cases, cousins, or adult co-villagers were (also) pres-

³² Koser and Kuschminder (2016) similarly show that while the decision to leave the country of origin is often made under stress and rather quickly, migrants have more time in transit countries to build up networks and find about potential destination countries. Brekke and Aarset (2009) report similar results.

ent. About half of the Afghan and Syrian³³ minors left the country with others (e.g. family members, neighbours, friends of the family). However, having left the country together does not necessarily mean that the group completed the journey together. Sometimes the group split soon after crossing the border where everyone went their own way, sometimes travel partners separated once they reached Europe. In other cases the original companions met each other by coincidence again after they had split up, or new travel companions were met along the way. Some respondents had lost their travel companions to tragic events or got separated from adult relatives and never found them again. Respondents who said they travelled 'alone', mostly travelled with groups of asylum seekers.

During the journey almost all our respondents received help from a variety of people. Although we have not asked this question directly, many of our respondents told us that they had travelled with a smuggler. It is clear from their stories that in the journey to Europe and eventually to the Netherlands networks of smugglers were involved, where the minors sometimes were handed from one 'agent' to another at borders. At times, the minors or their parents arranged new smugglers once they arrived in a transit country. In addition to providing transport and instructions how to hide from the border police and other authorities, smugglers provided food and 'shelter', sometimes bought tickets for the minors to travel further in Europe. An Afghan family trusted money to the smuggler who in turn gave this money to the respondent once they reached Europe. As we will see later, in some cases they also played a crucial role in determining the final destination.

Some of our respondents also relied on the help of their families during the journey. Even in cases where the minors left the country without informing their parents, during the journey contact with the family was sought, especially to finance the trip. Not only parents and/or siblings (of whom some were living abroad), but also distant relatives were contacted for this purpose. Sometimes these family members arranged smugglers so that the minors could travel further, and also kept contact with the smugglers to ensure the safe 'passage' of these respondents. A minor who first lived in Ethiopia for a long time, and then left that country for Europe in spite of her father's resistance illustrates this:

When I arrived in Sudan I had contact with my father through the smuggler. He was living in Israel. I told him that I was already in Sudan. He knew by then that I would also leave Sudan just like I had left Eritrea and Ethiopia. He had no choice but to pay. That's why, against his will, he arranged all the contacts with the smugglers and arranged everything so that I could travel safely. If my father had not been there for me, I would have lost my way somewhere or something terrible would have happened to me. (ER)

There were also respondents who travelled with another minor or an adult family member, or with another adult acquaintance (e.g. a neighbour or an adult friend of the parents). In cases where there was an adult co-traveller, the adults took care of all 'essentials' during the journey.

Fellow asylum seekers, regardless of their age and regardless of their familiarity with the respondents, were also commonly cited as a source of help during the

³³ As mentioned before, Syrian respondents who first lived in a third country in the region almost always left Syria with their families. While looking at their travel companions we consider their departure from that third country to Europe.

journey: *everyone helped each other to survive the trip*. Some of our respondents reported that they had joined and followed fellow country men during their journey, to be safe or for 'practical' reasons:

When I was staying at a refugee camp in Greece, I asked an Afghan family whether I could be a 'part' of their family. I heard from other refugees that otherwise they would not allow me to travel further because I was younger than 18 years. They told me that if I joined and travelled together with a family, it would be easier for me to continue my journey and that I would not be kept behind at the refugee centre because of my age. So I travelled further with them. (AF)

Furthermore, the respondents mentioned various authorities and organizations (e.g. Red Cross, border police in different European countries), that helped them during their journey.

3.3 Intended destination before departure

In this section we first present our findings related to the intended destination before departure. In the following sections, we discuss the reasons for considering that destination, information and sources of information, and expectations regarding the intended destination. While doing so, we make a distinction between respondents whose intended destination was the Netherlands (paragraph 3.4) vs. the others (paragraph 3.5).

In what follows, in cases where the respondents first lived in a third country in the region, we assume that their journey towards Europe started from that country. For narrative purposes we will use the term 'country of origin' for all cases. Where it is essential for the respondents' story that they had first lived in a country in the region, we will underline that fact.

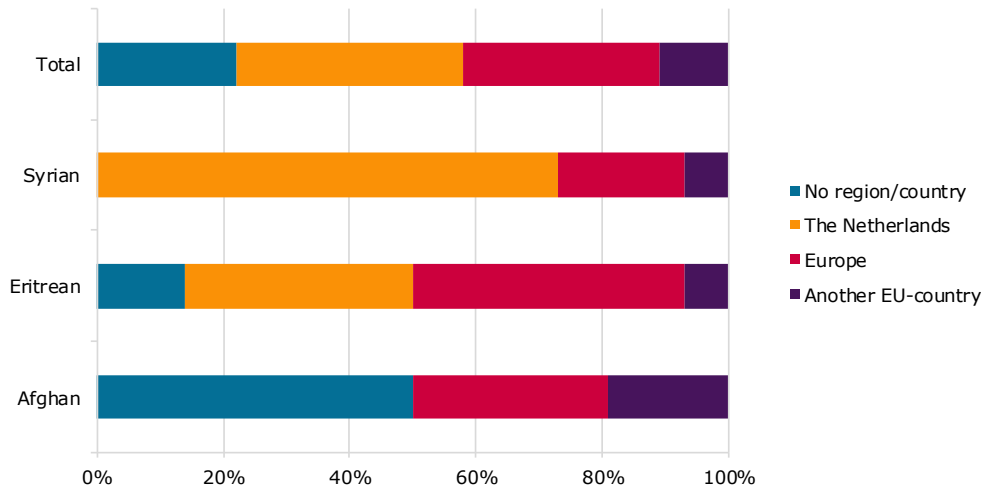
Results of our interviews show that only a minority of the respondents saw the Netherlands as a possible destination before their departure (36%) (Figure 3.1). The majority left either without any specific destination in mind (22%), actually wanted to go to another European country (11%), or simply headed towards Europe (31%). However, there are important differences according to nationality.

While none of the Afghan minors, and only a minority of the Eritrean respondents intended to come to the Netherlands, that was precisely the case for a big majority of the Syrian group. The few Syrian minors who did not consider the Netherlands as the intended destination were planning to end up either in Germany, or in Europe with no specific country in mind.

At the time of their departure, half of our Afghan respondents had no specific destination whatsoever in mind, while the rest just wanted to go to 'Europe' or Sweden or Finland. This is not surprising if we consider the rushed state in which the Afghan respondents left their country. Likewise, a majority of Eritrean respondents just wanted to end up in Europe or had no destination in mind at all.³⁴

³⁴ Some of the Eritrean respondents, made the choice for the Netherlands in a third country where they first lived. This explains why the percentage of minors whose intended destination was the Netherlands is high, although many of them left Eritrea with no specific destination.

Figure 3.1 Intended country of destination before departure from country of origin/country in the region; by nationality (relative distribution of respondents)



3.4 Intended destination: the Netherlands

3.4.1 Pull factors for the Netherlands

The respondents who intended to come to the Netherlands from the beginning named different reasons for this. Many of these reasons have to do with the positive image and reputation of the Netherlands abroad, which we can relate mostly to macro level pull factors.

Our respondents' reasons to prefer the Netherlands are mostly multiple. In Box 3.1 these reasons are summarized in different categories. The most commonly named reasons were related to i) the image/reputation of the Netherlands regarding shorter and quicker procedures, and; ii) future possibilities for youngsters, particularly education.

Box 3.1 Pull factors for the Netherlands for respondents whose intended destination was the Netherlands (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 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, not racist, democratic, free society).
- 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).

* We borrowed this term from Bijleveld and Taselaar (2000).

My cousin is living in Denmark. She always talks to my father; she advised him to send me to Denmark. But my other cousin who has friends in the Netherlands got in touch with them. He told my father that for refugees the Netherlands is a better country; that getting a residence permit and family reunification procedure is much quicker than in Denmark. That's why my father decided to send me to the Netherlands [...]. All European countries are safe. But the Netherlands is better for the future of our family. I want to study and want that my little sister will also study (SY).

The third most commonly mentioned category concerns reasons related to the image and reputation of the Netherlands with respect to positive societal values (especially non-racist, free and safe).

I didn't think about the procedures, I just wanted to go to a safe country. I wanted to study; I was 15 years old. My friend in the Netherlands told me on the phone: 'the Netherlands is a beautiful and quiet country, people are not racist. Discrimination does not exist in the Netherlands. (SY)

As we have seen before, at departure, the Netherlands was an intended destination only among our Syrian and Eritrean respondents and none of the Afghan minors. Still, there seems to be a slight difference in the reasons stated by the Syrian and Eritrean respondents. While the Syrian minors reported the reputation of the Netherlands regarding the procedures and existence of social networks relatively more often, Eritrean minors stressed the positive societal values of the Dutch society (especially freedom and safety), and had relatively more often vague positive associations with the Netherlands. Both groups also mentioned prospects for the future for youngsters (equally often).

When I was in Eritrea I saw a video about a wedding and saw what a beautiful country Holland is. That's why I always dreamed of going to Holland. I had fellow villagers living in the Netherlands. I also heard from them what a beautiful country it is. That it was a free and safe country, and you could study here instead of going to the army. It was my dream to study. (ER)

About half of the respondents (almost all Syrian) whose intended destination was the Netherlands, also considered other countries (Germany, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Austria and Italy, and Canada). While deciding where to go, they compared these countries: because of longer procedures (Sweden, Germany, Italy and Denmark), shorter duration of the residence permit and longer duration of residence needed for naturalization (Italy and Germany), non-uniform asylum policy (Germany), discrimination against refugees (Germany), colder weather (Sweden and Denmark), a more difficult language to learn (Sweden, Denmark, Germany), they preferred the Netherlands. It looks like these respondents collected thorough information about their alternatives and made a carefully considered, intentional choice:

The asylum policy in Italy is worse than in Germany. In Italy it takes a refugee two to three years to get the residence permit. The residence permit itself is not valid for more than three years. After getting the residence permit, you must wait for a long time until you receive housing, schooling and starting a normal life. In the Netherlands, the situation is different. The asylum procedure goes fast, and the applicant gets the residence permit for 3-5 years. Furthermore, one can start building his life soon, because of the fast asylum procedure and quicker housing.

Moreover, the Netherlands has two extra advantages: first, family reunion goes more easily and faster than in other countries. Second, the status holder can apply for the Dutch nationality after five years of residency with a clear civil record. There is also DUO³⁵ and all kinds of help offered to students. After two months of thinking and searching, I decided that the Netherlands is the best choice for me. (SY)

In an exceptional case, an Eritrean minor whose second choice was Canada ended up in the Netherlands as a result of a combination of circumstances:

When I was at the refugee camp in Ethiopia, I heard from my fellow villagers who went to the Netherlands before, that the Netherlands was the best place to go. I heard that if I went there I would be reunited with my family much more quickly than in any other country in Europe. Then I decided to go to the Netherlands. Actually I had also considered to go to Canada; I have a cousin who lives there. That was my second choice. When I was in Italy I heard from the smugglers that it was not possible to travel there; I don't know why. If it were possible, maybe I would have gone to Canada; I don't know. (ER)

3.4.2 Information before and during the journey and sources of information

When we focus on the kind of information the respondents who intended to come to the Netherlands had about the country before their departure, we see that the information they had and their reasons for choosing the Netherlands are quite intertwined. We have seen above that this group of respondents were usually well informed about different countries. The most common information they had about the Netherlands concerned the positive image of the country as a society (safety, freedom, non-discrimination and equality), followed by the vague positive associations they had with the Dutch society and its people. Other two most commonly reported types of information reflect the two most often reported pull factors for the Netherlands: information on procedures (asylum and family reunification) and opportunities related to education in the Netherlands. A few respondents also had information about the 'care and comfort' UMAs receive from the Dutch government. A Syrian minor reported that information regarding care for UMAs in the Netherlands he came across online was crucial in determining his choice to come to the Netherlands.

Almost all the minors who had already considered the Netherlands as a destination before departure, had social networks (relatives, friends, acquaintances or fellow villagers who passed through the asylum procedure) here. Syrian respondents often had family members in the Netherlands: older brothers, cousins, aunts, as well as the respondents' and/or the respondents' parents' friends. One of our respondents had a brother-in-law living in the Netherlands, while another had a girlfriend living here.

The Eritrean respondents' networks also consisted of older brothers, aunts, and/or friends, and distant relatives, but also of fellow villagers, whom the respondents referred to as 'family'.

Although the presence of family or friends was not always the reason to prefer the Netherlands, they did have an essential function: information provision. These

³⁵ Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs; the Dutch Student Funding Agency.

'strong ties' (Granovetter, 1973)³⁶ were the most common source of information about the Netherlands. As the above examples already showed, information through these networks, but also through networks in other European countries, was of crucial importance for the determination of the final destination:

[...] There are of course possibilities for the future in other countries. But we found out that the Netherlands was the best for us [...] My father's friend in Germany told him that he would expect a long time for the asylum procedure. Additionally, there was no guarantee that he could apply for family reunion. According to another friend of my father's in Sweden the situation was not any different there, in addition to the cold weather. On the other hand, in the Netherlands the family reunion and granting the residence permit were the fastest among all. My father's friend in the Netherlands led him to the conclusion towards the Netherlands. Apparently, he had himself obtained his residence permit after only three months. (SY)

In addition to social networks, social media and Internet were sources of information before departure, but mostly for Syrian respondents. However, it seems that these minors wanted to confirm this information with first-hand evidence:

I collected information from the Internet, but it wasn't enough for me. I needed to talk to people who passed through the asylum experience. That is what influenced my decision. My aunt and her family fled to the Netherlands a few years ago. They got a residence permit and housing within one year. My cousins started their regular schools, and they were having a good experience. (SY)

Eritrean minors rarely relied on social media or Internet for information, regardless of whether they first lived in a third country in the region or not. Many of these respondents probably had limited or no access to Internet. For them other asylum seekers or refugees in the refugee camps in the third country in the region, as well as NGO-professionals or volunteers working in these camps served as additional sources of information.

Furthermore, TV and schools in Syria and Eritrea provided general knowledge about the Netherlands, which contributed to the vague associations the respondents had with the Netherlands. In some cases, TV was the source of information regarding the situation of asylum seekers and refugees in other countries (specifically Germany).

According to the experts in the focus groups, recent cohorts of UMAs, including Afghan and Eritrean minors, arrive better prepared regarding information about the Netherlands.

Only very few respondents whose original destination was the Netherlands, received information during the journey. In these exceptional cases the respondents usually received general information about the Dutch society from other asylum seekers, or they made use of their social networks living in Europe, with whom they could not have contact earlier. In these cases information about education possibilities, easier

³⁶ Strong ties are connections with whom we are intimate, intensely emotionally involved and with whom we interact frequently on a social basis, who mostly have homogenous networks, while weak ties exist between people who are connected with sparse, heterogeneous networks (Granovetter, 1973; Brown & Konrad, 2001). Example of strong ties are family and friends (Rademacher & Wang, 2014)

and quicker family reunification and/or better care for UMAs in the Netherlands was shared with the respondents. Some of these respondents made use of social media to get into contact with their family/friends.

Whether the information these minors received was accurate will be discussed in Chapter 4, which focusses on the life of our interviewees in the Netherlands.

3.4.3 *Expectations regarding the Netherlands*

When asked about their expectations regarding the Netherlands before their departure, the most common answers are related to future possibilities the Netherlands would offer: firstly study, then opportunities for work and building up a career. A couple of respondents expected that they could immediately start working on their aspired career (e.g. training to become a professional football player) or in a regular job. Another respondent expected to receive financial aid from DUO while studying. Further, not surprisingly, these respondents expected to find safety, freedom in different aspects of life, and to be reunited with their families. Regarding asylum and family reunification, their expectations not only included the actual realization of these applications, but also the speed with which they would be processed:

I expected that I would get a residence permit within three months and that the family reunification procedure would be concluded within six months. (SY)

Relatively more Eritrean minors stress their expectations about safety and freedom, while more Syrian respondents express expectations regarding family reunification. In addition, a few respondents express having had concrete expectations regarding how the Dutch government would take care of them as an UMA, and how they would be welcomed by the helpful and friendly Dutch people:

I expected to live with other people until I received a residence permit. That I would be entitled to shelter, guardianship and healthcare. That I would live under guardianship until my parents come to the Netherlands. [...] (SY)

Our findings show that these expectations were not always realized once the minors arrived in the Netherlands. We discuss their experiences regarding this issue in Chapter 4.

3.5 Intended destination: Europe in general, another European country or no destination at all

In this paragraph we describe how our respondents who actually did *not* intend to come to the Netherlands when they fled from their country, ended up in this country after all. Thereby we discuss the pull factors for their intended destinations if they had any, their expectations from these destinations, information they had about the Netherlands, and finally the reasons how and why they ended up in the Netherlands.

3.5.1 *Pull factors for Europe*

The most commonly cited reason by the respondents whose intended destination was Europe, with no specific country in mind, is the image or reputation of Europe being safe, peaceful and where one could find freedom.

