AUSTRIAN RED CROSS

ACCORD

**Austrian Centre for Country of Origin
& Asylum Research and Documentation**

RESEARCHING
COUNTRY
OF ORIGIN
INFORMATION

Training Manual
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FOREWORD UNHCR

With the number of people who are forcibly displaced continuing to rise, and with mixed movements posing additional challenges, the need for robust asylum systems has never been higher. Accordingly, the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) aims, among other outcomes, to strengthen the efficiency and adaptability of national asylum systems, while safeguarding their fairness and integrity. While the current context may seem daunting, there are practical steps that States can take to tackle asylum backlogs and create resilient systems that can respond both to current needs as well as future challenges. One such step is ensuring that all stakeholders engaged with the asylum procedure have access to high quality country of origin information (COI). Accurate and timely COI is essential for informed and quality asylum decision-making at all levels of the asylum procedure. Having such COI available is also key for increasing efficiency of the asylum process, as it can lead to faster decisions at first instance, fewer appeals being lodged as well as a reduction of the number of decisions that are ultimately overturned on appeal.

Equally, high quality COI is the basis for implementing triaging and differentiated case processing modalities, such as simplified or group refugee status determination processes. These are important caseload management tools that can deliver efficiency gains in the asylum process while upholding fairness and integrity. UNHCR recommends that when introducing triaging and usage of differentiated case processing modalities, oversight and review mechanisms are carefully considered to ensure that the quality and fairness of the process is not affected, and that the system is sufficiently flexible and adaptable to allow for any (sudden) changes in the situation in the country of origin, among other factors. Here too, accurate and up-to-date COI is crucial to inform decisions on appropriate processing modalities and to adjust them where necessary.

UNHCR is proud of its long-standing collaboration with ACCORD, who are globally recognised as a centre of expertise in the field of COI. UNHCR has supported the development of this fully revised and updated edition of ACCORD's COI Training Manual. It offers a clear conceptual framework on the role of COI in asylum decision-making. In addition, it offers practical tools for COI researchers and decision-makers to confront the major challenges in the field of COI in today's world, including how to focus on relevant information for the asylum case at hand given the often overwhelming amount of information that is available in the public domain. Similarly, the manual provides concrete steps for assessing the accuracy and reliability of the available information and to recognise misinformation and opinions masquerading as information. I recommend the manual to all stakeholders in asylum systems worldwide, including asylum decision-makers, judges and tribunal members, lawyers and legal aid providers, and UNHCR staff.

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INTRODUCTION

ACCORD (Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation) is a department of the Austrian Red Cross and has been active in the field of Country of Origin Information (COI) since 1999, providing research services, conducting training and running the information system ecoi.net.

ACCORD, along with partner institutions, drafted its first COI training manual, *Researching Country of Origin Information,* in 2004, which was revised in 2013. These manuals set out various approaches to COI research and formulated COI quality standards.

This updated manual outlines the role and standards of COI in refugee status determination (RSD) procedures or in procedures relating to other forms of international protection. There is general consensus that COI has an integral and indispensable role in decision-making on international protection. While the core COI quality standards set out in the 2004 version of the manual are now widely recognised and accepted, there have been developments in COI research and presentation. This revised edition aims to describe these developments and explain how they apply to those using and carrying out COI research. The manual would not have been possible without the invaluable contributions, discussions with and feedback from international stakeholders active in the field of COI throughout the drafting process.

COI service providers and RSD practitioners are confronted with an exponentially growing amount of potentially useful information, making the task of identifying what is relevant and reliable for use in RSD decision-making increasingly difficult. The challenge of separating accurate information from misinformation and manipulation has increased, while there is a greater need to consult experts to contextualise and explain country situations. Users also expect deeper and more detailed COI provided more quickly. Against this backdrop, COI units are increasingly required to provide a wider range of services and products which makes their work more complicated.

In this context, the training manual has been written to be used by both COI service providers and RSD practitioners, i.e. decision-makers (administrative and judicial level) and legal advisors. However, it does not provide legal guidance for decision-makers or legal advisors involved in the RSD process. Where reference to principles of refugee law and jurisprudence is made, this is solely to highlight the role of COI in the legal context of asylum and human rights decision-making.

An overview of the content of each chapter, with particular reference to the most significant changes made in the process of updating the manual, is provided below:

Chapter 1: Role of COI
Chapter 1 sets out the role of COI in RSD procedures including how it is used, who produces it, its role as evidence and its scope and limits.

The new edition provides a revised definition of COI, it also expands the section on COI service providers and their activities, and describes and compares different institutional contexts. There is discussion about the limits of COI and its relationship with (country) guidance.

Chapter 2: COI quality standards and principles
Chapter 2 provides an overview of COI quality standards and ground rules on how to conduct effective research to support a fair and efficient RSD process.

While the research standards and principles formulated in the 2004 manual remain valid, this update has modified the definition of transparency by adding the aspect of 'clarity' to it. There is new material discussing challenges of applying the quality standards in practice. There is also consideration of the similarities and differences between the European Union Agency for Asylum's (EUAA) COI report methodology and the methodological concepts presented in this manual.

Chapter 3: Questions
Chapter 3 explains what 'relevance' means in the context of COI. Based on an understanding of the legal concepts of international protection, the chapter introduces the "research tree" method for developing relevant research questions from legal concepts such as state protection or internal flight alternative. Examples are provided to illustrate how to formulate research questions based on Refugee Convention grounds.

Chapter 4: Sources
Chapter 4 emphasises that knowledge of sources and awareness of the sources' quality are key to providing high quality COI. It discusses different types of sources and sets out the criteria for assessing a source's reliability.

A list of frequently used sources is presented in Appendix B.

Chapter 5: Research
Chapter 5 focuses on COI research strategies and techniques, and discusses cross-checking information. The new edition expands the section "Consulting oral sources" and introduces new sections on the use of data and figures and medical COI as well as touching upon developments in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and how these may relate to COI research in the future.

Chapter 6: Presentation
Chapter 6 considers how to ensure transparency when presenting research results. The chapter discusses different ways of presenting information, referencing, documentation, how to structure COI products, and quality control.

The section on "Social media" which was previously in chapter 6 has been integrated into chapters 4 and 5.

Appendix A: International legal framework
Researching COI is closely connected to the international legal framework on the rights of refugees and other persons in need of international protection. Appendix A provides an overview of core international law documents, and introduces the 1951 Refugee Convention and the concept of persecution and complementary protection.

Appendix B: Sources
Appendix B describes frequently used COI sources.

How to use this manual

The manual is suitable for new and experienced COI practitioners and RSD decision makers / legal advisors. However, some sections are better suited for readers with an existing working understanding of COI research who are interested in further discussion of the role of COI and the applicability of the quality standards in practice. These sections are designated as "Advanced Reading".

We encourage readers to use the manual according to their individual needs and interest. You can read the manual from front to back or dip into a chapter on a particular issue which is important in a specific working situation. The manual can be used for a variety of situations including training for COI researchers, as a reference for COI principles or best practice, for ideas on how to develop research questions, or for learning about specific sources.

We welcome feedback from our readers, please send your questions or comments to accord@redcross.at.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES
summarises the key points that can be gained from studying a chapter

TIP
provides useful or practical tips that can save time or effort

NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY
provides more detailed descriptions or definitions of particularly relevant terms or concepts

EXAMPLE
offers specific examples to further illustrate a subject or concept

FURTHER READING
provides references to sources that offer more in-depth knowledge on a particular subject

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Asylos for providing a forum for fruitful exchange with COI units from civil society organisations, including the Danish Refugee Council, the Swiss Refugee Council, the Dutch Council for Refugees, and the Asylum Research Centre.

Finally, the drafting team thanks everyone at ACCORD and the Austrian Red Cross for their input, feedback, and support.

1 ROLE OF COUNTRY OF ORIGIN INFORMATION

This chapter lays the groundwork for an understanding of the role of country of origin information (COI) within procedures for determining international protection needs.

It provides a definition of COI, describes how an event or a situation is transformed into information, and explains the functions of COI and the actors involved. The section on COI as evidence considers the burden and standard of proof. The chapter finishes with a discussion of the scope and limits of COI, including reflections on the role and integrity of COI in theory and practice.

Content of chapter 1

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Having engaged with this chapter, readers

» will be able to explain the role of COI in procedures for determining international protection needs
» will be able to define COI and describe its scope
» will have acquired awareness of the limitations of COI

1.1 The definition of COI

In simple and informal terms, COI can be defined as information about the situation in asylum-seekers' home countries which is used in procedures for determining international protection needs.[1]

More comprehensively, we define COI and its function as follows:

Country of Origin Information (COI) is information that is used in

– procedures that assess applications for refugee status or
  other forms of international protection,
– or for determinations regarding safe country concepts,
– or in procedures regarding exclusion from and cessation of
  refugee status or other forms of international protection.

Its function is to support legal advisors and persons making decisions on international protection in their evaluation of, for example,

– the human rights and security situation,
– the political situation and the legal framework,
– cultural aspects and societal attitudes,
– the humanitarian and economic situation,
– particular events and incidents,
– geography and history

in applicants' countries of origin, countries of former habitual residence, or countries of transit.

The account of the applicant or of another individual personally involved in the case is not considered COI but constitutes another type of evidence.

To better understand this definition, it is helpful to investigate it more closely. The paragraphs below cite the main elements of the definition and describe their underpinning concepts.

"Country of Origin Information (COI) is information…"
COI is information, it is not guidance for decision-making.

In contrast, policy advice documents such as the Country Guidance produced by the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) or the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) Eligibility Guidelines, or sections of documents such as the Country Policy and Information Notes produced by the UK Home Office, provide country-specific guidance for consistency in asylum decision-making.

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[1] In this simplified version of the definition we use the term asylum-seeker because it allows the reader to immediately place COI in the wider field of migration and asylum. A more formal and inclusive terminology is used in the comprehensive definition below which refers to "applicants in procedures that assess claims to refugee status or other forms of international protection". The terms applicant and asylum-seeker are used throughout this manual to refer to "any person who is seeking international protection"; furthermore, the terms asylum procedure, procedure for international protection, or international protection procedure are used as synonyms (see the entries for "asylum", "asylum-seeker" and "international protection" in UNHCR Master Glossary of Terms, revised 2021).

These documents may also contain or refer to COI and case law, as well as providing an assessment of the situation in a given country or regarding a specific topic.[2]

While country policy or guidance in the above documents provide assessments of risk for certain groups or in certain regions, the COI itself does not and should not provide such an assessment. For a more detailed discussion on the boundaries between COI and country guidance, please see section 1.5.

"…that is used in procedures that assess applications for refugee status or other forms of international protection,…"

This phrase specifies the setting in which COI is used. COI can be used in procedures relating to individual claims for international protection, or in group-based procedures. The latter case includes situations of mass influx, which may lead governments to grant protection to a group of refugees without ruling on each individual case. Even though the situation in an individual's country of origin is also considered in migration cases not related to protection, e.g. residence or citizenship, these types of cases are not included in the COI definition because of their different legal basis. Procedures assessing international protection claims have to meet particularly high standards due to the potentially involved risks for the applicants.

"…or for determinations regarding safe country concepts, or in procedures regarding exclusion from and cessation of refugee status or other forms of international protection."

Some governments maintain lists of "safe countries of origin" (and lists of "safe third countries"). Decisions on claims of people originating from such countries often follow special rules, e.g. they are made in accelerated procedures. COI is needed to decide which countries should be added to or removed from such lists.

Consulting COI also plays a role in procedures that decide on whether there are grounds for exclusion from refugee status or other forms of international protection (EASO, January 2017, pp. 10-11), and in cessation procedures based on change of circumstances in the country of origin (EASO, November 2021, p. 20; on cessation, see UNHCR, February 2019, pp. 29-33).

"Its function is to support legal advisors and persons making decisions on international protection in their evaluation of…"

This part defines the function of COI. By providing background information related to a particular case, COI research helps to shed light on the context of a person's claim for international protection.

It is the decision-maker's duty to assess an applicant's claim and their credibility by putting the applicant's account in the appropriate factual context. This includes the situation in the country of origin (UNHCR, February 2004, p. 3). Legal advisors need COI to build arguments to support their clients' applications.

COI can thus be used to corroborate the testimony of the applicant, or it can reveal inconsistencies as to the credibility of the account or as to how well-founded any fears expressed may be.

Although COI is a crucial aid to support consideration of claims for international protection, it is not always determinative and is supplementary to an applicant's statements. In cases where applicants can provide documentary evidence, it may be possible to reach a decision even in the absence of COI.

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[2] A number of governments and institutions use different terms for country specific assessments of generalised risk for a particular group or country situation, including country guidance and country policy (advice). We will use the phrase "country guidance" to represent all variations of this concept hereafter.

"…for example, the human rights and security situation, the political situation and the legal framework, cultural aspects and societal attitudes, the humanitarian and economic situation, particular events and incidents, geography and history…"

This part of the definition lists the thematic fields that COI most commonly deals with. Typical topics of COI research include: the situation and treatment of members of ethnic or religious groups; the existence of certain laws and their application in practice; information about legal procedures and corresponding documents; treatment of government opponents (real or perceived); incidents such as demonstrations, post-election or sectarian violence; cultural practices; the living conditions of specific groups; discrimination against certain groups; geographical details; information on access to medical treatment; or information on specific events described in an applicant's statement.

"…in applicants' countries of origin, countries of former habitual residence, or countries of transit."

In the context of procedures to determine the need for international protection, the term "country of origin" refers to the country to which the person would be expected to return if their claim was denied. In most cases this will be the applicant's country of citizenship, but for stateless persons this would be the country of their former habitual residence.

In addition, it may in some cases be important to gather information on the situation in countries of transit, including third countries in which the applicant may previously have applied for asylum. In the European Union (EU), this relates mainly to cases where the Dublin III Regulation determines which EU state is responsible for examining an asylum application.

"The account of the applicant or of another individual personally involved in the case is not considered COI, but constitutes another type of evidence."

This last part of the definition helps to delineate between COI and other types of evidence. Even though information provided by the asylum-seeker or a person close to them in the course of the procedure deals in most cases with the circumstances in the country of origin, it does not fall into the category of COI.

1.2 From event to information

To gain a clear understanding of how COI is generated, it is important to consider how an event or a specific situation is transformed into information. This process can be visualised as developing through the following steps. An example is used to illustrate each step:

EVENT / COI	Step	Example
EVENT	**incident/situation** something happens or is the case	**Example** In a small village in Pakistan, a young woman who refused to marry her cousin, is killed by her father.
	knowledge somebody experiences, observes or knows about the incident or situation	A friend of the young woman becomes aware of the killing because she overhears a conversation between two family members of the slain woman.
	selection/filtering somebody considers the incident/situation worth reporting or relaying	The friend wants to talk to someone about this killing because she finds it outrageous that nobody seems to care and the family seems to get away with saying it was an accident.
	reporting somebody actually reports about the incident/situation	She finds a local women's support group and tells them what she overheard.
	accessibility the information is made available in written or oral form, as images, or in other forms	The women's support group has a social media account in Urdu which it uses to alert the public about cases of violence targeting women.
	language the information can be understood or is translated	Researchers from a human rights organisation in Islamabad are collecting stories to write a report on honour killings in Pakistan. They find the social media post and research the incident. The researchers corroborate the story and mention it in the organisation's English report.
	retrieval the information is found	A COI researcher finds the report of the human rights organisation.
COI	**quality assessment** to be considered and used as COI it is important that the piece of information meets COI quality standards	After carefully assessing the source and cross-checking the information, the information is used in a procedure for international protection.

Figure 1: From event to COI

The infographic above depicts the steps necessary to bridge the gap between the actual situation or incident and what becomes known to the decision-maker. It also illustrates why not all country information that might be needed can be found in practice. Every step depicted is a potential filter in the process of transforming an event into COI. It is important to be aware that not every event or situation in the country of origin makes its way (without being altered or distorted) to those involved in procedures for persons seeking international protection in the country of reception.

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[3] On the way from event to COI, the transmission does not necessarily follow the same trajectory in each case, rather some steps may be skipped or take place simultaneously. For example, knowledge, selection/filtering and reporting can take place in a more condensed way such as when a person participating in a protest produces live footage of security forces beating protestors.

The fact that no information on a specific incident or situation can be found does not automatically mean that the event did not happen or that the situation does not exist, nor does it necessarily undermine the credibility of the asylum-seeker's claim. This is especially relevant when the country of origin lacks freedom of expression and an independent press. Moreover, some events might be reported in the local language, and may not be accessible to those looking for information in the country of reception. As for the information that becomes COI, it is important to keep in mind the many steps between the primary source and the researcher and take into account the effects that this process may have on the information. In some cases, trying to understand who the transmitter was, what piece of information was transmitted and in what form, what the motivation was for the transmission, and when this step actually took place, may enhance the researcher's ability to evaluate the information. For more information on this matter, see sections 4.1.1 and 4.2.

1.3 Functions and actors (RSD practitioners, COI service providers)

COI is used at different stages of international protection procedures by refugee status determination (RSD) practitioners. We define RSD practitioners as decision-makers and judges at first instance and appeal stages as well as legal representatives, counsellors and advisors. The process of examining cases often leads to the identification of information gaps. Depending on their resources and the infrastructure they have at hand, RSD practitioners conduct COI research on their own or use COI service providers (see section 1.3.3).

This section introduces the COI research cycle with different phases of COI research, the functions of COI, and it elaborates on the role of COI service providers.

1.3.1 The COI research cycle

The different phases of researching and using COI can be described as a cycle that begins with the formulation of questions related to a specific case and proceeds via the consultation of sources to the research phase. This is followed by the documentation and presentation of research results. The RSD practitioner evaluates and assesses the information against an individual claim and will include these results in a decision or an appeal. Alternatively, a cluster of cases raising similar COI research questions might lead to the development of Terms of Reference (ToR) for a COI report. Such a report is larger in scope than a response to an individual query and has the capacity to deal with broader topics or a specific topic in more detail.

Figure 2 shows the division of labour between the COI service provider and the RSD practitioner. The RSD practitioner is in charge of the case and formulates COI questions on the basis of the applicant's statements and other evidence. The questions are the central communication tool for the RSD practitioner with the COI service provider. The COI service provider takes these questions as a starting point for the research process. In this process, sources are consulted and the results of research are documented and presented. A decision-maker can make use of this information as a resource for assessing the applicant's credibility and for deciding an applicant's need for international protection. Alternatively, a legal representative may use the COI to strengthen their argument in support of their client's claim.

It is essential that COI quality standards (see chapter 2) are adhered to in each phase of the research cycle.
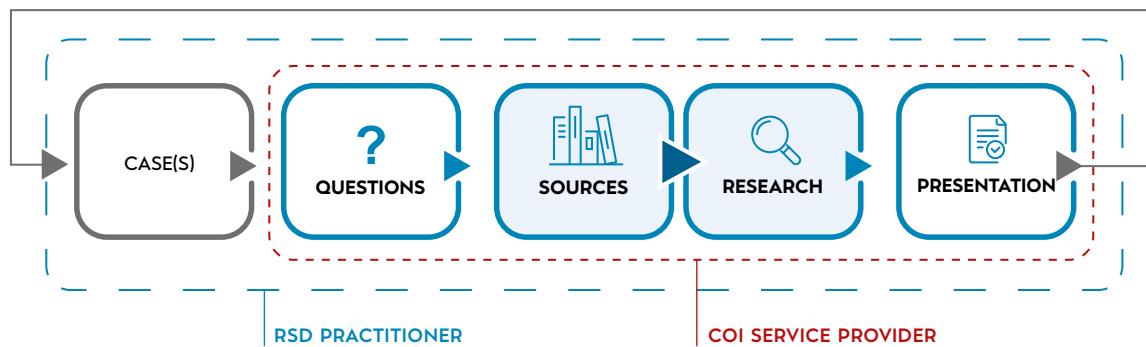
Figure 2: The COI research cycle

As noted above, many RSD practitioners have to conduct COI research themselves and use their own research results for their assessment. In this case, they should make a clear distinction between these two tasks. It is important to be aware that researching COI on the one hand and making decisions or constructing legal arguments on the other hand require different mindsets. The research process should not be influenced by other tasks of RSD practitioners, be it conclusions decision-makers have to draw or arguments legal advisers have to prepare.

1.3.2 Functions of COI

With regard to individual claims, COI first comes into play at the preparation stage for an applicant's asylum interview with a decision-making authority or for their interview with a legal representative. COI is also needed at the decision-making stage, when checking the facts related to the testimony of the asylum-seeker, for identifying other potential risks to the applicant and for assessing whether the person would be at risk of being subjected to persecution or serious harm in case of return to the country of origin.

Preparation

Both decision-makers and legal advisors should obtain an understanding of the general situation in the country of origin before an interview takes place. Depending on how much information on a case is available before the interview, decision-makers and legal advisors can identify important aspects of the claim beforehand and prepare questions they need to ask.

TIP

For the preparation of interviews, you may refer to documents such as country reports, country profiles or fact sheets. For instance:

COI reports of the EUAA (see https://coi.euaa.europa.eu)

The National Documentation Packages of the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (see https://www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/country-information/ndp)

The country pages of the COI database ecoi.net with the categories "Important Documents", "Country profiles", "Maps" and "National Laws" (or "Law guide"). Some country pages also contain a country briefing or refer to featured topics (see e.g. https://www.ecoi.net/afghanistan).

Checking the facts of a claim

The interview serves to gather the facts of a claim. This is a shared responsibility of the applicant and the decision-maker. During and after the interview, COI serves to contextualise or cross-check statements made by the applicant and to establish the credibility of their testimony.

In its *Note on the Burden and Standard of Proof in Refugee Claims,* UNHCR states the following regarding credibility assessments:

> "In assessing the overall credibility of the applicant's claim, the adjudicator should take into account such factors as the reasonableness of the facts alleged, the overall consistency and coherence of the applicant's story, corroborative evidence adduced by the applicant in support of his or her statements, consistency with common knowledge or generally known facts, and the known situation in the country of origin. Credibility is established where the applicant has presented a claim which is coherent and plausible, not contradicting generally known facts, and therefore is, on balance, capable of being believed." (UNHCR, 16 December 1998, para. 11)

In its manual *Building in Quality,* UNHCR states that doubts arising in relation to the applicant's testimony should be shared with the applicant for their comment or explanation. This includes any inconsistencies or contradictions with respect to COI. Applicants should have access to the same information as the decision-maker, so that they have the chance to challenge the accuracy or relevance of the information when it might lead to a negative credibility finding (UNHCR, September 2011, p. 26).

Supporting the assessment of risk of future persecution

COI plays an important role in assessing whether an individual would be at risk of being subjected to persecution or serious harm upon their return to the country of origin. It serves as a basis for the assessment of future risk which the decision-maker has to make when coming to their decision. In this regard, COI may not only be useful for assessing a risk brought forward by the applicant but may also help identify other potential risks that may be relevant in the case at hand.

Beyond its function in individual decisions, COI can also be used as a basis for formulating country guidance relating to certain countries or profiles.

1.3.3 COI service providers: institutional settings, target groups, products

COI service providers are individuals and institutions that provide COI products and services to support RSD practitioners. The main task of COI service providers is researching and analysing country information and drafting COI products such as COI reports, query responses, fact sheets, or documentation packages.

A large number of COI service providers (COI units) have been established in recent decades. Most of these COI units are part of either the public administration or the judiciary in countries where applicants are seeking protection, but there are also non-governmental or regional organisations that provide COI services. Most of the larger COI units operate in the developed asylum systems of Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

COI units vary in their institutional context, their target groups, and the limitations provided by their respective mandate. Some units have their own distinct methodology. They may or may not publish their products, and they differ with regard to the size and composition of their respective teams.

Institutional context and target groups of COI units

As for the institutional context, most COI units are part of the respective government agency or ministry responsible for asylum and international protection issues. There are a few government-operated examples of COI units that have a special institutional context: Norway's COI unit Landinfo is an independent body within the immigration authorities; in Canada, the Research Directorate is part of the Immigration and Refugee Board, an independent administrative tribunal; in Ireland the Refugee Documentation Centre is part of an independent, publicly funded statutory body that provides legal aid.

In some countries the respective Ministry of Foreign Affairs or their embassies also produce country reports with the main purpose of being used in procedures for international protection (e.g. Australia, Austria, Germany, the Netherlands).

