Summary

Luanda-Holanda; irregular (asylum)migration from Angola to the Netherlands

1. Introduction

In 1996 roughly 2,600 Angolans lived in the Netherlands. Since the end of the nineties this number grew considerably. From 1998 to 2003 more than 10,000 Angolans applied for asylum in the Netherlands; more than in any other European country in the same period. In the same period roughly 15,000 Angolans applied for asylum in the rest of Europe. Almost half of the Angolan asylum seekers were so-called ‘unaccompanied minors’; persons who claimed to be under eighteen years of age and had applied for asylum without being accompanied by parents or other family members. The process of (irregular) (asylum) migration from Angola has hardly been studied and their reasons for applying for asylum in the Netherlands is are unclear. Why have they ended up applying for asylum in this far away country? And what has been their modus operandi of passing the borders of ‘Fortress Europe’? The central research-questions in this study are why and how these Angolan asylum seekers have migrated to the Netherlands. Understanding the Angolan migration-cycle can contribute to explain other migration processes and expand the already existing theoretical and empirical knowledge with regard to (irregular) (asylum) migration.

2. Theoretical framework

With regard to the ‘why-question’ literature on the motivation of migration is analysed. It is common to distinguish two types of migrants: survival migrants and opportunity seeking migrants. The first type of migrants predominantly leave their country because they are forced to migrate; the situation they are in, leaves no other choice but to leave. The second type of migrants hope that they can improve their livelihood by migrating. The traditional push-pull paradigm stresses that people are pushed to migrate from a place with poor social, political or economical conditions and attracted - pulled - to a destination with better living conditions. The fundamental assumption is that the more disadvantaged a place is, the more likely it will produce out migration and the more advantaged a place is, the more likely it will attract migrants.

Migration can be explained on different levels. Based on Becker’s rational choice theory, it is argued that migration on a micro-level is guided by economical principles. On the basis of this theory it is suggested that individual migrants act on the basis of a cost-benefit analysis and that individual migrants are thus most likely to migrate to a place where they hope to find better working conditions or better wages. Migration can also be explained on a meso-level. In this regard the decision making process of the individual migrant is not seen as a central feature of migration processes, theories on a meso-level rather focus on the role of the social network of migrants. The social network approach emphasizes the role of family and friends during the process of migration. Members of the social network might facilitate migrants during their travels and may influence the decision making process where migrants want to migrate to. Migration can finally be explained on a macro-level by considering migration movements as being part of a complex network structure that is influenced by historical, economical, political, international and institutional relations. The systems theory argues that bi- and multilateral relations and political decisions based on these relations may shape migration movements. As many Angolans who migrated to the Netherlands have applied for asylum, specific literature on asylum migration is studied. This literature is characterized by discussion whether asylum seekers are predominantly survival migrants or whether they are predominantly opportunity seeking migrants that use the asylum procedure for strategic purposes. Another point of debate is whether asylum seekers can choose the country of destination themselves, or if the country of destination is based on coincidence or decided by human smugglers. Finally, it is analysed to what extend relatively ‘attractive’ asylum policies in European countries have a pull-effect on asylum seekers.

With regard to the ‘how-question’ an analysis is made of the literature that discusses the organisation of migration. Over the last decade various academics have emphasised the growing importance and influence of human smugglers on (asylum)migration. In relation to migration to the Netherlands, various Dutch studies about the migration process of asylum seekers find support for the idea that human smugglers (have) influence(d) the migration process of asylum seekers more and more. Various studies conclude that the majority of asylum seekers in the Netherlands has received assistance of human smugglers.