No one leaves Eritrea with a certain country in mind; they just want to go to Europe and do not worry about where to end up. What they want is just to leave the country and settle in a secure and safe place. (ER)

Opportunities regarding the future, study, and work are the second most commonly named reason. A few respondents report that the aim of going to Europe also had to do with family reunification:

I just wanted to get to a safe place. I hoped to start a new life in Europe, get a proper education and get my diploma, find proper work, bring my family to Europe, provide my family the help they needed, especially my parents, and my sisters who did not have the opportunity to attend school in Afghanistan. [...] As you know it is difficult for an Afghan girl to take such a dangerous journey to get to Europe. My parents told me, 'son go to Europe, settle there and help us get out of here.' (AF)

Occasionally, a 'culture of migration' (Massey et al., 1993)³⁷ seems to play a role, and the respondents state that they just wanted to go to Europe because everybody else did:

I saw my neighbours and many others in my village leaving for Europe. I thought 'how is that possible? I want to do that too.' I heard that some of my fellow villagers were in Germany, others were in Sweden, and some were in 'Holland'. It was not important which country I ended up in. I thought that all these countries were 'Europe'. 'They are all in Europe, aren't they?' I thought. I was just curious about 'Europe'. (ER)

Some minors saw the journey to Europe as an adventure to enjoy:

It was stupid to stay there on your own. All my friends and children in my town had already left. I couldn't go to school as everybody was gone. I thought it was a nice idea; an adventure. I would travel with my friends who were my peers [...] To travel in a group is 'gezelliger'³⁸ than on your own. (SY)

3.5.2 Pull factors for other European countries

Only a few respondents, three Afghan, one Eritrean and one Syrian, had left their countries with the intention of going to a European country other than the Netherlands. Named countries were Sweden, Finland, Germany, and Switzerland. In a couple of cases this was because of the existence of social networks: a Syrian minor wanted to end up in Germany as he had friends who fled there before. He had heard from them that there were good education possibilities and that it was easy to find a job. While one Afghan minor had the intention of ending up in Sweden to join his elder brother, another Afghan minor wanted to end up there 'just for safety and study'. Another Afghan respondent was heading towards Finland without knowing the reason why. He had heard from his uncle, whom he had left Afghanistan with, that their destination was Finland, and he did not question him: 'in Afghanistan, you do what the elderly tell you to do'. However, he was separated from him during the

³⁷ A situation in which increasing migration within a community leads to changes in values and cultural perceptions, so that the prospect of migration becomes a norm.

³⁸ A typically Dutch word, meaning something along the lines of 'cozy'.

journey. For an Eritrean minor, Switzerland was a country in Europe that she heard of by chance:

I just wanted to be safe and free. When I was in Ethiopia [where the respondent lived for almost a year], I heard other people in the refugee camp talking about 'Swiss'. The name was very 'promising'. I thought, 'I want to go there', but I had no idea where it was and what kind of a place it was. I didn't know anybody there. I had never left my village before, and I didn't understand back then that there were so many different countries in Europe. (ER)

3.5.3 No intended destination

For those respondents who left their countries with no destination in mind, it seems that push factors played a key role. The only consideration was to leave the country of origin and arrive to a safe, secure, free, peaceful place no matter where that was.

I just wanted to be safe. That was the most important [...]. I wanted to be independent, do what I wanted. I wanted to study further and work and wanted to move freely. In my country the government determines everything for you. You are finished with school, then you have to be a soldier. (ER)

There are some indications from our interviews with Afghan respondents however, that in cases where these minors had reported that they had no intended destination at all at departure, the actual destination, 'Europe', was probably already determined by the family and/or the smuggler, without the minor being aware of it. For example, in one case, once in Turkey, the smuggler gave the minor some money and told him that he had received this money from the respondent's uncle (who had originally arranged the smuggler) and that he had to travel further to Greece alone. In another case, the smuggler had received 10,000 dollars from the family to bring the minor 'somewhere safe'. Another smuggler bought a ticket for the respondent when they were 'in some country' in Europe and put him on a train together with others. The respondent later found out that he was in Germany.

3.5.4 Expectations regarding the destination

The respondents who originally did not have the intention of coming to the Netherlands, had mainly expected to find safety, freedom, and peace, followed by study and work opportunities at the destination they would arrive eventually. Some respondents who wanted to end up in 'Europe' in addition cited that their expectations were to have a good life, have social contacts with the native population of the country where they would end up in, and meet well-mannered people. Some Afghan respondents had conceptualized 'Europe' almost as a father or mother figure, which would embrace and suit them, and solve all their problems:

I expected Europe to understand my difficulties, to feel with me considering the situation in Afghanistan. I expected that I would be able to study here and build a future. (AF)

I expected that, coming from a war-torn country, I would be welcomed with open arms in Europe. (AF)

A few minors – also – expected to be reunited with their families in the country they would end up in and/or get a residence permit and be naturalized. Occasionally, the respondents reported that they had no particular expectations.

3.5.5 Information and source of information about the Netherlands before departure and during the journey

As might be expected, only a minority of our respondents who originally did not aim to come to the Netherlands, knew anything about this country before their departure. Moreover, in almost all of these cases, their 'knowledge' was limited to some vague positive associations with the Netherlands: 'the good national football team', 'beautiful flowers', 'many bicycles', 'cows', 'good poultry and milk', 'small and beautiful'. TV and school were the two most commonly cited sources of information. Occasionally, the respondents read about these aspects in books or on the Internet. In one case, a Syrian minor had read on Facebook that the Dutch government took good care of Syrian refugees who arrived in the Netherlands.

Only a small minority of the respondents who originally did not intend to come to the Netherlands, had family (an older brother, aunt, uncle, or father's cousin), friends or fellow villagers in the Netherlands. However, this was mostly a person whom they had not seen in many years or had not met at all, with whom they could rarely have contact due to problems in means of communication, or was a relative who had only recently arrived in the Netherlands himself. Consequently, there were hardly any 'active' social networks in the Netherlands before departure from the country of origin.

In contrast to their situation before departure, and different from the situation of the respondents who originally intended to come to the Netherlands and were already well informed about their destination, the majority of these minors received information about the Netherlands during their journey, mostly once they reached Europe. This usually happened in Italy, Germany, or Austria, but occasionally also in Greece, Switzerland, Serbia or Turkey. Some respondents state that the journey to Europe was very dangerous and information exchange never came to mind or was not possible at all then:

What do you mean with whether I received any information during the journey? During the journey you are only busy with praying; you enter the Sahara with eighty people and come out with forty! [ER]

During a risky journey, the only thing you think about is to be safe. Everyone thinks about himself. No one shares any information about any countries. Everyone is concerned about getting to a safe place. And smugglers just transport you from one place to another. Every time you arrive somewhere new, you meet a new group of smugglers. They are very short tempered and aggressive. They don't talk to you at all during the entire journey. [AF]

Information received during the journey was most often about asylum and family reunification procedures in different European countries. This information came regularly from 'weak ties': from other UMAs and/or adult asylum seekers, who were mostly fellow countrymen whom the minors met during their journey. In some occasions the respondents relied on the social networks of their 'comrades'. Other sources of information such as social media (Facebook), smugglers, people met by chance (e.g. a taxi driver) were also cited as sources of information (see below for

illustrations). Family and/or acquaintances in the Netherlands or other countries were also occasionally contacted, for example via WhatsApp or Viber.

To a lesser extent, the respondents received information about specific care facilities for UMAs, education opportunities, and/or societal values in the Netherlands (also mostly via other UMAs/asylum seekers and/or family/friends). A few respondents cited other types of information such as the friendly Dutch government, lower number of asylum seekers in comparison with other European countries, or better medical care, with similar sources of information.

3.5.6 *How and why did these respondents end up in Netherlands?*

Why did these minors, who originally did not plan to come to the Netherlands, end up here after all? It seems that for some this was a matter of coincidence, while for others information acquired during the journey, especially from weak ties, played an important role in the final decision to come to the Netherlands. Occasionally, the minors ended up in the Netherlands as a result of the presence of family here, or as a consequence of a combination of events. Below we illustrate different cases with examples.

Destination Netherlands as a result of information through weak ties

As we have seen, for respondents whose intended destination at departure was the Netherlands, information from family and friends in the Netherlands or other European countries was an important source of information. In contrast, for minors who did not plan to come to the Netherlands, information from weak ties or from people met by pure coincidence appears to have played a key role.

A minor who just wanted to come to Europe with no specific destination country in mind, relied on information from peers whom she met during her journey:

When I was in Italy, I decided to travel further to Germany. Nobody stayed in Italy, I don't know why. In Germany I heard from other Eritrean minors that the care for children under the age of 18 was much better in the Netherlands than in Germany: 'they get money, they can go to school and they get supervisors'. They told me to go to the Netherlands. I asked them 'I am under 18, so also better care for me?' They said 'Yes!'. So, I decided to come here. [ER]

Another respondent whose initial goal also was to reach 'Europe', relied on his smuggler's advice:

Once I arrived in Germany, I stayed almost two months with the human smuggler who brought me to Europe. I asked the smuggler which European country was a good destination country. The smuggler told me that Holland was a good country, that it was close to Germany and that the case processing time was quicker compared to other European countries (6 months in the Netherlands versus 1-2 year in other European countries). After I got this information about the Netherlands, I told the smuggler I wanted to go to the Netherlands. He purchased me a train ticket to Holland and dropped me off at a train station in Germany. (AF)

Sometimes information about the Netherlands came from an unexpected party, met by chance. This person and/or the information he provided was apparently convincing enough to change the mind of a respondent whose original destination was Germany:

When I was in Austria, I got involved in a conversation with a taxi driver. He was Turkish, he had good experiences with people from Syria. He wanted to help me. He told me that in the Netherlands the asylum and family reunification procedures were much easier in comparison to Germany. And that in the Netherlands education, work and accommodation were as good as in Germany. Then I decided to come to the Netherlands although I had Germany in my mind all the time as my destination. [SY]

Destination Netherlands as a result of existence of or information from strong ties

A few respondents acquired their information – also – from family. For example, when an Eritrean respondent arrived in Italy, his brother in the Netherlands advised him to travel to the Netherlands for good education opportunities. The respondent had considered England as an option as he spoke some English, but he heard from others that it was difficult to travel there. Similarly, a father advised his daughter to travel on to the Netherlands when she was in Italy, as he had heard from his own networks who had family members living in different parts of Europe that family reunification was much easier in the Netherlands. He advised her to travel there so that the family could be reunited:

I heard about the easier family reunification in the Netherlands from others too. But I didn't trust them, I didn't know if the information was correct. But my father knows the best of everything. (ER)

Occasionally for respondents with no planned destination, the presence of social networks in the Netherlands was the sole reason to come to the Netherlands. An Afghan respondent decided eventually to come to the Netherlands, simply because he had an uncle here although he had never met him before; an Eritrean respondent had an aunt who arrived in the Netherlands a month before the respondent and who advised him to come to the Netherlands when he was considering alternatives once he was in Italy.

Destination Netherlands as a result of coincidence

There are also quite some minors who ended up in the Netherlands by coincidence. This seems to be slightly more often the case for Afghan minors. Examples are: just following other UMAs who are on their way to the Netherlands, taking a wrong train, border control in the Netherlands, or the destination being determined by others.

When I arrived in Hamburg, I wanted to go Sweden where my brother lives. I entered a train assuming that it was heading towards Sweden. I arrive in Amsterdam where the police sent me to Ter Apel. In Ter Apel they took my fingerprint. (AF)

I travelled via Libya to Italy with a group of asylum seekers who were going to Germany. Once in Germany, I met some Eritrean boys at the station who were on their way to the Netherlands. I decided to travel with them. I just didn't want to be alone. That was all. (ER)

Occasionally the minors were helped by people whom they met accidentally and who actually determined the destination of these minors. We call them 'grey agents' as their function is not totally clear from the narratives of our respondents; they might be smugglers, working in the black market, or be serving for the good of their fellow countrymen.

[...] When I was in Germany at the station I met some Eritrean boys selling train tickets [According to the respondent these boys stay at the station, talk to 'new-comers' and help them, sell them tickets.] Without even asking, they sold me a ticket to the Netherlands. (ER)

[...] At this shopping centre, my friend and I met a young Afghan man. He was apparently a refugee staying at the same camp as us. He asked us whether we wished to go to a better place. We agreed to follow him. When someone older tells you something good, you believe him, and you follow him. We went to the train station where he bought us and himself train tickets. He told us: 'wherever I go, just follow me. Don't ask me what or where. Just sit next to me and follow me.' At the end we arrived in the Netherlands. But we did not know where to go or what to do. He bought himself another ticket. I asked him, 'can you at least tell me your name, where are you going, where am I? What can you tell me about this country? He said: 'I cannot give you any sort of information. If I do that, maybe while exchanging information with a stranger, you will tell the stranger that you met me and that I helped you and that stranger will think I am a human smuggler. I am no one. I just offered you my help, bought you a ticket. Now take care. I am just from the same country as you.' (AF)

Destination Netherlands as a result of combination of events

Some of our respondent found themselves in the Netherlands as result of a combination of events, such as border control within the EU, information from weak ties and/or coincidence.

The narratives of two minors who were originally planning to go to, Sweden and Switzerland respectively, illustrate this:

I stayed at the German refugee camp for two months. During these 2 months, I tried to go to Sweden twice. Both times, I was caught in the bus by the police. [...] After knowing that I could not go to Sweden, I gave up. At this German camp, I heard from a few refugees about Holland. They told me that Holland was better than Germany and other European countries in the sense of study opportunities. Also people in camps were saying that the interviewing process was longer in Germany. In Germany, it was too crowded and it was a mess there. So, I decided to come to Holland. (AF)

When we arrived in Italy, I couldn't convince my friends, who wanted to go to the Netherlands, to go to Switzerland. We heard from other Eritrean asylum seekers that the borders in Switzerland were protected very well and it was not easy to get in. We also heard that the asylum procedure in Switzerland was longer than in the Netherlands. I had no family anymore; I didn't want to lose my friends as well. I thought 'if we go to the Netherlands together we always stay together as a family'. I am happy now I didn't go to Switzerland. A friend of mine who is there still doesn't have a residence permit. I heard that it is difficult for refugees to integrate there. (ER)

The influence of factors such as hearsay among UMAs or other asylum seekers, smugglers and border control on the determination of destination is also expressed by Nidos experts. According to some Nidos experts UMAs, families and other asylum seekers keep each other informed about rules and procedures in different European countries and adjust their destination to admission policies. Others hear clear stories about the influence of border control from their pupils and also from foster families.

Narratives of UMAs such as 'it was not the intention that I would end up here; I wanted to travel further to Norway or Sweden. But due to circumstances the smuggler could not send us there' are not uncommon. In the words of one of the experts: 'One can travel the whole world, but if you come to Schiphol you are exposed!'

A Nidos expert pointed out that during the 2015 inflow there were Eritrean UMAs who arrived with different colours of polish on their nails. It was then suspected that different colours were given by smugglers and determined to which countries these UMAs would go.

The example of one of our Syrian respondents shows that the decision to come to the Netherlands can be based on information but also on different experiences.

When I was in Turkey where I stayed about ten days, I collected information about the best European countries to seek asylum: duration of procedures regarding to get a residence permit and nationality, how easily I could learn the language and study. I came to the conclusion that there were four countries I should consider: Germany, Belgium, The Netherlands, and Norway. Still, when I headed towards Greece, I had no specific country in mind. At that moment I also started to think about bringing my parents to Europe. They had gone back from [...] to Syria. I felt responsible for them. When I was in Germany I started to collect information about family reunification procedures in different European countries. I came to the conclusion that the Netherlands was the best. Norway was too cold, I heard from my friend in Belgium that the country was overcrowded with foreigners and they didn't have their own culture, the situation in the German refugee camp was miserable, I had got into a conflict there with my friend whom I was travelling with, the German tourists in Germany were quite hostile to me once they learned I was Syrian, while the Dutch tourists were very friendly. In the end I decided to head towards the Netherlands. (SY)

Reasons for coming to the Netherlands vs. pull factors

The above findings illustrate that UMAs who did not originally plan to come to the Netherlands ended up in this country after all due to a variety of reasons. While some of these respondents at some point in time decided 'consciously' to come to the Netherlands, others ended up in the Netherlands by pure chance. Box 3.2a sums up the reasons why UMAs whose original destination at departure was *not* the Netherlands, ended up in the country after all. In other words, it includes the reasons of minors who en route made a deliberate choice to come to the Netherlands as well as those cases where the minors ended up in the Netherlands by chance.

Box 3.2a Reasons for ending up in the Netherlands, respondents whose intended destination at departure was *not* the Netherlands (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 residence permit, shorter time to naturalise).
- Vague positive associations (e.g. nice, beautiful (houses), small, country of milk and cheese, good people, moderate weather, good football).
- Simply following others.
- 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, free society).
- Border control.
- Existence of social networks.
- Image/reputation of the Netherlands regarding facilities for UMAs (good/better accommodation and care, supervision by Nidos).
- Other advantages (e.g. low number of asylum seekers; friendly government).
- Other reasons (coincidence as a result of people met by chance).

Box 3.2b presents pull-factors for the Netherlands for these UMAs *excluding* those who arrived in the Netherlands by chance.

Box 3.2b Pull factors for respondents whose intended destination at departure was *not* the Netherlands; excluding respondents who ended up in the Netherlands by chance (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 residence permit, shorter time to naturalise).
- Vague positive associations.
- 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, free society).
- Existence of social networks.
- Image/reputation of the Netherlands regarding facilities for UMAs.
- Other advantages (e.g. low number of asylum seekers, friendly government).