Apart from the COI units operated by governments, there are a few units that are run by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Asylos, a global network of volunteers, provides COI for legal representatives of asylum-seekers in several countries, with the biggest share in the UK. Both the Swiss Refugee Council and the Dutch Council for Refugees have their own COI unit, catering mainly to legal representatives and asylum lawyers in their countries. The team of lawyers at the asylum department of the Danish Refugee Council has a COI focal point and is involved in drafting COI on a regular basis, partly in cooperation with the Danish Immigration Service after conducting joint fact-finding missions.[4] ACCORD, the COI unit of the Austrian Red Cross, provides information to all actors involved in the asylum procedure in Austria and also takes part in drafting reports for EUAA and UNHCR.

Extending beyond a single country is the Country Information and Guidance Unit of the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), which provides COI and medical COI (MedCOI), but also country guidance, for and in cooperation with EU+ countries[5] (EUAA, 19 December 2022, pp. 16-17; Annex I, p. 97). Furthermore, guidance and COI for RSD procedures around the world is also provided by the Department of International Protection of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Units operated by governments provide services and products for their own agency or ministry (which is in many cases the first instance decision-making body in the asylum procedure), some of them also cater for the second instance (e.g. courts, judges, tribunals). If they publish their products, they may also benefit other target groups. In general, COI units engage in bilateral cooperation with each other and within transnational networks.

COI-related activities or networks at an international level are organised by EUAA (EASO, June 2019, p. 6) or the Intergovernmental Consultations on Migration, Asylum and Refugees (IGC)[6]. For instance, EUAA coordinates multiple COI Country Specialist Networks (EUAA, n.d. (a)), aimed at fostering capacity and country expertise among governmental EU+ COI specialists; the EUAA Consultative Forum, consisting mainly of civil society organisations, comprises a thematic consultation group on COI (EUAA, n.d. (b)).

Variation in mandates and duties of COI units

A factor that may have an impact on the quality and quantity of a COI unit's output is the size and the composition of the team of persons who directly work on the creation of COI products (i.e. analysts, researchers). Team sizes range from a few staff members to about 30; the biggest teams of employed research staff[7] can be found in Canada, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands. Most units try to foster

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[4] The information in this paragraph was collected during an online meeting of the mentioned NGOs on 17 November 2022.

[5] EU+ in this context refers to the 27 member states of the European Union (EU), plus Norway and Switzerland.

[6] The IGC describes itself as "an informal, non-decision-making forum for inter-governmental information exchange and policy debate on all issues of relevance to the management of international migratory flows" (IOM, n.d.).

[7] Asylos has an even larger number of volunteers who engage in research, however most of them do so only for several hours a week (Asylos, n.d.) and can therefore not be compared to settings with teams consisting mainly of employed full-time staff.

some sort of regional specialisation to build up expertise on specific countries or regions. Some COI units focus on the recruitment and development of staff with wide-ranging generalist research skills that can be applied to research across all regions. However, the means and resources to implement this can differ considerably: some units have the means to hire staff with specific academic qualifications and language skills,[8] ideally with extensive experience in and considerable knowledge on a specific country or region. Some send their staff on regular fact-finding missions in the countries of origin; some are able to invest in building a network of experts and gain access to a wide range of contacts; some allow for extensive on-the-job training and staff development.[9]

COI units have developed a range of different job titles for their staff members directly involved in the production of COI. These include country analyst, country specialist, COI researcher, research specialist, COI analyst, COI expert or COI research officer. These different designations may in some cases be synonyms for the same function. Sometimes, however, they express different professional responsibilities and identities and may be based on different mandates.

All COI service providers must be experts in conducting neutral research and in presenting results in a transparent manner; collecting, selecting and analysing information are among their core tasks. In addition, some COI units require or allow their staff members to draw conclusions or assess the situation in the country of origin based on their own country expertise. This can contribute to increased knowledge of RSD practitioners on the issues at hand and make it easier for decision-makers to interpret the information in the context of the country of origin. From a methodological point of view, drawing conclusions or assessing the information presents a great challenge and is more complex than the mere compilation of COI. Assessing information might in some cases bring the risk of unduly simplifying matters or inadvertently introducing bias. Therefore, it requires staff members with a considerable level of experience and country expertise, and an institutional culture that is highly aware of the boundaries and pitfalls of this task.

A text containing information in a summarised, analysed or assessed form may be easier to comprehend for some target groups; at the same time, readers need more effort and time to trace information to its origin.

Notwithstanding the differences in mandate and practice outlined above (i.e. irrespective of whether assessment of COI is seen as a task of COI service providers or not), there is a common understanding that legal assessment and drawing legal conclusions are never part of COI. These tasks must be performed by persons with the necessary skillset for decision-making or policy development. For a detailed discussion on the relation between COI and guidance as well as potential conflicts of interests for COI service providers, see section 1.5.3.

Products and services of COI units

COI units have developed a range of products and services to serve their clients and target groups. These products range from country and thematic reports to responses to individual queries, all of which may include information retrieved via desk research, interviews with experts, or during fact-finding missions (FFM). Other products include media monitoring or briefing notes.

Most COI units publish at least some of their products; for a more detailed overview of units publishing COI see section B.2 of Appendix B. Examples of the structure of COI products can be found in chapter 6.

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[8] Qualification of staff in COI units usually comprise a wide range of degrees within the realm of social science and humanities. English is usually considered a compulsory language skill, and a language spoken in the country or region of specialisation may be required.
[9] The information in this paragraph was compiled by collecting feedback from COI units in January 2023.

Besides creating COI products, often based on report methodologies, some units offer services that go beyond this task. These services include running a COI database and training target groups to use them, offering consultations by phone or providing expert testimonies in court, conducting workshops or webinars on country topics or methodological issues, or compiling country specific case law overviews. Podcasts and blogs are used by COI units to reach their target groups through different channels.

1.4 COI as evidence

From a legal point of view, COI constitutes evidence in international protection procedures. This is, for instance, reflected in legislation within the EU. The 2011 EU Qualification Directive states that the assessment of an individual case has to take into account

> "all relevant facts as they relate to the country of origin at the time of taking a decision on the application; including laws and regulations of the country of origin and the manner in which they are applied." (EU Qualification Directive 2011, Article 4 (3) (a))

The 2013 EU Asylum Procedures Directive stipulates that member states shall ensure that

> "precise and up-to-date information is obtained from various sources, such as EASO and UNHCR and relevant international human rights organisations, as to the general situation prevailing in the countries of origin of applicants and, where necessary, in countries through which they have transited, and that such information is made available to the personnel responsible for examining applications and taking decisions; [...]" (EU Asylum Procedures Directive 2013, Article 10 (3) (b))

Based on the function of COI as evidence, it is necessary to briefly reflect on the burden and standard of proof in the context of international protection; this will help us to better understand the implications for COI research.

Burden of proof
UNHCR outlines important principles for balancing the duty of the asylum applicant to present and substantiate the facts of their individual claim and the duty of the decision-maker to produce necessary documentation that helps to ascertain the facts.

The UNHCR *Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status and Guidelines on International Protection* emphasises a shared duty between the applicant and the examiner when it comes to ascertaining and evaluating all the relevant facts:

> "It is a general legal principle that the burden of proof lies on the person submitting a claim. Often, however, an applicant may not be able to support his statements by documentary or other proof, and cases in which an applicant can provide evidence of all his statements will be the exception rather than the rule. In most cases a person fleeing from persecution will have arrived with the barest necessities and very frequently even without personal documents. Thus, while the burden of proof in principle rests on the applicant, the duty to ascertain and evaluate all the relevant facts is shared between the applicant and the examiner. Indeed, in some cases, it may be for the examiner to use all the means at his disposal to produce the necessary evidence in support of the application. Even such independent research may not, however, always be successful and there may also be statements that

are not susceptible of proof. In such cases, if the applicant's account appears credible, he should, unless there are good reasons to the contrary, be given the benefit of the doubt." (UNHCR, February 2019, para. 196)

In its *Note on Burden and Standard of Proof,* UNHCR writes the following:

"[...] In view of the particularities of a refugee's situation, the adjudicator shares the duty to ascertain and evaluate all the relevant facts. This is achieved, to a large extent, by the adjudicator being familiar with the objective situation in the country of origin concerned, being aware of relevant matters of common knowledge, guiding the applicant in providing the relevant information and adequately verifying facts alleged which can be substantiated." (UNHCR, 16 December 1998, para. 6)

For the assessment of refugee claims by vulnerable individuals, such as children, individuals with psychosocial or intellectual disabilities and, under certain circumstances, women, special efforts need to be made to gather relevant COI. This is particularly the case when individuals are not able to articulate why they left their country and what they fear on return. In its *Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status and Guidelines on International Protection*, UNHCR posits the following:

"Although the burden of proof usually is shared between the examiner and the applicant in adult claims, it may be necessary for an examiner to assume a greater burden of proof in children's claims, especially if the child concerned is unaccompanied. If the facts of the case cannot be ascertained and/or the child is incapable of fully articulating his or her claim, the examiner needs to make a decision on the basis of all known circumstances, which may call for a liberal application of the benefit of the doubt. Similarly, the child should be given the benefit of the doubt should there be some concern regarding the credibility of parts of his/her claim." (UNHCR, February 2019, p. 163 [Guidelines on International Protection No. 8, 22 September 2009, para. 73])

Standard of proof

Rules on standard of proof are of particular relevance to how much and which kind of information the decision-maker needs in order to decide whether an applicant has a well-founded fear of persecution. According to UNHCR, indicators for a well-founded fear of persecution include both the applicant's personal circumstances, as well as elements relating to the situation in the country of origin:

"While by nature, an evaluation of risk of persecution is forward-looking and therefore inherently somewhat speculative; such an evaluation should be made based on factual considerations which take into account the personal circumstances of the applicant as well as the elements relating to the situation in the country of origin. [...] Relevant elements concerning the situation in the country of origin would include general social and political conditions, the country's human rights situation and record; the country's legislation; the persecuting agent's policies or practices, in particular towards persons who are in similar situation as the applicant, etc. [...]" (UNHCR, 16 December 1998, paras. 18-19).

The term standard of proof refers to "the threshold to be met by the applicant in persuading the adjudicator as to the truth of his/her factual assertions" (UNHCR, 16 December 1998, para. 7). It is important to note that refugee status determination is not a criminal procedure. The facts necessary to recognise someone's refugee status need not be proven but have to be credible. Legal systems in countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States have developed a number of formulas to describe the standard of proof needed under refugee law for determining how

well-founded the fear of being persecuted is; for example, "good grounds", "reasonable chance" or "serious possibility". These formulas are meant to suggest a risk that is not remote and can nevertheless have a probability of under 50% (Gorlick, 2002, pp. 9-12).

In the leading case of *INS v. Cardoza-Fonseca,* the US Supreme Court assessed "reasonable possibility" and stated:

> "There is simply no room in the United Nations' definition [of 'refugee'] for concluding that because an applicant has a 10% chance of being shot, tortured, or otherwise persecuted, that he or she has no 'well-founded fear' of the event happening. [...] [A] moderate interpretation of the 'well-founded fear' standard would indicate 'that so long as an objective situation is established by the evidence, it need not be shown that the situation will probably result in persecution, but it is enough that persecution is a reasonable possibility'." (INS v. Cardoza-Fonseca, 1987, 480 US 421)

Civil law jurisdictions have been less formalistic about the standard of proof required. Reference is sometimes made to the "plausibility" or "considerable likelihood" of persecution, indicating a combination of a coherent and credible testimony, backed up by what is known about the country of origin.

UNHCR reminds states parties to the 1951 Refugee Convention that after "the applicant has made a genuine effort to substantiate his story" (UNHCR, February 2019, para. 203), and once the decision-maker is satisfied with an applicant's overall credibility, they should give the benefit of the doubt to an applicant regarding missing pieces of evidence (UNHCR, February 2019, para. 204).

The EU Qualification Directive 2011 has specified the principle of the benefit of the doubt in Article 4 (5) for those states that require the applicant to substantiate their asylum claim. According to the directive, where aspects of the applicant's account cannot be supported by evidence, the benefit of the doubt has to be given to the applicant if the following cumulative conditions are met:

> "(a) the applicant has made a genuine effort to substantiate his application;
>
> (b) all relevant elements at the applicant's disposal have been submitted, and a satisfactory explanation has been given regarding any lack of other relevant elements;
>
> (c) the applicant's statements are found to be coherent and plausible and do not run counter to available specific and general information relevant to the applicant's case;
>
> (d) the applicant has applied for international protection at the earliest possible time, unless the applicant can demonstrate good reason for not having done so; and
>
> (e) the general credibility of the applicant has been established." (EU Qualification Directive 2011, Article 4 (5))

Burden and standard of proof in connection with cessation and exclusion
The question of burden and standard of proof also becomes important in connection with procedures related to the cessation of refugee status under Article 1 C of the 1951 Refugee Convention. In situations where circumstances in the country of origin may have changed and cessation of the refugee status is considered, the "burden rests on the country of asylum to demonstrate that there has been a fundamental, stable and durable change in the country of origin" (UNHCR, February 2019 p. 105 [Guidelines on International Protection No. 3, 10 February 2003, para. 25 (ii)]).

Where exclusion under Article 1 F of the 1951 Refugee Convention is being considered (e.g. if the applicant has been a member of an armed group that has been involved in war crimes or crimes against humanity), the standard of proof is that of "serious reasons for considering" that the person comes within the provisions of Article 1 F (a-c). This requires credible and reliable information (UNHCR, 19 February 2019, p. 121 [Guidelines on International Protection No. 5, 4 September 2003, paras. 34-36]).

> UNHCR's Note on Burden and Standard of Proof in Refugee Claims, 16 December 1998, includes a discussion on the relevant standards in civil and common law jurisdictions
> https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3338.html

More detailed information on the legal context of refugee protection, including the 1951 Refugee Convention, can be found in section A.1 of Appendix A.

1.5 Scope and limits of COI

1.5.1 Scope of COI

As defined in section 1.1, COI deals with human rights questions, the security situation, the political, societal and legal situation, events and incidents, as well as the humanitarian, economic, cultural and geographical conditions in a given country. While COI is grounded in provisions of refugee and human rights law, its thematic scope goes well beyond the human rights situation in a particular country. An understanding of the political institutions, developments and power relations forms a backdrop for understanding rationales and motives behind persecution and human rights violations.

COI can help to answer two types of questions: protection-related questions and questions related to establishing credibility. An understanding of these two categories of questions helps to recognise what type of information falls within the scope of COI and when its boundaries are reached. Of course, in practice, protection-related questions and credibility questions often overlap.

Protection-related questions

> EXAMPLE
> - What is the current political and security situation in Cabo Delgado province in Mozambique?
> - How do authorities react to actions by founders, leaders or members of the civic organisation called Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH)?
> - Is homosexuality a crime in Pakistan?
> - What is the role of Shia militias in Iraqi government bodies?

Protection-related questions are closely connected to the substance of a claim for international protection. They deal with the applicant's fear of being persecuted on one or more of the five grounds mentioned in the 1951 Refugee Convention; or with violations of human rights which form the basis for a claim to complementary protection. The purpose of asking protection-related questions is to receive information which helps assess the risk an applicant might face upon return to their country of origin.

Credibility questions

> ### EXAMPLE
> - Did the Taliban ban the Afghan national boxing team from taking part in the Word Championship in Serbia in 2021?
> - Was the former mayor of Argun, Chechnya, killed in a road accident?
> - What kind of documents do refugees from Tigray receive when they are registered in the Um Rakouba refugee camp in Sudan?

In asylum procedures, the testimony of the asylum-seeker is the most important evidence. The assessment of the credibility of an applicant's statement is therefore an important element of refugee status determination.

To assess the applicant's credibility, their evidence has to be analysed with regard to its sufficiency of detail and specificity, its internal and external consistency, its consistency with available COI, and the statement's overall plausibility. COI requested for the purposes of assessing the credibility of an asylum-seeker may relate to specific events, persons or situations featured in the applicant's statement. Alternatively, such COI may relate to particular aspects of the applicant's country and region of origin, such as geography, topography, culture and history, which will be used to test the veracity of the applicant's statements. Such COI may also come in the form of background information on the political, religious or ethnic group the applicant claims to belong to.

Confirmation of details contained in the applicant's testimony will often not be possible. Credibility research of this type can be particularly time-consuming and resource-intensive, often without yielding the results needed, either in terms of the substance of the response, or in terms of the quality and reliability of the sources found.

RSD practitioners should make sure that the information they seek is crucial to the decision in the individual case. They should also bear in mind that an asylum-seeker does not need to prove all the facts of their case. COI can support certain statements made by the applicant, but even exhaustive COI research is unlikely to produce independent corroboration of every aspect of the applicant's statements. Where the applicant's overall credibility has been established, it is frequently necessary to give the applicant the benefit of the doubt on the remaining aspects of their statement (UNHCR, February 2019, paras. 203-204).

In February 2023, EUAA published the second edition of its judicial analysis document on evidence and credibility assessment in the context of the Common European Asylum System, which includes a compilation of jurisprudence. The publication was drafted by the International Association of Refugee and Migration Judges (IARMJ).

EUAA – European Union Agency for Asylum: Evidence and credibility assessment in the context of the Common European Asylum System. Judicial analysis [second edition], February 2023b https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2023-02/Evidence_credibility_judicial_analysis_second_edition.pdf

UNHCR – UN High Commissioner for Refugees: Beyond Proof. Credibility Assessment in EU Asylum Systems, May 2013 http://www.unhcr.org/51a8a08a9.html

The field of COI

A way of visualising the scope and limitations of COI is by drawing a diagram that allows us to map the "field" of COI, indicating the type of questions COI can address as well as the limitations of COI.

general country situation

FIELD OF COI

context of testimony,
credibility (past)

RISK
ASSESSMENT

risk of persecution
upon return (future)

applicant's personal
circumstances
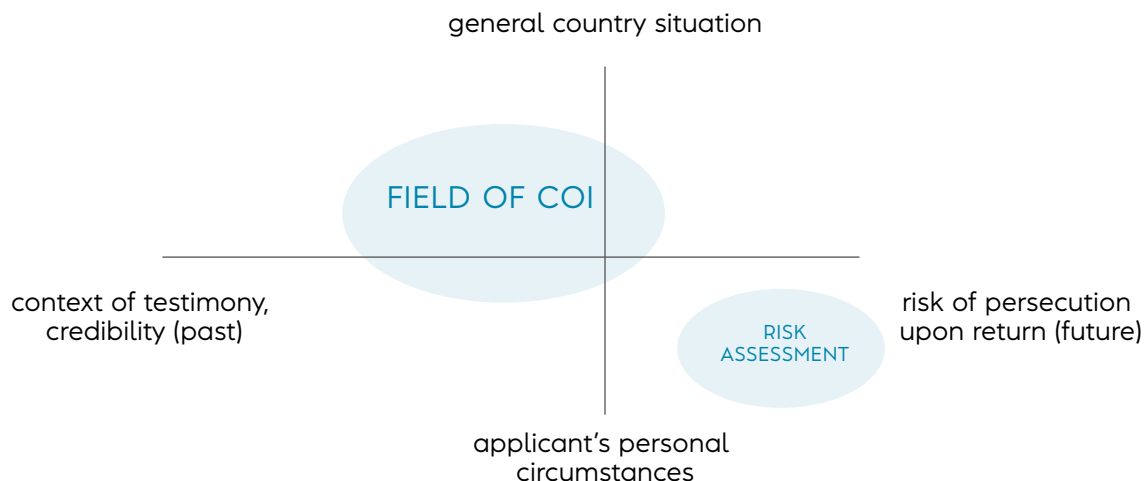
Figure 3: The field of COI

The horizontal axis depicts a timeline from the past to the future. Events that took place prior to the application of the asylum-seeker are placed on the left. Questions relating to the risk of persecution or serious harm upon return relate to events in the future and are placed on the right-hand side of the diagram. The vertical axis runs from information that pertains to the personal circumstances of an individual applicant at the bottom of the diagram to the general information about the situation in the country of origin at the top of the diagram.

As the field of COI in the diagram illustrates, the strength of COI lies mainly in informing about facts related to the general (human rights) situation in a country rather than in cross-checking details of an applicant's personal circumstances.

Thus, COI research is more likely to find relevant information from reliable sources when working on a question such as

"Do university regulations in Nigeria allow students to establish groups for the promotion of certain cults, and what is the situation of student members of such groups?"

than when trying to answer a question such as

"Was Mr XY a member of the Nigerian campus cult group called 'the Pirates' at the University of Ibadan from 2014 until 2018?".

The main exception to COI providing general information is when the question concerns a person with a high public profile, whose acts, statements and decisions have been reported in the media.

As the field of COI in the diagram also shows, COI relates almost exclusively to past events. While COI is an important input for the assessment of the future risk of persecution in the case of an applicant's return to their country of origin, COI research focuses on documenting past events as opposed to forecasting future events. COI researchers must not make assessments about future events as this is part of the assessment of risk and belongs to the sphere of decision-making.

1.5.2 Limits of COI

A number of limitations of COI are touched upon above. In this section we will take a more detailed look at the limits of COI.

COI is not risk assessment

COI research comprises the collection and selection of information, the assessment of sources and the analysis of the material compiled in order to present it in a clear and verifiable manner. Risk assessment on the basis of the information at hand forms part of the use of COI. It is up to the RSD practitioner to draw conclusions related to the individual claim and to make an assessment of future risk. In doing so, they should be aware of the difference between research and use and interpretation of COI, and separate them carefully.

For example, the question "Is there an internal flight or relocation alternative available in Somalia for people fleeing from Al-Shabaab?" exceeds the limits of COI by implying a risk assessment. Internal flight or relocation alternative (IFA/IRA) is a legal concept and COI can be useful and necessary to inform decisions on the existence of an IFA/IRA. Assessments concerning IFA/IRA and decisions on it, however, are in the hands of the decision-maker. Therefore, the research question should be rephrased (see section 3.2.4 on IFA/IRA).

The need to protect the personal data of the applicant

When conducting COI research, the applicant's personal data must be protected under all circumstances. Persons or institutions in the country of origin must not be contacted if there is a danger of harming the applicant or their affiliates. Be aware that the mere act of contacting someone in the country of origin may in itself give away key information, such as the fact that the applicant is alive and seeking asylum in your country. This may in turn constitute a new sur place risk of persecution or might place family members at risk.

For instance, if we want to find out whether an applicant was a member of an Iranian opposition group, it might be tempting to contact this group directly if we have its contact details. However, we must be aware that it could be possible for the Iranian intelligence service to intercept communication with this organisation. Thus, forwarding information about the applicant might endanger the applicant or their affiliates or even the organisation we are contacting. Therefore, in this case, this research strategy is not an option unless it can be done securely.

COI evidence is seldom conclusive

COI can help to foster understanding of the context of an applicant's claim; it may corroborate an applicant's statements; and it supports decision-makers in assessing the applicant's risk of future persecution. However, COI seldom provides conclusive answers concerning a person's credibility or their need of international protection. COI frequently leaves room for interpretation.

COI is often too generic

While information about the general human rights situation in a country of origin may be available, less information (or sometimes no information at all) will be available about people who find themselves in specific circumstances similar to those of the applicant. We will, for example, find a lot of reports and articles on a demonstration in Iran. It is, however, unlikely to find information about the participation of a specific person in this demonstration, unless this person is well-known and therefore reported on. Even if information about individuals who are not publicly known is found, it may come from sources with questionable reliability and cannot be corroborated.

The scarcity of information may particularly affect some women seeking asylum, such as those with specific intersecting identities. Information on elderly people, children, LGBTIQ+ persons or other vulnerable groups may also be scarce because general reports often do not consider the different groups and their specific living situation.

Sometimes COI is not available or accessible

There are various reasons why at times no information can be found about a question or issue at stake. The more restrictive the situation in a given country is, the more difficult it can be to obtain information about the precise circumstances in that country, due to restrictions placed on the media and independent human rights monitors. Limitations of access for international press or human rights missions are often aggravated by a lack of independence within the national media, self-censorship or restrictions on freedom of movement. The presence of international organisations, the communication infrastructure of a specific country or a functioning and diverse civil society are also aspects that influence the availability of information.

Other more practical aspects such as time constraints, limited research experience, or lack of access to databases also sometimes limit the information that can be found.