When discussing human smuggling, various organisational typologies can be identified. According to a range of authors for instance, organised crime syndicates that are also engaged in other illegal activities, have penetrated the
highly profitable human smuggling market, attracted by its huge profit margins. Smugglers would ‘lure’ or ‘recruit’ potential migrants to make use of their services and sometimes on purpose paint an extremely positive picture of possible destinations. Violence and threats are said to be used as tools to control migrants. Apart from professional human smuggling organisations also networks of different ‘smaller fish’ are said to be active in the smuggling market. Some authors for instance describe human smuggling to Europe as a ‘cottage industry’ instead of a ‘business’. The same authors who sketch for instance Chinese human smuggling as predominantly organised, also point to the existence of a more diverse market where individuals and smaller groups are active. The archetypical image of human smuggler in general however remains the unknown ‘professional’ group that manages (parts of) the irregular migration and makes huge profits. There is also a range of authors who indicate that the influence of commercial human smuggling organisations on (asylum) migration may be overestimated. Their studies show that assistance from people within the social network of migrants may (also) play a crucial role in the process of irregular migration of asylum seekers. Family and friends in other words could also be actively engaged in helping irregular migrants to cross borders and assist them during their initial stay.

3. Methodology

Various research-methods were used during the period 2003-2006 in order to answer the research-questions. Studying irregular migrants is a difficult process, since the objects of study by definition try to keep their methods of traveling and survival out of sight. Because there is a scarcity of information, triangulation was used. One uses different sources of data and compares and verifies these various data. For this study five different sources of data were used and compared. Information was sought in the Netherlands, Angola, Portugal and the United Kingdom. In the first place - in addition to general literature about migration - all available literature on Angolan migration to Europe was studied. A second source consisted of all the files (N=5) from the Netherlands Prosecuting Service regarding human smuggling cases with Angolan suspects. Thirdly an a-select sample of files (N=150) from the Dutch Immigration Services (IND) were analysed. Fourthly interviews (N=105) were held with key informants, so-called ‘experts’. An expert could be anyone who might have any knowledge about the process of (irregular) migration from Angola; from historians and social workers to diplomats and immigration officers. The fifth method of information gathering turned out to be most fruitful and useful. It consisted of conversations (N=150) with Angolan (potential) migrants, returnees, their friends and family members. The respondents were found by way of snowball sampling with various zero-stage respondents. The author, without interference of translators, spoke personally with all respondents. In many instances they talked in Portuguese - the most common language in Angola – but sometimes also in Dutch or English. Not just migrants who had migrated to the Netherlands were contacted, but also people who had migrated – or wanted to migrate – to other European countries. In most instances the conversations took place in an informal setting. The author had introduced himself and the research quite ‘wide-ranging’ and said he was writing a book about the relation between Angola and the Netherlands, or about Angolan migration. During the conversations there was no taping. Notes were only made after the interview was over. With some respondents conversations have taken as short as ten minutes, others were spoken more frequently. Because of ethical considerations only respondents that the researcher believed to be eighteen years of age or older were contacted. All information the respondents and experts have given is used anonymously and confidentially. In some instances details about the respondents barring no relevance to research questions were altered to guarantee absolute anonymity.

4. Angola

Before discussing the motivation for Angolans to leave their country, a short introduction of Angolan modern history will be given. Angola is situated in the south of Africa, neighbouring the countries Namibia, Congo and Zambia. The country was engaged in a civil war since its independence from Portugal in 1975 until 2002. MPLA-government troops fought UNITA-rebels for almost three decades. The stakes changed from political influence during the cold war to the control of natural resources during the nineties. Although the country is rich in oil and diamonds and has an extremely rich elite, the majority of its population up to his day has remained extremely poor. Because of intense fighting since the seventies, throughout recent history Angola has known millions of internally displaced persons (IDP’s). Hundreds of thousands of refugees have fled to neighbouring countries.

Apart from moving within Africa, Angolans have ever since the seventies also travelled to other continents. With Angola being a socialist country until the beginning of the nineties, many students had the opportunity to study with bursaries in other socialist countries like Cuba, the Soviet-Union and in Eastern Europe. The elite could travel around the world for holiday- or business purposes. Parents who could afford this, sent their children to
Portugal to escape military conscription and study at Portuguese high schools and universities. Young men travelled especially to Portugal in search of work. In the end of the eighties the first Angolans started applying for asylum in Europe.

After a short period of peace from 1990 until 1992, fighting started again because UNITA did not accept the election results. According to many respondents, this episode marks a breaking-point in the migration history from Angola. The Angolan people had lost faith in a peaceful future, inflation rates grew day by day and many Angolans were again forced to migrate to bordering countries. People who could afford it migrated to Europe where they applied for asylum. As in many African societies, Angola also knew a group people who were neither extremely rich, nor extremely poor and made their money by working in the informal ‘buy-and-sell’ economy. Apart from a small elite and a large majority of very poor Angolans, one could therefore argue that in the eighties and nineties Angola also had an economical ‘middle class’. Mostly this group wanted – and had the opportunity – to leave Angola during the nineties.