In both cases, it is clear that the reputation of the Netherlands regarding procedures is the most commonly stated reason. This is similar to the respondents whose original destination at departure was the Netherlands. This finding is in line with the experiences of the Nidos experts, who observe among their pupils that quicker procedures, especially for family reunification, are the most common reason why these minors choose the Netherlands. The Nidos experts further express that this is the same for UMAs who were younger than 14 years old at the time of arrival.

The second most commonly stated pull factor for the respondents who did *not* originally aim to come to the Netherlands is the vague positive associations these minors had with the Netherlands. This is not surprising, if we recall that the majority of the respondents who did not initially plan to come to the Netherlands only had some vague knowledge about the Netherlands at their departure, such as it being

a small and beautiful country with friendly people. Apart from that, similar to the respondents whose intended destination was the Netherlands originally, these minors cite future possibilities regarding education and work, as well as values and norms of the Dutch society as common pull factors. For them, the existence of social networks is a less common pull factor in comparison to the respondents whose initial destination at departure was the Netherlands. According to the experience of the Nidos experts, the reputation of the Netherlands regarding the care for UMAs is also an important pull factor. Regardless of whether at departure their initial destination was the Netherlands or not, some respondents cite better care for UMAs as a key reason to come to the Netherlands, but this seems to be a relatively less common pull factor among our respondents.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter we described why our respondents from the 2015 cohort of UMAs left their countries of origin, how and why they ended up in the Netherlands, and what they expected from their intended destination before they departed.

For the majority of our respondents the Netherlands was *not* the intended destination. There are differences according to nationality, however. Secondly, it is too simplistic to assume that the flight to the Netherlands consisted of one single journey; some respondents first lived in a third country in the region. Thirdly, information gathered before and during the journey and perceptions formed by this information played an essential role in the choice of the Netherlands as the final destination, although some respondents ended up in the Netherlands by coincidence. In what follows these conclusions are elaborated.

Figures 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4 present, respectively for our Syrian, Afghan and Eritrean respondents, a schematic overview of (changes in) their intended destination (if any), starting from the country of origin,³⁹ finally leading them to the Netherlands. The thickness of the lines reflects the relative number of respondents in that trajectory. For the majority of our Syrian respondents the Netherlands was the intended destination. Afghan and Eritrean respondents usually left with no destination in mind, or just targeted to go to 'Europe'. Occasionally their intended destination was another European country. Some of the Syrian respondents with their families, and Eritrean minors by themselves, first tried to make a living in a third country in the region for durations ranging from six months to five years before heading towards Europe.

³⁹ A few of our Afghan respondents were born in Iran or migrated there as a child.

Figure 3.2 (Changes in) intended destination at departure (Syrian respondents)

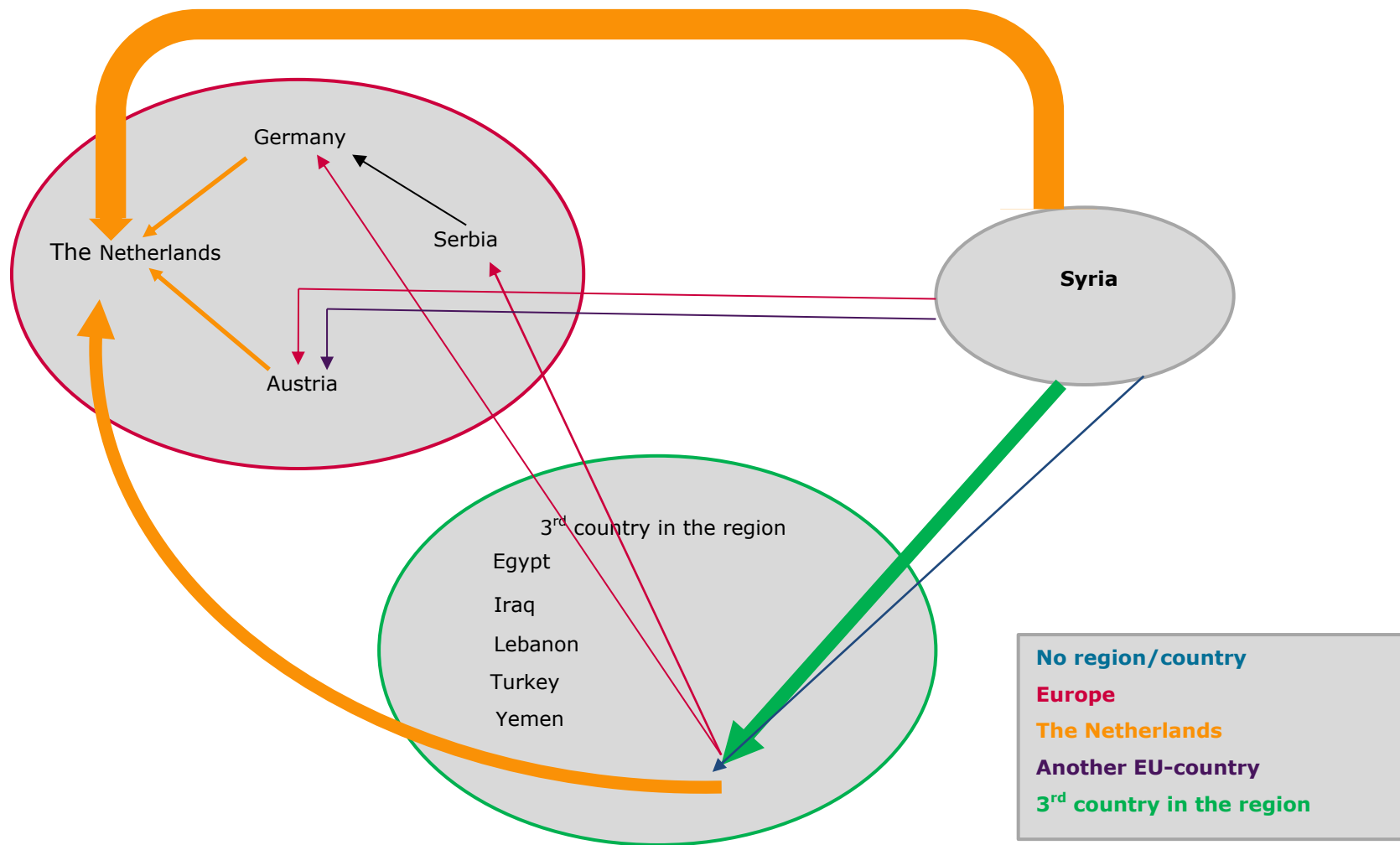


Figure 3.3 (Changes in) intended destination at departure (Afghan respondents)

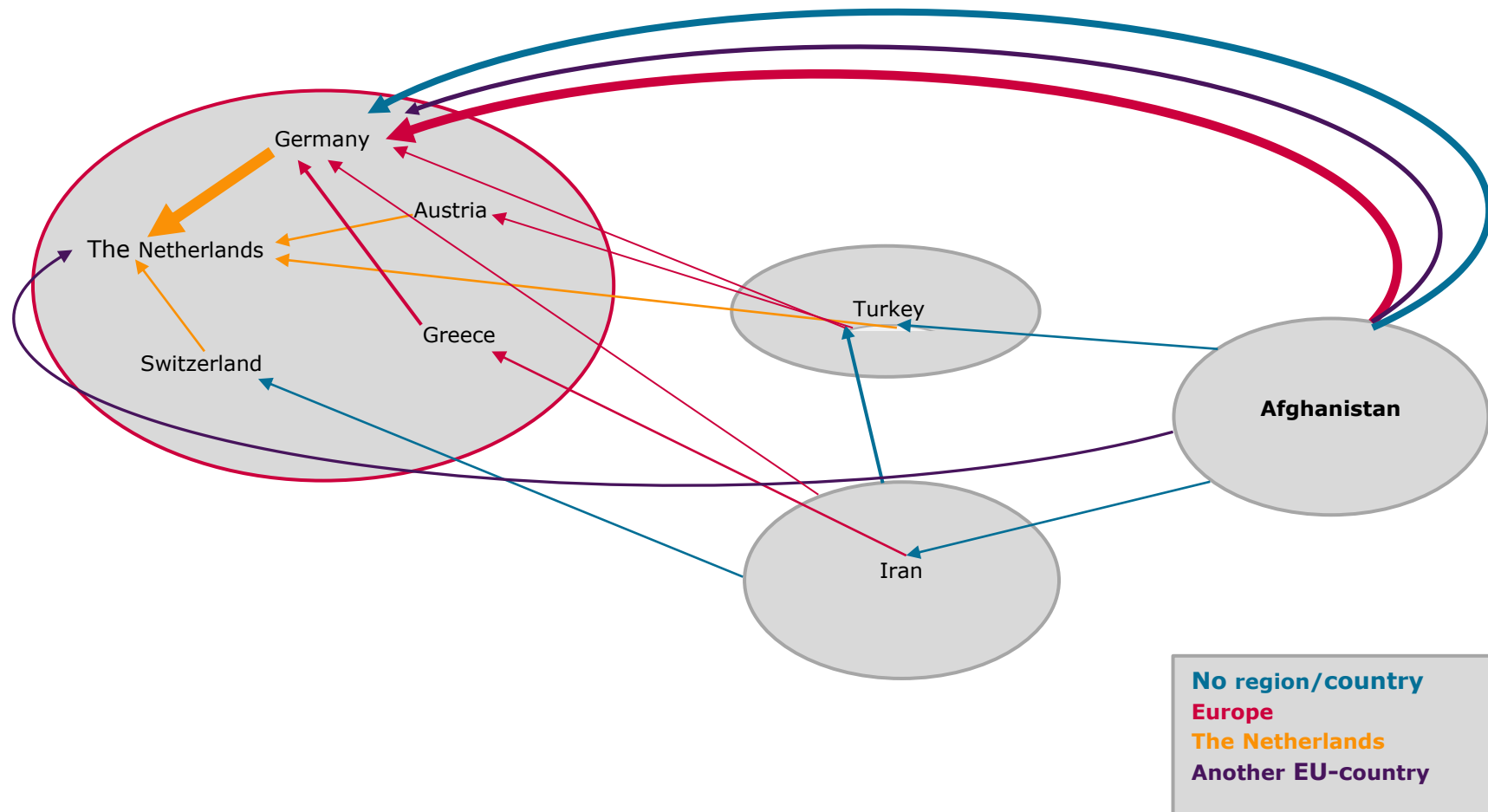
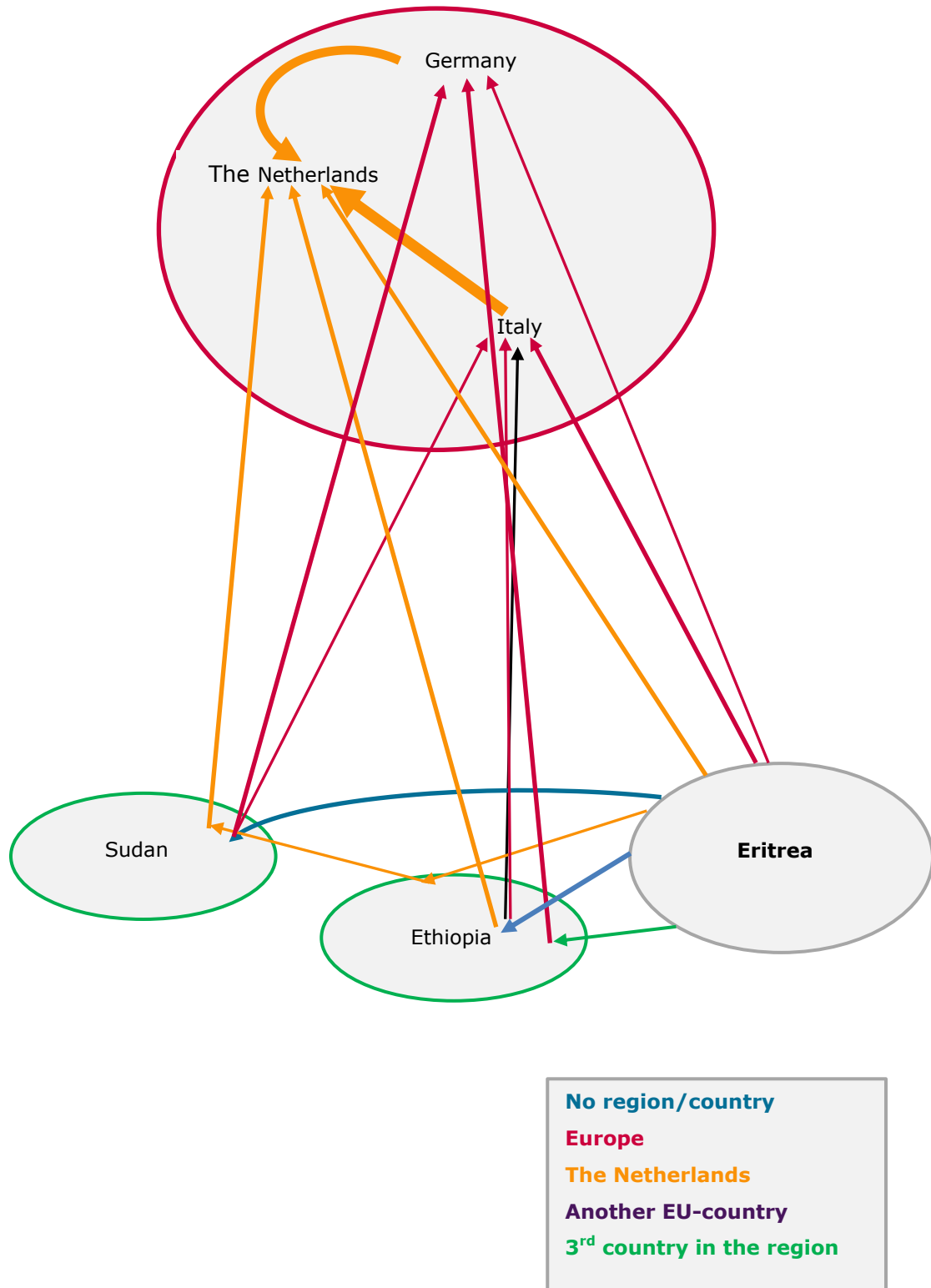


Figure 3.4 (Changes in) intended destination at departure (Eritrean respondents)



Major (usually macro) push factors were unsafety (all respondents), war (Syrian respondents), compulsory, possibly indefinite military service, lack or 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 (Afghan respondents). Feeling unsafe due to hostile attitudes and other negative experiences, lack of future prospects (education and work), cultural differences, and examples of others leaving for Europe were the reasons why minors who first lived in a third country in the region headed towards Europe finally.

In the migration decision of our Syrian and Afghan respondents the family played a central role. 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 left almost always 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 sought contact with their families, who then financed (the rest of) 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 – also involved in the flight of their children. All minors received help during their journey from different parties, including family, smugglers, co-travellers, NGOs, etc.

Our analyses show that information our respondents had about the Netherlands, their expectations and reasons for choosing for the Netherlands are very much intertwined.

Minors who before departure already intended to come to the Netherlands, were mostly well informed about the country and usually had social networks in the Netherlands (mostly family and friends). These 'strong ties' provided information about values and norms in the Dutch society (e.g. freedom, democracy, lack of discrimination), future prospects (education, work and career) and different procedures (e.g. asylum, family reunification, housing). In addition, these minors relied on relatives and friends in other European countries and the Internet (Syrian respondents), other asylum seekers in refugee camps or volunteers (Eritrean respondents) for information. All these sources seem to have shaped the perceptions of our respondents (and/or their families) regarding the Netherlands, but also other countries. About half of the respondents whose intended destination was the Netherlands (almost all Syrian), also considered alternative European countries as a possible destination. Longer procedures (Germany, Italy, Denmark), shorter duration of the residence permit and a longer period needed for naturalization (Italy and Germany), non-uniform asylum policy, the 'mess' and discrimination (Germany), a more difficult language to learn (Sweden, Denmark, Germany), and colder weather (Sweden, Denmark), were reasons not to choose for these alternatives as a destination after all.

Expectations of minors who intended to come to the Netherlands seem to be influenced by the information they received: building a good future regarding education, work and career, finding safety and freedom, and being reunited with their families in the Netherlands (more quickly).

Minors who originally did *not* plan to come to the Netherlands were usually not well informed about the country, and had only some vague positive associations with the Netherlands. Only a small minority had family or friends there, networks that were usually not 'active'. The majority of these minors received information during the journey, mostly once they reached Europe (generally in Germany, Italy, and occasionally (also) in other European countries, see Figures 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4) usually about asylum and family reunification procedures and to a lesser extent about other aspects (e.g. specific facilities for UMAs, education opportunities and/or societal values in the Netherlands or in other European countries). Information came regularly from 'weak ties', including people met by chance. Occasionally, family or friends in Netherlands were contacted. Finding safety, peace and freedom wherever they would end up was their main expectation. Similar to their counterparts who originally planned to come to the Netherlands, they expected to have good future opportunities for themselves, but for this group family reunion was a less pronounced expectation at departure. These minors ended up in the Netherlands due to perceptions formed as a result of hearsay or by coincidence (e.g. simply following other UMAs who were on their way to the Netherlands, or as a result of border control). Sometimes actors operating at the meso-level, such as smugglers, 'grey agents' or people met by chance in Europe played a key role in the Netherlands being the final destination for these minors. Once in a while they ended up here as a result of combination of events or due the existence of family members.