And last but not least, the question itself influences whether information can be gathered. A question can be too general or too specific; misspellings of names, places or groups can hinder the finding of results. Sometimes, even if there are sources able to provide information, they may not agree to forward information for the purpose of international protection.

Language constraints

In practice, one of the obstacles in accessing COI is language. The majority of documents commonly used as COI (UN documents, reports by international human rights NGOs, etc.) are published in English. Those who do not understand English may find that they have only a limited range of COI sources to work with. Conversely, a lot of information published in the languages of countries of origin, including reports in local and national media and information published by local and national institutions, remains inaccessible to those who lack the respective language skills. However, language translation tools can help readers to access information in languages they are not versed in.

1.5.3 Further reflections on the role and integrity of COI in theory and practice

After elaborating on the scope and limits of COI, it is worthwhile to further analyse the role and integrity of COI in theory and practice from a systemic perspective. These rather advanced reflections are intended to raise awareness for potential and existing challenges and thus to underscore the importance of COI standards and principles (introduced in chapter 2) in dealing with these challenges.

From a systemic point of view, the purpose of procedures for international protection is to produce a well-informed binary (yes/no) decision on whether an individual is in need of any kind of international protection. This outcome is based on legal considerations and takes information (COI) regarding the situation in the country of origin into account. This system can be depicted as a pyramid because the matter considered with regard to the country situation becomes more condensed the further you get to the top (i.e., COI can only capture part of the factual situation in the country; guidance can only consider part of the COI or the country situation; and the decision can only consider parts of the guidance, the COI or the country situation) (see Figure 4 below).
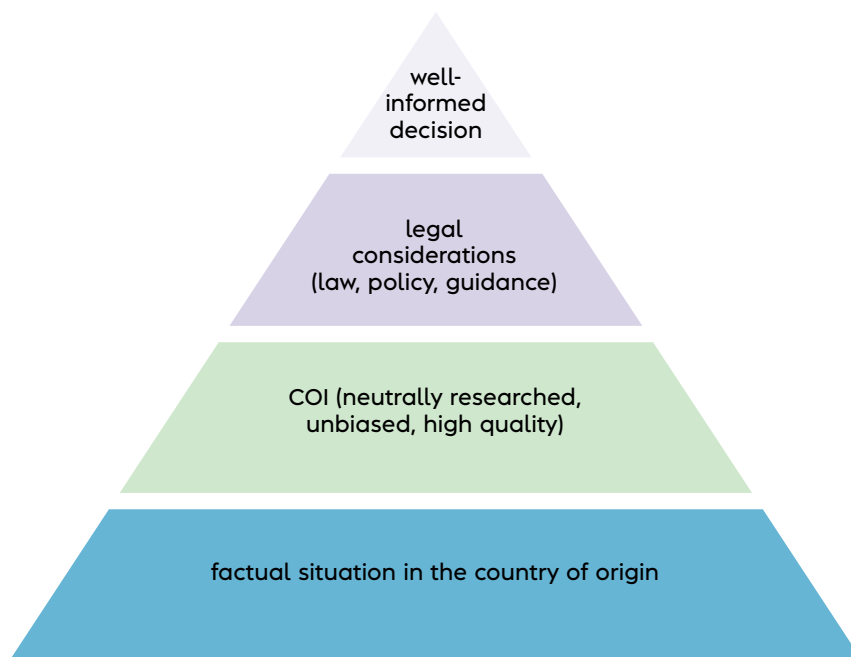
Figure 4: Ideal conception of COI as a link between country situation and decision-making

In this system, COI functions as a neutral and unbiased link between the factual situation in the country of origin and the requirements of the international protection procedure in the reception country (policy, guidance, decision-making). Here, the positioning of COI research between social science methods on the one hand and legal and policy decision-making on the other hand comes into focus. In academic literature, this relation was described by Van der Kist et al. (2019, p. 2) as a translation process in which "complex and fragile information about countries of origin […] is materially gathered, standardized and consolidated, and processually rendered into grounds for asylum decision-making".

There are however some challenges in putting the above theoretical system into practice. For a better understanding of these challenges, we first have to enrich the ideal conception of the system by adding some elements and questioning some of the underlying assumptions.

The first assumption to be questioned is that of the "objective" situation in the country of origin. This is based on the notion that the real situation in the country can objectively be described if only there is enough information available. However, what we are confronted with in practice is a multi-layered and facetted, often unclear, situation with (often hidden) interests of actors involved. We can only learn about this complex situation via sources, and these sources themselves have their specific perspectives, their interests, and their biases (see, e.g. Good, 2015, pp. 139-140). The aspect of reliability of sources will be discussed in detail in chapter 4, and it will practically help us to distinguish between sources that can be used for COI and others that cannot.

Another assumption that needs to be critically reviewed is that of neutrally researched, unbiased production of high-quality country information. COI units cannot be completely separated from their institutional contexts and their specific challenges, be it limited resources, lacking skills, growing pressures, methodological requirements, clients' expectations, or biases induced by the professional environment, or by personal views of their staff. Nevertheless, conscientious adherence to COI principles and standards (which will be laid out in chapter 2) can serve to curb these influences to some extent.

As with the other actors in the reception countries (decision-makers, officials formulating policy or guidance), COI units might – to a greater or lesser extent – be influenced by the political context of the

country of reception. This may range from political actors (e.g. the minister responsible for migration issues, political parties) trying to directly influence the outcome of decision-making at large to the more subtle influence of public opinion or advocacy organisations such as, for instance, diaspora communities or human rights activists. This more complex situation is depicted in Figure 5:
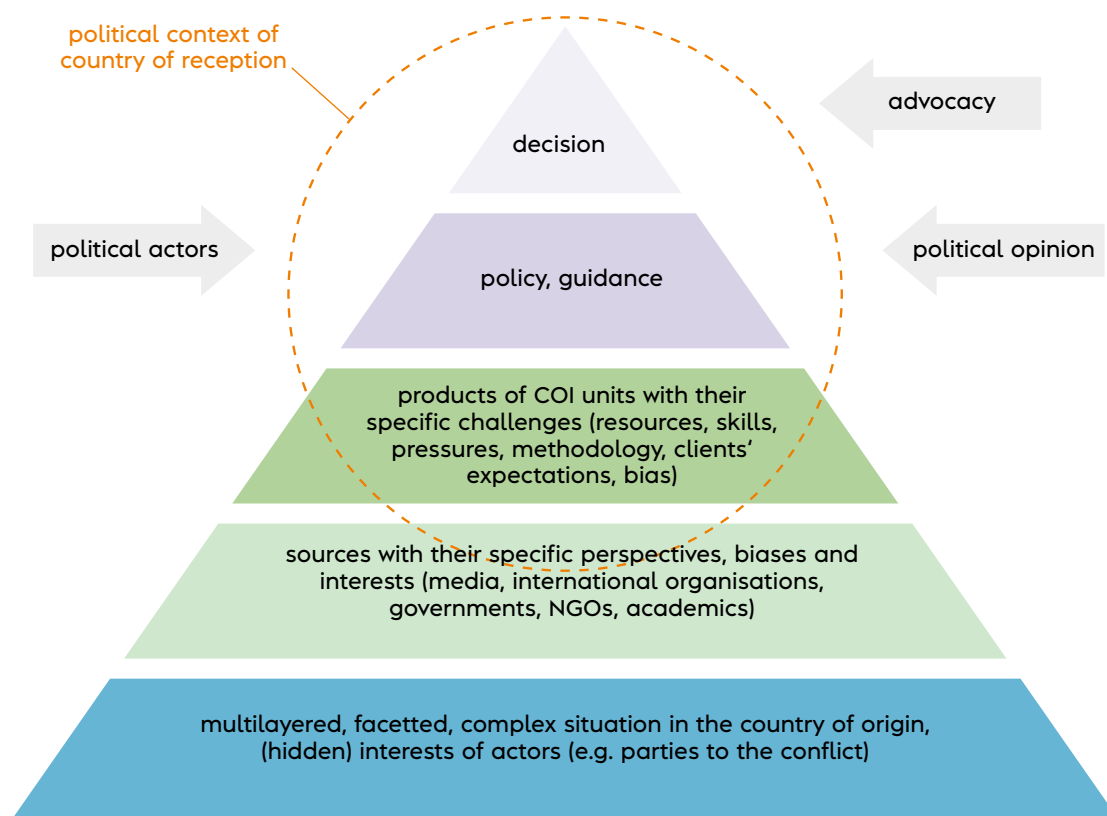
Figure 5: Describing COI and its context in a more nuanced way

The above description raises the issue of integrity when looking at the field of COI in theory and COI service providers in practice. In the practical context the integrity of COI faces many challenges, of which actors using and producing COI should be aware. This section further discusses different aspects of integrity of COI: 1. the demarcation between COI and country guidance (or policy); 2. the demand directed at COI units to provide information on personal details of asylum-seekers; 3. the independence of COI service providers from other actors; and 4. the challenges posed by new demands in terms of content, i.e. questions that go beyond COI and are nevertheless directed at COI service providers:

Aspect 1: COI versus guidance/policy

As mentioned in section 1.1, there is a boundary between country of origin information and country guidance (or policy recommendations). While this boundary is considered clear-cut by most actors in the field, it is sometimes blurred or misunderstood. COI practitioners and units should prevent the impression that country guidance is COI or that COI implies legal conclusions that amount to guidance. In order to emphasise that COI and guidance are not the same, the following is recommended:

▶ Whenever COI service providers refer to guidance in their own products, they should explicitly mark it as such. Guidance must not be referred to as country information and vice versa.

- When referring to COI used in a guidance document, the primary source should be indicated.
- When producing a COI document, COI service providers can refer readers to guidance documents that may be relevant for them in the given context.

There are different approaches on how closely producers of COI and producers of guidance cooperate, and there are some settings where the same people are tasked with drafting both COI and guidance. However, in general most RSD authorities have separated the production of COI and the production of guidance to reduce the likelihood of real or perceived influence of policy over COI, and enabling each task to be fulfilled by specialised staff with specific skill sets and responsibilities.

EXAMPLE

The European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) has a Country Information and Guidance Unit working under its Asylum Knowledge Centre. The unit includes two teams involved in the production of COI (COI Sector, MedCOI Sector), and the Country Guidance Sector that is responsible for organising the drafting of EUAA's guidance documents on countries of origin (EUAA, 19 December 2022, pp. 16-17; Annex I, p. 97).

Aspect 2: Research on personal details of asylum-seekers

In some cases, requests for information on personal details of asylum-seekers are directed at COI units. Background checks of persons applying for asylum are occasionally requested by decision-makers in order to decide on exclusion (e.g. because of war crimes), sometimes for testing the credibility of the applicant's account. These kinds of questions raise issues with regard to data protection, ethics, and working methodology. It may require a different skill set and additional research methods to gather this kind of information, and it can be quite difficult to distinguish which aspects of such research still fall under the scope of COI, and which go beyond it. For instance, if information is requested by law enforcement agencies prosecuting war crimes, this would clearly be beyond the scope of COI as defined in this manual, as it is not part of the procedure for international protection.

COI service providers have responded in different ways to this challenge. There are COI units that do not provide this kind of information, because they consider it to be beyond COI or because it is not possible to fulfil the task in an efficient way that still adheres to COI principles and standards. There are, however, COI units that have integrated this kind of work into their duties or have created sub-units dedicated to it.

Aspect 3: Independence of COI

The integrity of COI may come under pressure if other actors do not respect the independence of COI providers, for example in situations where these actors have a vested interest in COI products portraying the situation in a country of origin in a particular manner.

Examples range from strong interests (or perhaps even pressure) by political actors or advocacy groups (including diaspora communities, etc.), a nation's involvement in conflicts in a particular country of origin (e.g. when troops are stationed in that country, etc.), public pressure (e.g. when aid agencies participate in FFMs that have problematic outcomes from their target group's perspective) to measures taken by other countries (e.g. denial of visas needed for conducting FFMs). While the degree of independence and freedom from directives of some COI service providers may be clearly stipulated by their mandate, others may have to be more careful to avoid influence.

Aspect 4: New demands in terms of content, questions beyond COI

The clients or stakeholders of COI service providers may identify information needs that go beyond the scope of COI, but in the absence of better options they may assume that a COI unit is the best place to meet such a demand. However, even if it is decided that a COI unit has to deal with these needs, such tasks do not automatically constitute COI research.

Some challenging aspects of delineation have already been described above in this section. Examples of requests directed at COI units that might be difficult to categorise include, for instance, activities of actors from the country of origin in the reception country. Some COI units are also tasked with research not related to procedures for international protection such as preparing migration analyses, forecasts, recommendations or policy briefings, or with providing information on cultural practices and political conflicts in diaspora communities.

This may challenge the view of COI units regarding their mandate and the boundaries of their methodology and professional expertise. As long as their mandate sets clear boundaries it may be easy for COI units to deal with such demands. However, they may also be confronted with the need to formulate a position towards attempts to newly interpret or to widen their mandate. They may also have to weigh their institutional interests (e.g. avoiding competition by newly established units, creating new career opportunities for staff, accepting interesting new challenges) against basic considerations regarding COI standards and principles.

These challenges may force units to carefully navigate between demands and their field of expertise. They must strive for solutions in an uncertain environment without compromising COI standards. Especially in such circumstances, a heightened awareness of standards and principles and of the boundaries of COI proves useful for navigating the strategic development of the COI unit.

A critical stance on COI from academic literature

The reflections presented in this section touch upon a topic that, in academic literature, has been termed as the symbolic functions of expert knowledge in highly sensitive and politicised contexts. Thereby, the use and role of COI as a specific type of expert knowledge is assumed to follow a symbolic logic, while its actual content is not the reason for its perceived relevance. Following this approach, COI can have a "legitimising function" and a "substantiating function" (Boswell, 2009, p. 65; Rosset/Liodden, 2015, p. 27).

Regarding the legitimising function, the systemic value of COI is primarily to portray procedures and decisions as well-informed and rational, thereby legitimising the decisions' outcomes and the authority of the institutions involved (Rosset/Achermann, 2019, p. 64). In terms of the symbolic function of substantiation, expert knowledge is used to back up judicial decisions (Feneberg et al. 2022, p. 243; 265) or preconceived policy preferences (Boswell, 2009, p. 81). In the COI context, this can mean that COI is at risk of becoming instrumentalised for political interests, as indicated by research conducted by Rosset/Liodden 2015 and Engelmann 2014. However, if a COI report is disregarded as factually incorrect or partial, it is argued that this may in turn have a delegitimising effect for COI in general, or at least for the institution that produced the respective report (Rosset/Liodden, 2015, p. 27).

In this section, we have critically outlined the challenges of navigating the COI field between different stakeholders, multiple interests, and manifold forms of pressure. In essence, these highlight and underscore once again the importance of COI research adhering to methodological safeguards established by COI standards and principles. Striving to ensure the accountability and reliability of COI, these standards and principles are set out in more detail in the following chapter.

1.6 Summary of chapter 1

✔ COI is evidence in procedures for persons seeking international protection and supports decision-makers and legal advisors (RSD practitioners) in the assessment of an individual claim. COI is also used as a basis to inform policy decisions related to groups.

✔ COI is used during the preparation of the interview, to examine the statement of the applicant and to support the assessment of future risk. It helps to answer questions related to protection and to credibility.

✔ Due to the limits of COI, sometimes it is not possible to find information about a specific incident or situation. This does not mean that the event or situation did not occur. The absence of such information alone should not be presumed to mean that events in an applicant's narrative are not truthful.

✔ COI ends where guidance and decision-making begins. Risk assessment forms part of the duties of the decision-maker or the lawyer, not the COI researcher.

PRACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

For RSD practitioners	For COI service providers
When conducting research yourself, separate research from assessing the case.	Take a critical look at the COI research questions you receive.
Avoid preliminary judgements and be careful not to ignore information which does not support a particular argument.	If a question goes beyond the limits of COI, contact the person who submitted the request and try to reformulate it. A different focus, a new wording or a specification might bring it back within the scope of COI.
When instructing COI service providers with research tasks, ask for information, not risk assessments.	Do not make legal assessments of information.

2 COI QUALITY STANDARDS AND PRINCIPLES

Procedures for determining international protection needs have a decisive impact on people's lives. For this reason, it is important for everyone dealing with COI to have a framework for assessing the quality of the information they produce or use. In the 2001 meeting of the Global Consultation on International Protection it was considered that "[d]ecision-makers should have access to accurate, impartial and up-to-date country of origin information from a variety of sources" (UNHCR, 31 May 2001, para. 50j; UNHCR, February 2004, para. 4). Even though national procedures for persons seeking international protection differ, they all need COI for assessing and deciding claims. COI quality standards have been developed to ensure that COI can contribute to fair and efficient procedures.

The quality standards "relevance", "reliability and balance", "accuracy and currency" and "transparency" rest on the basic principles of "impartiality and neutrality", "equality of arms as regards access to information", "using public information" and "data protection". Together, standards and principles help those who research and use COI to achieve the maximum possible objectivity.

At the end of this chapter, an overview of developments regarding COI quality standards is provided.

Content of chapter 2

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Having engaged with this chapter, readers will be able to

» identify and explain COI quality standards

» identify and explain principles for researching and using COI

2.1 COI quality standards

This section provides an overview and a general understanding of the main quality standards for researching and using country of origin information.

The standards are assigned to the different phases of the research cycle and are presented in the order in which they appear in this cycle. Starting with the formulation of relevant research questions (or, in case of a report, terms of reference), continuing with finding reliable sources and balancing sources as well as researching accurate and current information, and concluding with the presentation of research results in a transparent manner. Nevertheless, in practice the phases and their assigned standards are closely related and thus may have to be considered at the same time. As depicted in Figure 6 below, this concerns above all the phases of sources and research: to balance sources is not only a standard in its own right, it also forms the basis for researching accurate information.
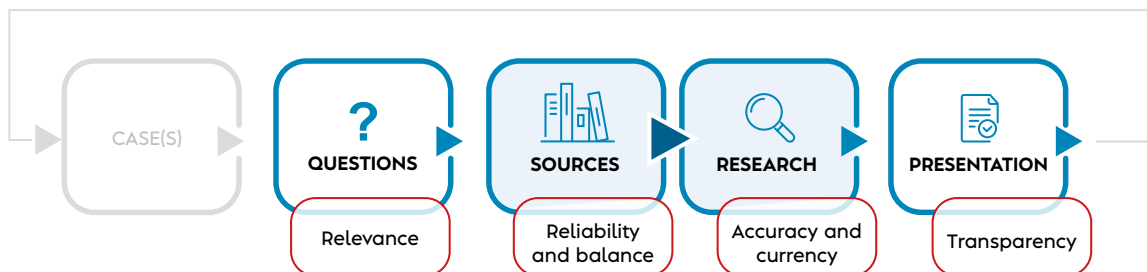
Figure 6: COI quality standards in relation to the research cycle

2.1.1 Relevance

> COI is relevant when it is based on questions rooted in legal concepts of refugee and human rights law or on questions derived from an applicant's statements.

Information about the conditions in a given country qualifies as COI when it serves to support the assessment of international protection needs. Information therefore has to be relevant to the circumstances of the applicant and to the issues raised by the case: relevance is determined by whether the information helps to assess if the applicant has a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. When the applicant is applying for a complementary form of protection, such as subsidiary protection or protection on humanitarian grounds, relevance means that the information needs to help the decision-maker in the assessment of whether the applicant meets the criteria for the respective form of protection (e.g. risk of serious harm).

The following three examples are questions related to persecution, to complementary protection, and to credibility: The question "What is the situation of Coptic Christians in Egypt? Have there been any incidents targeting members of this group in the past year?" is related to persecution, whereas the question "Is there any assistance for single mothers in Egypt? Do they receive any form of social support by the state? Can they make a living on their own?" may aim at establishing whether there are grounds for granting complementary protection. The question "Was there a conflict between Copts and Muslims protesting against the building of a church in Luxor governorate in Upper Egypt in 2022? How many people

participated in the demonstration?" might aim at corroborating an important detail of the testimony of an applicant and is asked with the intention of establishing the credibility of this testimony.

In order to be relevant, the information needs to be specific: For example, to assess whether a lesbian woman may have a well-founded fear of persecution in her country of origin, information about the treatment of gay men may be of limited relevance.

Relevance can only be achieved if RSD practitioners define exactly what information they need. Thus, one of the main challenges to ensure relevance is the formulation of questions relating to the core human rights issues, the substance, the material facts of the case, and the subsequent transformation of these questions into researchable topics.

In settings in which RSD practitioners can forward questions to COI service providers, it is crucial that both know about the working reality of the other: On the one hand, COI service providers should be aware of the legal background of the asylum procedure; on the other hand, RSD practitioners should be aware of the fact that it is a challenging job for the COI service provider to find and filter information according to somebody else's needs. The joint aim for both should be to clarify the terms of reference before the actual research process begins. When conducting research, the COI service provider should be in the position to decide whether a certain piece of information will actually be of value for the RSD practitioner or not.

In settings where RSD practitioners conduct COI research themselves, it is advisable to clearly separate the different "working modes" and mindsets of formulating questions on the one hand and of the research process on the other hand. This can help to concentrate on the most relevant issues and not be driven away by minor points.

An overview of international and regional human rights instruments related to protection can be found in Appendix A. A detailed discussion on and examples for formulating relevant questions can be found in chapter 3.

2.1.2 Reliability and balance

Decisions on international protection should be based on COI from reliable sources, taking into account the source's political and ideological context as well as its mandate, reporting methodology and motivation.

As each source has its own perspective and focus, different sources and different types of sources should be consulted to achieve the most comprehensive and balanced picture possible.

The quality of research results depends to a large extent on the reliability of the sources that produced the information. It is necessary to include a range of sources in order to create a more comprehensive account of the situation and to balance out biases of individual sources.

Knowledge of frequently used sources of COI and awareness of different types of sources (e.g. international organisations, governments, NGOs, media, academics) are essential for both COI service providers and RSD practitioners. Adopting a careful and critical approach towards sources in general, being

able to recognise dubious and biased sources, and knowing how to deal with them belong to the basic skills of all persons dealing with COI.

Both COI service providers and RSD practitioners need to be able to assess sources based on specific criteria. Every source has its own perspective and works in a certain context with a particular mission and mandate; behind each publication there is a specific intention and methodology.

Although sources striving for objectivity will always be preferable, bias need not be a ground for disqualification. Information from sources with a certain bias can be of value as long as the bias is taken into consideration and balance is sought by checking other sources.

Therefore, many different sources, and different types of sources, should be consulted in order to achieve the most complete and balanced picture possible.

In the context of the EU, the standard of reliability and balance can also be seen as a legal requirement set forth by Article 10 (3) (b) of the EU Asylum Procedures Directive 2013. The EU regulation on establishing the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) in 2021 strengthened this standard by the obligation of the Agency to make use "of all relevant sources of information, including information gathered from international organisations, in particular the UNHCR and other relevant organisations, including members of the Consultative Forum referred to in Article 50, Union institutions, bodies, offices and agencies and the EEAS [European Union External Action Service], and through the networks referred to in Article 10 and fact-finding missions." (EUAA Regulation, 2021, Article 9)

For member states of the Council of Europe, the European Court of Human Rights has repeatedly provided important guidance on assessing sources, for instance in the case *J.K. and others v. Sweden:*

> "In assessing the weight to be attached to country material, the Court has found in its case-law that consideration must be given to the source of such material, in particular its independence, reliability and objectivity. In respect of reports, the authority and reputation of the author, the seriousness of the investigations by means of which they were compiled, the consistency of their conclusions and their corroboration by other sources are all relevant considerations (see Saadi v Italy, cited above, paragraph 143; NA v the United Kingdom, cited above, paragraph 120; and Sufi and Elmi v the United Kingdom, cited above, paragraph 230)." (J.K. and others v. Sweden, ECtHR, 23 August 2016, para. 88)

The knowledge and assessment of sources is discussed in detail in chapter 4. The balancing of sources is discussed in section 5.10 on cross-checking. Appendix B contains brief descriptions of frequently used sources.

2.1.3 Accuracy and currency

> Only information that is correct and valid at the time a decision is made should be used. Accuracy and currency can be achieved by cross-checking and corroborating information.