The civil war ended in 2002 with the death of UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi. From that moment on fewer and fewer Angolans have applied for asylum in Europe.


Around the millennium Angola was engaged in a civil war, had a high numbers of internally displaced persons relative to the total population and had a low ranking on the Human Development Index and a low life expectancy. These factors might be considered as the overriding push-factors to leave Angola. At first many of the Angolan respondents also mentioned the overall deprived situation in their country as a reason to leave. “People are dying on the street”, “We have been in war for more than twenty years now.” were some of the standard stories they told. But as the conversation lengthened and we came to speak about their individual reasons and motives to migrate, it turned out that most respondents belonged to the economical middle class, originating from the capital Luanda, or provincial capitals such as Benguela, Huambo, Malanje and Lubango. Apart from Huambo and Malanje, since the beginning of the nineties direct consequences of war had just hardly reached these cities. Consequently few of the respondents had suffered direct life-threatening situations during the war. Most of those the researcher spoke, reported therefore that they had not left Angola because of direct fear to be persecuted or killed. More or less six push-factors on a micro-level that are related to the civil war and the overall socially deprived situation in Angola can be identified.

Primarily fear of being conscripted for military service constituted an important reason wanting to leave Angola. There was a strong correlation between the intensified pressure to conscript for military service from 1998 onwards and the desire to leave the country. For male teenagers the possibility of having to serve in the Angolan army was very realistic. Serving in the army was dangerous and could last several years. This threat was for youngsters - as for their parents – a crucial reason for wanting to leave the country.

But fear of conscription for military service cannot be seen as the overriding push-factor. Another important second reason to leave Angola were the poor study facilities. Many respondents said that the meagre quality of Angola’s universities and difficulties with entering higher education had pushed them to migrate to other countries. The bursaries for socialist countries that had been available in the eighties had disappeared after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Parents however still wanted their children to study on good universities outside Angola. Therefore they had started to send their children to universities in especially South-Africa and Namibia during the nineties. At a certain moment there were rumours that children could also live and study for free in certain European countries, so then they started sending their children to Europe.

The other four identified individual factors that had made Angolans leave their country were the high unemployment rate in Angola, poor and expansive housing conditions in especially Luanda, the desire to set up commercial activities in Europe and ‘personal’ reasons, such as family problems or the desire to see more of the world. It is difficult to quantify which of the above mentioned push-factors was most important or of overriding importance to leave. In most instances a combination of push-factors made people leave.

A specific feature of Angolan migration - and especially why they ever started applying for asylum in Europe - is related to the migration process from Congo. Already since the eighties Congolese migrants had started to apply for asylum in European countries like France and Belgium on a considerable scale. Especially members of the ethnic group of the Bakongo had been going to Europe for reasons of trade. Because of cheap flight tickets and a
less stringent border control they had preferred travelling via Angola to Europe. In the capital Luanda they had been welcomed by Angolese members of the Bakongo and returned Angolan refugees who had once lived in Congo as refugees. The Angolan Bakongo were inspired by the travels of their Congolese counterparts and started migrating to Europe as well.

From the conversations it has become evident that most respondents have migrated to the Netherlands because of a combination of push factors in Angola and pull-factors in the Netherlands. Although the Angolan community in the Netherlands prior to the migration wave since 1998 was limited, on the basis of the conversations with the migrants, it appears that still mainly news from this relatively small group had made fellow countrymen decide to travel to the Netherlands also. Back in Angola people heard from relatives and acquaintances who lived in the Netherlands that their lives were good and that they were studying. Migrants who returned from the Netherlands to Angola for holiday purposes were very positive about living in the Netherlands and soon their friends and relatives made plans to migrate. In that sense a process of 'cumulative causation' started. One could hear also positive stories about other European countries such as the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, but few of those stories were as positive as those in the Netherlands. Various respondents claimed that at a certain stage it was just 'moda' - fashionable - in several high schools in Luanda to set foot for 'Holanda'. Before leaving, migrants reportedly sometimes did not even know anyone in the Netherlands. They had just heard general information in school or on the streets that the Netherlands was the place to go to. Primarily on the sole basis of the relatively 'meagre' information from friends and family that the Netherlands was “good”, middle-class parents sent their children to Europe and adults saved money themselves in order to follow their friends, family-members or vague acquaintances who communicated these positive claims.