Regardless of whether their intended destination at departure was the Netherlands or not, for the majority of our respondents the image/reputation of the Netherlands regarding procedures (especially asylum and family reunion) was the most common pull factor for coming to the Netherlands.⁴⁰ Perceptions formed by the image/reputation of the Netherlands regarding future possibilities is the second important pull factor for these minors to come to the Netherlands. Minors for whom the Netherlands was not an intended destination at departure, more often had some vague positive associations with the Netherlands (e.g. a beautiful country, friendly people), while those who originally intended to come to the Netherlands more often referred to the image/reputation of the Netherlands regarding future possibilities and as a society. Although social networks in the Netherlands were an important source of information especially for those who intended to come to the Netherlands from the beginning, their presence seems to play a less prominent role in the choice of the Netherlands as a destination country.

⁴⁰ Excluding minors who ended up in the Netherlands by coincidence.

4 Life in the Netherlands

How is life in the Netherlands after the asylum procedure has been completed? This final empirical chapter focuses on experiences of UMAs after the completion of their asylum procedure. It seeks to answer the following questions:

- Were the expectations that UMAs held about the Netherlands met?
- Are UMAs satisfied with their life in the Netherlands and why (not)?
- What are UMAs' plans for the future with regard to staying in the Netherlands?
- Did they apply for family reunification?

As in Chapter 3, these questions will be answered using data from 45 interviews with Syrian, Eritrean, and Afghan UMAs of the 2015 cohort, as well as six focus groups with Nidos experts (for more information on interviews and focus groups see Chapter 1). Regarding the question on family reunification, statistics from the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) will be used as well. As the analysis shows, the aforementioned topics are intertwined, with family reunification and education emerging as the most important themes.

The outline of the chapter is as follows: first, we will discuss general satisfaction with the Netherlands, to proceed with the expectations and information that likely drive this satisfaction. The next part focuses on specific aspects of the Dutch UMA experience in more detail, discussing reception, family reunification, and education. Then, we consider UMAs' outlook on the future. Finally, we conclude.

4.1 General satisfaction

To assess general satisfaction, we asked the respondents whether they were generally satisfied with their life in the Netherlands and why (not). To form a more general idea of their experience, we also asked them to describe the Netherlands in three words. While this latter question was difficult for some, the body language and/or reactions of most respondents suggested that they enjoyed answering it.

We find that our respondents are generally satisfied with their life in their new home country, describing the Netherlands as 'a beautiful country', 'a land of peace', and even 'the best country ever'. Dutch people are seen as friendly and keen to help – an important point given that the alleged unfriendliness of people in Germany was a reason for some not to stay in that country, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Responses to the question what our respondents were satisfied with, can be largely divided into the following categories:

- general factors related to the Netherlands: the country in general, how it is organized, its social policy system, its nature, its people, and that there is no discrimination; the fact that people respect the rules; regulations (e.g. having a job while continuing to receive social benefits);
- freedom (in all aspects), independence, and safety;
- school;
- social life and leisure: the presence of family; friends, hanging out with others from the same country; sports and hobbies (including music);
- wellbeing: health and the mere fact of being alive;

- money and work: (opportunities for) work; receiving money;
- lifestyle: having a calm and easy life; being able to take care of oneself;
- future perspectives: having opportunities for establishing a new life and living one's dreams;
- procedural factors: having a residence permit and the freedom to travel within Europe;
- accommodation;
- general reception; guardianship; and help with school, accommodation, psychological wellbeing, and other issues.

Our respondents, some without a valid residence permit, also mention factors that affect their satisfaction with life in the Netherlands negatively. Reported reasons can be summarized as follows:

- general factors related to the Netherlands: the Dutch health care system (e.g. having to wait for a doctor's appointment); bureaucracy; minor importance of social life in Dutch culture compared to the own; xenophobic incidents with Dutch people; perceived lack of democracy and justice; Dutch egocentrism; the fact that everything takes long in the Netherlands; being treated disrespectfully;
- money and work: financial problems due to bureaucratic issues; difficulty to find work; no opportunities to work or study;
- personal factors: homesickness; not knowing whereabouts of family members;
- procedural issues: rejected family reunion application and lack of help by Nidos with procedures; rejected asylum application; lack of help from COA with asylum procedure or filling out forms in Dutch; (prospects of) deportation;
- reception: general care and guardianship by mentor and guardian;
- social life and leisure: lack of Dutch friends;
- accommodation: having (dirty) flat mates; not being able to live with significant others for legal reasons; being assigned to a municipality rather than choosing where to live; no (access to) accommodation;
- school: long school days, long duration of studies before starting to work in the preferred field and having to study at a low level;
- future perspectives: lack of opportunities for the future;
- wellbeing: stress and (mental) health issues.

The most commonly cited factor that our respondents are satisfied with in the Netherlands is school. This is especially true for Syrian UMAs, of whom a majority express satisfaction with their education in the Netherlands. Several of the minors spontaneously mention the simple fact that they have the opportunity to go to school, while some provide more elaborate reasons for their satisfaction or display detailed plans for their education in the coming years:

I am satisfied with the education system here. I am studying the language. I will soon reach B1 level. After that, I will get a loan from DUO⁴¹ to study to become a doctor's assistant. (SY)⁴²

The school is the best in the Netherlands, and it is better than anything else. It is 'gezellig',⁴³ I can chill with my friends. (ER)

⁴¹ *Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs*; the Dutch Student Funding Agency.

⁴² We illustrate our findings with citations from UMAs. In order to guarantee anonymity of the respondents, we end each citation by only referring to the nationality of the UMA concerned (AF, SY, or ER).

⁴³ A typically Dutch word, meaning something along the lines of 'cozy'.

I can go to school here and unlike in Eritrea, where the government decides what you do, I can even choose what I want to study. (ER)

Despite this general satisfaction with the educational opportunities in their new home country, some of our respondents express their impatience about being able to continue their studies at a higher level (after completing the International Transition Class (ISK); see Chapter 3) or disagree with the required length of studies before being able to start working in their preferred profession. We will discuss satisfaction with school as well as non-attendance in more detail below.

Some half of the Syrian UMAs also express their satisfaction with general factors related to the Netherlands and Dutch society. In line with the descriptions of the country referred to above, our respondents say:

I am satisfied with my life in The Netherlands. The Netherlands is a beautiful country. The people are good and friendly. It is a green land with beautiful nature. (SY)

Dutch people are polite, respectful, and good help. In addition, they have wonderful morals and values. They greet people and smile at them even to those who are strangers to them. I admire the cleanliness of the country, the infrastructure, the city planning and all the details related to the presentation of the country. The Netherlands is a very well-planned country. (SY)

Despite these general positive feelings about their new country, some UMAs report incidents of racism. Moreover, as shown by the examples below, a few others struggle with cultural differences, in particular with regard to social life, which they feel is not as rich as in their home countries. Evidently, these are examples of factors that negatively affect satisfaction.

Everything is good here but I am homesick. I miss my country, my neighbourhood, our food, family, and friends. I miss the nice weather, our holidays, our language, the stores... everything really. (SY)

In the Netherlands you live for yourself and you are not in touch with your neighbours, you do not talk to anyone. And you do not have family here either, everyone is living by themselves. It is not like in our country. I miss the culture of my country. In my country, 'friend' has a different meaning than it does in the Netherlands. A friend is your other half. (ER)

A third important factor that is often mentioned when talking about satisfaction with life in the Netherlands is freedom. Arguably related to the reasons for leaving their country of origin, this factor is cited reported particularly often by Eritrean UMAs. As one respondent explains:

I live in freedom and I can do whatever I like. I can get in touch with whomever I want. In Eritrea this was too limited. You have to be very careful, you cannot just contact others, you cannot trust them. (ER)

The single most reported reason for dissatisfaction among our respondents who have been granted asylum status is failed family reunification. As we will discuss in more detail below (paragraph 4.3), Eritrean UMAs in particular are prone to see their application for family reunification rejected, breeding not only emotional con-

sequences but also non-attendance at school and difficulties to settle in the Netherlands. For those respondents who have not been granted asylum, the question of satisfaction is more complicated, as we will see in the following section. Satisfaction with general reception and care for UMAs in the Netherlands, another relevant topic included in the study, will be discussed in paragraph 4.2.

4.1.1 Expectations, information, and satisfaction

It is reasonable to assume that satisfaction with life in the Netherlands is determined to some extent by pre-existing expectations. This premise is voiced also by some of the Nidos experts with regards to unrealistic expectations about care and facilities in the Netherlands among their pupils. For instance, upon arrival some pupils are reported to assume that they will immediately receive things such as a house for themselves, money, asylum, family reunification, and so on. When they find that these expectations are unrealistic, whether that is with regard to the actual services provided or with regard to the time that elapses before that happens, this leads to dissatisfaction.

In our study, the connection between expectations and satisfaction is most obvious for the Afghan boys whose expectations of getting asylum have not been met; an outcome which results in great disappointment and dissatisfaction. Indeed, Afghan minors whose asylum application was rejected are the only respondents in our study who indicate being unhappy with their life in the Netherlands. In the words of one of our interviewees:

I have been in Holland for one and a half years. Whatever expectations I had, none of them were met. I escaped from Afghanistan because of war, because of insecurity. I expected that when I came here, people would accept me with open arms. But none of these expectations were met. I have no right to live here, they continuously tell me that I have to go back to Afghanistan. But because of the personal problem I have in Afghanistan, I cannot return to my homeland. It is impossible for me to live in Afghanistan. I am so lost that I really do not know what to do anymore. (AF)

In the experience of the Nidos experts, psychiatric issues including self-harm and suicidal behaviour are prevalent among this group. One of our respondents indeed displayed traces of self-harm and reported attempted suicide in the past.

The expectations that have and have not been met, respectively, mirror the previously described factors contributing to (dis)satisfaction to some extent. In line with their expectations, (some of) our respondents found: freedom; education; safety; possibility to exercise hobbies (including football, kickboxing and music); learning Dutch; peace; being treated with respect; family reunification; asylum; care for minors; living calmly; own place to live; living independently; health care; being received hospitably by government and people; and gender equality.

In contrast, they reported to have held different expectations with regard to: asylum; duration of the procedures; possibility to have housing for oneself; family reunification; living in peace; safety; democracy and justice; success of personal relationships; quality of reception facilities (including language courses and quality food); possibility to live with significant others; possibility to go to school; empathy with personal circumstances; appearance of the Netherlands; finding lost family again in the Netherlands; having a calm life; being offered shelter; and being able to start working immediately.

Once again, school and freedom appear as two important factors, with similar differences between nationalities as we observed for satisfaction. To be precise, Syrian UMAs often cite educational opportunities as an expectation that was fulfilled, while freedom seems to have been an important – and fulfilled – expectation for Eritrean minors.

Safety, a basic expectation that was articulated often by Eritrean and Afghan UMAs who left without a clear destination in mind, reveals another distinction between groups, with Afghan boys whose asylum application had been rejected indicating that this expectation had not been met.

Again, family reunification marks differences between nationalities. Whereas almost half of the Syrian respondents cite family reunification as an expectation that was met (albeit occasionally with some delay), we find that this same expectation was not met for many Eritreans and Afghans. As we will see below, these results mirror national acceptance rates of family reunification applications for different nationalities in the 2015 UMA cohort.

Touching upon a more general connection between family reunification and expectations, the participants in our focus groups share stories of pupils who found that life in the Netherlands was so different from what they had anticipated, that they did not believe their parents would be able to live here, and had consequently decided to stop their application for reunification.

It is worth noting however that violations of expectations are not necessarily negative or serious, as the example below illustrates:

When I came here, I did not think I was in a European country. In Iran, you see many skyscrapers. When I arrived in Amsterdam, I did not see any skyscrapers. Only when I went sightseeing in Rotterdam, I realized that I was in Europe. (AF)

The issues discussed here concern expectations that existed before departure. We may assume, therefore, that these were shaped by the information that was gathered before the journey. Indeed, it results from our interviews that the distinction between the two is rather blurry. For instance, when asked about information about the Netherlands, one of our respondents stated that he had already answered the question, when in fact, he had been asked about expectations. Moreover, this is reflected in the most important themes that emerge when discussing the correctness of the information our respondents possessed: these include again education and family reunification. With only a few exceptions for those with rejected family reunification applications, our respondents generally report that their information was correct. An important exception are the Afghan boys whose asylum request has been rejected:

Information about the Dutch rules being better was not correct. According to what I have experienced, I feel the Dutch rules are much stricter. I applied for asylum thinking the rules were less strict here. However, my request for asylum has been rejected. I have much more problems now than I had before. (AF)

As discussed in the previous chapter, information about comparatively quick procedures was a reason for many UMAs to favour the Netherlands over other European countries. However, a small number of Syrian respondents report having had a dif-

ferent experience, one of whom explains that this does not mean that they had received incorrect information:

We thought the procedure would be faster in the Netherlands than in other European countries. But when we arrived in the Netherlands, it turned out differently. It is not that people gave us wrong information, that was not the issue. But many asylum seekers have come to the Netherlands so the IND was extremely busy. They do not have enough manpower to assess all applications. That is why the procedures for asylum and family reunification take longer than expected. (SY)

In a similar vein, an Eritrean respondent points out that his expectations were based on the information he had received from conationals who had migrated to the Netherlands in previous years, when the situation was different.

In general, our respondents report that their information about the Netherlands turned out to be correct. In case of the contrary, however, it should be noted that, as was true for expectations, this is not necessarily negative. Consider for instance:

The Dutch football team used to be good but it is not anymore. So that information was wrong. (ER)

An important element that arises when discussing information is the quality of care for UMAs in the Netherlands. As discussed in the previous chapter, some of the minors in our study were aware of the facilities in the Netherlands, and our interviews show that their experience is in line with what they had learned prior to their arrival. We will now discuss satisfaction of our respondents with their treatment by the Dutch government in more detail.

4.2 Treatment by the Dutch government

Evidently, the reputation that the Netherlands enjoys with regard to care for minors is bound to set high expectations, to the extent that UMAs were aware of this. Overall, the youngsters in our study are satisfied with the way they were received; a result which suggests that these expectations were generally met.⁴⁴ In the words of our respondents:

The different authorities and their employees (like my mentor, with whom I get along very well) help me if I have questions and are very caring. I feel like they do not let me down. (SY)

The Dutch government has embraced us and taken care of us like a mother. They have protected us, given us shelter, and sent us to school. (ER)

The latter quote highlights two of the main factors that emerge from the analysis: general care and – once again – educational opportunities. As for general care, the youngsters in our study generally express their satisfaction with their mentors and Nidos guardians. They value the care and guidance they have received, as well as the way the caretakers have engaged with them. As another respondent puts it:

⁴⁴ Given that questions about satisfaction with treatment and reception in the Netherlands might prove sensitive for respondents who have seen their asylum application rejected, only respondents whose application was accepted were asked this question.

I received a lot of care and attention by Dutch organizations as an under aged girl. They still contact me and try to help me when I am depressed. My former mentors check in on me regularly, even after I left the youngsters house. They do their best to make me happy. (SY)

A small minority of our respondents voices discontent with their guardians and/or mentors, which seems to be due mostly to a perceived lack of time or communication problems. In part, these issues seem to be rooted in (intercultural) misunderstandings. For instance, one of the girls explained that she felt the mentors at the group accommodation did not understand their pupils' feelings and what they had been through; another felt her mentor could not understand her due to a lack of understanding of her culture. Paradoxically, one of our respondents expresses discontent with the fact that he will not be able to count on the support of Nidos anymore once he turns eighteen. We find evidence that the transition to living independently may be problematic in other ways too:

I was supposed to get an answer from the IND on my family reunification application five to six months ago [the respondent has applied for family reunification more than once with no success]. My legal guardian, who does not work at Nidos anymore, had the name and phone number of my lawyer. The other legal guardian who replaced the previous one probably does not have the number of the lawyer and I do not have contact with Nidos anymore as I am living independently now. My current mentor whom I see only once a month says she does not know anything about this issue and does not want to call Nidos either. (ER)

Some other UMAs indicate partial dissatisfaction with issues like money:

I like to go to fitness. Every time I go to fitness I feel like a newborn. It costs € 240. Nidos is not helping me to pay that fee. Also, Nidos is not paying for my public transport. I am just waiting to get my BSN⁴⁵ number and to get my house so I can find a proper job and be able to provide for myself. (AF)

...or housing:

I live in a flat with Eritrean boys only. I want to go to bed early because I have to go to school the next day; they want to watch TV or listen to music. They do not want to go to school. I also go to school with refugees. I will not be able to continue studying or work because I speak only Eritrean at home and school. Now I have to move to a building with 200 refugees and live with eight other refugees. This is not a good life. If you are always only with refugees there is no point in fleeing. I want to find a place of my own; but if I can live with Dutch boys it is fine. (ER)

I live independently with three other girls now but I would prefer to live by myself. If you live with so many others, you need to compromise. (ER)

Interestingly, while some of the respondents living in groups express the desire to live by themselves, others who live independently (after turning 18 shortly before our interview) mention it is hard to live alone.

⁴⁵ Burger Service Number; Social Security number.