Accuracy and currency are quality standards that refer to the correlation between a piece of information and the actual situation. Accuracy is a straightforward notion in relation to some matters like names

and dates, but more contested in relation to others (for example the treatment of members of certain minority groups by society at large).

Currency of information can be understood as one crucial component of accuracy. Information is current if it reflects an event or a situation as it stands at the time of researching. In some cases, a report that is several years old may still be accurate, while in other cases yesterday's news may have been rendered obsolete by more recent events. In many situations, older reports on certain cultural, historical or religious issues will remain accurate for longer periods since these facts (e.g. a historical event, an ancient religious rite) may remain unchanged over time. Note, however, that even long-established narratives and social norms may sometimes change quite abruptly (e.g. an old rite is no longer considered as appropriate by large parts of society, historical events may be seen in a new perspective and assessed differently by younger generations or after revolutionary change).

The most common method of testing accuracy and currency of information is cross-checking. Several reliable sources of different types should be identified that report on a specific issue, and the information provided by each of these sources should be compared and contrasted. The less reliable a source is considered to be, the more cross-checking needs to be done. Where contradictions between different sources cannot be resolved (for example where there is no agreement on whether certain human rights abuses continue or have been ended), including information from sources giving different perspectives is imperative.

Ideally, every piece of information should be corroborated by different types of sources (UN report, international or local human rights organisations, international or local media, expert opinion) that do not quote each other. Where this is not possible – and often it won't be – COI service providers should provide the available information and in addition mention that other sources were consulted but provided no information. RSD practitioners, on the other hand, have to decide whether to use the information even though no corroborating information is available. If the information is "an undisputed fact" (Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information, 2008, p. 12) such as "Moscow is the capital of the Russian Federation", corroboration is not necessary. Information known to be false must not be used. We recommend corroborating information which is central to the question, or which has an impact on a decision, by using, whenever possible, three different sources that report the information independently from each other.

Accuracy of information depends largely on a good research strategy and professional research skills. It is closely related to a source's reliability and to balancing information obtained through the use of multiple sources. Research strategies may involve methods of verifying information found in reports by consulting experts or oral sources on the ground.

The standard of accuracy and currency has also been enshrined in EU legislation which includes the requirement that "precise and up-to-date information is obtained from various sources" (EU Asylum Procedures Directive 2013, Article 10 (3) (b)). Furthermore, the EU Qualification Directive 2011 reinforces the requirement of currency by stipulating that "all relevant facts as they relate to the country of origin at the time of taking a decision on the application" must be taken into account (EU Qualification Directive 2011, Article 4 (3) (a)).

Further details on research strategies and research skills as well as on cross-checking are presented in chapter 5.

2.1.4 Transparency: clarity and traceability

> To ensure transparency, COI should be clearly presented, and its meaning must not be distorted. Every piece of information should be traceable to its source. Therefore, information should be fully referenced to enable readers to independently verify and assess the information.

The standard of transparency comprises the two aspects of clarity and traceability.

Clarity is achieved by a clear structure and concise language to ensure that the content can be easily read and understood. In the process of translating, paraphrasing, summarising or synthesising, the content and meaning of the information must not be distorted.

Traceability is achieved when every piece of information gathered from a source is referenced as such, enabling readers to independently trace, verify and assess the information provided. It is not sufficient to provide a list of sources at the end of a report/decision without referencing the information within the text.

An administrative decision or a court ruling bears more authority if the information referred to can be traced and checked. Applicants' representatives can support their legal argumentation by providing transparent information.

Further information on presentation of research results in a transparent manner can be found in chapter 6.

2.1.5 COI quality standards in theory and practice

In theory, COI should meet all the above quality standards. However, in practice, there may be instances in which certain standards cannot be achieved or where it becomes necessary to compromise on one standard in favour of another. How to proceed in such situations depends on various factors and, above all, on the specific circumstances.

A reliable source that itself draws on a balanced mix of sources and provides accurate and current information, but whose references are not fully traceable, may in many cases still be included in COI reports or considered high-quality COI by decision-makers. In other cases, it can also be argued that information relevant to the question at hand, that comes from a source whose reliability cannot be fully assessed (e.g. a blog entry from an unknown author), is included in a COI report if this information is considered useful and is contextualised based on the expertise of the COI researcher. However, a COI researcher who has no substantial knowledge on the respective country might not be able to identify the same information as useful.

The actual handling of the various COI quality standards is therefore not always clearly discernible and attainable in practice. Nevertheless, the clear theoretical assignment of the standards to the different phases of the research cycle can assist in making the analysis of the quality of COI more transparent. Thus, the sometimes-necessary trade-offs of one standard in favour of another also become more plausible. The COI standards are the main measuring and guiding tool that allows both COI service providers

and RSD practitioners to assess the quality of information. It is the knowledge of these standards that enables those involved to think about compromises in the first place.

In the context of the practical applicability of COI quality standards, another aspect that needs to be considered is the usability of COI. In EUAA's COI report methodology, for example, user acceptance plays a central role and is to be ensured through EUAA's postulated guiding principles (for more on this topic, see section 2.3.1). The balance that needs to be reached between usability and the adherence to some of the quality standards presented above can be illustrated when considering the two aspects of the transparency standard described above. The aspects of clarity and traceability can sometimes interfere with each other and must be weighed against each other when presenting COI. Consequently, persons and institutions producing COI must decide whether to present one relevant piece of information followed by another to ensure traceability over clarity, or to, for example, jointly present sources whose content is consistent, thus improving readability. Ultimately, this is a matter of how COI research results are presented, and it is handled differently from one COI unit to another, and preferred differently by each individual user of COI. For a comparison of different approaches on how to present COI, see chapter 6.

2.2 Principles for researching and using COI

The standards described above rest on basic principles that should be observed when researching and using COI. While technical skills and an understanding of international protection are needed to adhere to quality standards, the principles provide a foundation for the standards and aim at contributing to fair procedures. A neutral and impartial approach to COI is essential to achieving valid research results. Equality of arms and data protection are legal requirements in many countries. The use of public information strengthens fairness and quality.

2.2.1 Neutrality and impartiality

> COI research should be conducted and presented in a neutral manner and not favour a particular outcome. COI service providers should be impartial with regard to their clients.

Research should be approached with neutrality regardless of whether it is conducted by an RSD practitioner or a COI service provider. The principle of neutrality means that the research process must not be influenced by any interest in a particular outcome.

Where a division of labour between COI service providers and RSD practitioners is in place, the COI service providers must be impartial with regard to their clients. COI service providers should not have any stake in the procedure, nor should employees of a decision-making authority or a court. For COI units, formal independence from the protection decision-making process can strengthen impartiality. If the COI unit is not formally independent, it is recommended to separate it from the decision-making process and from policy-making.

If a state authority, a court or an organisation legally representing applicants has a sound understanding of the role of COI within the RSD procedure, it will ensure that COI service providers enjoy the

impartiality they need in order to be neutral with regard to the information they find. Requests by RSD practitioners submitted to COI service providers should be formulated in a way that does not favour a certain research result.

The role of RSD practitioners is likely to differ with regard to impartiality from the role of COI service providers. In accordance with their mandate of supporting their client, legal advisors will submit those reports to the authorities that support their client's testimony. They must, however, be aware of information detrimental to their client's case in order to adequately prepare their legal arguments and discuss this information with their client. COI research that only presents information supporting a case does little service to high quality legal representation.

In order to be able to assess COI in regard to an individual claim, decision-makers should make use of sufficient relevant information from reliable sources. No relevant information, be it of advantage or of disadvantage to the applicant, should be withheld or ignored.

❗ NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Other COI methodologies list objectivity among their COI quality standards. This manual suggests perceiving objectivity not as a quality standard but rather as a result that should be strived for and that can best be achieved by following the proposed quality standards and adhering to the principles as closely as possible.

When in the jurisprudence of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU), the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and in national law "objective sources" are mentioned in relation to COI (see, e.g., EASO's compilations of jurisprudence, 2018), it should be borne in mind that in this context a rather "pragmatic" approach to the concept of objectivity is adopted, essentially indicating that information is reasonable and in line with the prevailing view of other experts (Good, 2015, pp. 137-138).

The fact that the collection, processing and presentation of information always involves "processes of contextualisation, interpretation, even construction, to which such knowledge is subject" (Good, 2015, pp. 137-138) should not be overlooked when considering the objectivity of COI. Based on this understanding, in the context of COI production and use, objectivity remains an ideal to strive for, but one that is difficult to operationalise and impossible to fully attain. In fact, COI research needs to be conducted as neutrally as possible and the results should be as factually accurate as possible. Premature conclusions or assumptions that influence the research process, whether consciously or unconsciously, should be avoided.

2.2.2 Equality of arms as regards access to information

COI should be available to decision-making bodies and legal advisors of applicants in procedures for persons seeking international protection. Applicants must have access to the information a decision is based on, so that they may comment on it.

The principle of "equality of arms" aims at ensuring that the applicant (and their legal representative or advisor) is aware of the information used to decide the claim. It thus strengthens the fairness of procedures. Equality of arms is part of the right to a fair trial before courts and tribunals. Applications of persons seeking international protection are administrative procedures in most countries and will only come before a court or a tribunal in case of appeal. However even in administrative procedures, applicants shall be informed about the evidence used and should have an opportunity to comment on it. The EU has stipulated the right of access to information for legal assistance of the applicant in the EU Asylum Procedures Directive (EU Asylum Procedures Directive 2013, Article 12 (1) (d)).

2.2.3 Using public information

> To support fair procedures, publicly available information should be used.
> Public information is open to review and scrutiny by the applicant, experts,
> and the public at large.

Public information is defined as information that is not confidential or subject to limited distribution, and is therefore traceable. While the use of public information on countries of origin is undisputed, the positions on using and producing restricted information may differ from country to country.

UNHCR (February 2004, pp. 10-12), the International Association of Refugee and Migration Judges (IARLJ, 2017 [2006], pp. 40-41) and EUAA in its Judicial Practical Guide on COI (EASO, 2018, p. 28) recommend the use of publicly available and accessible information as an important quality criterion for COI. The use of public information ensures that the information is open to review, verification, or examination by the asylum applicant, experts and the public at large.

Using – and producing – public information directly serves the quality standard of transparency; furthermore, it serves the standard of accuracy and currency by allowing others to scrutinise the information and contribute to corrections and amendments. In cases where there are no data protection concerns (see section 2.2.4), it is desirable that COI reports or query responses are made available to the public. Nevertheless, a number of extensively used key documents produced by various national COI units, that are not made publicly available, diverge from this principle.

Finally, the principle of using public information cannot justify the violation of the protection of the applicant's data or the endangering of persons or organisations that share information. More detailed information on this matter can be found in section 5.6.5 on confidentiality and anonymity of oral sources.

2.2.4 Data protection

> The personal data of an applicant, as well as any information that could make the
> applicant identifiable, must be protected. This information should never be shared
> – either directly or indirectly – with the alleged persecutor.

All actors that play a role in RSD procedures – be it decision-making bodies, COI service providers or legal advisors – must protect the personal data of the applicant. Personal data must not be shared with anyone without explicit and informed consent by the applicant. In particular, personal data must never be shared directly or indirectly with the alleged persecutor. Special care should be taken when contacting embassies or other institutions or contact persons; information requests might indirectly point to the applicant or their associates or relatives.

It is essential that the personal data of an applicant are protected at all stages of the procedure to prevent them from falling into the wrong hands. Failure to do so may seriously endanger the applicant or their relatives or associates; it may even result in the applicant becoming a refugee sur place (for more details see UNHCR, February 2004, pp. 13-17). The principle of data protection is binding for EU member states; it is embodied in the EU Asylum Procedures Directive 2013 in Article 48.

2.3 Developments related to COI quality standards

First methodological reflections on COI date back to the 1980s. Already in 1988, a publication emphasised the need for international coordination to obtain the best possible information for ensuring refugee protection (Rudge/Kjaerum, 1988, pp. 1-2). In 1989, when the Documentation Centre of the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada was established, first "COI research standards" were developed (see Rusu, 2019). After UNHCR released a paper on country of origin information in 2004, the first edition of ACCORD's COI training manual on researching COI was published in the same year. Since then, several initiatives have contributed to the development and distribution of COI quality standards. Some of those initiatives originated from units responsible for COI research within the EU, motivated by a desire to strengthen practical cooperation among EU member states, others from judicial actors deciding on international protection claims, or from the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) which became the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) in 2022.

The following chart gives a quick overview of various institutions and their available publications that have been developed in transnational settings. Below, each of these initiatives is briefly described:

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)	2004: Country of Origin Information: Towards Enhanced International Cooperation
Austrian Red Cross/ACCORD	2004, 2013, 2024: Researching Country of Origin Information: Training Manual
	2006, 2015, 2022: e-learning courses on COI standards, partly in cooperation with UNHCR
International Association of Refugee Law Judges (IARLJ, became IARMJ in 2019)	2006, 2017: Checklist on judicial criteria for assessing COI
Selected EU member states (GDISC-project)	2008: Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information (COI)
European Country of Origin Sponsorship (ECS)	2010: EU common guidelines on (Joint) Fact Finding Missions
European Asylum Support Office (EASO), succeeded by European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) in 2022	2012, 2019 (rebranded version 2023): Country of Origin Information report methodology
	2018 (second edition published in 2023): Judicial analysis: Evidence and credibility assessment in the context of the Common European Asylum System
	2018: Judicial practical guide on country of origin information
	2019: EUAA COI Training Module (based on European Asylum Curriculum COI Module 2009)

Table 1: Publications on COI quality standards developed in transnational settings

The UNHCR paper *Country of Origin Information: Towards Enhanced International Cooperation* aimed at assisting "the development of country of origin information standards, tools, and mechanisms, hence, contribute towards more consistency in decision-making" (UNHCR, February 2004, p. 1). This paper focussed on the use of COI and formulated quality standards.

Within the framework of the project "COI Network & Training", co-funded by the EU, a transnational network under the lead of the Austrian Red Cross/ACCORD published the COI training manual *Researching Country of Origin Information in September* 2004. The COI quality standards in this manual are based on the 2004 UNHCR paper on COI and were developed further through consultations with various governmental and non-governmental organisations working in the field of COI. A revised edition of the manual was published in 2013. In 2006, a first e-learning tool presenting the content of the training manual was published by the COI Training Network coordinated by ACCORD. This e-learning tool formed the basis for the development of the COI module of the European Asylum Curriculum (EAC) and later became part of the EASO (now EUAA) Training Curriculum. Another e learning course developed by ACCORD and UNHCR and published in 2022 can be found via https://www.coi-training.net/training/e-learning. For details on COI training sessions provided by ACCORD see https://www.coi-training.net/participate.

In 2006, the International Association of Refugee Law Judges (IARLJ, which, in 2019, became the International Association of Refugee and Migration Judges, IARMJ) developed a *Checklist on judicial criteria for assessing COI,* which was republished in 2017. For the European context, the checklist has since been substituted by the legislation of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and ECtHR jurisprudence. The checklist's accompanying explanatory memorandum, however, remains a useful point of reference, and can be found at: https://www.iarmj.org/iarlj-documents/2017_publications/IARLJ_guidechartCOIJul17.pdf

In 2008, a group of COI desks from EU member states' asylum offices formulated the *Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information.* This paper presents the guidelines with the aim of "improving the quality of COI products that are processed on the basis of public information [...] and factual information". Thus, these guidelines explicitly do not refer to classified information (in contrast to public information) or "assessments, opinions by the COI-producer on the in-country situation, interpretations of the facts, or conclusions formulated for policy reasons" (in contrast to the term "factual information") (Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information, April 2008, p. 2). The quality criteria for evaluating and validating public and factual information listed in the Common EU Guidelines are: Relevance, reliability, currency, objectivity, traceability, transparency (Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information, April 2008, p. 12). *The Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information* are available at: https://www.ecoi.net/en/blog/2008-common-eu-guidelines-for-processing-country-of-origin-information-coi

In 2010, the *EU common guidelines on (Joint) Fact Finding Missions* were elaborated by representatives of COI units working for selected immigration authorities in the EU. These guidelines consist of three parts; starting off with a description of the methodology and moving on to practical aspects such as time frames, security issues and code of conduct. The third part comprises templates, information on how to conduct and to document interviews, a practical checklist, etc. The guidelines "are meant to be a practical tool for preparing and conducting a FFM by Member States" (EU common guidelines on (Joint) Fact Finding Missions, November 2010, p. 4).

As part of its efforts to create a Common European Asylum System (CEAS), the EU established the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) in 2010. Among other duties, EASO was tasked with the production of COI. In January 2022, EASO was replaced by the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA). The agency was granted additional functions compared to EASO's former mandate. The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union integrated the following standards into the regulation on establishing the EUAA:

"The Agency shall be a centre for gathering relevant, reliable, objective, accurate and up-to date information on relevant third countries in a transparent and impartial manner, making use of relevant information, including child-specific and gender-specific information, and targeted information on persons belonging to vulnerable and minority groups." (EUAA Regulation, 2021, Article 9)

In cooperation with the IARLJ, the EASO Courts and Tribunals Network in 2018 produced two publications for members of courts and tribunals, each accompanied by a compilation of jurisprudence. The first publication, of which a second edition was published in 2023, is a judicial analysis on evidence and credibility assessment and addresses standards for assessing country of origin information, specifically making reference to the requirements of precision, temporal relevance, and the usage of a variety of sources as evaluation criteria under EU law (EUAA, February 2023b, pp. 158-169). The second publication, a judicial practical guide on COI, proposes an approach based on the COI assessment criteria of the ECtHR along the following questions:

"1. Is the source independent?
2. Is the source reliable?
3. Is the source objective?
4. What is the author's reputation?
5. Is the methodology sound?
6. Are the conclusions consistent?
7. Are other sources used as corroboration?
8. Is the COI relevant and adequate?
9. Is the COI up to date and/or temporally relevant?"
(EASO, 2018, p. 21)

The compilations of jurisprudence accompanying these publications present examples of case law from the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). The compiled examples aim to provide courts and tribunals in EU member states with support for dealing with COI and evidence and credibility assessment in international protection cases.

EASO: Compilation of jurisprudence - Evidence and credibility assessment in the context of the Common European Asylum System [EASO Professional Development Series for members of courts and tribunals], 2018
https://euaa.europa.eu/file/25321

EASO: Compilation of jurisprudence - Judicial practical guide on country of origin information [EASO Professional Development Series for members of courts and tribunals], 2018
https://euaa.europa.eu/file/25329

An overview of the publications of the EUAA (EASO) Professional Development Series can be found at: https://euaa.europa.eu/asylum-knowledge/courts-and-tribunals

In a collaborative process with COI researchers from member states' administrations, EASO published its first *Country of Origin Information report methodology* in 2012 based on the *Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information and the EU common guidelines on (Joint) Fact Finding Missions*. In 2019, EASO published a new version of this COI report methodology, building further on the 2012 version and the ACCORD training manual (2013) and based on input from a working group of EU+ member states, from civil society organisations specialised in COI, and an expert reference group including

UNHCR (EUAA, February 2023a, p. 7). The use of the methodology is binding for EUAA COI reports. The following section offers a detailed discussion of this methodology.

2.3.1 EUAA COI report methodology: discussion and comparison

The following comparison outlines the similarities and differences between the EUAA COI report methodology and the methodological concepts presented in this manual. Thereby, it aims at avoiding or at least mitigating potential confusion due to diverging terminology.

EUAA's COI report methodology defines four guiding principles for COI (neutrality and objectivity, relevance and usability, transparency and publicity, validity and quality) that should be strived for in all five stages of the production process (preparation, researching, drafting, quality control and publication). The guiding principles represent EUAA's code of conduct in COI research and aim at ensuring overall quality, but also its acceptance by users (EUAA, February 2023a, pp. 8-9).

EUAA's first guiding principle of neutrality and objectivity is basically in line with the principle of neutrality and impartiality presented here. However, when elaborating on this principle, EUAA also refers to the need of COI to be fact-based as well as to a necessary balance of different sources, an aspect that is covered by this manual's quality standard of reliability and balance.

The guiding principle of relevance and usability is defined by EUAA as the need for COI to be closely related to the matters in question and thus relevant to the user, as well as being easy to use. In this manual, these two aspects are largely covered by the quality standard of relevance and the clarity aspect of transparency.

What EUAA defines as transparency in its third guiding principle coincides with the traceability aspect of transparency in this manual, while publicity is addressed by the principles of equality of arms and using public information.

EUAA's fourth guiding principle of validity and quality shares parallels with the quality standard of accuracy and currency in this manual. However, within the scope of this principle, EUAA also stresses that validity is achieved when it meets the needs of the target users.

In general, user acceptance is very strongly highlighted within EUAA's guiding principles. The extent to which usability and user-friendliness must not be disregarded in the light of certain COI standards, and the trade-offs that sometimes become necessary in the presentation of COI research results, are addressed in section 2.1.5 of this manual. Moreover, for a comparison of different approaches to the presentation of COI, see chapter 6.

In addition to its guiding principles, EUAA makes reference to "COI quality standards" in another section: In its discussion of source and information assessment, EUAA explains that sources and information must be selected, assessed, and validated according to the standards of relevance, reliability, objectivity, accuracy, currency, traceability, and transparency (EUAA, February 2023a, p. 13). Apart from the standard of objectivity (see note on terminology in section 2.2.1), the wording of these standards is consistent with the quality standards presented in this manual in its previous editions. ACCORD, however, assigns the standards to the different phases of the research cycle (see section 2.1).

Accompanying its COI report methodology, EUAA also published a writing and referencing guide for its COI reports. Next to a hands-on guidance on the referencing of various types of sources, the guide provides its drafters with guidance on COI writing strategies, including paraphrasing, summarising, and

synthesising, as well as on COI-specific language use. Furthermore, in 2020 a practical guide on the use of COI for case officers was published:

EUAA – European Union Agency for Asylum: Country of Origin Information (COI) Report Methodology, February 2023 [rebranded edition of June 2019 COI Report Methodology] https://coi.euaa.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/2023_02_EUAA_COI_Report_methodology.pdf

EUAA – European Union Agency for Asylum: Country of Origin Information (COI) Reports - Writing and Referencing Guide, February 2023 [rebranded edition of June 2019 Writing and Referencing Guide] https://coi.euaa.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/2023_02_EUAA_COI_Writing_and_referencing_guide.pdf

EASO – European Asylum Support Office: Practical guide on the use of country of origin information by case officers for the examination of asylum applications, December 2020 https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/EASO_Practical_guide_COI_EN.pdf

2.3.2 National guidelines for quality standards, working methodologies and style guides

Besides the above-mentioned efforts, there are various national guidelines for quality standards and working methodologies for COI, or style guides for COI products, as the following examples show.

Austria:
In 2013, the COI department (Staatendokumentation) of the Austrian Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum (BFA) first published their working methodology which was last modified in 2023 and can be found at https://www.staatendokumentation.at/methodology. It is in German and comprises quality standards and guidelines for elaborating various COI products. Furthermore, it describes working processes with regard to research.

Belgium:
CEDOCA, the COI unit of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons published its style guide for COI products. It is available in French at https://www.cgra.be/fr/infos-pays/cedoca and in Dutch at https://www.cgvs.be/nl/landeninfo/over-cedoca.

Canada:
The Research Directorate of the Immigration and Refugee Board provides COI services to the board members. To ensure the quality and the uniformity of query responses, internal guidelines on "The Research Process", "The Writing Process" and "The Editing Process" are in place.

Norway:
The Norwegian COI unit Landinfo created its guidelines for source and information analysis in 2015. This methodological document, based in part on the 2013 ACCORD manual, focuses on the means of source and information assessment. The guideline is available in Norwegian and can be found at: https://landinfo.no/asset/3135/1/3135_1.pdf

2.4 Summary of chapter 2

Quality standards for researching and using COI:

✔ Relevance: COI is relevant when it is based on questions rooted in legal concepts of refugee and human rights law or on questions derived from an applicant's statements.

✔ Reliability and balance: Decisions on international protection should be based on COI from reliable sources, taking into account the source's political and ideological context as well as its mandate, reporting methodology and motivation. As each source has its own perspective and focus, different sources and different types of sources should be consulted to achieve the most comprehensive and balanced picture possible.

✔ Accuracy and currency: Only information that is correct and valid at the time a decision is made should be used. Accuracy and currency can be achieved by cross-checking and corroborating information.