Above mentioned push- and pull factors were derived from an analysis of the conversations that were held with Angolans and experts. The analysis of the files of the IND sketch a completely different picture of the background of Angolan migrants and their reasoning to leave their country. In the hearings most asylum seekers claimed that they came from a poor (rural) background and were transported to the Netherlands by an unknown or relatively unknown person who acted as a benefactor and guide. In most cases they claimed that they themselves had not decided where to travel to, but this was done by their guide. The fact that many asylum seekers during their asylum claim could not give any relevant specific information about their background and travel and the similarity of their stories are an indication that not all have told the truth during the hearings. Especially the resemblance of the information that migrants have given during the hearings gives the impression that they were somehow instructed before their hearing. This indication is underpinned by the fact that various Angolan respondents have told the researcher that they themselves and many other Angolan asylum seekers had not enlightened their true story during the hearings. Due to the possibility that unreliable information was given during the hearings, the researcher has chosen not to use any information from these hearings to answer the research questions in this study.

6. Travelling to Europe

Travelling from Africa to Europe is not an easy task. Angola is situated in the south of Africa and thousands of miles from European soil. Virtually all respondents said that the option of travelling by land or sea had never seriously crossed their minds. It was considered to take too much time and to be far too dangerous. Therefore all respondents wanted to - and had - travelled by air. For this purpose just having an Angolan passport was not enough. A passport for Angolans was without any value if it did not have a visa. All EU-countries applied the same strict visa-regime for Angolan migrants and consequently, the most crucial hurdle to be taken by Angolans who wanted to migrate to Europe was to get hold of a visa.

During the conversations most respondents told that they had by and large arranged and planned their own trip to Europe. This means they had arranged - sometimes with ad-hoc help of others - their own passport, visa and flight ticket. Indeed, contrasting with one would expect on the basis of the literature study few respondents said they had used services of archetypical human smugglers who arranged and guided a complete trip to Europe.

For some respondents the strict visa requirements did not constitute much of a problem. They could quite easily get hold of a regularly obtained visa. If migrants had family members living in Europe, they could be invited by these family members who acted as a guarantor. Another tactic that was used to obtain regular visa was to join a group. If for instance a group of performers or a sports team were somehow permitted to travel to Europe, individuals of these groups sometimes (ab)used this permission and overstayed their visa.
Portugal was most frequently used as a ‘port of entrance’ to enter Europe with a regularly obtained short-term visa. Because of the traditionally considerable Angolan community in Portugal it was on the whole the most commonsensical route. But apart from that, most respondents also said that the Portuguese embassy was seen the most ‘easygoing’ embassy of all European embassies to arrange visas in a regular mode. Not only respondents had noted this, also [representatives of] the Dutch government and various other experts had the idea that Portugal was relatively ‘lenient’ with the issuing of visas to Angolans. This mildness can be explained by the fact that Portugal itself did not consider Angolan immigrants as a nuisance. Angolan immigrants spoke the Portuguese language and were therefore quickly integrated in Portuguese society. They usually did not apply for asylum and they did important work in the hardly regulated Portuguese labour market. Apart from that there was also an interest in allowing Angolans to travel to Portugal. As various experts noted a more stringent visa-regime might damage the good bilateral relationship between Portugal and the Angolan government.