Some of the UMAs in our study voice complaints relating to their treatment by the IND, in particular with regard to family reunification. For instance, an otherwise very satisfied respondent tells:

I have had a harder time than others with the family reunification. I have filed two applications for my siblings but both have been rejected. The IND does not believe me even though I have told them everything I know and I have told the truth. They do not trust me. Nidos, the IND, everyone knows my story but they just do not listen. (...) They do not believe what you tell them unless they see it with their own eyes. They do not know how tough it has been for us there; if they looked into it more and studied the situation better, they would understand. (ER)

It may be clear from the above that family reunification is a major issue for UMAs in the Netherlands, touching upon expectations and information as well as satisfaction with different aspects of their lives. Below, we will further explore this theme.

4.3 Family reunification

As outlined in chapter 1, UMAs with an accepted asylum status have the possibility to request family reunification 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). In practice, these applications are handled simultaneously (personal communication, IND).

All of our respondents were aware of the possibility of family reunification, and were found to hold high expectations about it. The Nidos experts indicate that a family reunification request is part of the standard procedure for UMAs under their supervision.⁴⁶ Considering the applications for family reunification with parents as well as applications for UMAs' siblings, IND data (reference date 31/12/2017, calculations by WODC) show that requests were filed with regard to 87.5% of the Syrian, Eritrean, and Afghan UMAs in the 2015 cohort.⁴⁷ This figure varies by nationality however, with roughly 9 in 10 Eritreans and Syrians submitting a request, as compared to only 6 out of 10 Afghan UMAs.⁴⁸

Differences between nationalities appear as well when comparing the percentages of granted applications for family reunion. Figure 4.1 displays the total numbers and percentages of the finalized decisions on applications filed by Syrian, Eritrean, and Afghan UMAs for reunification with their parents as well as the applications for reunification with the UMAs' siblings. Among the 2015 cohort, 7317 applications were filed for parents and siblings of 2340 UMAs of Syrian, Afghan, or Eritrean nationality (on average 3.13 applications per UMA). By 31 December 2017, decisions on 5399 of these applications had been finalized. As the figure shows, acceptance

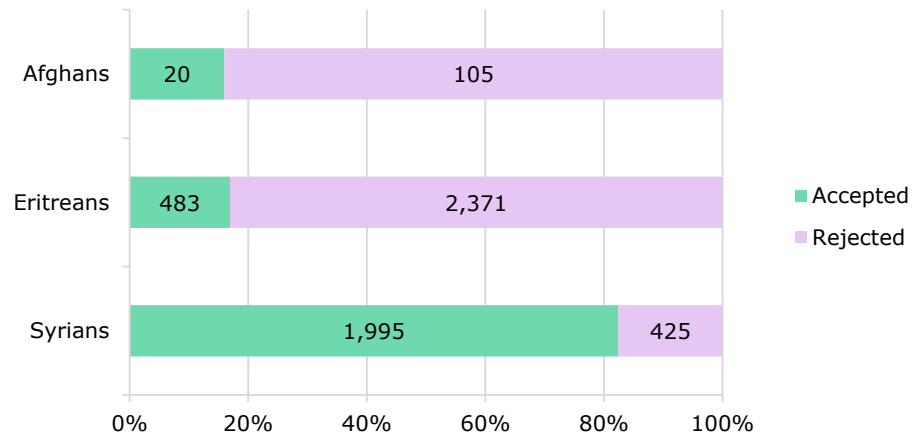
⁴⁶ According to Nidos, this is firstly because reunification with parents is in the best interest of the child, and secondly because there is a strict time limit to apply for reunification with parents with relatively less requirements to fulfil (see also next footnote) (Nidos, personal communication).

⁴⁷ Due to the use of different reference dates, figures and group sizes reported in this chapter may differ from those in IND reports.

⁴⁸ While a family reunification application is part of the standard Nidos procedure, the application is always at the discretion of the UMA, and personal reasons or preferences may lead UMAs to refrain from applying. It is unclear why the share of Afghan UMAs applying for family reunification is so much lower than that for Eritrean and Syrian UMAs.

rates are below 20% for Afghans (16%) and Eritreans (17%) alike, while no less than 82% of applications by Syrians were accepted.

Figure 4.1 Numbers and acceptance rates for finalized decisions on family reunification* requests for top-3 nationalities in the 2015 UMA cohort



* Applications for parents (*nareis*) and applications for siblings under Article 8 of the ECHR.

Source: IND, calculations by WODC, reference date: 31/12/2017; excluding pending or withdrawn applications.

Our interviews reveal a similar pattern. Out of the 35 respondents whose asylum application was accepted, 32 applied for family reunification. In the majority of the cases, the application concerned one or both of the parents; about a third of our respondents indicated an application for their siblings had been filed as well. In one case, a respondent whose parents were divorced filed an application for her father, who in turn filed an application for the respondent's step mother and their children. We have not come across other examples of similar chain migration.

At the time of the interviews, a number of our respondents had already been reunited with their family members, while others had seen their application accepted but were still waiting for the arrival of their families. Reflecting the differences between countries of origin reported in Figure 4.1, this was true primarily for Syrian respondents, and to a lesser extent for their Eritrean and Afghan counterparts.

The Nidos experts recognize these differences in family reunification acceptance rates between nationalities, and tailor their work accordingly. For instance, given the high success rates for Syrian UMAs, the mentoring process for this group is often carried out in consultation with the parents, even while they are still abroad awaiting the reunification.

It may be clear from the above that for UMAs in the Netherlands, successful family reunification is key to satisfaction. This is confirmed by the experts in our focus groups. They report that, rather self-evident feelings of homesickness and missing their family members aside, the minors under their supervision who are not (yet) reunited with their families have to deal with feelings of guilt, and worries about their family members who are still in the origin country. Moreover, a large number of UMAs experience pressure from their family members abroad to organize the reunification. These factors ultimately lead to low school attendance (more on which below), as well as hindering the process of integration in the Netherlands: as long

as they are not reunited with their families, UMAs often have their lives 'on hold', being unable to start building their future in the Netherlands. Some of the Nidos experts expressed their worries about the psychological wellbeing and future prospects of this group. Given the differences between nationalities in acceptance rates, we may assume that these issues are more pronounced for those with a lower chance of seeing their application for family reunification granted.

Importantly, an approved request for family reunification does not necessarily mean that family members actually come and live in the Netherlands. In some instances, family members want to come but are unable to travel due to the situation in their country. Examples of this are reported both by our Syrian and Eritrean respondents and experts in our focus groups. In other cases parents change their mind, do not want to leave others behind, or get into disagreements and end up not coming after all:

I stopped the application for now; neither my mother nor my father want to come here. I would like to have my mother here, but she said 'my dear son, I do not want to flee to another country, I want to die here'. (ER)

Even if everything goes according to plan and a family is reunited, our experts warn that this does not automatically solve all problems UMAs may experience in the Netherlands. While a reunited family goes a long way, it does not solve traumas that UMAs commonly experience and which may affect their quality of life. Moreover, the family equilibrium is likely to be skewed in the time spent apart, with the child having grown up, usually being used to more freedom than before, and being the more experienced person in terms of knowledge about the Netherlands compared to their parents. One of our respondents shared her mixed feelings about being reunited with her father, telling that, while she was very happy to see him again, it would be hard for him to accept that she was an adult now. Moreover, she was worried that he would limit her freedom and expect her to take care of the household chores. This example shows how family reunification can give rise to ambiguous feelings. Getting acquainted with the new family situation adds to the issues UMAs and their family members have to deal with.

4.4 Education in the Netherlands

As outlined above, education is a recurrent theme for UMAs, affecting their expectations of, as well as their satisfaction with the Netherlands. Aside from the mentions of education when discussing satisfaction more generally, we also asked our respondents more detailed questions about their experiences with the Dutch education system. Given that this topic was raised when the data collection was already well on its way, only about half of the respondents, among whom only Eritreans and Afghans, were asked these questions. This group includes Afghan boys whose asylum application was rejected.

In line with the importance of education as a factor contributing to satisfaction in the Netherlands, an overwhelming majority of our respondents indicate that they enjoy going to school. They value the mere opportunity and freedom to study, and many enjoy their time spent with classmates and teachers. As for the very few who are not satisfied with their school, they criticize the study materials used, not being in the same school as their friends, and the fact that they are still in a preparatory

program, which they will need to finish before being allowed to enter the regular Dutch education system.

Given that the youngsters in our sample are indeed required to complete the preparatory ISK, they spend their first time in the Dutch education system amongst other international students. Most of our respondents name this as a positive factor; they appreciate meeting people from different countries and one respondent remarks that the fact that their only common language is Dutch, forces them to practice the language. In contrast, another youngster believes that it is hard to learn proper Dutch and get to know Dutch society when being surrounded by other refugees only, citing this as a negative factor.

Some of the comments about education highlight cultural differences. Occasionally, this can lead students to feel misunderstood, as one of our respondents explains:

Sometimes I struggle with the fact that others do not get us. In Eritrea the teacher would understand us; we speak the same language and have the same culture. If there was something I did not comprehend because I was sad she would understand this and help me. But in the Netherlands this is not the case. (ER)

However, other cultural differences point at factors that might seem basic from a Western perspective. For instance, one of our respondents says:

Luckily, in the Netherlands students have rights. Teachers respect their students. In Eritrea, if you were late at school the teacher would hit you. They would hit you hard with a stick on the front or back of your hands. (ER)

Other comments touch upon more general differences between teaching philosophies, as shown in the following example:

Education in the Netherlands is very different from how it is done in Eritrea. There, I just needed to memorize the materials. A student is always supposed to listen to the teacher but not the other way around. In the Netherlands, they expect you to learn to think critically and give your own opinion on matters. It is still hard for me to do that. (ER)

We might expect to find differences in experiences with education in the Netherlands between the three nationalities in our study. While we did not include detailed questions about education in our interviews with Syrian respondents, the Nidos experts point out that there is a marked difference between Syrian and Eritrean UMAs in particular. To be specific, as compared to their Eritrean counterparts Syrian children are likely to have spent more years in formal education, and have done so more recently. Moreover, cultural differences between Syrian and Western European cultures and the value that is placed on education in either are relatively small. These factors facilitate the transition to the Dutch education system.

In line with their expressed high satisfaction with school in the Netherlands, a large majority of our respondents report going to school every day. This finding is contested by the Nidos experts, who observe high levels of non-attendance among their pupils, regardless of the nationality. This discrepancy might be driven by social desirability issues (i.e. respondents might not want to admit that they do not attend school) or by selection effects (i.e. non-attendance occurs among those who did not agree or were not deemed 'suitable' by their legal guardian to be interviewed due to their personal situation; see Chapter 1, Method).

The reasons for this discrepancy aside, we might wonder what drives non-attendance among UMAs. First off, it is important to keep in mind that we are talking about adolescents living without their parents – a group of which we might not expect high attendance to start with. There are more specific circumstances particular to this group, however, which form an additional risk to attendance. For instance, the Nidos experts report that in some cases, UMAs contact family in their home countries during night time, thereby confusing their regular circadian rhythm and ultimately hindering school attendance during the day. More often, however, non-attendance is driven by worries related to formal procedures. In the case of Afghan respondents this typically concerns the (repeated) asylum application, as in the following example:

I enjoy going to school. I used to attend it full time but in the past few months, I have been going just two to three days a week. I used to go swimming and play football. But lately I have isolated myself from school and from my hobbies... I am constantly thinking about my next interview and what the outcome is going to be. (AF)

For respondents whose asylum application was accepted, instead, worries concern family at home and sadness about failed family reunion. As one respondent explains:

I like school, I enjoy going. Sometimes I do not attend because I think about my parents a lot. The procedure did not work out for me and that makes me wonder: why am I even going to school, is there not something I can do to get my family here? I think about them and then I do not go to school. It makes me sad. (ER)

These results underline the importance of successful family reunification for satisfaction and integration in the Netherlands once more.

4.5 A future in the Netherlands

We studied UMAs' plans for the future with regard to staying in the Netherlands by asking where they hoped to live in ten years from now and why. Given that Afghan boys whose asylum application was rejected arguably have a different outlook on the future, we asked them where they hoped to live in one year (rather than ten years) from the time of the interview.

A majority of our respondents indicate that they see themselves living in the Netherlands in ten years from now. About one third, mostly Eritreans, specify that this would be the case even if their country of origin were safe by then. Interestingly, the results for Afghan respondents whose asylum application was rejected were very similar to those of the group as a whole, with a majority responding that they see their future in the Netherlands, not only in the next one year, but often even longer. This is in line with the experiences of the Nidos experts, who observe that the UMAs who come, come to stay, regardless of their nationality or the outcome of their asylum application.

About a third of our respondents say not to know where they will 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). Two of our respondents, both Eritreans, hope to live elsewhere in ten

years from the time of the interview. One says he hopes to go back to Eritrea when the situation has improved, while another hopes to live with her mother in Ethiopia; she says the Netherlands is so different from her home country that it would be impossible for her mother to adapt here.

As for those who envision a future in the Netherlands, about two thirds do so for one (or both) of two main reasons: future prospects, and being adapted to the Dutch language and way of life:

I speak the Dutch language, I have lived here for 2 years now, I have adapted to the culture and the people. I can go to Germany if I do not get my asylum, but I do not want that. I really want to stay in the Netherlands very badly. I will never leave Holland. Even if my asylum request is not accepted, I will accept being illegal here. I do not want to leave Holland. (AF)

In ten years from now, I will be in The Netherlands because I will have established my life. I will be an independent person holding a diploma in mechatronics. My financial situation will be better, I will have bought a car and a house too. In sum, I will be well settled and have established my life. (SY)

Interestingly, there is a divide by nationality in the reasons offered: Eritrean and Afghan respondents in particular point out that they are adapted to the Netherlands and unwilling to start over the difficult rooting process, including learning a new language, elsewhere. In contrast, a majority of Syrian respondents offer more future-oriented reasons for wanting to stay in the Netherlands. Taking into account the differences between the three countries of origin, this pattern of response should not come as a surprise. Firstly, many of the Afghan boys in our study have seen their asylum application rejected, implying that the Netherlands simply will not offer them any viable future prospects. Indeed, none of these respondents mentions future prospects as a reason to stay in the Netherlands. Secondly, Eritrean UMAs grew up in a situation in which the government made most decisions for them (such as choosing what to study, as we have seen above) and the only realistic future prospect was to join the army. Some of the Nidos experts suggested that this upbringing, which did not leave much room to formulate personal wishes for the future, has led these youngsters to struggle envisioning plans for their future now that they do have the possibility. Consequently, we may expect that future prospects are less likely to be named as a reason to stay in the Netherlands.

The fact that the majority of our respondents are planning to stay in the Netherlands does not necessarily imply that they would advise other minors to come by themselves as well. On the contrary, half of our respondents would advise against this, with the most important reason being the dangerous journey to get here, as in the following example:

I have very bad experiences of travelling alone. These experiences I will never forget. If I were living in Afghanistan and I had to go through the same experiences, I would accept getting killed there but not going through it all over again. (AF)

Interestingly, only Afghan and Eritrean UMAs would advise against coming to the Netherlands. Instead, an overwhelming majority of our Syrian respondents would advise other minors to come. In many cases, future prospects are cited as an argument yet again, as in the following example:

I would advise other Syrian children like me to come to the Netherlands as well. There are good future prospects here with regard to education, work, and freedom, and you can find peace. In this country everyone is equal. (SY)

Without aiming to downplay the hardships that Syrian UMAs have lived through during their journey, this result might point at different experiences for each group. At the same time, it could be that these respondents focus on different aspects of their overall experience. As shown by the following quote, from a respondent who refrains from taking a position when asked whether she would advise other minors to come to the Netherlands or not, this is a multifaceted issue:

I would not advise anyone to come to the Netherlands. If I faced the same decision now, I would not do it again. The journey is hazardous, it is not worth risking your life. But I would not advise anyone to stay in Eritrea either because I know how horrible things are there. And I know the situation has worsened since I left. I am happy I can stay here. (ER)

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter set out to analyse whether the expectations that UMAs held about the Netherlands were met, whether they were satisfied with their lives here, whether they had applied for family reunification, and how they saw their future with regard to staying in the Netherlands. As the analysis showed, these topics are intertwined, with education and family reunification in particular emerging as bridging issues connecting these several elements.

Our interviews show that the expectations that UMAs held about the Netherlands were generally met, with the exception of Afghan boys whose asylum application was rejected. Relatedly, these are the only interviewees who replied negatively to our questions about overall satisfaction with life in the Netherlands. Otherwise, the UMAs in our study are generally satisfied, valuing freedom, education, and general factors related to the Netherlands in particular. They appreciate the way they were received and treated by the Dutch government, aside from incidental complaints about the relationship with their mentors, and their financial or housing situation. Family reunification proves a divisive topic, with those who have been reunited with their families citing this as a positive factor while the opposite is true for interviewees whose application was rejected. This is a pivotal issue. To be reunited with their families is an important expectation for most of our respondents and our interviews and focus groups reveal that as long as this expectation has not been fulfilled, it undermines general satisfaction with life in the Netherlands, personal health, and school attendance.

While these findings apply *grosso modo* to all of our interviewees, we observe some relevant differences between the three nationalities in our study, mostly setting apart the Syrian UMAs from the other groups. In part, these contrasts are due to differences in acceptance rates of family reunification applications: given that these are higher for Syrians, our Syrian respondents are less likely to be confronted with issues related to rejected family reunification applications, which are so essential to the other groups in our study. Further distinctions between the groups that emerge from the interviews are likely due to differences in issues related to reasons to flee and the journey to the Netherlands. For instance, Eritrean UMAs particularly value freedom, and a large majority of both Eritrean and Afghan UMAs would discourage

others from their country to come to the Netherlands as well. Instead, our Syrian interviewees report almost unanimously that they would advise others to come.