✔ Transparency: To ensure transparency, COI should be clearly presented, and its meaning must not be distorted. Every piece of information should be traceable to its source. Therefore, information should be fully referenced to enable readers to independently verify and assess the information.

Principles for researching and using COI:

✔ Neutrality and impartiality: COI research should be conducted and presented in a neutral manner and not favour a particular outcome. COI service providers should be impartial with regard to their clients.

✔ Equality of arms regarding access to information: COI should be available to decision-making bodies and legal advisors of applicants in procedures for persons seeking international protection. Applicants must have access to the information a decision is based on, so that they may comment on it.

✔ Public information: To support fair procedures, publicly available information should be used. Public information is open to review and scrutiny by the applicant, experts, and the public at large.

✔ Data protection: The personal data of an applicant, as well as any information that could make the applicant identifiable, must be protected. This information should never be shared – either directly or indirectly – with the alleged persecutor.

3 QUESTIONS

This chapter deals with the development of relevant research questions derived from legal concepts rooted in international refugee law. It introduces "research trees" as a method to structure questions and highlights the importance of considering vulnerabilities when formulating research questions. The last part of the chapter illustrates the formulation of questions using practical examples based on the 1951 Refugee Convention.

Although the chapter does not explicitly address legal concepts related to complementary forms of protection such as subsidiary protection or protection on humanitarian grounds, it is important to note that the method explained here may also be applied to these concepts. Thus, research trees could also be used to structure questions on medical or socioeconomic issues, or for cases of indiscriminate violence in situations of armed conflict. To benefit from this chapter, a basic understanding of the underpinning legal concepts is required. Appendix A gives an overview of the 1951 Refugee Convention and regional protection instruments and discusses what constitutes persecution.

Content of chapter 3

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Having engaged with this chapter, readers will be able to
- » identify relevant COI topics to search for and explain why they are relevant
- » derive legally relevant research questions from testimonies of applicants for refugee status
- » pay due attention to gender and specific vulnerabilities in research questions

3.1 Functions of research questions

Any type of research – be it scientific, journalism or COI – is guided by questions. The formulation of a research question is the first step when approaching a research task. It is important to be aware of how research questions influence the quality of the research process.

Relevant COI research must be informed by an understanding of international human rights law and how it relates to international refugee law. COI research should pay particular attention to sources providing an explanation of the reasons for human rights violations, and whether individuals or groups are targeted because of their political opinion, religious beliefs, race, nationality, or ethnicity,[10] or because they belong to a particular social group.

> **Note:** This chapter will focus on protection-related questions, not credibility questions. While protection-related questions can be systematically derived from legal concepts, any aspect of a given case may give rise to credibility questions. Therefore, there is no general method for deriving credibility questions from a case. When formulating credibility questions, the limits of COI mentioned in section 1.5 should be taken into account.

In settings where RSD practitioners can draw on the support of COI service providers, questions are the central means of communication between the two. Background information on a case can help COI service providers to understand the context of a specific query.

COI service providers need a basic knowledge of legal concepts of international protection to be able to understand the rationale behind the questions posed by RSD practitioners. If COI service providers have doubts about a question, they should reformulate the query in collaboration with the RSD practitioner. For instance, research tasks which are found to be too general should be broken down into specific sub-questions, and queries containing requests for assessing risks should be reformulated as COI questions.

3.2 Research based on legal concepts

From a COI perspective, most asylum cases revolve around one or more of the following four core legal concepts: national law, state protection, persecution by non-state actors, and internal flight or relocation alternative. COI questions often arise from these concepts that will be dealt with in detail below.

"Persecution by a state actor" is not specifically listed as one of the concepts above, but in the COI context can be analysed as a specific manifestation within national law (see section 3.2.1) or as unwillingness of the state to protect (see section 3.2.2). By using the term "national law", we are referring to the national legal system as a whole, not only to specific legislation.

Apart from the concepts discussed hereafter, other issues can come into play when the applicant applies for a complementary form of protection, such as subsidiary protection or protection on humanitarian grounds. These may include, for example, medical issues such as availability and accessibility of health care treatment, socioeconomic issues like food security, or indiscriminate violence in situations of armed conflict.

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[10] The terms race and nationality are used in the 1951 Refugee Convention, in today's practice the term ethnicity is more commonly used. The terms partly overlap and are difficult to differentiate. For further details on these terms, see section 3.5.3.

3.2.1 National law

Any assessment of the national legal system affecting the human rights situation in a country of origin must address the following questions: Are basic human rights enshrined in national legislation? Are these laws applied in practice? Do laws themselves infringe fundamental human rights?

The following aspects can be crucial for this assessment: the extent to which fundamental human rights and guarantees of non-discrimination are enshrined in the constitution; the legal framework guaranteeing judicial independence and respect for the rule of law; laws relating to the rights of women and minorities; laws relating to freedom of association and assembly.

Furthermore, it is not sufficient for laws that protect human rights to be adopted, they also need to be implemented in practice and in a non-discriminatory and non-arbitrary manner. Researching legal provisions and their implementation is a core task of COI research.

An important area of legislation that may infringe fundamental human rights is criminal law. While people fleeing prosecution in their country of origin are generally considered fugitives from justice, not refugees, there are instances in which prosecution for criminal acts may in fact constitute persecution (e.g. stoning as a punishment for women who committed adultery). In order to distinguish prosecution of criminal offences from persecution, it is necessary to take into account whether the criminal law conforms with human rights standards or is inherently persecutory, and whether implementation of the law is carried out in a manner that amounts to persecution based on a Convention ground (UNHCR, April 2001, para. 18; see also UNHCR, February 2019, paras. 56-60 and paras. 167-174).

The different aspects of national law can be visualised as follows:

Figure 7: National law

In practice, specific questions for COI research can be derived based on the main aspects outlined in the figure above. The following (non-exhaustive) list provides examples of such research questions assigned to each aspect:

Text of legal provisions:
- ▶ What is the text of the relevant legal provisions?
- ▶ Are there discriminatory legal provisions?
- ▶ Is there evidence of disproportionate (excessively harsh) punishment?
- ▶ Do international human rights organisations consider certain provisions of national legislation to infringe fundamental human rights? If yes, what information is there on enforcement of such laws?

Application of legal provisions in practice:
- ▶ How are laws interpreted and applied? Do public officials including the police support the implementation of these laws?
- ▶ Do traditional norms, social, cultural, or religious rules affect the application of national law? How?

- Are religious laws (e.g. Sharia) or unwritten (e.g. traditional) laws/norms applied in parallel to written law? Does national law allow for such application?
- Is there evidence of cruel, inhuman, and degrading punishment, such as corporal punishment or the death penalty? Even if such punishment is not prescribed by national legislation, can it be ordered by judges based on the application of, for example, religious rules?

Legal procedures:
- Does the judicial system act according to the law?
- What do reports say about the fairness of legal procedures? Is there information on denial of due process on Convention grounds?
- Is there information on discriminatory prosecution or punishment for reason of one or more Convention grounds? Is there information on cruel, inhuman, or degrading punishment?

Legal remedies:
- Are legal remedies against human rights violations available and effective?
- Are there any oversight bodies that hold the courts accountable?

3.2.2 State protection

Requests for COI research often include a question regarding the effectiveness of state protection (also called domestic protection or national protection) in the country of origin, particularly where the applicant claims to fear persecution by non-state actors. Respect for, and the promotion of human rights, and access to legal remedies against human rights violations, are all important aspects of state protection. In relation to state protection, UNHCR observes the following:

> "The question is whether the risk giving rise to the fear is sufficiently mitigated by available and effective national protection from that feared harm. Where such an assessment is necessary, it requires a judicious balancing of a number of factors both general and specific, including the general state of law, order and justice in the country, and its effectiveness, including the resources available and the ability and willingness to use them properly and effectively to protect residents." (UNHCR, April 2001, para. 15)

There are different indicators for a state's willingness to provide protection, including
- whether the state respects its human rights obligations and works to prevent human rights violations
- measures taken by the state to promote human rights and prevent human rights abuses by others
- whether the central government condones persecution by other actors or stands by persecution although able to intervene
- the availability of legal remedies for human rights violations that have taken place
- or whether the state itself acts as an agent of persecution.

Even where a state is willing to protect human rights, it may not be able to do so: the state may lack resources or the government's control may not extend to all parts of the territory.

Situations where actors like autonomous regional authorities or international organisations exercise de facto control over (parts of) the state led to the question of whether only national state actors can offer protection against persecution. For instance, the 2011 EU Qualification Directive recognises a limited number of actors of protection besides the state. It mentions "[…] parties or organisations, including international organisations, controlling the State or a substantial part of the territory of the State; provided they are willing and able to offer protection" which is "effective and of a non-temporary nature" (EU Qualification Directive 2011, Article 7).

The different aspects of state protection can be visualised as follows:

Figure 8: State protection

In practice, specific questions for COI research can be derived based on the main aspects outlined in the figure above. The following (non-exhaustive) list provides examples of such research questions assigned to each aspect:

Ability to protect:
- ▶ Does the state exercise control over the whole territory and population? If not, is there an organised and stable authority able to provide protection in the parts of the country not controlled by the state?
- ▶ Are there functioning administrative and judicial structures? Is there an effective legal system for the detection, prosecution and punishment of acts constituting persecution?
- ▶ Are resources available to protect individuals from serious harm? (For example: infrastructure and training of officials in the judicial system and law enforcement agencies; presence of security forces; infrastructure and resources to investigate; shelters or safe houses for survivors of domestic violence; witness protection programmes.)

Willingness to protect:
- ▶ Is there police corruption including evidence of bribery leading to the dropping of criminal cases, or the requirement of bribery for a case to proceed, or corruption in the judiciary?
- ▶ Is there information on collusion between government authorities and organised crime or infiltration of oppositional armed groups in the security forces?
- ▶ Does the state prevent human rights violations or other forms of serious harm by state authorities?
- ▶ Do state authorities intervene to prevent instances of serious harm? Do authorities protect against acts by some groups, but not by others?
- ▶ What motives are indicated as reasons for the unwillingness of state authorities to intervene on behalf of an individual or a particular group?

Access to law enforcement:
- ▶ Do individuals have effective access to law enforcement and courts? Is there access to practices of statutory or customary law?
- ▶ Is there discrimination against certain individuals or groups such as religious or ethnic groups, persons of a particular gender or persons belonging to a specific political group?

3.2.3 Persecution by non-state actors

Refugee status under Article 1 A of the 1951 Refugee Convention may also be granted because of persecution by non-state actors. The UNHCR *Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status states* the following:

"Persecution is normally related to action by the authorities of a country. It may also emanate from sections of the population that do not respect the standards established by the laws of the country concerned." (UNHCR, February 2019, para. 65)

The EU Qualification Directive also refers to non-state actors when defining actors of persecution:

"Actors of persecution or serious harm include: (a) the State; (b) parties or organisations controlling the State or a substantial part of the territory of the State; (c) non-State actors, if it can be demonstrated that the actors mentioned in points (a) and (b), including international organisations, are unable or unwilling to provide protection against persecution or serious harm as defined in Article 7." (EU Qualification Directive 2011, Article 6)

The United States, Canada and Australia also accept the relevance of non-state persecution in their interpretation of the 1951 Refugee Convention (Zimmermann/Mahler, 2011, p. 365).

Research on persecution by non-state actors must consider the power dynamics in the country of origin. Who exercises power and where? Which alliances exist between which actors? Are certain non-state actors supported by certain branches of the government?

National case law will often look at two quite complex issues in the context of persecution by non-state actors: Can an individual expect protection by government authorities against human rights abuses committed by non-state actors? And would an individual be safe from persecution if they relocated to another area where the non-state actor was not present? The figures and questions regarding state protection (section 3.2.2) and regarding internal flight or relocation alternative (section 3.2.4) provide assistance when researching these issues.

Persecution by non-state actors can be visualised as follows:

Non-state actors

- Position of non-state actor(s) within the power framewoark
- Internal flight or relocation alterantive – see figure in section 3.2.4
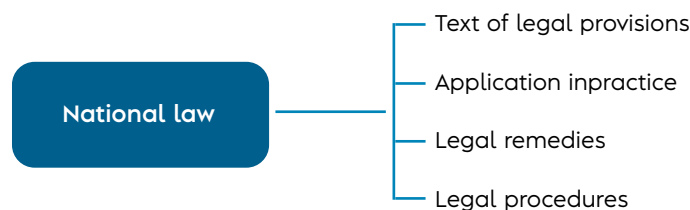- State protection – see figure in section 3.2.2
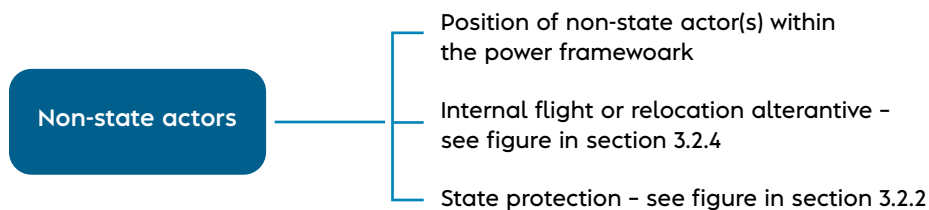
Figure 9: Non-state actors

In practice, specific questions for COI research can be derived based on the main aspects outlined in the figure above. The following (non-exhaustive) list provides examples of such research questions assigned to each aspect:

Position of non-state actor(s) within the power framework:
▶ What is the position of the non-state actors within the power framework of the country?
▶ Are they acting in complicity with or are they tolerated by state actors or, where relevant, other actors of protection?
▶ Do they have affiliations or collaborations with other non-state actors?
▶ Are they in de facto control of part of the territory?
▶ Are they supported by traditional norms and customs which are embraced by large segments of the society?

Internal flight or relocation alternative (see section 3.2.4), in particular:

- ▶ Does the non-state actor have a motive to pursue and persecute the applicant in the proposed area of relocation?
- ▶ Would a non-state actor have the means and the ability to pursue and locate the applicant in the proposed area of relocation?
- ▶ Would state authorities be able and willing to provide protection to the applicant in that area, even if they are not able and/or willing to provide protection to the applicant in his or her area of origin?

Effective state protection (see section 3.2.2), in particular:

- ▶ Is the state able and willing to protect against human rights abuses by non-state actors? Are there reports about protection efforts and effectiveness of this protection?

3.2.4 Internal flight or relocation alternative – IFA/IRA

Where an applicant's well-founded fear of persecution for reason of a Convention ground has been established, the question may be posed whether the applicant can live safely in another area in the country of origin where they could relocate to avoid the persecution. For this concept, the terms "internal flight alternative" (IFA), "internal relocation alternative" (IRA), or "internal protection alternative" (IPA) are frequently used.

Internal flight or relocation considerations arise mostly in cases of human rights violations by non-state actors, and where effective state protection may not be available in one part of the country (e.g. because it is under the control of a rebel force responsible for the human rights abuses), but may be possible in another area. In rare cases, the question of an internal flight or relocation alternative arises with regard to alleged persecution by state actors, for example where part of a country is effectively and foreseeably out of reach of the alleged persecutor (e.g. under administration by a de facto government, or under international administration).

According to UNHCR, the assessment of whether an internal flight or relocation alternative is available requires two main sets of analyses:

1. The relevance analysis answers the following questions:
   - ▶ Is the area of relocation practically, safely, and legally accessible to the individual?
   - ▶ Is the agent of persecution the state? If it is the state, there is a presumption that an internal flight is not relevant. If the agent of persecution is a non-state actor an internal flight alternative is relevant only where the non-state actor is not willing or able to locate and persecute the applicant in the proposed area of relocation.
   - ▶ Would the applicant be exposed to new risks of harm upon relocation? (UNHCR, February 2019, p. 109 [Guidelines on International Protection No. 4, 23 July 2003, para. 7])

2. The reasonableness analysis answers the following question:
   - ▶ Could the applicant live a relatively normal life in the place of relocation without facing undue hardship (UNHCR, February 2019, p. 109 [Guidelines on International Protection No. 4, 23 July 2003, para. 7]).

The burden of proof in relation to an internal flight or relocation alternative rests with the decision-maker (Marx, April 2002, p. 214; UNHCR, February 2019, p. 113 [Guidelines on International Protection No. 4, 23 July 2003, paras. 33-34]).

COI research thus plays an essential role in providing reliable information that supports an assessment of the availability of an IFA/IRA, both in terms of its relevance and reasonableness. Where a decision-maker wishes to consider the possibility of an IFA/IRA, UNHCR advises that a particular area of the applicant's country of origin must be identified (UNHCR, February 2019, pp. 108-109 [Guidelines on International Protection No. 4, 23 July 2003, para. 6]). Research on an internal flight or relocation alternative should therefore always aim to refer to a particular place or region.

In countries where the security and political situation is unpredictable and unstable, for example due to a civil war, parts of the country previously considered safe may rapidly become dangerous. In such situations, the currency of COI in relation to the proposed area of relocation is particularly important. UNHCR notes that in practice, up-to-date COI about a particular area of relocation may not be available for countries where the security situation is subject to sudden changes (UNHCR, February 2019, p. 114 [Guidelines on International Protection No. 4, 23 July 2003, para. 37]). In these situations, it is particularly important for the decision-maker to be aware of the described changeability. Therefore, COI service providers may include disclaimers that indicate the volatility of a situation and possible changes in the near future (this is standard practice in New Zealand's COI unit, for example).

> Further information on the application of IFA can be found in the following EUAA publication:
> EASO: Practical guide on the application of the internal protection alternative, May 2021
> https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/EASO-Practical-guide-application-IPA.pdf

The different aspects of internal flight or relocation alternative can be visualised as follows:

Internal flight or relocation alternative (IFA/IRA)
- Accessibility of safe area - relevance analysis
- Persecution by state actor - relevance analysis
- Persecution by non-state actor - relevance analysis
- Risk of new persecution - relevance analysis
- Personal circumstances - reasonableness analysis
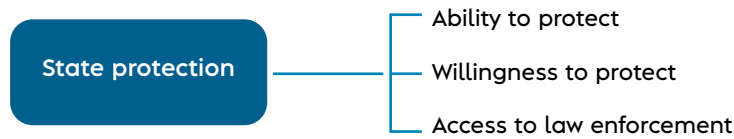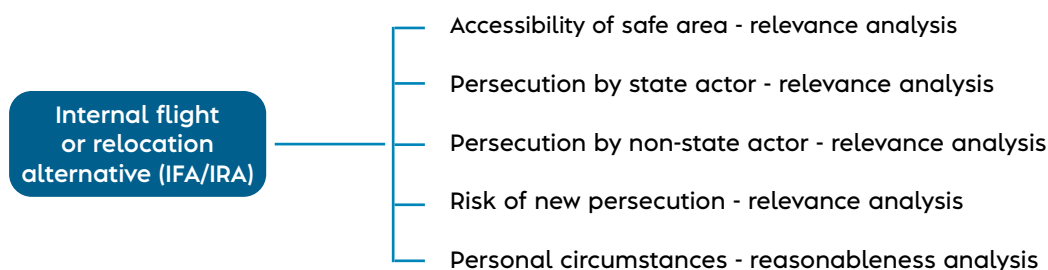
Figure 10: Internal flight or relocation alternative (IFA/IRA)

In practice, specific questions for COI research can be derived based on the main aspects outlined in the figure above. The following (non-exhaustive) list provides examples of such research questions assigned to each aspect:

Accessibility of safe area:
▶ Is the area of relocation practically, safely, and legally accessible to the individual? Are there any natural barriers or areas of grave security concerns?
▶ What are the regulations for legal entry and residence in the area of relocation?
▶ Is safe travel possible? Also for single women, children, etc.?

Persecution by state actors (or other actors of protection, i.e. parties or organisations, including international organisations, which control the state or a substantial part of the state's territory):
▶ Is there clear evidence of limited reach of local or regional authorities?

Persecution by non-state actors:
- ▶ Are there particular circumstances to explain the national government's (or other actors of protection) failure to counteract the localised harm?
- ▶ Is protection by state authorities (or other actors of protection) available to the applicant in that area? Is there information about the effectiveness of such protection?

Risk of new persecution:
- ▶ Do people of the same group (ethnic or religious group, clan, etc.) live in the area of proposed relocation?
- ▶ Is there information about a serious risk to life, safety, freedom or health, or serious discrimination, in the proposed area?
- ▶ Considering the profile of the applicant, are there reports about persons who faced a serious risk to life, safety, freedom or health, or serious discrimination? For example, if the applicant could escape a threat of being persecuted for religious reasons by relocating internally, the relevance test would not be satisfied if they were unable to practise their religion in the potential area of internal relocation.

Personal circumstances (reasonableness test):
- ▶ Is economic survival possible without undue hardship? Is food and accommodation available and affordable?
- ▶ What is the personal, professional, and work background of the person? Is there access to employment and education?
- ▶ Are there any cultural links and/or knowledge of the local language?
- ▶ Are there any family ties or is social and humanitarian assistance available?
- ▶ What is the standard and quality of life of internally displaced persons in the area?

3.3 The research tree method

Based on the legal concepts introduced in section 3.2, this manual uses the "research tree" method for assisting RSD practitioners and COI service providers to develop and structure research questions. Research trees are logic trees similar to mind maps and help to visualise questions based on legal concepts related to a specific case. Section 3.5 applies the research tree method to simplified examples of asylum claims.

How to develop research questions applying the research tree method:

General steps	Simplified practical example
1. Identify the substance of the case and make it the trunk of the tree: What is the key question relating to fear of return? For instance, what Convention ground is it related to? Or, is it related to concepts of complementary protection?	Iran: How are persons critical of the regime treated?
2. Find relevant topics and make them the main branches: Which aspects have to be considered?	Freedom of assembly and association; freedom of expression
3. Derive research questions from the topics; they form the twigs growing out of the branches: Which questions should be researched?	Is there information on police crackdowns on anti-regime protests taking place in Tehran during 2022? Are social media sites being monitored by the authorities? Are there laws criminalising the dissemination of information that is critical of the authorities?
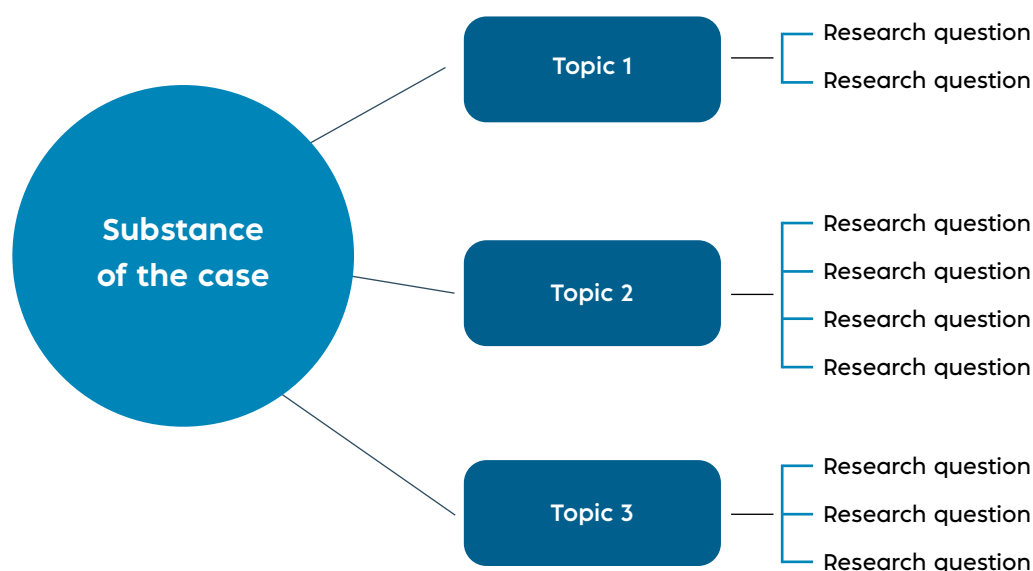
Figure 11: Developing a research tree

Why do research trees help?

- ▶ **Quality:** The research tree method links research questions to legal concepts and thus helps to ensure that research questions are relevant.
- ▶ **Visualisation:** Research trees help to create a comprehensive set of questions and to visualise the main research tasks.
- ▶ **Control:** Research trees help to identify topics central to the case and to set priorities. Thus, they help researchers to stay focussed and to save time.

When working on actual cases you will find that research trees often feature the legal concepts and related aspects presented above. In practice, it will not always be possible, nor will it always be necessary, to answer all potential research questions raised in this chapter.