But apart from travelling with regularly obtained visas, Angolans also migrated in an irregular mode. Some migrants used fake or look-alike (European) passports and sometimes adults presented themselves as parents of a certain child, when they in reality were accompanying someone else’s child. Most of the respondents who had not arranged a visa in a regular manner, however said they had used the services of middlemen - so-called ‘esquemas’ - who could somehow deliver official visas in an irregular mode. It is important to note that the term esquema does not exclusively refer to someone who arranges visas or helps in the process of migrating. The word esquema is used to name middlemen who arrange any service; from a driver’s licence or a housing plot, to a job or a shipment of cheap products. Some esquemas reportedly worked at strategic positions like in the Angolan government or at European embassies, but it was also possible they did not even have a formal job-description. People who just happened to know people who knew people who knew people (who knew people) who could somehow arrange visas could act as esquemas as well.

Many respondents informed the researcher that finding such an esquema in general did not pose an insurmountable problem. In the capital Luanda everyone seemed to know how and where to find these people. Various respondents claimed that they obtained their visa for free via their esquemas. Others claimed they bought their visa. The prices of visa that were sold by middleman could vary from a few hundred dollars to two thousand dollars; it all depended who one knew. As a rule of thumb, one could say that the cheaper the visa was, the closer the buyer was to the actual ‘source’ who could deliver the visa.

It was not uncommon that parents or other family members financed the trip of younger migrants who wanted to escape conscription for military service or study in Europe. Older migrants who mainly wanted to go to Europe to search for work or possibilities to trade saved money themselves, or rented out or even sold their house in order to pay the trip. It was not a widespread practice that several persons saved money in order to let one person of the group migrate to Europe.

7. Informal society

We take a closer look to the Angolan society, in order to explain how the earlier mentioned esquemas could get hold of visa. Because of the long civil war it is not surprising that Angola for a long time was a country where the informal economy was of vast significance and corruption was endemic. In the nineties it was one of the most corrupt countries in the world and as in many other African societies, the ‘unofficial’ was of more importance than the ‘official’. Just about anyone who could gain, earn, or win anything by bribing, being bribed or informally rendering services for friends or family members did this if he was in the position to do so. Angolans use a saying in this respect: O cabrito come onde ele esta amarado, or ‘the goat eats wherever it is tied’. More than in the European context ‘instrumentally-activated personal networks’ were of crucial importance. Especially in situations of crisis it is in general important to have a network of contacts that can offer vital, but scarce goods or services in an informal way. In the Angola of the nineties one of such important services was the deliverance of visa.

Angolans who wanted to migrate therefore first of all tried to use their informal personal relationships with Angolan officials who might be able to use their position or their personal contacts to arrange visas in an informal mode via European embassies. According to various respondents, high-ranking Angolan public officials could also use a more formal method to arrange visas for friends or family members. They could apply for a visa for their friends or family members via a so-called note verbale. This is a formal request from the one government to the other government. In case diplomats or other government representatives need a visa to travel, it is common to request visas by means of such notes verbales. Obviously it is very difficult to estimate how broadly this method was used in reality, but one could argue that there was at least a large pool of potential esquemas who were in the
position to issue notes verbales for their friends and family members. Angola has 30 Ministries with, apart from a
minister and two or three vice-ministers, a range of directors, vice-directors and heads of units. All these high-
ranking officials were in the position to write notes verbales.

Hence, knowing the right people and having access to them could clearly increase the chances to obtain a visa.
But what could one do if one had no family members living in Europe, no group to join and no influential
contacts in government? He was left with no solution but bribery. In other words; in the informal Angolan
society, migrants without the right network to contact esquemas who could fix visa for free had few options but
to turn to esquemas who sold visa. As mentioned before, in actual practice finding someone like that was
according to my respondents not all that difficult.

A valid and legal visa has to be issued by a European embassy. How cold esquemas arrange these visa? Most
respondents claimed that some functionaries of European embassies actively co-operated in the visa-schemes. On
their accounts employees of certain embassies were in other words corrupt and the middlemen knew where to
find these employees. According to most respondents and experts, again, it was easiest to bribe officials who
worked at the Portuguese embassy.