In summary, our analyses show the importance of education and family reunification for several aspects of UMAs' experience in the Netherlands. Family reunification policies, while equal for all UMAs, affect those with different nationalities differently.

5 Conclusions

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. With a sharp increase in terms of both actual numbers of UMAs and relative group size within the total asylum seekers compared to previous years, the Netherlands ranked seventh among the destination countries in the EU. The question why asylum seekers end up in a specific country is particularly pertinent in such times of high influx (cf. Brekke & Aarset, 2009). The current study aimed to shed light on the push and pull factors that played a role in the flight of the 2015 cohort of UMAs who arrived in the Netherlands, to understand the processes through which these minors ultimately ended up in this country, their expectations regarding the intended destination, and their satisfaction with life in the Netherlands. The study employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods: face-to-face interviews with UMAs from the top-3 nationalities within the 2015 cohort (Syrian, Eritrean and Afghan UMAs), focus groups with Nidos experts (guardians, region managers, and employees responsible for the placement of younger or vulnerable UMAs in foster families), and use of national and international registration data. In this final chapter we present the most important findings, following the research questions that were formulated in Chapter 1.

5.1 Results

What is known about the inflow of UMAs to other European countries in 2015 and about the pull factors which play a role?

According to Eurostat in 2015 95,205 UMAs sought protection in the EU (extracted on 29/3/2018), about eight times more than the annual average number 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 belonged to the age group 16 to 17 (68%). 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, and Austria. Together in these four countries over three quarters of all applications were registered. Norway and Italy preceded the Netherlands regarding the number of registered UMAs, while the United Kingdom, Belgium, and Switzerland received lower numbers than the Netherlands. Eurostat figures on the 2015 cohort indicate not only that the composition of the top-3 nationalities of minors who sought protection in these countries differs, but also that UMAs and adult asylum seekers from specific countries of origin do not necessarily end up in the same destination countries. Furthermore, the UMAs in the 2015 cohort come from a smaller total number of origin countries than their adult counterparts (Eurostat, extracted on 11/12/2017). Finally, some countries are probably less attractive for UMAs than for families arriving with minor asylum seekers (or for their smugglers), and vice versa.

A literature survey as well as an inquiry among the National Contact Points of the European Migration Network (EMN NCPs) revealed that there is hardly any research done among the 2015 cohort of UMAs regarding why these UMAs ended up seeking refuge in a particular EU country. Based on previous research or experience, EMN NCPs mentioned the following possible reasons for the arrival of the 2015 cohort of

UMAs in their countries: the presence of family members or diaspora, procedural and protective safeguards in the admission procedures and integration process, special care and educational facilities for minors, and disadvantages of the systems in other European countries, as well as arrival by chance

Among UMAs interviewed in Italy in 2016 and 2017, the most reported reasons to prefer specific destinations (outside or within Europe) were work opportunities (47%), available education (20%), respect for human rights (11%), and that it is supposedly easy to get a residence permit (10%). Family or friends at the destination also play a role (REACH/UNICEF, 2017).⁴⁹

What is the size of the 'Dutch' 2015 UMA cohort, 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?

In 2015 3,859 UMAs were registered in the Netherlands, a quadrupling compared to 2014 (960). The composition of the 'Dutch' cohort regarding nationality, gender, and age shows a similar pattern to that of the EU total, except for the distribution of the top-3 nationalities. In the Dutch cohort, Syrian UMAs were the leading nationality (38% of the cohort), followed by Eritrean UMAs (32%). Afghan minors, who were the leading nationality in the EU in general, ranked third with a much lower percentage (17%). The sex and age composition of the Dutch cohort also mirrored that of the EU cohort: the majority being boys (83%), 16 or 17 years old (59%). There are some differences in the sex distribution according to nationality, however: while the Syrian and Afghan UMAs were predominantly boys (nine out of ten), this was less often the case for their Eritrean counterparts. Three out of ten Eritrean UMAs were girls.

The 2015 UMA cohort in the Netherlands differs from two previous peaks in terms of nationality: the highest-ever Dutch peak of UMAs in 2000 (with 6,705 registered UMAs) was dominated by minors from Angola, China, Guinee, and Sierra Leone, while a minor peak in the last decade, in 2009 (with 1,040 registered UMAs) was dominated by minors from Afghanistan and Somalia. In the 2016 and 2017 cohorts, when the total number of UMAs declined radically, Syrian, Eritrean, and Afghan minors still formed the top-3 nationalities. However, in these years Eritrean minors constituted the number one nationality while the shares of Syrian and Afghans minors dropped significantly.

Regarding the age and sex distribution, the 2015 cohort is generally similar to the cohorts in previous and later years, with boys and the oldest groups dominating the cohorts.

Why did the UMAs who came to the Netherlands leave their home countries?

Narratives from the interviews with UMAs show that some of the minors (or their families) had first tried to make a living in a third country in the region, where they lived for a duration ranging from six months to five years (Syrian respondents with their parents, Eritrean minors without their parents). None of the Afghan respondents lived in a third country first, but a few were born in Iran or had moved there at a young age. The results show that, mirroring the situation in origin countries as

⁴⁹ According to Derluyn and Broekaert (2005), most UMAs en route to the UK who had been intercepted in Belgium between 2000 and 2003 wanted to set up a new life in the UK firstly to create a better life for themselves and their families, secondly because they knew somebody in the UK. Other reasons mentioned explained more about why they left their country of origin than about their reasons to opt for the UK: fleeing lack of freedom or a life on the street.

described in Chapter 1, macro level push factors, but sometimes also micro level factors led these minors to leave their home countries: war (Syrian respondents), compulsory, possibly indefinite military service, lack or poor quality of education, lack of physical and intellectual freedom (Eritrean respondents),⁵⁰ risk of being recruited by armed groups (Syrian and Afghan respondents),⁵¹ personal issues (e.g. threat of life due to rivalries between family members, problems with parents due to partner choice or sexual preferences), ethnic violence (Afghan respondents),⁵² and unsafety (all respondents). Nidos experts pointed out that mass emigration from Eritrea also has to do with the lack of social and economic prospects in the country.⁵³

Feeling unsafe due to hostile attitudes and other negative experiences, lack of future prospects (education, work and career possibilities), cultural differences and examples of others leaving for Europe were the reasons why minors who first lived in a third country in the region headed towards Europe finally. The narratives of some (Syrian and Eritrean) respondents show that for them a 'culture of migration', a situation in which migration becomes a norm in the community, (Massey et al., 1993), (also) played a role. Examples of others leaving for Europe and information received through the diaspora seems to have influenced the aspirations and expectations of these respondents and motivated them to leave their home countries or the third country in the region where they first settled.

Did the UMAs in the 2015 cohort 'choose' the Netherlands consciously, and if so, why?

a Did they have relatives or acquaintances in the Netherlands? If yes, whom?

b Did they have information about the Netherlands before they arrived?

c If yes, what information did they have before they left their country of origin, what information did they receive during their journey, and from whom?

Did they have certain expectations regarding the Netherlands? If so, what were they?

Narratives of the minors we spoke to show that before departure, the Netherlands was the intended destination for only a minority (36%). The majority either left their home country or the third country they were living at the time with no specific

⁵⁰ Different studies report indefinite conscription into National Service, consequent lack of future opportunities and an adverse human rights situation as the main push factors for UMAs, young adults and other asylum seekers to flee Eritrea (e.g. Amnesty International, 2015; DSP Groep 2016; Van Reizen, 2016; Horbach & Rijken, 2017; SCP, 2018). Røsborg and Tronvoll (2017) report that in their study among 154 adult Eritrean migrants and 56 unaccompanied minors in a number of refugee camps in Ethiopia, minors were less prone than their adult counterparts to migrate in order to avoid National Service, but were instead motivated by improving the standard of living for themselves and/or their family. In addition desire to reunite with family members or conflicts in the family played a role in their migration.

⁵¹ In their study on the aspirations of Afghan UMAs who ended up in Belgium, Vervliet et. al. (2015) found that for them the danger of being recruited by the Taliban was the most frequently mentioned reason to leave Afghanistan.

⁵² Many Afghan UMAs – also in the present study – are Hazara. According to Donini et al. (2016) they have no prospects in Afghanistan or neighboring countries where many of them were born or arrived at a young age.

⁵³ In a representative sample of IND files concerning 427 UMAs originating from 38 different countries (with Somalia and China in the lead), who applied for asylum in 1993-1996, war (31%), having no one to care for him or her (21%), prosecution for political reasons (12%), and accompanying parents/care takers (12%) were the reasons mentioned most often (Smit, 1997).

destination (22%), simply headed for Europe (31%), or were planning to end up in another European country (11%). Still, there are differences according to nationality: while the majority of our Syrian respondents planned to end up in the Netherlands,⁵⁴ that was only exceptionally the case for Eritrean minors, and for none of the Afghan respondents, who usually left with no destination in mind, or just targeted to go to 'Europe'.⁵⁵ This is in line with earlier studies. Staring and Aarts, who interviewed (former) UMAs illegally residing in the Netherlands, find that only a minority of the youngsters originally intended to come to the Netherlands.⁵⁶ Blaak et al. (2004) find that many of the Chinese UMAs in their study did not know in advance where they were going, and had never heard of the Netherlands. Similarly, analyzing 522 IND files on UMAs from ten different origin countries, Olde Monnikhof and Van den Tillaart (2003) find that many UMAs did not 'choose' the Netherlands and had little say in their destination. Rather, it seems that most journeys were organized by 'travel agents'. Smit (1997), based on her analyses of IND files, find that for at least 67% of the 427 UMAs concerned, the destination was determined beforehand, possibly by the travel agent.

It may be the case that some of our Afghan respondents, who stated to have departed 'with no destination at all', were not aware that their destination actually was Europe, as determined by their parents and/or a smuggler. Previous studies show that it is not uncommon that the choice of destination is made by a smuggler or a family member, without the UMAs being aware of their destination (e.g. Hopkins & Hill, 2008; Vervliet et al., 2015; Crawley, 2010; Staring & Aarts, 2010; Kuschminder et al. 2015). Some only learn about it once they arrive there (e.g. Crawley, 2010; Staring & Aarts, 2010; Kuschminder et al. 2015).

Family played a central role in the migration decision of our Syrian and Afghan respondents. There are differences in how this decision was made, however. While for Afghan minors the decision to flee was predominantly taken by the family with little say of the minors themselves (see also Buil & Siegel, 2014), Syrian interviewees generally initiated the flight themselves, but left almost always in agreement with their families. A majority of the Syrian minors stated that, before their departure, their family members who stayed behind also intended to come to Europe making use of the possibility of family reunification; that was occasionally the case for Afghan minors.

Donini et al. (2016) report that many Afghan UMAs in different European countries do not have family members in those destination countries, but, are sometimes sent as 'scouts' to allow other family members to come later. It often concerns the oldest or second oldest unmarried son for whose journey large loans had been taken (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2016; Buil & Siegel, 2014).

Family members helped UMAs in our study to prepare for the journey, they sometimes arranged for (adult) co-travelers, and arranged and financed the smuggler. This was not the case for Eritrean respondents who typically fled without informing their parents, as they feared that they would not allow them to undertake the dangerous journey (see also Schippers, 2017, who mentions that Eritrean parents not always agree with the flight of their children). The Eritrean minors sometimes

⁵⁴ In their study on the use of social media by 54 adult Syrian asylum seekers who had arrived in the Netherlands, Dekker et al. (2016) find similar results: for 87% the Netherlands was the intended destination, and most of them had prior knowledge about the Netherlands.

⁵⁵ Afghan UMAs, according to Donini et al (2017), often have little awareness of policies and practice in the various EU countries, but a stereotyped polished image of Europe, based on Bollywood films.

⁵⁶ The same is true for Belgium: according to a study by Vervliet et al. (2015), for a large majority of Afghan UMAs who had arrived in Belgium, Europe was the intended destination at departure.

sought contact with family members once they were on 'safer' grounds (in the neighbouring country or Europe) to finance their journey.

Other studies also report that Eritrean children flee Eritrea without telling their parents (Amnesty International, 2015; Rosberg & Tronvoll, 2017). There is evidence that the same is true for young adults (SCP, 2018). Brekke and Aarset (2009) report that adult Eritrean asylum seekers in their study made the decision to leave Eritrea by themselves, but contacted family members once in transit.

The Nidos experts recognize the influence of family regarding the migration decision, and think that even Eritrean parents are sometimes – secretly – aware of their child's flight.

Minors who intended to come to the Netherlands before departure were mostly well informed about the country. They usually had social networks in the Netherlands (older brothers, cousins, aunts, friends, fellow villagers (to whom the Eritrean minors also referred as 'family')). These 'strong ties' (cf. Granovetter, 1973) provided information about values and norms of the Dutch society (e.g. safety, freedom and lack of discrimination), possibilities of future prospects (education, work and career possibilities), and information on different procedures (e.g. asylum, family reunification, housing). Occasionally respondents received information about the care facilities for UMAs in the Netherlands. In addition minors relied on the Internet, relatives and friends in other European countries (Syrian respondents), but also on 'weak ties' (other asylum seekers in refugee camps or volunteers from NGOs, Eritrean respondents) for information. All these sources seem to have shaped the perceptions and expectations of our respondents (and/or their families) regarding the Netherlands, but also other countries. About half of the minors, almost all Syrian, actually considered other European countries as an alternative destination. Longer procedures (Germany, Italy, Denmark), shorter duration of the residence permit and a longer period needed for naturalization (Italy and Germany), non-uniform asylum policy, the 'mess in the asylum procedure and refugee camps' and discrimination (Germany), a more difficult language to learn (Sweden, Denmark, Germany), and colder weather (Sweden, Denmark), were reasons not to choose those alternatives. It seems that these minors (and/or their families) made a considered, well-informed decision to come to the Netherlands.

Expectations of minors who intended to come to the Netherlands seem to be influenced by information they received: building a good future regarding education, work and career, finding safety and freedom, and being reunited with their families in the Netherlands (more quickly). A recent study by SCP (2018) supports the notion that information regarding procedures in different European countries, especially regarding family reunion, circulates through the social networks of asylum seekers influencing the perceptions of asylum seekers in search of a destination.

Only a small minority of our respondents who did *not* originally plan to come to the Netherlands, had family or friends here. Moreover, these networks were hardly 'active' before departure. The majority of these interviewees received information during the journey, mostly once they reached Europe, usually about asylum and family reunification procedures in different countries, and to a lesser extent about other aspects (e.g. specific facilities for UMAs, education opportunities and/or societal values). Information regularly came from 'weak ties' (other UMAs or adult asylum seekers met at the refugee camps), or people met randomly. Occasionally, family or friends in the Netherlands were contacted.

For these minors, the main expectation was finding safety, peace, and freedom wherever they would end up, but similar to their counterparts who originally

planned to come to the Netherlands, they (also) aspired to have good future opportunities regarding education and work. For them, family reunification was a less pronounced expectation at departure, but seems to have developed along the journey or once they arrived in the Netherlands.

Only some of the minors whose initial destination was *not* the Netherlands ended up in the Netherlands 'consciously'. While some minors reacted upon information they received, others eventually ended up in the Netherlands as a result of coincidence⁵⁷. This does not mean that the latter group consists of only 'passive victims' (cf. Crawley, 2010). While some of those who arrive in the Netherlands by chance ended up here as a result of border control (for similar findings see Staring & Aarts, 2010; Buil, 2011; SCP, 2018) or taking the wrong train, others followed peers who were travelling to the Netherlands as they did not want to travel alone or lose their 'comrades' or friends they travelled with. A few of our respondents ended up in the Netherlands through a combination of events.

There are indications that actors at a meso level, in this case smugglers, played a role in how and why these minors ended up in the Netherlands. Although we have not asked this question explicitly, almost all our respondents told us that they travelled with a smuggler or 'agent'.⁵⁸ They were sometimes handed over from one smuggler to another at borders; at times, they or their parents arranged new smugglers once they arrived in a transit country. Smugglers not only organized the journey to Europe and eventually to the Netherlands; some of the minors also received help during the journey from their smugglers (e.g. instructions how to hide from the border police and other authorities, tickets for further destinations). There are examples of smugglers who played a predominant role by providing information to minors who did not originally intend to come to the Netherlands, about asylum and family reunification policies in the Netherlands as well as in other countries, and advised them to go to the Netherlands. Nidos experts recognize the influence of smugglers in why and how UMAs end up in the Netherlands. Similarly, Staring and Aarts (2010) report that smugglers played an important role in the choice of the Netherlands as a destination for (former) UMAs who did not actually intend to come here. According to Mougne (2010) UMAs often seem to base their 'motivations' on limited and unrealistic information, in particular, regarding host countries' living environments, influenced by, among others, stories of smugglers. In 2015, Frontex exposed an overview in which smugglers compare the Netherlands to four other European countries (Germany, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark), regarding duration of family reunion, type of residence permit, time to obtain residency, accommodation, and social benefits.⁵⁹

It is unclear to what extent smugglers might have played a role in some of the cases where our respondents ended up in the Netherlands by chance. There are indications that smugglers influence the destination of their 'clients' by giving them false or misleading information, for example about the living conditions in the destination (e.g. Gilbert & Koser, 2006). Some adult Eritrean refugees who arrived in

⁵⁷ Out of the UMAs who arrived in the Netherlands in 1993-1996, 13% also ended up there by chance. The others ended up there because they were sent there (56%), had relatives living in the Netherlands (11%), had been advised to go there/had heard positive things about the country (9%), or other less often mentioned reasons (10%) (Smit, 1997).