3.4 Consideration of vulnerabilities when formulating research questions

A person's particular characteristics may influence their position in society and result in vulnerabilities. Therefore, it is important to have the applicant in mind when formulating research questions: Is the applicant an adult or a child? Does the person identify as a man, a woman, or as non-binary? Is the applicant a healthy person or somebody who lives with an illness? Are there specific vulnerabilities, or even intersecting inequalities that lead to compounded disadvantages in society?

Although all individuals seeking protection may be – in one way or another – vulnerable, certain groups may be more vulnerable than others. This may, among others, apply to women, children, torture survivors, people with disabilities or people with mental or physical health problems. Individuals whose sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and/or sex characteristics place them outside the mainstream categories of their cultural environment may also be confronted with disadvantages that make them more vulnerable.

UNHCR's guidelines on gender-related persecution emphasise the importance of COI specifically relevant to claims brought by women:

> "Country of origin information should be collected that has relevance in women's claims, such as the position of women before the law, the political rights of women, the social and economic rights of women, the cultural and social mores of the country and consequences for non-adherence, the prevalence of such harmful traditional practices, the incidence and forms of reported violence against women, the protection available to them, any penalties imposed on those who perpetrate the violence, and the risks that a woman might face on her return to her country of origin after making a claim for refugee status." (UNHCR, February 2019, p. 91 [Guidelines on International Protection No. 1, 7 May 2002, para. 36 (x)])

In relation to children, UNHCR's guidelines on child asylum claims observe the following:

> "Just as country of origin information may be gender-biased to the extent that it is more likely to reflect male as opposed to female experiences, the experiences of children may also be ignored. In addition, children may have only limited knowledge of conditions in the country of origin or may be unable to explain the reasons for their persecution. For these reasons, asylum authorities need to make special efforts to gather relevant country of origin information and other supporting evidence." (UNHCR, February 2019, p. 163 [Guidelines on International Protection No. 8, 22 September 2009, para. 74])

Section introduces examples of claims based on the convention ground "particular social groups" including women, LGBTIQ+ persons and children.

3.5 From case to question: Examples based on Convention grounds

In this section, the research tree method is applied to simplified examples of asylum claims. Each example focuses on a different Convention ground and combines elements from the various legal concepts discussed above to form a research tree.

3.5.1 Religion

The protection of the right to freedom of religion and belief is enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Articles 18 and 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), as well as in various regional instruments: Article 8 of the African Charter of Human and Peoples' Rights, ACHPR; Article 12 of the American Convention on Human Rights; Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). The right protected by these documents is two-fold: 1) the right to hold or not to hold a religion or belief, and 2) the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief in private and in public. This right to religious freedom "is not only directed against interference by the State, but also obliges the State to protect individuals against encroachments by third (private) parties" (Zimmermann/Mahler, 2011, pp. 381-382).

Claims for international protection which are based on religious grounds may involve three different aspects of religion:
- ▶ The first aspect involves religion as belief (including non-belief), that is "convictions or values about the divine or ultimate reality or the spiritual destiny of humankind" (UNHCR, February 2019, p. 125 [Guidelines on International Protection No. 6, 28 April 2004, para. 6]).
- ▶ The second aspect concerns religion as identity in the sense of belonging to a community that observes or is bound together by common beliefs, rituals, or traditions (UNHCR, February 2019, p. 125 [Guidelines on International Protection No. 6, 28 April 2004, para. 7]).
- ▶ The third aspect is related to religion as a way of life and may manifest itself in the observance of particular religious practices (such as religious holidays or dietary laws) or activities such as the wearing of distinctive clothing (UNHCR, February 2019, p. 125 [Guidelines on International Protection No. 6, 28 April 2004, para. 8]).

Religious discrimination and persecution may consist of coercion in two directions, "one that disrupts or interferes with religious activity and the other that enforces compliance with religious norms". Both the state and religious (or social) communities can be agents of persecution in such cases (Gunn, 2003, p. 206).

Enforcing compliance is often directed towards members of the same religious group. Individuals may be seen as heretics, apostates, schismatics or pagans if they do not comply with a given set of religious norms.

Freedom of religion entails the right to change one's religion. However, persons who convert from their religion to another faith or adopt atheistic views may face discrimination or persecution as a result. It is crucial to note that the actor of persecution may target the applicant because of their actual or perceived beliefs (for more details see UNHCR, February 2019, pp. 123-131 [Guidelines on International Protection No. 6, 28 April 2004]).

Research questions related to persecution on religious grounds (non-exhaustive)

National law and state protection:
- ▶ Are there legal provisions protecting freedom of religion? Are there legal restrictions or limitations on religious belief or practice?
- ▶ What is the relationship between the state and religion in a given country?
- ▶ Is it prohibited to be a member of a particular religious community, worship in public or in private or to give religious instruction? Is there legislation requiring compulsory registration of religious groups?
- ▶ Are there penalties for violating freedom of religion and are these enforced? Are there specific regulations relating to groups which restrict the exercise of freedom of religion or belief?
- ▶ Are there reports about discriminatory prosecution or punishment?
- ▶ Are legal remedies against violation of freedom of religion available and effective?
- ▶ Are there penalties for refusal to serve in the military based on religious belief?
- ▶ Are there penalties for converting to a different faith (apostasy), for proselytising, or for celebrating religious festivals?
- ▶ Is non-compliance with religious practices and norms punishable by law? Does this happen in practice?
- ▶ Does the law impose disproportionate punishment for breaches of the law (for example, imprisonment for blasphemy or practising an alternative religion, or death for adultery)?
- ▶ Are there regulations and practices affecting women in particular (clothing requirements, restrictions on movement, harmful traditional practices, unequal or discriminatory treatment in the name of religion)?

Actors of persecution:
- ▶ What is the prevalence of forced conversion to a religion by state or non-state actors?
- ▶ Do state or non-state actors force compliance with religious practices?
- ▶ Are there actors targeting specific religious groups or persons with a specific belief? What is their influence?
- ▶ What are the attitudes of society towards religious minorities? Do these extend throughout the country?
- ▶ Are there serious measures of discrimination imposed on persons because they practise their religion or belong to a particular religious community (e.g. labour market, housing, educational system, health system)?

Internal flight or relocation alternative (IFA/IRA):
- ▶ Are there regions where religious minorities form a local majority? If so, does religious discrimination take place against this religious group there?
- ▶ Do some religious communities have their own jurisdiction in a certain region?
- ▶ Is there autonomy of certain religious communities in a specific region?

EXAMPLE

A man from Pakistan claims he needs international protection because he is an Ahmadi. He fears he might face serious harm by the Khatme Nabuwwat Movement, a non-state actor that targets Ahmadis in Pakistan, claiming that they are apostates. This organisation states its aims are in accordance with the Pakistani legal framework, in particular the laws against blasphemy.

Ahmadi man from Pakistan

National law and state protection
- Is the state able and willing to protect Ahmadis?
- How are laws applied in practice? Is there discriminatory enforcement?
- Are legal procedures (incl. remedies) fair for Ahmadis?
- Are there discriminatory provisions against Ahmadis (incl. blasphemy laws)?
- What does the law stipulate regarding freedom of religion?

Non-state actors
- Is the K.N. Movement supported by the government and/or society?
- Does the K.N. Movement exert influence in parts of the country?
- Does the K.N. Movement exert influence in parts of the country?

IFA/IRA
- What is the situation of Ahmadis in the proposed location?
- Is the area accessible to the individual at risk?
- Is there a possible new risk in this area?
- Is economic survival possible (housing, education, employment, social assistance, etc.)?
- Do the personal circumstances of the individual allow for internal relocation (e.g. vulnerabilities)?

Is the situation different if the applicant is a young or elderly man or with a particular gender identity or sexual orientation? Does he belong to a vulnerable group?

Figure 12: Research tree: Religion

3.5.2 Political opinion

The protection of the right to hold opinions and the right to freedom of expression is enshrined in Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) and Article 19 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR), as well as in various regional instruments (Article 9 of the *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights*, Article 13 of the *American Convention on Human Rights* and Article 10 of the *European Convention on Human Rights*). Refugee case law reflects a broad understanding of the term "political".

According to the UNHCR Handbook, fear of persecution for holding political opinions presupposes that opinions of an applicant are not tolerated by the authorities. Certain applicants may fear persecution on the basis of imputed political opinions, i.e. opinions which they do not necessarily hold, but which are attributed to them by the actor of persecution, in most cases state authorities (UNHCR, February 2019, para. 80).

Although the definition of "refugee" refers to political opinion and not to political acts, acts are often interpreted as manifestations of an applicant's political opinion. In a number of cases, courts were convinced that specific acts implied political opinions, e.g. the refusal of a Kurd to serve in the Turkish army, membership in a labour union, anti-government theatre performances or activity as a confidential informer in a political conflict (Zimmermann/Mahler, 2011, pp. 401-402).

The UNHCR Handbook notes the following:

> "While the definition speaks of persecution 'for reasons of political opinion' it may not always be possible to establish a causal link between the opinion expressed and the related measures suffered or feared by the applicant. Such measures have only rarely been based expressly on 'opinion'. More frequently, such measures take the form of sanctions for alleged criminal acts against the ruling power. It will, therefore, be necessary to establish the applicant's political opinion, which is at the root of his behaviour, and the fact that it has led or may lead to the persecution that he claims to fear." (UNHCR, February 2019, para. 81)

Further information on handling claims related to political opinion can be found in the following EUAA publication:

EUAA – European Union Agency for Asylum: Practical Guide on Political Opinion, December 2022
https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2022-12/Practical-Guide-Political-Opinion.pdf

Research questions related to persecution on grounds of political opinion (non-exhaustive)

General political situation:
- ▶ What is the political system in the country?
- ▶ Are there free and fair elections?

National law:
- ▶ Are there legal provisions protecting freedom of expression, assembly and association and how are they applied in practice?
- ▶ Are there legal restrictions or limitations on freedom of expression, assembly and association?
- ▶ Are there any prohibitions of political parties or political organisations and how are they enforced?
- ▶ Are there restrictions regarding the registration of political parties or organisations, or their activities?
- ▶ What are the punishments of those deemed to have committed political offences?
- ▶ Are there reports on prosecution being used as a pretext for sanctioning a person's political opinion?
- ▶ Is the fairness of legal procedures guaranteed in political cases?
- ▶ Are there reports on impunity for politically motivated crimes?
- ▶ Do authorities tolerate crimes committed by affiliates of the group in power (corruption)?
- ▶ Do the authorities condone human rights abuses by affiliated groups or individuals against (real or perceived) political opponents?

Freedom of assembly and expression:
- ▶ Are there different political parties/groups operating in public?
- ▶ Are there reports on protests or rallies and on the authorities' response?
- ▶ Are there reports on political prisoners?
- ▶ Are there reports on political opinion being imputed to persons?

A woman from the Russian Federation claims that she needs international protection because she participated in demonstrations against the government in 2021 and is now being prosecuted for offending a policeman. She also claims that she writes a blog in which she regularly expresses critical views of the government and highlights corruption. The woman says that upon return she might face a lengthy prison sentence.

Female blogger and participant in demonstrations in the Russian Federation

National Law

- Is there unduly harsh punishment foreseen in cases of political acts?
- Is the fairness of legal procedures incl. remedies guaranteed in political cases?
- What are the legal provisions and penalties for offending a policeman?
- Are there provisions prohibiting participation in demonstrations or publishing blogs (incl. penalties foreseen)?
- Are there provisions restricting the organisation of demonstrations?
- Are there legal provisions protecting or restricting freedom of expression and freedom of assembly?

Freedom of assembly and expression

- How are state authorities responding to demonstrations?
- What is the general situation of media in the Russian Federation? Do state authorities take measures to curb free expression?
- Is there information on internet censorship or monitoring?
- Are there reports about restrictions for bloggers?
- What are the consequences of criticising state authorities and corruption?
- Are there reports on charges being fabricated against individuals expressing dissent?

Is the situation different if the applicant is a single woman? If she is young or an elderly person or a person with a particular gender identity or sexual orientation? Does she belong to a vulnerable group?

Prison conditions

- How are perceived political opponents treated?
- What are the prison conditions for women?

Figure 13: Research tree: Political opinion

3.5.3 Race, nationality

In the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* (ICERD), ratifying states condemn racial discrimination and agree to "undertake to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating racial discrimination in all its forms and promoting understanding among all races, [...]" (ICERD, 21 December 1965, Article 2 (1)). Article 1 defines the term "racial discrimination" as

> "[...] any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life." (ICERD, 21 December 1965, Article 1 (1))

Beyond ethnicity, race may include cultural or linguistic distinctiveness, and it often overlaps with other Convention grounds. According to the UNHCR Handbook, race

> "has to be understood in its widest sense to include all kinds of ethnic groups that are referred to as 'races' in common usage. Frequently it will also entail membership of a specific social group of common descent forming a minority within a larger population." (UNHCR, February 2019, para. 68)

Nationality includes legal notions of nationality (citizenship), including statelessness. It may occasionally overlap with the term "race" (UNHCR, February 2019, para. 74). The EU Qualification Directive provides an example of the broad interpretation of "nationality" in the context of refugee law, stating that

> "the concept of nationality shall not be confined to citizenship or lack thereof but shall in particular include membership of a group determined by its cultural, ethnic, or linguistic identity, common geographical or political origins or its relationship with the population of another State." (EU Qualification Directive 2011, Article 10 (1) (c))

Acts of persecution for reasons of nationality may be based on measures directed against or adverse attitudes towards a national minority. In some situations, where there is clear evidence that a certain minority group is particularly ill-treated, "the fact of belonging to such a minority may in itself give rise to well-founded fear of persecution" (UNHCR, February 2019, para. 74).

While in most cases persecution for reason of nationality is feared by persons belonging to a national minority, there are also circumstances where members of a majority group may fear persecution by a dominant minority group (UNHCR, February 2019, para. 76).

Claims for 1951 refugee status on the grounds of well-founded fear of persecution for reason of race/nationality in part overlap with questions in the context of statelessness determination procedures. However, it should be noted that these are different areas that should be distinguished from each other.

The following publication deals with COI research on statelessness:

Asylos: Principles For Conducting Country of Origin Information Research on Statelessness, 2023
https://www.asylos.eu/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=c259abef-cc25-45cd-a8fc-aef1e0484da4

Research questions related to persecution on grounds of race and nationality (non-exhaustive)

National law:
- ▶ Are there legal provisions protecting national minorities?
- ▶ Are there legal provisions that discriminate on the basis of race, nationality or ethnicity?
- ▶ Are these provisions enforced in practice?
- ▶ Is there information available about equal treatment in legal procedures, in theory and in practice, for people belonging to different racial or ethnic groups?
- ▶ Are remedies available against discriminatory treatment on the basis of race or nationality?

State protection and non-state actors:
- ▶ Are there reports about the police or other state actors discriminating on the basis of race or nationality?
- ▶ Are there reports on physical or psychological violence against members of racial, ethnic, or national minorities at the hands of state agents or non-state actors?
- ▶ Is there information available about the authorities protecting minorities from abuses at the hands of members of majority groups, including, for example, acts of extortion by private actors belonging to majority groups?
- ▶ Is there equal access to basic resources like food and water, to education, health care, housing, employment, social welfare, etc., regardless of people's race or nationality?
- ▶ Are members of all ethnic or cultural groups free to practice their traditions and use their language in everyday life and in public?

Internal flight or relocation alternative:
- ▶ Are there regions where the ethnic group of the applicant is in the majority or lives under better conditions for other reasons?

EXAMPLE

A woman from China's Xinjiang region claims that she needs international protection because she belongs to the Uyghur ethnic group. One day, her home was subjected to a random inspection, during which alleged "illegal items" such as books and clothes were confiscated. She regularly had her mobile phone inspected at a local checkpoint when going to work. After her parents were sent to a so-called re-education camp run by the Chinese government, she fled the country in fear of also being sent to such a facility where Uyghurs face torture or even forced sterilisation.

Uyghur woman from China

National Law
- Are legal remedies against discriminatory treatment on the basis of ethnicity available for Uyghurs?
- Is there information available on the treatment of Uyghurs in legal procedures?
- How are these provisions enforced in practice?
- Are there discriminatory provisions specifically targeting Uyghurs?

State protection
- Are there reports on police or other state actors discriminating against Uyghurs on the basis of their ethnicity?
- Does the state monitor the Uyghur population specifically? What are the surveillance measures employed by the state?
- Are there cases of arbitrary arrests, disappearances, internment of Uyghurs?
- Have cases of torture, forced sterilisation or other forms of violations been documented in the Uyghur re-education camps?
- Are members of the Uyghur ethnic group free to practice their traditions and use their language in everyday life and in public?

Is the situation different if the applicant is a single woman? If she is young or an elderly person or a person with a particular gender identity or sexual orientation? Does she belong to a vulnerable group?

Figure 14: Research tree: Race and nationality

3.5.4 Particular social group

The *UNHCR Guidelines on Membership of a Particular Social Group* note that

> "There is no 'closed list' of what groups may constitute a 'particular social group' within the meaning of Article 1A(2). The Convention includes no specific list of social groups, nor does the ratifying history reflect a view that there is a set of identified groups that might qualify under this ground. Rather, the term membership of a particular social group should be read in an evolutionary manner, open to the diverse and changing nature of groups in various societies and evolving international human rights norms." (UNHCR, February 2019, p. 94 [Guidelines on International Protection No. 2, 7 May 2002, para. 3])

Two approaches have dominated decision-making on what constitutes a particular social group for the purposes of the 1951 Refugee Convention. The "protected characteristics approach" examines whether a group is united by an immutable characteristic so fundamental to human dignity that a person should not be compelled to forsake it. The "social perception approach", on the other hand, examines whether a group shares a common characteristic that makes them a cognizable group or sets them apart from society at large. UNHCR has adopted a definition that gives equal weight to both approaches, defining a particular social group as

> "a group of persons who share a common characteristic other than their risk of being persecuted, or who are perceived as a group by society. The characteristic will often be one which is innate, unchangeable, or which is otherwise fundamental to identity, conscience or the exercise of one's human rights." (UNHCR, February 2019, p. 95 [Guidelines on International Protection No. 2, 7 May 2002, para. 11])

The 2011 EU Qualification Directive stipulates in Article 10 that both defining approaches must be fulfilled:

> "[A] group shall be considered to form a particular social group where in particular:
> members of that group share an innate characteristic, or a common background that cannot be changed, or share a characteristic or belief that is so fundamental to identity or conscience that a person should not be forced to renounce it, and that group has a distinct identity in the relevant country, because it is perceived as being different by the surrounding society." (EU Qualification Directive 2011, Article 10 (1) (d))

In its preamble, the EU Qualification Directive makes reference to the ground of persecution "membership of a particular social group" and states that

> "[f]or the purposes of defining a particular social group, issues arising from an applicant's gender, including gender identity and sexual orientation, which may be related to certain legal traditions and customs, resulting in for example genital mutilation, forced sterilisation or forced abortion, should be given due consideration in so far as they are related to the applicant's well-founded fear of persecution." (EU Qualification Directive 2011, Preamble (30))

For an applicant to come within the scope of the 1951 Refugee Convention on the basis of (actual or imputed) membership of a particular social group, human rights abuses or lack of protection from abuses have to be motivated by this common characteristic in order to provide the required causal link (nexus) between the fear of persecution and the reasons for persecution.

For this manual, three groups that are often subject of COI research have been chosen to illustrate how to formulate research questions concerning membership of a particular social group: women, LGBTIQ+ individuals, and children.

3.5.4.1 Women

Persons of all genders can bring gender-related asylum claims, however these types of claims are more commonly brought by women than by men (UNHCR, February 2019, p. 84 [Guidelines on International protection No. 1, 7 May 2002, para. 3]). Gender might be the cause of persecution of women and girls, for example due to discriminatory laws or particular cultural practices. Another example is the use of sexual violence to specifically inflict harm on women and girls (Morondo Taramundi, 2020, p. 244). In many cases of gender-related harm, persecution is committed by non-state actors rather than the state (Morondo Taramundi, 2020, p. 246).

The *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW) and its Optional Protocol are often described as the international bill of rights for women. According to Article 1 of this convention,

> "the term 'discrimination against women' shall mean any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field." (CEDAW, 1979, Article 1)

Research questions related to women-specific persecution (non-exhaustive)

National law:
- ▶ Are civil and political as well as socio-economic rights of women protected? Is there anti-discrimination legislation? Is it enforced?
- ▶ Is there evidence of patterns of legal or de facto discrimination against women of a substantially prejudicial nature to the woman concerned (e.g. severe limitations to the right to earn a livelihood, or to the right to practise her religion, or to access education)?
- ▶ Is there evidence of discriminatory prosecution or punishment of women for certain crimes?
- ▶ Are there laws against women who violate social or cultural norms (including laws that may be neutral in text but in practice be applied against women)? If so, what are the penalties? Are these laws enforced?
- ▶ Are survivors of rape themselves charged with criminal offences?
- ▶ Is there a legal prohibition of state and non-state violence, including sexual violence, against women?
- ▶ Is there legislation based on certain policy goals that implies violations of core human rights (e.g. forced sterilisation or abortion as a means of demographic control)?

Societal attitudes and behaviour:
- ▶ Which cultural, social, and/or traditional norms and practices/policies (with relation to women) prevail in the country of origin? Are there reports on harmful traditional practices against women?
- ▶ What are the consequences for women transgressing social mores (e.g. for not obeying dress codes, for extra-marital affairs ("adultery"), etc.)?
- ▶ Does society or the state see women as individuals and full members of society in their own right?
- ▶ Is there evidence of harassment, intimidation, detention, threats against women because of their affiliation with relatives/husbands who hold a certain political opinion (imputed political opinion; collective punishment), or because of their membership in a particular group?

State protection:
- ▶ Are there reports that police or public authorities refuse to protect women against harmful conduct by private persons? Are there reports of public authorities remaining inactive when faced with harmful conduct directed against women? Is there evidence of the police ignoring or mistreating women who report crimes, especially those involving sexual violence?
- ▶ Is there information about potential barriers preventing women from filing complaints?
- ▶ Are public authorities able to intervene (e.g. is there sufficient/properly trained personnel)?
- ▶ Does the state run campaigns to raise awareness about domestic violence or harmful cultural practices (e.g. FGM)?
- ▶ Are there reports of private actors committing human rights violations against women with either impunity or disproportionately low punishment?
- ▶ Are there reports on prosecutions/convictions based on provisions against harmful conduct directed against women?
- ▶ Are there policies to combat domestic violence and harmful cultural practises and evidence of their implementation or success?
- ▶ Are there structures of protection and support (e.g. availability of safe houses or shelters for women fleeing a domestic setting)?

Gender and vulnerability:
Bear in mind that the answers to your questions might be different when looking for information about the situation of single women, a young or an elderly woman, or a person with a particular gender identity or sexual orientation, or a woman belonging to other vulnerable groups.

EXAMPLE

A woman from Mongolia claims she needs international protection because she had to flee her abusive husband. She states that he raped and beat her on several occasions, leading to hospitalisation. She tried to file a complaint with the police, but the police did not take any action. When her husband found out about the attempted complaint, he threatened to kill her. After this incident she left the country.

Mongolian woman threatened by husband

National law
- Is violence against women prohibited by law?
- Does the prohibition include domestic violence? Is spousal rape recognized as rape?

Willingness of the state to protect
- Are the state authorities willing to protect victims of domestic violence?
- Are there policies in place to fight the prevalence of domestic violence in society?
- What are the punishments for acts of domestic violence?
- Is violence committed by a husband punished in the same way as other forms violence?

Ability of the state to protect
- Do state authorities have the resources and capacity to protect victims of domestic violence?
- Are there prosecutions/convictions based on provisions agains domestic violence?

Access to state protecion
- Is there social stigma preventing women from filing complains?
- Are there other potential barriers dissuading individuals from reporting domestic abuse?
- Do authorities refuse to accept complaints because they see domestic violence as an internal 'family matter'?

IFA/IRA
- Are there areas in the country where the woman would be safe from her husband?
- Can a single woman reach the area safety?
- Can she make a living on her own? (Housing, labour, social assistance, etc)

Is the situation different if the applicant is a young or an elderly person? Does she belong to a vulnerable group?