8. Transit in Europe

As mentioned earlier, most respondents have entered Europe via Portugal. No matter if they had travelled on a
regularly obtained visa or on an irregularly obtained visa. The period of transit of Angolans in Portugal before they
travelled to the Netherlands - or any other European country - could differ considerably. Roughly three types of
‘transit migrants’ in Portugal can be differentiated. The first group consisted of migrants who when they travelled
from Angola to Portugal already had the idea in mind that they wanted to head on to a different European
country. They normally stayed for a few days or weeks with relatives or friends in Portugal before travelling
further. Sometimes they paid for the assistance, but for the most part they did not. Migrants without contacts in
Portugal stayed in (informal) pensions. The second group consisted of migrants who had travelled to Portugal at a
venture, mainly with the idea in mind to work in the informal Portuguese economy. From the end of the
nineties onwards, illegal Angolans in Portugal however encountered stiff competition on the informal market
from hard working, well educated and cheap Eastern European migrants. This competition had made some
Angolans after having stayed in Portugal for a couple of weeks or even years travel to a different European
country. Finally there was a third group of Angolans who had lived five years or longer in Portugal before
travelling to another European country. Amongst others discrimination, low wages, poor chances on the labour
market and long and costly procedures made them decide to try their luck somewhere else in Europe.

When analysing the Angolan population in Portugal, it stands out that Angolans - like migrants from any other
nationality - hardly ever applied for asylum in Portugal. From 1998 to 2003 - the period in which 10.000
Angolans applied for asylum in the Netherlands - only 150 Angolans applied for asylum in Portugal. Apart from
the Netherlands many Angolans applied for asylum in countries like England, Germany, Switzerland or Belgium.
That so few Angolans applied for asylum in Portugal is peculiar, since based on the social network theory one
would expect migrants to apply for asylum in a country where they have many relatives or friends. The low
number of asylum claims in Portugal is however explicable if one knows that the asylum policy in Portugal was
not particularly attractive in comparison with other European countries. In general the type of reception was not
appealing and Angolan asylum seekers had very little chances of being granted a status in Portugal. Some
respondents and experts were convinced that the Portuguese desire to keep up good bilateral relations with the
Angolan government caused the low acceptation rate. A large percentage of the few Angolans that did apply for
asylum in Portugal, turned out to be sent back via a so-called Dublin claim to Portugal after a failed asylum claim
in another European country.

Travelling over land from Portugal to the Netherlands was in principle uncomplicated, since both Portugal and
the Netherlands are members of the Schengen-treaty. This means that migrants in Portugal could easily travel via
other Schengen-partners (Spain, France and Belgium) to the Netherlands. Some respondents said they had kept
their passport with their valid visa with them during their journey; others had left it behind in Portugal. Most of
them said they had not used any type of assistance during this stretch and simply travelled alone or with other
migrants by bus or train. Some who were afraid to travel alone, or unaware of the easiness of travelling within
Schengen-territory however had used some sort of assistance and for instance paid someone who drove them by
car to the Netherlands. Again, the type of assistance that was used within Europe, can hardly be described as well
organized archetypical human smuggling.
9. Applying for asylum

The asylum policy that was in place in the Netherlands around the millennium, had some features that were specifically attractive to Angolan asylum seekers. The most attractive feature was the fact that any Angolan who applied for asylum between 1998 and 2001 would not be sent back to Angola because of the insecure situation. In the meantime they could temporarily stay in the Netherlands and were taken care of by the Dutch authorities. For some years the Dutch asylum policy stated also explicitly that Angola lacked “adequate reception facilities” for children without family-members and that unaccompanied minors could therefore not be sent back either. They received a temporary status as well and during their stay they had the opportunity to learn the Dutch language, the option to study and the right to special housing. A third asset of the Dutch asylum policy was that procedures took on average very long. This was attractive in combination with the policy that asylum seekers could – under certain circumstances – receive a permanent status if a definitive decision on their request was not issued within three years.

Almost none of the respondents had known any of these advantages before they set foot for the Netherlands. Many said that they had just heard that the Netherlands was supposed to be ‘good’. Apart from this, they had no detailed knowledge. About the Netherlands itself, the asylum system, perceived weaknesses in the procedure, the living conditions, legal aspects, the social status of asylum seekers, sometimes even the word ‘asylum’– they knew very little to nothing. The first thing most respondents had done once in the Netherlands was to contact members from their social network. Only during those first days they became to know what being an Angolan migrant in the Netherlands meant. To the majority reality came as a surprise, not to say as a ‘shock’. Many of them said they had expected to arrive in a different Holanda. After arrival they noticed that asylum seekers lived a very sober life, had a low social status, that adults were only permitted to work on a very limited basis and that entering higher education proved to be difficult. The newly arrived migrants were given also all sorts of advices by their fellow countrymen what to tell during the hearings with the Immigration Services.