⁵⁸ According to the IND files concerning UMAs who arrived in the Netherlands in 1993-1996, also then a smuggler or travel agent was often involved in the flight, sometimes arranging passports, and accompanying UMAs en route (Smit, 1997).

⁵⁹ <https://nos.nl/artikel/2049254-mensensmokkelaars-prijzen-nederland-aan.html>

the Netherlands recently were told by their smugglers that Amsterdam was the capital of Sweden (SCP, 2018).

In a few cases, our respondents ended up in the Netherlands by chance influenced by third parties whom we call 'grey agents' whose function is unclear to us; they might be smugglers, working in the black market, or simply be serving for the good of their fellow countrymen.

It is obvious that processes regarding information transmission and feedback mechanisms influenced the aspirations and perceptions of the minors who knew little about the Netherlands before departure. Considering the entire group of respondents, the image/reputation of the Netherlands regarding procedures (especially asylum and family reunion) was the most commonly mentioned reason for coming to the Netherlands. About half of our respondents named this reason, regardless of their intended destination at departure. The second most commonly mentioned reason was the image/reputation of the Netherlands regarding future possibilities for minors (education, work and career) (see Box 5.1). Furthermore, they (also) had some vague positive associations with the Netherlands (e.g. a beautiful country, friendly people) (mostly respondents whose intended destination was *not* the Netherlands at departure),⁶⁰ and were attracted by the image/reputation of the Netherlands as a society (e.g. tolerant, safe, non-racist). Although social networks in the Netherlands were an important source of information, their presence seems to play a less prominent role in the choice of the Netherlands as a destination country.

Box 5.1 Reasons for coming to/ending up in the Netherlands (total respondents; 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 residence permit, shorter time to naturalise).
- Image reputation of the Netherlands regarding future possibilities (e.g. study, work, career).
- 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 as a society (e.g. freedom, safe, tolerant, free, not racist, democratic, free society).
- Existence of social networks.
- Simply following others.
- Image/reputation of the Netherlands regarding facilities for UMAs (e.g. good/better accommodation and care, supervision by Nidos).
- Border control.
- Other advantages (e.g. easier language, low number of asylum seekers; friendly Dutch government).
- Other reasons (coincidence as a result of people met by chance).

⁶⁰ See also SCP, 2018 regarding vague positive associations among Eritrean refugees who originally did not plan to come to the Netherlands.

Were the expectations that UMAs held about the Netherlands (if any) met? Are the UMAs satisfied with their life in the Netherlands? Why so/why not?

Overall, the UMAs in our study were satisfied with their lives in the Netherlands. While some respondents also mentioned issues that they were unhappy with, this satisfaction generally applied to all studied topics (general life in the Netherlands, the way they had been received and treated by the Dutch government, and education). Moreover, in most cases our interviewees found their expectations were met and the information they received at departure and/or during the journey often turned out to be correct. Afghan boys whose asylum application had been rejected formed an important exception to this. Unsurprisingly, the outcome of their application was a source of disappointment and dissatisfaction, and many cited this as an expectation that had not been met. In addition, some boys in this situation mentioned that their basic expectation and hope of finding safety also had not been fulfilled.

Education proves to be a recurring topic in the narratives of our respondents. Many of our respondents indicated that before their arrival, they expected to be able to continue their studies in the Netherlands – an expectation that had been met. Many of them cited education as a factor that contributed to their satisfaction with life in the Netherlands. We found examples of minors who were unhappy with the low level they were required to attend, or with elements more specific to the Dutch system, such as the study materials used and the number of foreigners in their class⁶¹ (see also Schippers, 2017). However, general satisfaction with education in the Netherlands was high among our respondents, and a large majority indicated attending school regularly.⁶² The few, mostly Eritrean, respondents who report occasional absence, indicate that this is due to obligations or issues regarding their family reunification application. This is in line with a recent study by Brummel-Ahlaloum et al. (2018), which reports non-attendance among young Eritrean refugees due to problems related to family reunification. The guardians in our expert meetings also reported non-attendance among (not only Eritrean) UMAs, and Schippers (2017) notes that some UMAs have not attended school for a long time before their arrival in the Netherlands, and many have concentration problems and difficulties in getting up in the morning due to stress and trauma complaints.⁶³

Family reunification emerged as a pivotal issue from the interviews, with relevance in and of itself, and connecting many topics included in the study: expectations, general satisfaction, satisfaction with the treatment by the Dutch government, and education. Submitting a family reunification application is part of the standard Nidos procedure, and indeed virtually all of our respondents whose asylum application had been accepted reported having filed a request, although some withdrew this application at a later stage. For many of the youngsters in our study, the (perceived) favourable family reunification policy in the Netherlands had been a reason to come

⁶¹ Some of the Chinese UMAs who were interviewed in 2002, voice similar sentiments: education was important for them, but the pace in the international transition class, among foreigners, was too slow. For some to such an extent that they did not consider it worthwhile to attend (Blaak et al., 2004).

⁶² While education was mentioned by several respondents when discussing satisfaction with life in the Netherlands, detailed questions about satisfaction with school were included only in interviews with Eritrean and Afghan minors. For more information refer to Chapter 4.

⁶³ In a study among 109 18 and 19 year old former UMAs about their transition to adulthood, some respondents stated that they did not follow any education because of psychological problems. Most UMAs who did follow education, reported not having such problems, but truancy did occur for several reasons: not in the mood, no motivation, physical or psychological problems, or because the UMAs wanted to spend time with friends (Thomeer-Bouwens & Smit, 1998).

here, and a successful outcome of the application proved to be of utmost importance for their satisfaction with life. The importance of family reunification extended to virtually all aspects of their experience in the Netherlands, including general satisfaction, psychological wellbeing, school attendance, and sometimes plans for the future. Importantly, this was true also for those who first learned about the possibilities for family reunification upon arrival in the Netherlands.

UMAs' relationships with mentors and guardians, too, are influenced by whether or not an application for family reunification is successful. This is firstly due to the negative psychological effects incurred by waiting for family reunification, such as uncertainty, anxiety, and sadness. These feelings inevitably put a strain on relationships with others. At the same time, some UMAs have difficulties in distinguishing between the respective responsibilities of the guardians and the Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND), and feel the former are not making enough of an effort when the application process proves lengthy or unsuccessful. Furthermore, according to Nidos experts family members awaiting reunification often pressure the child to arrange the family reunification quickly, thereby interfering with the mentoring process.

Lamba and Krahn (2003, p. 338) argue that 'family support [is] a crucial factor in the resettlement process of immigrants and refugees'. The Nidos experts voiced similar ideas, pointing out that the integration process does not truly start before UMAs' families have arrived in the Netherlands. The importance of successful family reunification in this respect is confirmed by the aforementioned study by Brummel-Ahlaloum et al. (2018), which shows how stress related to (failing) family reunification can hinder integration in the Netherlands.

What are the UMAs' plans regarding their future stay in the Netherlands?

A majority of the UMAs in our study envisioned a future in the Netherlands, and this was true for both those whose asylum application had been accepted and those whose had not. Given the literature on refugees' intentions, this finding should not come as a surprise: previous studies among adults in the Netherlands show that some 70% of Afghan refugees aim to stay (Muller, 2011), while the same is true for 93% of recent Syrian refugees (Dagevos & Maliepaard, 2018). A case study among young Eritrean refugees in a Dutch town (Ferrier & Massink, 2016) shows that in spite of mixed feelings about the Netherlands as a result of expectations that were not realized or disappointments regarding different aspects of life, they want to integrate in the Dutch society as soon as possible. Staring and Aarts (2010) report a similarly strong intention to stay among (former) UMAs whose asylum application has been rejected.

Did the UMAs apply for family reunification?

As demonstrated in the above discussion on satisfaction with life in the Netherlands, family reunification is key to the contentment of UMAs. IND data⁶⁴ show that requests for family reunification with parents as well as siblings 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) whose asylum application was accepted. This group, of 2,340 UMAs in total, filed an average of 3.13 applications per individual⁶⁵ (see Chapter 4). There are differences between nationalities,

⁶⁴ Reference date 31/12/2017; calculations by WODC. Due to the use of different reference dates, figures and group sizes reported in Chapter 4 may differ from those in IND reports.

⁶⁵ This figure includes reunification applications with parents under special conditions within three months after the granting of the asylum application (*nareis*) as well as applications for reunification with siblings of the UMA who

however, both in terms of the percentage of UMAs filing a request and in the acceptance rates of these requests. While almost all Syrian and Eritrean UMAs in the 2015 cohort filed a request for family reunification, this is the case for less than half of the Afghan UMAs.⁶⁶ While 82% of applications by Syrian UMAs are accepted, this rate is below 20% for Afghan (16%) and Eritrean (17%) minors.

Our interviews with UMAs reveal a similar pattern. About 90% of our respondents whose asylum application was accepted⁶⁷, applied for family reunification (32 out of 35). In the majority of the cases, the application concerned one or both parents; about a third of our respondents indicated a request for their siblings had been filed as well. At the time of the interviews, a number of our respondents had already been reunited with their family members, while others had seen their application accepted but were still awaiting the arrival of their families. Mirroring the trend in IND figures, this was true primarily for Syrian respondents, and to a lesser extent for their Eritrean and Afghan counterparts. A small number of UMAs told us that their family reunification application had been accepted, but that their family members ended up not coming after all. In some cases, this was due to unsafe travel conditions; in others, parents changed their minds or got into disagreement among themselves.

5.2 A note on the methods

In this mainly qualitative study we presented information about the intended destinations of 45 Syrian, Eritrean and Afghan UMAs at departure, who belonged to the 2015 cohort who came to the Netherlands and about the reasons why and how they ended up in the country.

We have seen that our respondents whose asylum application had been accepted were generally satisfied with their life in the Netherlands and were also attending school regularly. It might indeed be the case that UMAs whose asylum application has been accepted are generally satisfied – problems with family reunification disregarded. However, the initial ‘screening’ of potential respondents in the pool population was done by their legal guardians who considered the psychological wellbeing of their pupils. Therefore, our findings might provide a biased picture regarding satisfaction with life in the Netherlands, as those who were not deemed suitable for participation might have a more negative stance on the issue. In addition, although emphasized during the interviews that the respondents could speak freely and their answers would be treated anonymously, they may have been inclined to give socially desirable answers.

Regarding their migration stories and reasons why and how they ended up in the Netherlands, we have no reason to suspect that a possible selection bias or social desirability bias was at work. On the contrary, many respondents told us their stories open-heartedly, spontaneously sharing many details. It is however possible that the distribution of the reasons mentioned for ending up in the Netherlands, is different in the total 2015 cohort population of UMAs.

can be eligible for a residence permit for stay with the parents under Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) (see Chapter 1 for more information).

⁶⁶ The reasons for this discrepancy are unclear but could be related to family circumstances and motivations for the flight.

⁶⁷ As mentioned before, among the interviewees are Afghan UMAs whose asylum application was rejected (see Chapter 1).

5.3 Concluding remarks

This study aimed to answer the question *why* and *how* Syrian, Eritrean and Afghan UMAs who sought refuge in Europe in 2015, ended up in the Netherlands. In addition we considered their expectations before migration, realization of these expectations and satisfaction with life in the Netherlands. Our results show that safety was the main concern of these minors, and for the majority the Netherlands was not the intended destination from the beginning of their journey. Instead, a combination of different intertwined, interacting micro processes led them to the Netherlands.

Among these: expectations of the minors and their families, information acquired from family and friends, but also from others with whom the minors had weak connections, perceptions about the Netherlands as well as about other European countries. In addition actors and processes operating at a meso level (e.g. smugglers, border police) played a role. For some UMAs it was a choice to come to the Netherlands, while for others it was just a coincidence.

The two major pull factors regarding the Netherlands for these UMAs, were the image/reputation of the Netherlands regarding procedures, and future possibilities concerning education, and work. It needs to be stressed, however, that it is difficult to place these findings in perspective, as hardly anything is known about the motivations of 2015 cohort of UMAs who did not come to the Netherlands, and about how they ended up in other European countries. It is possible that for them similar reasons, circumstances, and perceptions were at play.

It is clear that the UMAs we spoke to are eager to build their future in the Netherlands, regardless of how they ended up here, and regardless of their residence status. However, the literature shows that family reunification and family support are of great importance for processes of resettlement and integration, and this raises concerns for the circumstances of UMAs whose application for asylum was rejected (mainly Afghan boys), and for those whose family reunification was not (yet) successful (Eritrean UMAs in particular).

Samenvatting

Alleenstaande minderjarige vreemdelingen in Nederland: een keuze?

Achtergrond, doelen en onderzoeksmethoden

Achtergrond

Het jaar 2015 werd in Europa gekenmerkt door een hoge instroom van asielzoekers, inclusief alleenstaande minderjarige vreemdelingen (AMV's). Nederland vormde hier geen uitzondering op.

Het aantal AMV's dat bescherming zocht in Europa, was bijna vier keer zo groot als een jaar eerder (meer dan 96.000 in 2015, tegen ongeveer 23.000 in 2014). Nederland stond op de zevende plaats van bestemmingslanden in de EU, met 3.859 AMV's. Net als in de EU was dit aantal ongeveer vier keer hoger dan in 2014 (984), en kwamen AMV's vooral uit Syrië, Eritrea en Afghanistan.

Doelen en onderzoeksvragen

De vraag waarom asielzoekers terechtkomen in een specifiek land wordt vooral interessant in tijden van plotselinge hoge instroom, zoals in 2015. Het onderhavige onderzoek had als doel inzicht te bieden in de push en pull factoren die een rol speelden in de vlucht van AMV's die in 2015 in Nederland aankwamen. Verder lag de focus van het onderzoek op de processen waardoor deze minderjarigen uiteindelijk in Nederland terechtkwamen, op hun verwachtingen van de voorgenomen bestemming (als die er al waren), en hun tevredenheid met het leven in Nederland – onderwerpen waarover tot nu toe weinig bekend was.

De belangrijkste onderzoeksvragen waren:

- 1 Wat is er bekend over de instroom van AMV's in andere Europese landen in 2015 en over de pull factoren die een rol spelen?
- 2 Wat is de omvang van het AMV cohort dat in 2015 in Nederland aankwam, hoe is het samengesteld wat betreft land van herkomst, leeftijd en geslacht en in welk opzicht verschilt dit van cohorten in eerdere en latere jaren?
- 3 Waarom verlieten AMV's die naar Nederland kwamen hun herkomstland?
- 4 Kozen zij bewust voor Nederland en zo ja, waarom?
- 5 Hadden zij bepaalde verwachtingen ten aanzien van Nederland? Zo ja, welke, en zijn die uitgekomen?
- 6 Zijn AMV's tevreden met hun leven in Nederland? Waarom (niet)?
- 7 Wat zijn hun toekomstplannen met betrekking tot verblijf in Nederland?
- 8 Hebben zij een aanvraag voor nareis/gezinshereniging gedaan?

In dit vooral kwalitatieve onderzoek zijn verschillende informatiebronnen en onderzoeksmethoden gebruikt om deze onderzoeksvragen te beantwoorden.

De eerste onderzoeksvraag werd beantwoord door gebruik te maken van gegevens van Eurostat, het statistisch bureau van de Europese Unie en door een ad-hoc-vragenlijst uit te zetten onder de Nationale contactpunten (NCP) van het Europees Migratie Netwerk (EMN), in samenwerking met het Nederlandse Nationale Contact

Punt, de afdeling Onderzoek en Analyse van de Immigratie en Naturalisatie Dienst (IND O&A).

Om de tweede onderzoeksvraag te beantwoorden, werden registratiegegevens van de elektronische database Statline van het CBS gebruikt en verschillende publicaties, zoals die van de IND en VluchtelingenWerk Nederland.

Onderzoeksvragen 3 t/m 8 zijn beantwoord door gebruik te maken van de volgende twee methoden:

- 1 Face-to-face-interviews met 45 AMV's uit de top-3 nationaliteiten van het cohort dat in 2015 naar Nederland kwam, namelijk Syrische, Eritrese en Afghaanse AMV's die 14 jaar of ouder waren op het moment van aankomst. De selectie van de respondenten werd gedaan op basis van de leeftijds- en geslachtsverdeling van de respectieve cohort populaties en het aantal inwillingen van de aanvragen voor deze nationaliteiten.
- 2 Zes focusgroepen met experts (voornamelijk jeugdbeschermers van AMV's, maar ook regiomanagers en medewerkers die verantwoordelijk zijn voor het plaatsen van kwetsbare AMV's in pleeggezinnen) van de stichting Nidos, de gezinsvoogdij-instelling die de voogdijtaak voor alleenstaande minderjarige buitenlanders verzorgt.