Figure 15: Research tree: particular social group - women

3.5.4.2 LGBTIQ+ persons (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer and other diverse identities)

There is no universally agreed terminology for referring to persons with diverse sexual orientation or gender identity / expression (SOGIE). The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) frequently uses the term LGBTI, but also recognises a variety of other terms used in different countries (ILGA, 15 February 2022, p. 5). Furthermore, variations of the term 'individuals of diverse sexual orientations, and gender identities, gender expression and sex characteristics' (SOGIESC) are also used.

UNHCR points out that a number of jurisdictions have affirmed the position that "sexual orientation and/or gender identity are fundamental aspects of human identity that are either innate or immutable, or that a person should not be required to give up or conceal" (UNHCR, February 2019, p. 170 [Guidelines on International Protection No. 9, 23 October 2012, para. 12]).

Regarding the Convention grounds relevant in cases of LGBTIQ+ persons, UNHCR states the following:

> "Refugee claims based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity are most commonly recognized under the 'membership of a particular social group' ground. Other grounds may though also be relevant depending on the political, religious and cultural context of the claim. For example, LGBTIQ+ activists and human rights defenders (or perceived activists/defenders) may have either or both claims based on political opinion or religion if, for example, their advocacy is seen as going against prevailing political or religious views and/or practices." (UNHCR, February 2019, p. 176 [Guidelines on International Protection No. 9, 23 October 2012, para. 12]).

There is a wide range of reasons why LGBTIQ+ persons may be subject to abuse and discrimination. Being perceived as abnormal, criminal, worthless, etc. can be the result of traditional, religious and social norms or intolerance. Legislation may reflect these norms and attitudes. According to ILGA, 62 UN member states had provisions criminalising consensual same-sex conduct as of July 2023 (ILGA, as of July 2023).

Freedom of sexual orientation is not explicitly recognised as an international human right. However, it is well established that LGBTIQ+ persons are entitled to all human rights on an equal basis with others. The *Yogyakarta Principles* developed in 2007 by human rights experts interpret international human rights standards regarding sexual orientation and gender identity (Yogyakarta Principles, 2007). They are supplemented by the Yogyakarta Principles plus 10 (YP+10) document that was adopted in 2017 (Yogyakarta Principles plus 10, 2017).

UNHCR refers to the treatment of LGBTIQ+ individuals in its guidelines on claims based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity:

> "It is widely documented that LGBTI individuals are the targets of killings, sexual and gender-based violence, physical attacks, torture, arbitrary detention, accusations of immoral or deviant behaviour, denial of the rights to assembly, expression and information, and discrimination in employment, health and education in all regions around the world. Many countries maintain severe criminal laws for consensual same-sex relations, a number of which stipulate imprisonment, corporal punishment and/or the death penalty. In these and other countries, the authorities may not be willing or able to protect individuals from abuse and persecution by non-State actors, resulting in impunity for perpetrators and implicit, if not explicit, tolerance of such abuse and persecution." (UNHCR, February 2019, p. 166 [Guidelines on International Protection No. 9, 23 October 2012, para. 2]).

With regard to COI on the situation and treatment of LGBTIQ+ individuals, UNHCR points out the following:

> "Relevant and specific country of origin information on the situation and treatment of LGBTI individuals is often lacking. This should not automatically lead to the conclusion that the applicant's claim is unfounded or that there is no persecution of LGBTI individuals in that country. The extent to which international organizations and other groups are able to monitor and document abuses against LGBTI individuals remain limited in many countries. Increased activism has often been met with attacks on human rights defenders, which impede their ability to document violations. Stigma attached to issues surrounding sexual orientation and/or gender identity also contributes to incidents going unreported. Information can be especially scarce for certain groups, in particular bisexual, lesbian, transgender and intersex people. It is critical to avoid automatically drawing conclusions based on information about one group or another; however, it may serve as an indication of the applicant's situation in certain circumstances." (UNHCR, February 2019, p. 183 [Guidelines on International Protection No. 9, 23 October 2012, para. 66])

Even though reporting on LGBTIQ+-related issues has increased in recent years, there are still challenges for COI research due to a lack of documentation, and information is often scarce, incomplete or too general. The lack of reporting and documentation may be the result of social taboos associated with LGBTIQ+ issues, self- or state censorship and a lack of capacity for international monitoring. While information about gay men may be available, information on the situation of lesbian, bisexual, trans and intersex persons is often more difficult to come by. However, the scarcity of information on these groups does not mean that they do not face human rights violations (EUAA, February 2023c, pp. 18 19).

EUAA – European Union Agency for Asylum: Country of Origin Information - Research Guide on LGBTIQ, February 2023c [rebranded edition of 2021 version]
https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2023-02/2023_02_EUAA_COI_Research_Guide_LGBTIQ_Rebranded.pdf

IOM – International Organisation for Migration: International standards on the protection of people with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) in the context of migration, May 2021
https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl486/files/documents/InfoNote-International-Standards-Protection-of-People-with-Diverse-SOGIESC.pdf

Research questions related to LGBTIQ+-specific forms of persecution (non-exhaustive)

National law:
- ▶ What are the legal provisions regarding LGBTIQ+ persons?
- ▶ Are there legal provisions criminalising consensual same-sex sexual acts between adults? What are the penalties? Are these provisions enforced?
- ▶ Are there any laws that are used in a discriminatory fashion against LGBTIQ+ persons?
- ▶ Are LGBTIQ+ persons forced to receive certain medical treatments (e.g. compulsory physical or psychiatric treatment)?
- ▶ Are there legal provisions that criminalise advocacy for LGBTIQ+ rights?

State protection:
- ▶ Can LGBTIQ+ persons effectively contact the authorities when they are subjected to abuse?
- ▶ Are there reports on incidents where state authorities did or did not intervene to prevent serious harm? What was the stated rationale in cases where they did not intervene?
- ▶ Are there reports of successful protection by state authorities?
- ▶ Is discrimination reported regarding governmental institutions or agencies (including police, prisons)? Does the state take action to prevent/punish ill-treatment by the police or other state officials?
- ▶ Are there reports about discrimination against LGBTIQ+ persons in the judicial system?
- ▶ Does the state run campaigns to raise awareness about LGBTIQ+ rights?

Societal attitudes and behaviour:
- ▶ How are LGBTIQ+ persons (including the individual sub-groups) perceived by society?
- ▶ Which cultural and social traditional norms and practices with regard to LGBTIQ+ persons prevail in the country?
- ▶ Are there forms of discrimination against LGBTIQ+ persons in education, the labour market, housing, health care, public places, etc.? Are there reports on social exclusion of LGBTIQ+ persons? Are there differences in the treatment of the individual sub-groups?
- ▶ Are there reports on whether LGBTIQ+ persons have to hide their sexual orientation and/or gender identity?
- ▶ Are there reports about incidents involving violence against LGBTIQ+ persons?
- ▶ Is there evidence of patterns of other forms of de facto discrimination against LGBTIQ+ persons?
- ▶ Are there reports of LGBTIQ+ persons being forced to marry regardless of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity?
- ▶ Are there reports about traditional practices regarding sexual orientation and/or gender identity that involve physical or sexual violence?
- ▶ Is there any form of traditional justice in place (e.g. council of elders, religious courts, etc.)? How are LGBTIQ+ persons treated?
- ▶ Are there any institutions or organisations supporting LGBTIQ+ persons?

Gender and vulnerability:
Bear in mind that the answers to your questions might be different when looking for information about the situation of lesbian women or gay men, or of transgender or intersex persons. The situation might be different if the person is young or elderly or belongs to other vulnerable groups.

A woman from Guinea claims she needs international protection because she had a sexual relationship with a woman. She now fears harsh punishment. She states that she cannot return to her family, as she would be forced to marry a man.

Lesbian woman from Guinea

Laws regarding homosexuality
- Is access to fair procedures incl. remedies guaranteed? Are there reports on that issue?
- How are the laws applied?
- Are there penalties for lesbian conduct?
- Are there laws that criminalise consensual same-sex sexual acts between adults?

State protection
- How are lesbian women treated by the police?
- Can a lesbian woman go to the authorities to report abuse?

Discrimination and homophobia
- How are lesbian women perceived by society?
- Do lesbian women face discrimination in social and every day life (housing, education, employment, medical treatment, social assistance, etc.)?
- Do lesbian women have to hide their sexual identity?
- Is there violence resulting from homophobia?
- Does the state intervene to prevent homophobia?

Forced marriage
- Is forced marriage common in Guinea?
- Is a lesbian woman forced to marry a man?
- Are there legal provisions protecting against forced marriage?
- Is there social support for women refusing forced marriage?

Is the situation different if the applicant is a young or an elderly person? Does she belong to a vulnerable group?

IFA/IRA
- Are there differences with regard to the perception of homosexuality within the country (e.g. countryside - cities)?
- Can a woman without family ties travel safely?
- Can a single woman live safely when moving to another place?
- Does she have to conceal her sexual orientation in the area of relocation?
- Is it possible for a single woman to survive economically there?
- Are there organisations supporting single or lesbian women in the area of relocation?
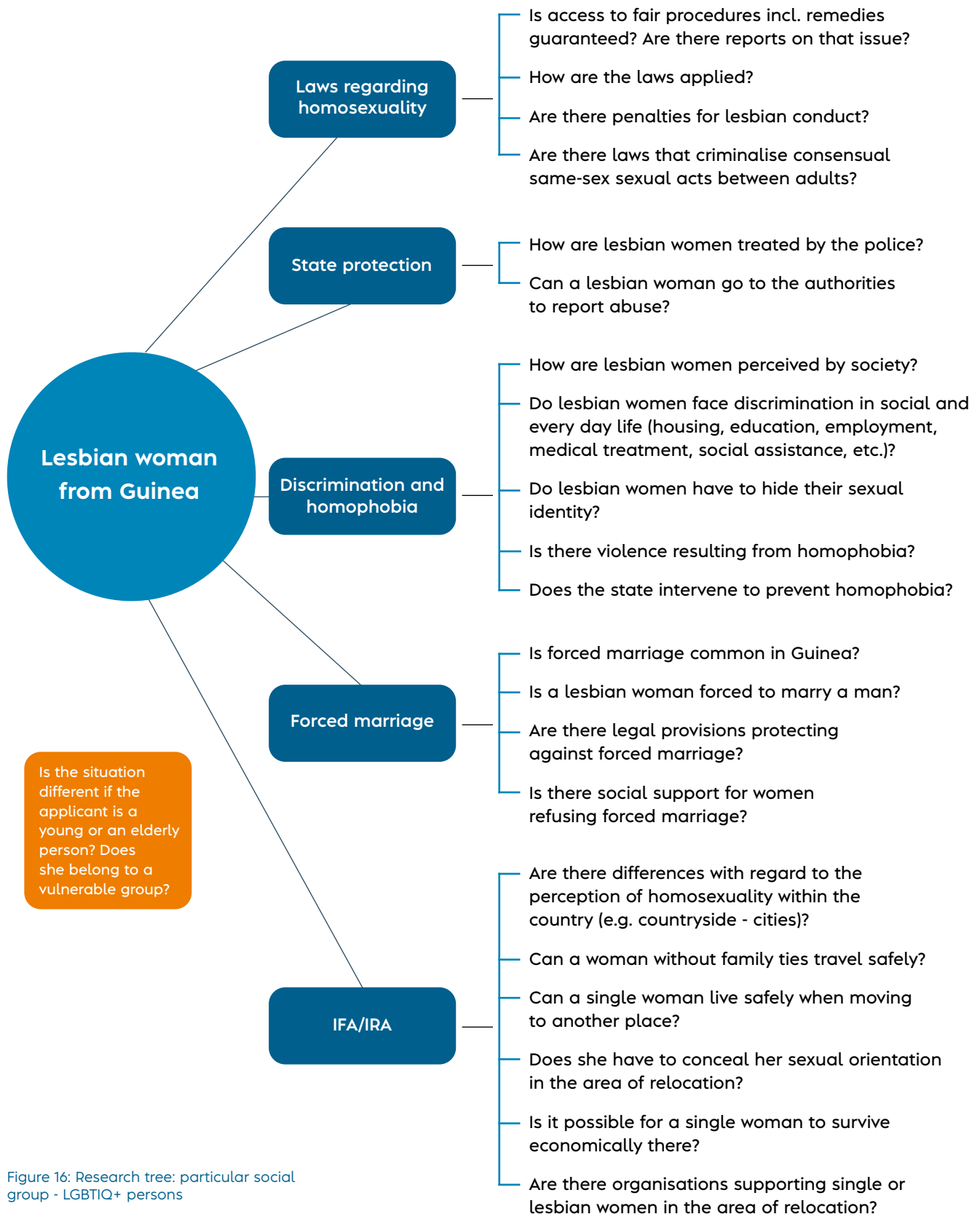
Figure 16: Research tree: particular social group - LGBTIQ+ persons

3.5.4.3 Children

The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC), together with the Optional Protocols on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, and on the involvement of children in armed conflict, form a comprehensive legal framework to protect the rights and best interests of children.

Pursuant to Article 1 of the CRC, "a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier" (CRC, 1989, Article 1). Likewise, the EU Qualification Directive sets the age of majority at eighteen (EU Qualification Directive 2011, Article 2 (k)).

A well-founded fear of child persecution may be linked to any of the grounds of the 1951 Refugee Convention. However, membership of a particular social group has frequently been applied in connection with children's claims. In its *Guidelines on Child Asylum Claims*, UNHCR refers to some of the more prominent social groupings such as homeless children, children affected by HIV/AIDS, and children recruited or used by an armed force or group (UNHCR, 22 December 2009, para. 52). Child-specific forms of persecution may further be related, for instance, to child trafficking, female genital mutilation, family and domestic violence, forced or underage marriage, debt bondage or hazardous child labour, forced labour, forced prostitution and child pornography, or violation of economic, social, and cultural rights (UNHCR, 22 December 2009, paras. 18-36).

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child emphasises that

> "under-age recruitment (including of girls for sexual services or forced marriage with the military) and direct or indirect participation in hostilities constitutes a serious human rights violation and thereby persecution, and should lead to the granting of refugee status where the well-founded fear of such recruitment or participation in hostilities is based on 'reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion' (Article 1A (2), 1951 Refugee Convention)." (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 1 September 2005, para. 59).

With regard to socio-economic needs of children, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states the following:

> "[T]he lack of educational opportunities for children often reinforces their subjection to various other human rights violations. For instance these children, who may live in abject poverty and not lead healthy lives, are particularly vulnerable to forced labour and other forms of exploitation. Moreover, there is a direct correlation between, for example, primary school enrolment levels for girls and major reductions in child marriages." (UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 10 May 1999, para. 4)

The EU Qualification Directive stresses the need for particular attention to child-specific forms of protection (Preamble 28) and for recognising the fact that acts of persecution can be of a child-specific nature (EU Qualification Directive 2011, Article 9 (2) (f)).

For the assessment of refugee claims by children, special efforts are needed to gather relevant COI, particularly as children may not have sufficient knowledge of conditions in their country of origin.

Research questions related to child-specific forms of persecution (non-exhaustive)

National law:
- ▶ What legal provisions are in place to protect children? Are they enforced?
- ▶ Is there legislation to protect children against harmful practices? What are the penalties for breaking these laws? Are these laws enforced?

Societal attitudes and behaviour:
- ▶ Are there reports on harmful traditional practices involving children (e.g. FGM, forced/underage marriages, witchcraft accusations, ritual killings, etc.)?
- ▶ What cultural, social, or traditional norms and practices or policies affecting children prevail in the country?

Children in armed conflicts:
- ▶ Are there reports about the involvement of children in armed conflicts? On underage recruitment for fighting? On the recruitment of children for sexual services or forced marriage with members of the military or armed groups? On other forms of direct or indirect participation in hostilities?
- ▶ Who are the recruiters? Are they state or non-state actors?

Child trafficking:
- ▶ Are there reports on child trafficking?
- ▶ Is information available on the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of children for the purpose of exploitation?
- ▶ Are there reports on a possible complicity of the child's parents, other family members or caregivers in arranging or consenting to the trafficking?
- ▶ Are there reports of authorities' interventions against child trafficking?

Child labour:
- ▶ Are there reports on child labour and slavery? On debt bondage and other forms of forced labour? On the use of children in criminal activities (e.g. prostitution, pornography, or the drugs trade? And are these laws enforced?
- ▶ Is a child's full development and education inhibited by the kind of labour performed? Is the labour likely to harm the health, safety or morals of a child?

Violence and corporal punishment:
- ▶ Are there reports on domestic violence against children (e.g. battery, sexual abuse in the household, incest, crimes committed in the name of honour, psychological abuse, etc.)?
- ▶ Are there national provisions referring to domestic violence? Are they enforced?
- ▶ Are there reports on corporal punishments in schools?

Violation of economic, social and cultural rights:
- ▶ Are there reports on violations of economic, social and cultural rights? On the denial of access to food, water and housing? On the denial of access to medical treatment in case of life-threatening illness? On the denial of access to education (especially for children of primary school age)?
- ▶ Is there an accumulation of discrimination?

Persecution due to family ties:
- ▶ Is there evidence of harassment, intimidation, detention, or threats against children because of their affiliation with parents/relatives that hold a certain political opinion (imputed political opinion; reflex persecution), or because of their membership in a particular group (e.g. ethnic cleansing)?

Gender and vulnerability:
Bear in mind that the answers to your questions might be different when looking for information about the situation of a child that belongs to a specific vulnerable group, beyond being a child.

EXAMPLE

A 16-year-old girl from Karnataka state in India reports that she fell victim to a trafficking ring. When her parents died, she dropped out of school to find work. A businessman promised to find her a job as a housemaid in Delhi but when she arrived, she was locked up in a home where she had to work all day doing menial tasks. The businessman told her that she had a debt to pay for arranging her travel and finding her a job. When she could not pay, he threatened to harm her and told her that his men would come and get her. She broke out of the house and fled.

Child being trafficked and forced into domestic servitude

trafficking networks — How do child trafficking networks operate in India, what is their reach and how do they cooperate?

state protection —
- Can a minor turn to the police for help and report trafficking cases? Is there a follow-up on such cases and witness protection measures for the child?
- Are there investigations into and prosecution of trafficking networks?
- Are there anti-trafficking regulations in place? How are they applied?

situation upon return —
- Are there shelters for trafficking victims and what are they able to provide?
- Are health and psycho-social services available and accessible?
- Are there reintergration programmes for victims oftrafficking?
- Is there societal discrimonation against victims of trafficking?

living situation of unaccompanied minors — Access to housing, education, social support?

IFA/IRA —
- Are there family ties in the area of relocation?
- Is institutional care available?

Is the child disabled or sick? Are there any other personal circumstances that have to be considered?
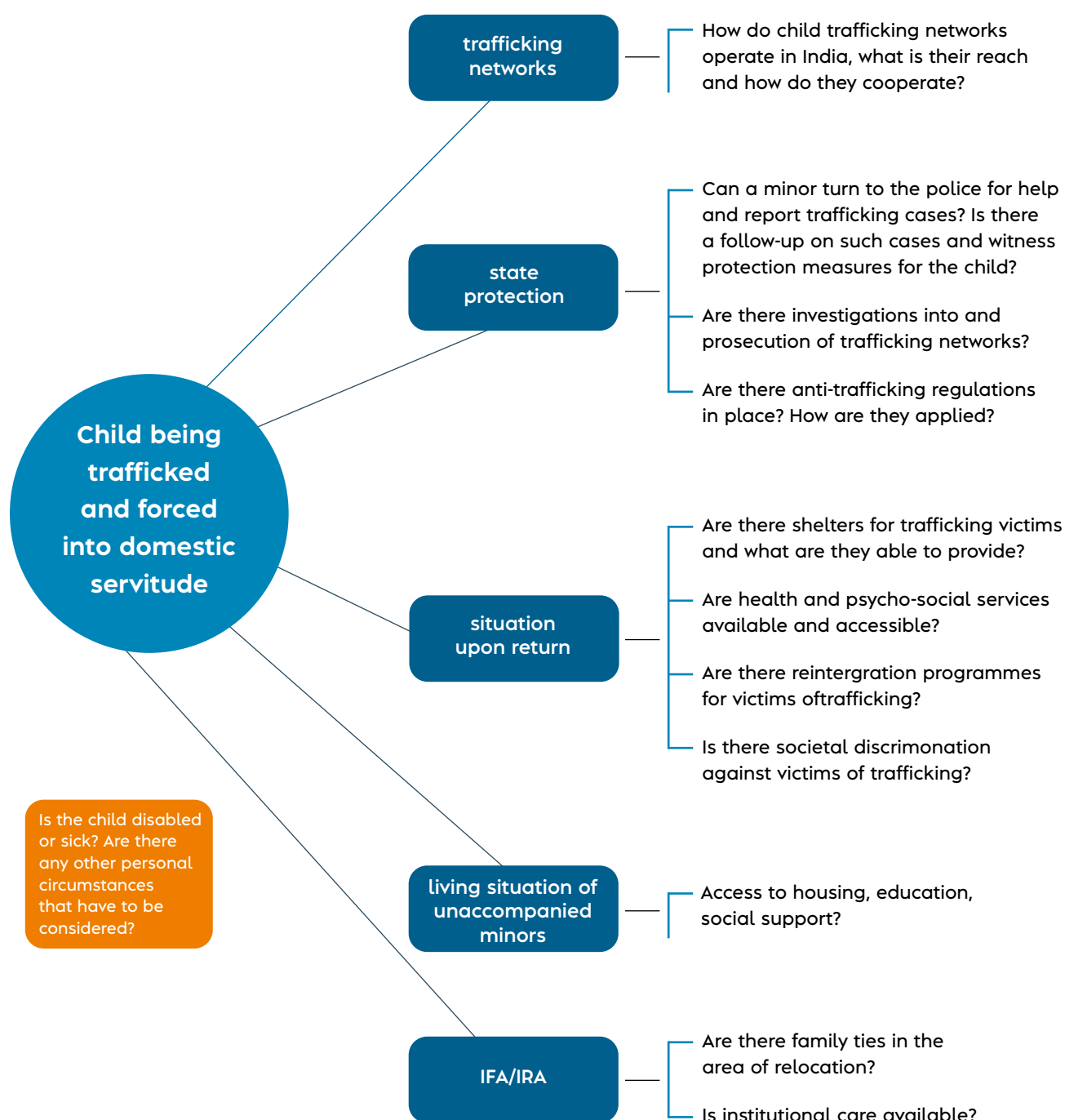
Figure 17: Research tree: particular social group - children

3.6 Summary of chapter 3

✔ COI research must be informed by an understanding of international human rights law to provide relevant COI.

✔ Protection-related questions should be derived from legal concepts:
  ▶ Convention grounds including political opinion, religion, race, nationality, or membership of a particul ar social group
  ▶ National law, state protection, persecution by non-state actors, internal flight or relocation alternative

✔ Mainstreaming gender and vulnerability is a process of creating awareness of and knowledge about how gender or belonging to a vulnerable group influences someone's position in society and adds a specific dimension to many research questions.

PRACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

Research trees help to structure and organise COI research.	
For RSD practitioners	**For COI service providers**
▶ RSD practitioners who conduct research for their own cases should separate COI research and legal assessment to avoid following preconceived ideas and judgements when researching. ▶ Formulating relevant and neutral COI questions helps to keep research separate from legal assessment. ▶ Consider contacting COI service providers for support or information. ▶ Formulate research questions with the applicant in mind. What is the sex/gender of the applicant? Is the applicant a minor? Is the applicant healthy or suffering from an illness? Are there other specific vulnerabilities?	▶ Background information on a case can help COI service providers understand the context of a specific query. ▶ Take a nuanced approach for a better understanding of how intersecting factors shape the risks, needs and experiences of individuals seeking international protection.

4 SOURCES

After formulating relevant questions, identifying reliable sources is the next step for effective and efficient COI research. In practice, this step is tightly interwoven with the question of how to deal with the information retrieved from these sources, a topic that will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5.

In general, any piece of information from any source may serve as COI – provided that the information is relevant to the consideration of an international protection claim and the reliability of the source is taken into account.

This chapter explains the concept of primary and secondary sources, lists the types of sources widely used for COI, and introduces social media and user-generated content as a resource for COI research. The criteria used to assess sources and guidance on the handling of dubious sources are also covered.