As noted before, many respondents were middle-class opportunity seeking migrants, rather than survival migrants. A middle-class Angolan who revealed his true background and motives to the Immigration Services, however had little chance to be granted a status. So on arrival, new migrants were guided by fellow countrymen to tell certain specific stories about their background in order to better their chances of receiving a status. According to my respondents, it was for instance said to be an attractive option to present oneself as a street child with a (very) poor background. Claiming having fled from the province of Cabinda - where after the peace accord in 2001 continued rebellion and fighting was going on - was another strategy that could be used to increase the chances of being granted a (temporary) status. Various respondents claimed that both the entire asylum procedure and all tactics and strategies involved were completely new to them. But once in Europe they felt they had no other option but to ‘play the game’. This meant that many of them hoped to create higher chances for staying in the Netherlands by fine-tuning their personal history to the requirements the Immigration Services set for a status.

Apart from presenting oneself with a different background, another aspect of the fine-tuning strategy consisted of not stating what route one had travelled. Most migrants specifically wanted to apply for asylum in the Netherlands, because this was the country they had heard such positive stories about. If migrants however during the asylum application revealed the fact that they had entered Europe via Portugal, they would be sent back to Portugal in order to apply for asylum in that country. The Dublin convention states one has to apply for asylum in the European country of entry. An almost foolproof strategy for asylum seekers to avoid being sent back, was to hide their passport and state that an unknown guide had transported them into Europe via an unknown route. In this way Immigration Services had little to no chances of checking the travel route and uncovering their true identity. Again, most respondents told that only once they had arrived in the Netherlands they were told by others not to reveal their true route.

After having applied for asylum, for most migrants a period of waiting and insecurity about the outcome of the asylum procedure started. Fearful of loosing their status as successful migrants, many of them said that they had not always communicated to their relatives in Angola that life in the Netherlands in reality was not all-positive. Some younger migrants had chosen not to inform their parents about the difficult situation they faced, since they did not want their parents to be concerned about their situation. Others mentioned the amount of money their parents had invested in their travel as a reason not to complain. Even migrants who returned to Angola were not always all clear and honest. The few migrants that did try to tell the truth were not always believed. Painting a realistic – sometimes negative – picture about life in Europe was simply not a welcome message. They were
sometimes accused of “wanting to have all good for themselves”. By means of keeping silent about the difficulties and highlighting the benefits of living in Europe, the myth of a ‘good’ life abroad continued. The result was that although many migrants had not found what they were looking for more relatives, friends and acquaintances wanted - and did - travel to Holanda.

10. After the war

After the peace accord in Angola was signed in 2002, about 4.500 Angolans without a permanent status had to leave the Netherlands. They had roughly three options. Firstly they could leave the Netherlands and try their luck in another European or African country. Secondly they could try to stay illegal in the Netherlands, accepting the risk that they could be forced to repatriate once they were detected by the Dutch authorities. Thirdly they could return to Angola on a voluntary basis.

Compared to other asylum seekers in the Netherlands a considerable number of Angolan asylum seekers has chosen to return on a voluntary basis, either on their own or with the assistance of the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Except for the fact that many Angolans were threatened to be expelled from the Netherlands, various other factors have made that people decided to return. The civil war had ended and the economy boomed. Migrants sometimes missed their family members, their friends, or the Angolan culture. This meant that sometimes even migrants with a permanent status decided to return to Angola. Apart from IOM also various other actors - mostly Dutch and Angolan NGO’s - have assisted the Angolan migrants before or during their process of (voluntary) return. But there were also parties that criticized or delayed the process of - especially forced - return migration, like representatives of the Angolan government and the Angolan diplomatic service in the Netherlands. Just as Angolan government officials have helped members of their social network to obtain visas, there are indications that Angolan government officials purposely delayed the issuing of laissez passers in order to prevent that their countrymen could be repatriated.