Resultaten

Instream van het 2015 AMV cohort in andere Europese landen en pull factoren

In 2015 zochten 95.205 AMV's bescherming in de EU (Eurostat, geraadpleegd op 29-3-2018). Dit aantal was ongeveer acht keer hoger dan het jaarlijkse gemiddelde gedurende de periode 2008-2013. Een op de twee AMV's die geregistreerd werden in Europa had de Afghaanse nationaliteit; zij vormden de grootste groep in ongeveer de helft van de lidstaten, gevolgd door Syriërs (16% van het cohort) en Eritreeërs (6%). Een grote meerderheid van het cohort betrof jongens (91%) en meer dan twee derde was 16 of 17 jaar. De jongste leeftijdsgroep (jonger dan 14) vormde slechts 10% van het cohort. Zweden ontving het hoogste aantal AMV's, gevolgd door Duitsland, Hongarije (voornamelijk een transitland) en Oostenrijk. Meer dan drie kwart van alle aanvragen werd geregistreerd in deze landen. De ad-hoc-vragenlijst onder NCP's van de EMN liet zien dat er nauwelijks onderzoek is naar de redenen waarom het 2015 cohort AMV's naar deze Europese landen is gekomen.

Samenstelling van het 2015 AMV cohort in Nederland

De top-3 nationaliteiten in het 2015 cohort waren tezamen verantwoordelijk voor 84% van de totale instroom van AMV's in Nederland (Syrisch 38%, Eritrees 32% en Afghaans 14%). De meerderheid werd gevormd door jongens (83%) en 59% was 16 of 17 jaar. De jongste leeftijdsgroep (jonger dan 14) vormde het kleinste deel (12%). De verdeling naar leeftijd en geslacht van het 2015 cohort leek in het algemeen op die van cohorten in eerdere en latere jaren, waarbij jongens en de oudste groepen de belangrijkste plaats innamen. Wat nationaliteit betreft zijn er echter wat verschillen in vergelijking met eerdere pieken: het recordaantal AMV's kwam in 2000 naar Nederland en bestond vooral uit minderjarigen uit Angola, China, Guinee en Sierra Leone; een kleinere piek in 2009 werd gedomineerd door minderjarigen uit Afghanistan en Somalië. In 2016 en 2017 (toen er een sterke afname was in het totale aantal AMV's) vormden Syrische, Eritrese en Afghaanse

minderjarigen nog steeds de top-3 nationaliteiten,⁶⁸ maar in deze jaren vormden Eritrese minderjarigen de grootste groep.

Migratie naar Nederland

Push factoren

Voor de geïnterviewde AMV's waren de volgende (meestal macro) push factoren van belang: onveiligheid (alle respondenten), oorlog (Syrische respondenten), (langdurige) dienstplicht, tekort aan mogelijkheden voor verdere studie, slechte kwaliteit van onderwijs, tekort aan fysieke en intellectuele vrijheid (Eritrese respondenten), het voorbeeld van anderen die het land verlaten (Eritrese en Syrische respondenten) en het risico te worden gerekruteerd door gewapende groepen (Syrische en Afghaanse respondenten). Soms werden factoren op microniveau gerapporteerd als reden om het herkomstland te verlaten: persoonlijke kwesties en etnisch geweld (voornamelijk Afghaanse respondenten). De redenen waarom minderjarigen die eerst in een derde land in de regio woonden uiteindelijk koers zetten naar Europa waren: zich onveilig voelen door vijandige houdingen en andere negatieve ervaringen, tekort aan toekomstperspectief, culturele verschillen en het voorbeeld van anderen die naar Europa gaan.

Voorgenomen bestemming

Slechts een minderheid van de AMV's in het onderzoek, voornamelijk Syriërs, beschouwde Nederland bij vertrek als bestemmingsland. Geen van de Afghaanse minderjarigen, en slechts een minderheid van de Eritrese AMV's, had bij aanvang de intentie om naar Nederland te komen. Zij vertrokken zonder bestemming in het hoofd (voornamelijk Afghanen), wilden alleen maar in Europa terechtkomen (voornamelijk Eritreeërs), of waren van plan naar een ander Europees land te gaan (voornamelijk Afghanen). Bovendien woonden verschillende Syrische en Eritrese respondenten eerst in een derde land in de regio, waar zij bij aankomst meestal de bedoeling hadden te blijven.

Besluitvorming aangaande vertrek

Familie speelde een centrale rol in de beslissing van de Syrische en Afghaanse AMV's om te migreren. Terwijl de beslissing om te vluchten voor Afghaanse minderjarigen vooral door de familie werd genomen, met weinig inbreng van de minderjarigen zelf, initieerden de Syrische respondenten de vlucht meestal zelf, maar vertrokken zij bijna altijd met instemming van de familie. Veel van de respondenten ontvingen hulp van ouders en/of andere familieleden bij de voorbereidingen en om de reis te financieren. Eritrese respondenten vertrokken zonder hun ouders in te lichten, maar als zij eenmaal op 'veiliger' plaatsen waren (in een buurland of in Europa), zochten ze soms weer contact met hun familie, die hun reis financierde of een smokkelaar regelde. Deskundigen van Nidos herkennen de invloed van de familie met betrekking tot de migratiebeslissing; sommigen hebben de indruk dat ook Eritrese ouders – in het geheim – op de hoogte zijn van de vlucht van hun kinderen.

(Bronnen van) informatie en verwachtingen.

Minderjarigen van wie de bestemming bij vertrek Nederland was, waren meestal goed geïnformeerd over het land, in tegenstelling tot hen die Nederland niet zagen als mogelijke bestemming. De eerste groep had vaker sociale netwerken in Neder-

⁶⁸ In 2017 behoorden AMV's met de Marokkaanse nationaliteit ook tot de top-3; ze vormden de derde grootste groep, samen met de Afghaanse AMV's.

land (meestal familie en vrienden), die hen van informatie voorzagen over Nederland (bijvoorbeeld vrijheid, democratie, weinig discriminatie), toekomstperspectieven (onderwijs, werk en carrière) en procedures (zoals asiel en gezinshereniging). Bovendien fungeerden familieleden en vrienden in andere Europese landen en het internet (Syrische respondenten), net als andere asielzoekers of vrijwilligers in vluchtelingenkampen (Eritrese respondenten) als informatiebron. Al deze bronnen lijken het beeld van de respondenten (en/of hun families) van Nederland, maar ook van andere Europese landen, gevormd te hebben. Ongeveer de helft van deze groep respondenten (bijna allemaal Syrisch) overwogen ook andere Europese landen als mogelijke bestemming. Redenen om niet voor deze alternatieven te kiezen waren de volgende: langere procedures, kortere duur van de verblijfsvergunning, een langere periode benodigd voor naturalisatie, niet-eenduidige asielprocedure, discriminatie, een moeilijker taal om te leren en kouder weer.

Van de respondenten die Nederland *niet* als bestemmingsland zagen bij vertrek, had slechts een minderheid informatie over het land. Deze was beperkt tot wat vage associaties met Nederland (bijvoorbeeld 'klein en mooi', 'veel fietsen', 'goed voetbalteam'). Zij kregen meestal informatie over Nederland en andere Europese landen tijdens de reis en vooral als zij in Europa aankwamen (bijvoorbeeld over asiel- en gezinsherenigingsprocedures, speciale voorzieningen voor AMV's, onderwijsmogelijkheden en/of maatschappelijke waarden in Nederland, 'vriendelijke Nederlandse overheid'). Informatie kwam regelmatig van andere AMV's of volwassen asielzoekers, meestal landgenoten. Andere bronnen van informatie waren netwerken van 'kameraden', mensen die zij toevallig tegenkwamen, smokkelaars en het internet. Sociale netwerken in Nederland of andere Europese landen werden in een enkel geval gecontacteerd.

De verhalen van de respondenten laten zien dat de ontvangen informatie, verwachtingen en redenen om (uiteindelijk) naar Nederland te komen met elkaar verweven zijn. De jongeren verwachtten mogelijkheden voor studie, het vinden van werk en het op kunnen bouwen van een carrière op hun eindbestemming, evenals veiligheid, vrijheid en hereniging met hun familie. Voor de respondenten die Nederland *niet* als bestemming zagen, waren verwachtingen aangaande gezinshereniging minder uitgesproken bij vertrek, maar lijken die te zijn ontwikkeld op basis van de informatie die tijdens de reis werd verkregen.

Redenen om naar Nederland te komen/in Nederland terecht te komen

Respondenten *die bij vertrek van plan waren naar Nederland te komen*, noemden de volgende redenen (in volgorde van afnemende frequentie).

- Beeld/reputatie van Nederland met betrekking tot procedures (gemakkelijkere en kortere asiel- en gezinsherenigingsprocedures, langere geldigheidsduur van de verblijfsvergunning, kortere vereiste tijdsperiode om te naturaliseren).
- Beeld/reputatie van Nederland met betrekking tot toekomstmogelijkheden (bijvoorbeeld studie, werk, carrière).
- Beeld/reputatie van Nederland als maatschappij (bijvoorbeeld vrijheid, veilig, tolerant, vrij, niet racistisch, democratisch).
- Bestaan van sociale netwerken.
- Vage positieve associaties met Nederland en Nederlandse mensen (bijvoorbeeld 'leuk', 'mooi(e huizen)', 'land van melk en kaas', 'aardige mensen', 'rustig', 'klein land', 'matig weer', 'goed voetbal').
- Beeld/reputatie van Nederland met betrekking tot voorzieningen voor AMV's.
- Andere voordelen (bijvoorbeeld gemakkelijker taal).

Respondenten *die zonder enige bestemming in gedachten gewoon naar Europa wilden, of die eigenlijk van plan waren naar een ander land in Europa te gaan*, namen de beslissing naar Nederland te komen niet altijd doelbewust; toeval speelde ook een rol (bijvoorbeeld het simpelweg volgen van leeftijdsgenoten, grenscontrole). Voor sommige respondenten speelden smokkelaars of toevallige ontmoetingen met mensen in Europa een sleutelrol in de komst naar Nederland. De volgende redenen werden genoemd door deze groep respondenten (in volgorde van afnemende frequentie).

- Beeld/reputatie van NL met betrekking tot procedures.
- Vage positieve associaties.
- Simpelweg anderen volgen.
- Beeld/reputatie van Nederland ten aanzien van toekomstmogelijkheden.
- Beeld/reputatie van Nederland als maatschappij.
- Grenscontroles.
- Bestaan van sociale netwerken.
- Beeld/reputatie over Nederland met betrekking tot voorzieningen voor AMV's.
- Andere voordelen (bijvoorbeeld laag aantal asielzoekers, vriendelijke overheid).
- Andere redenen (toeval als resultaat van willekeurige ontmoetingen).

Leven in Nederland

Tevredenheid

De AMV's die meededen aan het onderzoek waren in het algemeen tevreden met hun leven in Nederland, bijvoorbeeld met betrekking tot de organisatie van de samenleving, vrijheid, veiligheid, school, welzijn, levensstijl en de manier waarop zij werden/worden behandeld door de Nederlandse overheid (bijvoorbeeld ontvangst, accommodatie, mogelijkheden voor onderwijs, werk en het ontvangen van geld, voogdij, het hebben van toekomstperspectieven). Sommige respondenten drukten ook ontevredenheid uit (bijvoorbeeld over het Nederlandse gezondheidszorgsysteem, bureaucratie, xenofobie, financiële problemen, heimwee, gebrek aan mogelijkheden voor werk of studie, afgewezen aanvraag voor gezinshereniging). Toch vonden de respondenten in de meeste gevallen dat hun verwachtingen waren uitgekomen, en dat de informatie die zij hadden voor aankomst in Nederland juist bleek te zijn. Afghaanse jongens van wie de asielaanvraag was afgewezen vormden een belangrijke uitzondering, waarbij asiel en veiligheid de belangrijkste verwachtingen waren die niet waren uitgekomen.

Veel respondenten noemden school en onderwijs als bron voor tevredenheid en als verwachting die was uitgekomen. Desondanks waren er ook AMV's die niet tevreden waren, bijvoorbeeld met het lage niveau van het onderwijs dat zij moesten volgen voordat zij de door hen gewenste opleiding konden gaan volgen.

Gezinshereniging

Registratiedata van de Immigratie en Naturalisatie Dienst (IND) (peildatum 31 december 2017; berekeningen WODC) met betrekking tot Syrische, Eritrese en Afghaanse AMV's in het cohort 2015 laten zien dat voor 87,5% van hen een aanvraag is gedaan voor hereniging met ouders en broers/zussen⁶⁹ (9 van de 10 Eri-

⁶⁹ Binnen drie maanden na de inwilliging van het asielverzoek kunnen AMV's een nareisaanvraag indienen voor hereniging met hun ouders onder bijzondere voorwaarden. De broers en zussen van de AMV kunnen verblijf bij

trese en Syrische AMV's en slechts 6 van de 10 Afghaanse AMV's). Als gekeken wordt naar aanvragen waarover een beslissing is genomen, laat het aantal toegewezen aanvragen belangrijke verschillen zien tussen nationaliteiten: 17% van de aanvragen van Eritrese en 16% van die van Afghaanse AMV's werd toegewezen, vergeleken met 82% van die van de Syrische AMV's.

Net als in de cohortpopulatie van top-3 nationaliteiten, vroegen bijna alle geïnterviewde AMV's van wie het asielverzoek was geaccepteerd gezinshereniging aan. In de meerderheid van de gevallen betrof de aanvraag een of beide ouders; ongeveer een derde gaf aan dat er ook een aanvraag voor hun broers of zussen was ingediend. Ten tijde van het interview was een aantal respondenten herenigd met hun ouders en waren sommigen in afwachting van hun komst nadat de aanvraag was ingewilligd. Dit was vooral het geval bij Syrische respondenten. Niet alle ouders kwamen echter daadwerkelijk naar Nederland, ook al was de aanvraag toegewezen. De redenen waren dat het onmogelijk was veilig (uit) te reizen binnen of uit het land van herkomst, dat ouders van gedachten waren veranderd, of onenigheid tussen de ouders.

Gezinshereniging was een essentieel onderwerp voor de AMV's in het onderzoek. De procedure en/of de uitkomst van de aanvraag voor gezinshereniging had implicaties voor veel aspecten in het leven van de respondenten. Het resultaat van de aanvraag was belangrijk voor hun algemene tevredenheid, maar ook voor hun welzijn, schoolgaan, en soms voor hun toekomstplannen. Het al dan niet inwilligen van hun aanvraag had ook invloed op hun relaties met mentoren en jeugdbeschermers.

Toekomstplannen

Ongeacht de uitkomst van hun asielaanvraag, zag de meerderheid van de geïnterviewde AMV's een toekomst in Nederland voor zich, in ieder geval voor de komende tien jaar. Voor veel respondenten waren de belangrijkste redenen hiervoor toekomstperspectieven en/of het aangepast zijn aan de Nederlandse taal en levenswijze. Ongeveer een derde van de respondenten was onzeker over waar zij in de toekomst zouden wonen, omdat dit iets is om samen met de familie te bespreken (in het geval van de Syrische respondenten), of omdat hun situatie zo onzeker is dat zij zich niet kunnen voorstellen hoe hun toekomst er uit zal zien (Afghaanse respondenten met een afgewezen asielaanvraag). Onze bevindingen komen overeen met de ervaringen van de jeugdbeschermers, die opmerken dat AMV's die komen, komen om te blijven.

Het feit dat deze jongeren van plan zijn voorlopig in Nederland te blijven betekent echter niet dat zij andere minderjarigen aan zouden raden om ook op eigen houtje te komen. De helft van de respondenten (allemaal Afghanen of Eritreeërs) zou dit afraden wegens de gevaarlijke reis. Daarentegen zou een grote meerderheid van Syrische respondenten andere minderjarigen adviseren om naar Nederland te komen, meestal vanwege betere toekomstperspectieven.

Slotopmerkingen

Voor de meerderheid van de respondenten was Nederland bij vertrek *niet* de voorgenomen bestemming. Indien AMV's bewust kozen om naar Nederland te komen, waren de meest voorkomende redenen het beeld/de reputatie van het land wat betreft procedures en toekomstmogelijkheden. De meerderheid van de respon-

de ouders krijgen op grond van artikel 8 van het Europees Verdrag voor de Rechten van de Mens (EVRM) (indien aan de voorwaarden wordt voldaan).

denten die bij vertrek doorgaans vage positieve associaties hadden met Nederland, verzamelde meer informatie tijdens de reis. Sommigen kwamen bij toeval in Nederland terecht.

AMV's in ons onderzoek van wie de asielaanvraag was toegewezen, waren over het algemeen tevreden met hun leven in Nederland. We hebben echter geen AMV's geïnterviewd die volgens hun jeugdbeschermers psychisch niet sterk genoeg waren om deel te nemen aan dit onderzoek en we kunnen de mogelijkheid van sociaal wenselijke antwoorden niet uitsluiten. Wat betreft de migratieverhalen hebben we geen reden om te denken dat bias een rol speelt, aangezien de meeste respondenten openhartig spraken over hoe en waarom zij in Nederland terecht gekomen waren. Het is echter mogelijk dat de verdeling van genoemde redenen om in Nederland terecht te komen, verschillend is in de totale 2015 cohortpopulatie AMV's. Alles samengenomen is het duidelijk dat de AMV's met wie wij spraken graag een toekomst in Nederland willen opbouwen, ongeacht of ze doelbewust of toevallig in Nederland zijn geëindigd, en ongeacht hun verblijfsstatus. Echter, mislukte of uitgestelde gezinshereniging beïnvloedt het welzijn van deze jongeren en kan een obstakel vormen voor hun integratie in de Nederlandse maatschappij.

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