Once back in Angola returnees from the Netherlands encountered difficulties finding work. Many of them had not finished a study in the Netherlands and those who had, found out that their diploma’s were useless in Angola. Above all they had to compete with well educated English speaking countrymen who had studied in for instance Namibia or South Africa. On return they had to rebuild their social network and accept that - as some respondents said - “lost several years of life”. But not all returnees were that negative; some said they looked back at a rich experience and that they had learned a lot.

11. Conclusion and discussion

The central questions in this book were why and how Angolan asylum seekers migrated to the Netherlands.

One could argue that a combination of facets on a micro-, meso- and macro-level has shaped the migration process. This means that the different approaches are not fundamentally incompatible; regarding most aspects of the Angolan migration process insights of the various theories complement each other. On a micro-level, most migrants turned out to be predominantly young people (men) from the middle class who had left Angola in order to try to escape conscription for military service and the desperate situation in Angola and to strive for a better future in Europe. The patrimonial corrupt Angolan society offered them few chances for succeeding in life and in Europe they hoped to be able to work, trade or study. The migrants could therefore be described as opportunity seeking migrants, rather than survival migrants. The pull to travel to the Netherlands was mainly based on the positive claims from persons within their social network; on a meso-level in other words. This means that most respondents were not ‘lured’ or sent to the Netherlands by human smugglers as is sometimes suggested in literature. Rather, misrepresenting and beautifying stories from their own friends and family members had attracted them. Before leaving Angola they in general had no or very little knowledge about living conditions in Europe or asylum policies and - procedures. This leads to the conclusion that the Dutch asylum policy has not directly ‘pulled’ Angolans to the Netherlands. Indirectly however, one could argue it did. Especially because none of the Angolans who applied for asylum in the Netherlands between 1998 and 2001 was sent back, this contributed to the image of the Netherlands being a ‘good’ destination country. On a macro-level, it has become clear that especially the bilateral relations between Angola and Portugal and the Schengen-agreement have had a significant impact on shaping the Angolan migration process.

The study has given hardly any indications that in the Angolan migration process to the Netherlands ‘archetypical’ smuggling organisations have operated complete routes. Instead, the findings suggest that less organised types of
assistance from within the social network were far more prevalent. For getting hold of valid travel documents, various ad-hoc strategies were used. In general potential migrants first tried to arrange visas via members of their social network and only if that failed they used ad-hoc assistance of middlemen. Paradoxically it seems that because of the informality and corruption, archetypal large-scale human smuggling organisations could never become ‘big’ in Angola. The country simply had the perfect ‘infrastructure’ for migrants to arrange travel documents themselves. Many of my respondents did not feel an urge to contact a ‘professional’ smuggler, since the civil war with all its side effects had taught them how to paddle their own canoe in the Angolan ‘swamps’ of wheeling and dealing. Arranging visas with the ad-hoc help of esquemas was ‘business as usual’, just as fixing a driver’s licence or bribing a teacher to pass exams. Smugglers who wanted to operate a complete route from Angola to the Netherlands could therefore only establish a marginal customer market. Using human smugglers was thus restricted to those who did not have any knowledge about informal businesses or those who wanted to play it safe and did not dare to arrange the paperwork themselves or (have someone) travel alone. As a rule they flew on their own to Europe. Once in Europe - both during transit in Portugal and the first days in the Netherlands – migrants were first and foremost dependent on the assistance from their social network.

The Netherlands - like most EU-countries - have over the last years been confronted with less and less Angolan immigrants. This decrease seems a logical outcome, because since the end of the war important push factors have disappeared. Recruitment for military service has ceased and thanks to high oil prices the economy is booming. On the other hand one could argue that the reasons for the decrease of Angolan immigrants in the Netherlands are not that obvious at all. The war may have ended; still many push factors that existed in the nineties have not disappeared. Corruption is still endemic and therefore entering higher education remains problematic. Just a small percentage of the Angolan people directly benefits from the economical growth and a large percentage of Angolans is still unemployed. In the meantime a substantial Angolan community has been established in the Netherlands whose members might for a variety of reasons still claim that being a migrant in the Netherlands is ‘good’. If the Angolan society does not change fundamentally, there might be a chance that Angolans head to the Netherlands again.