Appendix B to this manual provides short descriptions of sources widely used in COI research. They are helpful for gaining an overview of a certain country or topic, and they can act as a starting point for research. Appendix B also includes an overview of publicly available COI databases as important tools to support COI research.

The importance of assessing sources varies for the different end-users of this manual: COI service providers support their clients with relevant and reliable COI. For them, knowledge of sources and the ability to efficiently assess unknown COI sources is a core competence. RSD practitioners need to understand the basics of source assessment to develop a balanced and accurate picture of the situation in a country and an ability to assign 'weight' to the COI as evidence.

Content of chapter 4

4.1   COI sources - definition and scope

    4.1.1   Primary and secondary sources

    4.1.2   Types of sources

    4.1.3   Social media and user-generated content as a COI resource

4.2   Source assessment

    4.2.1   Criteria of source assessment

    4.2.3   Assessment of sources that use social media

    4.2.4   Source assessment in practice

4.3   Dubious sources

4.4   How to build your knowledge of sources

4.5   Summary of chapter 4

4.1 COI sources – definition and scope

In the context of COI, sources are defined as individuals or institutions producing information.

To meet the quality standard of reliability and balance, it is essential to systematically assess sources and to balance the sources that are used to gain a comprehensive view of an event or situation.

The identification of COI sources occurs throughout the research process. Working with COI also requires familiarity with a basic set of sources widely used in COI research and the ability to select appropriate sources that contain information relevant to answering the questions at hand.

4.1.1 Primary and secondary sources

We define primary and secondary sources as follows:

▶ A primary source is an individual or institution providing first-hand testimony or observations on the event or issue in question.
▶ A secondary source is an individual or institution which documents, refers to, reproduces, compiles, or comments on a primary source or other secondary sources.

NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

The term "original source" is sometimes used as a synonym for primary source. The *Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information*, however, have introduced the term "original source" as a third category besides primary and secondary source. It is defined as "the person or institution who documents the event, fact or matter for the first time" (Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information, April 2008, p. 6). To avoid ambiguity, we do not use the term "original source" in this manual.

To familiarise ourselves with the terms primary and secondary source, let us take a look at the following example from the report "Crowdfunding a War: The Money behind Myanmar's resistance" published by the International Crisis Group (also called Crisis Group) on 22 December 2022, available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/328-crowdfunding-war-money-behind-myanmars-resistance.

The Crisis Group report comprises information derived from interviews, from the media, and from other organisations. Although it contains many references to information obtained from sources other than the Crisis Group, we still refer to the Crisis Group as the source of the report.

Different mechanisms are at work here. First, the International Crisis Group obtains information by conducting interviews. The interviewees who provided information to the Crisis Group are primary sources; these individuals have first-hand knowledge of an event or a situation that are addressed in the Crisis Group report. The Crisis Group documents what the interviewees said and integrates this information into its report. In doing so, the Crisis Group becomes a secondary source in those text blocks that contain quotations of interviewees.

Secondly, the Crisis Group refers to information from local media and to information already published by other organisations. Here too, the Crisis Group serves as a secondary source. Finally, parts of the report contain analysis or conclusions drawn by the Crisis Group itself. For these parts of the text, the Crisis Group is the primary source.

Let's have a look at some paragraphs of the report:

> A PDF [People's Defence Forces] member explained: "We lost a lot of money. Since then, we have been very careful with people who said they wanted to donate – we only accept donations from people we know. We also regularly create new accounts so there is less chance of our money being frozen".[74]

→ A member of the People's Defence Forces (PDF) is the primary source.

International Crisis Group is the source that first documented the information. It is a secondary source.

[74] Crisis Group interview, PDF official in Sagaing Region, September 2022.

> In September, the regime announced a ban on humanitarian work in six townships in central and northern Rakhine, later extended to eight townships.[117]

→ International Crisis Group is a secondary source.
A closer look at the article by RFA (https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/ban-09162022182948.html) shows that the article which is referred to in footnote 117 is itself based on information provided to Radio Free Asia (RFA) Burmese by staff of international NGOs (https://www.rfa.org/burmese/news/military-council-bans-the-movement-of-un-and-international-community-groups-in-six-rakhine-townships-09162022061725.html). The report was subsequently translated by Khin Maung Nyane and written in English by Joshua Lipes.

[117] „Junta bans aid groups from 6 townships in Rakhine State", RFA, 16 September 2022.

> A key aim of the law is to ensure that organisations working in Myanmar have no contact with "terrorists". If even partially enforced, the draconian legislation will further constrict the space for humanitarian work.

→ This paragraph is based on Crisis Group's own analysis. International Crisis Group is the primary source.

The example of the second quotation gives us an idea about the steps which information might go through before we use it. The following diagram shows the authors/publishers involved from the primary source to the Crisis Group report:

Staff member of an international NGO talking to RFA Burmese
Article by Burmese RFA service
Translation by Khin Maung Nyane
Written in English by Joshua Lipes and published by English RFA service
Cited by International Crisis Group

PRIMARY SOURCE   SECONDARY SOURCES
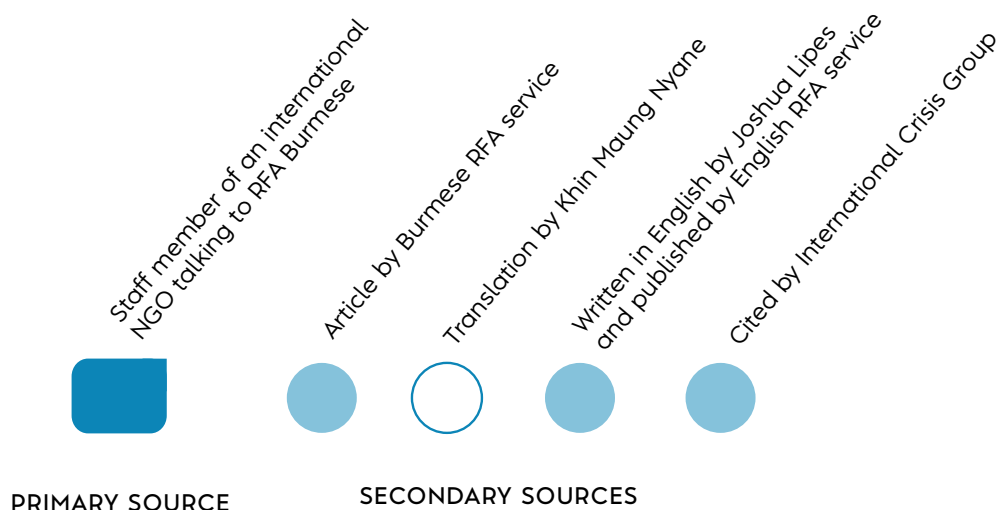
When researching or using COI, you will find that secondary sources frequently cite each other in relation to a particular piece of information. Problems may arise in terms of selective (and thus misleading) or erroneous quotations, incorrect translations, mistaken impressions of currency, etc. For this reason, it is important to be aware whether you are dealing with a primary or a secondary source.

Always try to identify the primary source – or the secondary source which first documented the primary source – and trace information back to it whenever possible. This will help to avoid false corroboration: you may find some information in several sources but, after careful examination of each source, realise that all the sources obtained the information from the same primary source.

Furthermore, a primary source is not necessarily of higher quality. Like a secondary source, it may provide false information, on purpose or by mistake. Carefully assessing a source is equally important for both primary and secondary sources.

4.1.2 Types of sources

Most of the information used in COI research is produced by the following types of sources (individuals or institutions):

1. international and intergovernmental organisations sources
2. governmental sources
3. non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other civil society sources
4. media sources
5. academic sources and think tanks

When reflecting on which types of sources to select and how to combine them, the question might arise of whether one type of source is generally more valuable than another. Is there anything like a hierarchy of sources? Do, for instance, media sources have the same value as UN sources? Should a governmental report have more weight than a paper published by a non-governmental organisation? In this context, it is important to stress that no general hierarchy of sources exists. The usefulness and authority of each

source depends on the question it is meant to answer. Each source should be assessed in its own right and conclusions on the reliability of the source should only be drawn after a thorough source assessment has been conducted.

Balance can be achieved by cross-checking information from different sources and source types. In-depth and practical information on cross-checking will be provided in section 5.10 of this manual.
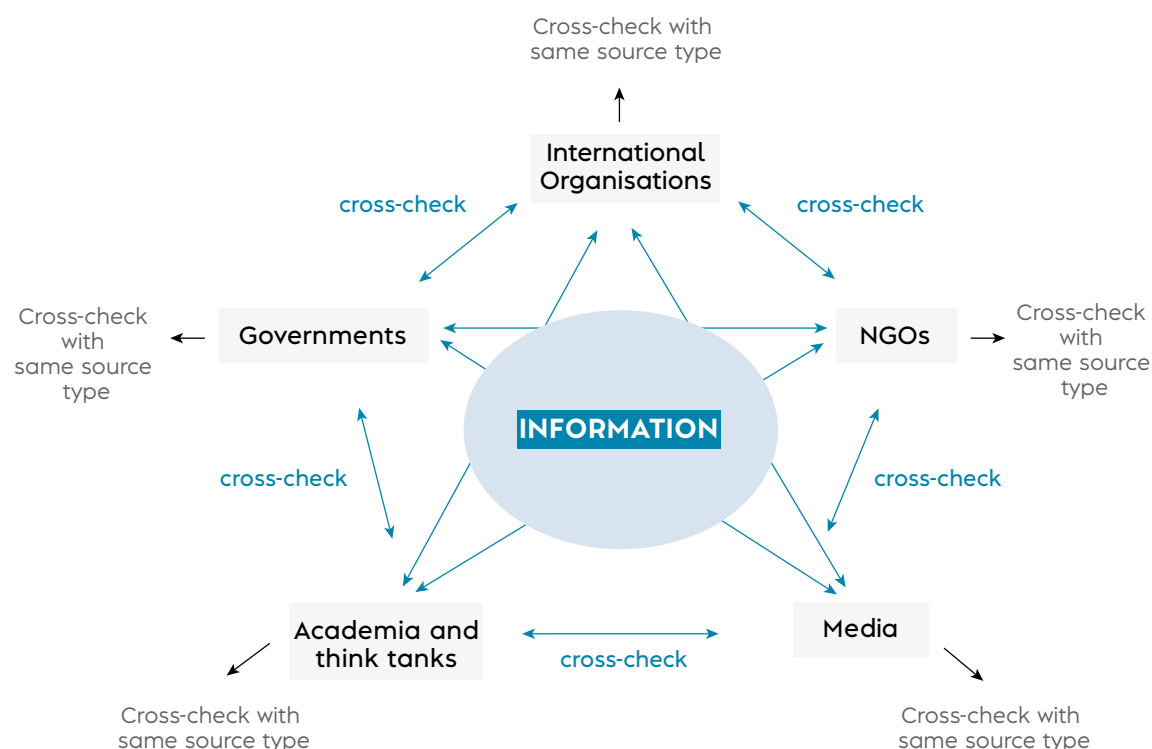
Figure 18: Balancing different sources and source types

The information generated by sources may appear in different forms: written reports or oral statements, photos, videos, maps, graphs, charts or raw data. The information can be contained in different types of reports and publications, including political analyses, human rights reports, security assessments, national laws, academic research papers, humanitarian briefings, press reports or witness statements.

In practice, most of the information used in COI research is accessible online, often for free, but increasingly behind paywalls or available via subscription. Books, magazines and maps accessible only in hard copy can contain important information and should be considered for research, however, most information is available in digital form. Oral sources may be able to provide details not available in the public domain.

Sources use different channels for distributing information. These range from traditional media such as hard copy newspaper, to official websites, podcasts or social media.

See Appendix B for lists of sources that are widely used for COI research.

4.1.3 Social media and user-generated content as a COI resource

Social media is a collective term for online applications and communication channels that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Social media is characterised by its openness to participation, contribution and feedback by anyone interested, with the option of forming communities around shared interests (APCICT/ESCAP, 2020, p. 9). Unlike professionally edited content on websites, social media content is primarily user-generated. However, there are also social media accounts officially maintained by institutions (including UN entities, media companies, research institutes, think tanks, etc.) as well as social media channels run by professional editorial teams.

Social media exists in a rapidly changing online landscape where communication platforms which are popular today might be forced out of the market by other applications tomorrow. In the context of COI research, it is also important to note preferences for, and use of, social media platforms vary by country, with bans sometimes in place.

Social media platforms are not sources per se, they are used as channels by sources – organisations or individuals – posting the content. There are different forms of social media: social networking sites, blogs, microblogging, wikis, podcasts, forums, content communities, and messaging (APCICT/ESCAP, 2020, p. 10). The following forms of social media might be of interest for COI research:

▶ Social networking sites: websites such as Facebook or LinkedIn serve to build and maintain social relations. Users create profiles and exchange messages, images, etc.

▶ Blogs: blogs can be hosted individually, as a part of a website, or on blogging platforms such as WordPress, Squarespace or Wix. Microblogging platforms such as X (Twitter) and Tumblr allow for the sharing of images, videos, links and articles.

▶ Wikis: A "wiki" (deriving from the Hawaiian word for "quick") designates a website developed collaboratively so that any registered user can add and edit content. Most wikis are used for knowledge management. The most popular wiki is the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia.

▶ Podcasts: Podcasts are audio files shared online which can be played on demand. They are relatively easy to produce and are readily available to the user regardless of time and place. Podcasts often have more leeway to examine the background and details of a certain issue while providing people's points of view or lived experience.

▶ Forums: Online forums (or message boards) are platforms where users discuss topics or seek help.

▶ Video, audio and image sharing websites: Websites such as YouTube, TikTok, Vimeo, SoundCloud, Flickr or Instagram allow users to upload video clips, audio files or images/photographs and share them with others.

▶ Location-based services: Collaborative mapping and geolocation projects such as Wikimapia and OpenStreetMap allow users to upload information and images relating to places they know or live in.

▶ Mobile-phone-based messaging services such as WhatsApp and Telegram allow users to send text messages, share photos, videos and have voice and video calls between individuals or within larger groups. Telegram users can open so-called channels to which other users can subscribe. If the channel is public, information shared there can be found online.

> ▶ Academic social-networking sites, such as Academia.edu or ResarchGate, allow researchers to share academic articles and abstracts, and engage in professional peer-to-peer exchange and networking.

The list illustrates that social media applications vary greatly in their aims and functions and the way in which information is presented. Most of the time it will be difficult to determine who the source of the information actually is. For more information on how to assess sources found on social media platforms, please refer to section 4.2.3. More information on how to deal with information shared on social media can be found in section 5.4.

Bazzell, Michael: OSINT techniques: Resources for uncovering online information, IntelTechniques, February 2023, chapters 10-13

4.2 Source assessment

To assess a source means to look at it systematically, to establish who publishes what kind of information, and for which purpose and by what means. Assessing sources helps to evaluate the quality of the information, and to determine whether a source can be trusted to such a degree that it can be used in the context of decisions on applications for international protection, or whether it should not be used in this context due to its lack of reliability.

The internet is a key tool for those researching COI. On the one hand, online availability of COI has meant a tremendous increase in the quantity, currency, and detail of information. On the other hand, the quality of the information found online is sometimes difficult to evaluate. This leads to a heightened responsibility on the part of those researching COI when assessing sources. As emphasised in section 2.1.2, sources used for COI should meet the quality standard of reliability and balance.

The following section focuses on "traditional" sources but can also be applied to sources that use social media platforms. Specific challenges regarding social media are dealt with in section 4.2.3.

4.2.1 Criteria of source assessment

A judgement on whether a source can be considered reliable is reached by a thorough assessment based on responses to five questions, which shed light on different aspects of a source, such as its role and authority, its reporting mechanisms, and the nature of its products:

Who provides the information?

What information is provided?

Why is the source providing this information?

How is the information generated and presented?

When was the information gathered and when was it provided?

> ## (!) NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY
>
> The questions behind this source assessment scheme can be traced back to the 2004 UNHCR paper on COI (UNHCR, February 2004, para. 26) and to the 2004 edition of this manual. The *Common EU Guidelines for Processing Country of Origin Information* also follow this scheme, albeit with a slightly different terminology. The guidelines use the term "validation of sources" which is defined as a process of "assessing the context of the source in which it operates" and "assessing the objectivity and reliability of the source" (Common EU Guidelines for Processing Country of Origin Information, April 2008, pp. 8-9). The scheme was also integrated into EUAA's COI report methodology (EUAA, February 2023a, p. 14).

In practice, the five source assessment questions are often interrelated. Below, we take a detailed look at each of the five questions to understand their importance and provide examples.

WHO provides the information?

When assessing a source, it is important to examine who the author or publisher of a given piece of information is. This will reveal potential interests and biases.

- ▶ Is it an intergovernmental/international organisation, a governmental organisation, a non-governmental organisation (NGO), an academic source, a media source, or a private person?
- ▶ Is this made transparent by the source or does the source remain anonymous?
- ▶ Is there any information concerning the reputation of the source?

We also need to establish whether the source has specific knowledge of or expertise on the issue at hand. One aspect of this can be whether the source has a permanent presence in the country of interest. Check if information on the source is available from other sources considered reliable. An official statement about the mission and mandate of an organisation can very often be found in the "about us" or "frequently asked questions (FAQ)" sections of the organisation's website. Note that much of the information about a source's mission and mandate will also be relevant for answering the question "what" below.

Another important aspect to consider when examining the author or publisher of the information is funding:

- ▶ Is the source funded by a government, a foundation, or individuals?
- ▶ What might the interests of these funders be?

Please note that considerations on the confidentiality of sources can be found in section 5.6.5.

WHAT information is provided?

Several questions come up when reflecting on the scope of reporting of a source:

- ▶ What kind of information is provided by the source?
  - o Is it a media article, a fact-finding mission report based on interviews with representatives in the country, a press release containing only the main messages about a certain topic?

- o   Is it an appeal of a human rights organisation with details about a person in danger, or is it a human rights report that is published annually?
- o   Is it an expert opinion, a position paper, a video report, or an account of an eyewitness in a blog?
- ▶ What is the geographical scope of reporting? Is the source specialised in a specific region or country?
- ▶ In which language or languages does the source report?
- ▶ Which topics does the source cover? Is there any focus or specialisation?
- ▶ What is the substance of the information produced? What is the level of detail in the source's report (general statements, assessments of developments, reporting on particular incidents)?

In many cases, the scope of reporting allows us to draw conclusions about the source's expertise and its capacity to provide reliable information on a certain topic.

For COI purposes it is important to assess whether a source presents observable facts or whether it presents opinions, conclusions or impressions.

When assessing an online source, exploring the navigation bar or site map may help to gain an overview of the scope of reporting.

WHY is the source providing this information?

This question is about the source's motivation for publishing the information.

- ▶ What is the source's purpose or mission?
- ▶ Does the source have a specific interest?
- ▶ What outcome does the source seek to achieve by making the information available?

It is important to be aware of the source's overall purpose in reporting on specific issues, since this purpose may play a significant role in the selection and presentation of information. Some human rights reporting may be done for the purpose of informing alone, but sources may also have other motivations. These can be diverse: to provide support to a government or to undermine a government; to advocate on human rights issues; to lobby a government or donor for the allocation of funds; to raise general awareness or to inform decision-makers. Commercial interests may also play a role in the motivation of sources.

The source's target groups might also shed light on the purpose of reporting. Try to find out whether the source publishes for the general public, for governments, policymakers, donors, human rights activists, UN Committees, courts, decision-makers or for other target groups.

As noted above, the mandate and mission of the source are relevant for determining the source's motivation for making information available.

HOW is the information generated and presented?

The research methodology applied by a source is a key indicator of its reliability.

- ▶ What methodology has the source used when gathering, presenting and interpreting information?
- ▶ Did the author get the information first-hand (missions, interviews) or is the report based on secondary sources only?

- If the source has conducted interviews, how many people were interviewed and how were interviewees selected? If the source has conducted a survey, what was the survey's sample size, reach and was it representative of the population group of interest? Are the source's conclusions supported by the evidence presented?
- Does the source have a permanent presence in the country (allowing for continuous on-the-ground monitoring)?
- Is it clear which research methods were applied?
- How is the information selected and cleared?
- Is the original information retrievable and well-referenced?
- Has the information been cross-checked against other sources, including sources that have first-hand information?
- Is the material presented in an objective, neutral and transparent way?
- Are facts transparently separated from own opinions/conclusions?
- Which medium is used for publishing (printed media, online reports, radio or TV broadcasts, social media)?

Indications of careful research include the provision of detailed information to back up all arguments and conclusions, transparent referencing and a well-edited text. The language and style of a source can reveal its standpoint plus any biases. Longer reports will frequently include an explanation of the report's research methodology in the introductory section or in a separate section on methodology.

The following questions may help identify potential biases of a source:

- Is the language accusatory, tendentious, suggestive, or judgemental?
- Does the source take sides or does it advocate a stance?
- Does the source's description correspond to the way other sources are describing the situation, or are human rights violations by one specific actor omitted or downplayed?

For instance, there are terms that may be used to describe the same phenomenon but which reveal different positions: Does a source use the term regime instead of the term government? Does it label a group as terrorists or as freedom fighters/rebels? Does it speak of liberation or of invasion of a certain territory?

Take into account whether the author has written in their native language, for example a small NGO from a non-English speaking country producing a report in English. Tone and style might be more important than grammar and editing in such cases. Be particularly careful when consulting a source that uses biased language.

Moreover, the cultural context in which a report or media article is produced has an impact on its reporting style. You should be aware of potential effects of cultural differences on reporting styles as well as on layout and web design and avoid prematurely judging the quality of a product's content on the basis of its style.

WHEN was the information gathered and when was it provided?

There is always a time lag between an event and the publication of information about the event. It is important to understand the reason for this time lag in relation to a particular source. The time lag can occur because the source only started to collect information about the event long after it took place. It can also happen because it took time to process and analyse information which itself was obtained soon after the event. Some sources have time-consuming clearance procedures which result in

publication delays. Delays are often a consequence of the source's publication cycle; it helps to be aware of these cycles.

- ▶ When was the information published?
- ▶ When was the information gathered? What was the cut-off date for the research?
- ▶ Are reports published on a regular basis (annually, semi-annually, monthly, weekly, daily) or at irregular intervals?
- ▶ Does the source publish ad-hoc updates when deemed necessary?

> ## TIP
>
> The COI database ecoi.net provides descriptions of the sources it uses regularly. The source description can be found by clicking on the source's name or the icon next to it.
>
> For an example see the description of Landinfo, the Norwegian COI Centre:
> https://www.ecoi.net/en/source/11373.html

4.2.2 Assessing different types of sources

In practice, it is not necessary to conduct a full source assessment each time you use a source you have already worked with before, although you should always keep an eye on potential developments that may impact a source's reputation or (perceived) reliability (for example, public revelations on a source's involvement in dubious activities, or a source being added to a media regulatory authority's list of banned or sanctioned sources). After some experience in COI research, you will be familiar with a set of widely used sources (see also Appendix B). Nevertheless, you should always consider the "who, what, why, how, when" questions described above. The following tips may be useful when assessing different types of sources:

International and intergovermental sources
Official human rights monitoring bodies reports are widely used international and intergovermental sources. They have the advantage of an international or regional mandate that creates a basis for expertise and allows access to information on particular human rights practices. Nevertheless, these bodies will sometimes be prevented from immediately carrying out first-hand investigations or may be completely denied entry into a country or region. Often, they gather information on a confidential basis. Be aware of whether a document is produced by a political body (composed of government delegates) or by a monitoring body (composed of experts and independent members).

Governments or governmental organisations
If the source is a government or governmental organisation, be aware of whether it is the government of the country concerned, or whether it is a foreign government. What are that government's policy interests? What is known about its human rights record?

Information produced by the government of the country of origin concerned should be analysed carefully. Acknowledgement or admission of past human rights violations by the responsible government authorities (or any other perpetrator) may carry great weight – governments will often try to justify their

actions or fail to mention certain human rights problems. Reports should be viewed in the wider political context; governments might admit certain human rights problems in order to deflect criticism about another issue.

Dealing with government statistics may sometimes be challenging: The state is often the only entity with the means to collect and process certain data which may render it impossible to cross-check government figures against other statistics.

Be aware of foreign or domestic policy interests in government reports describing the human rights situation in countries of origin. Security and trade interests, as well as diplomatic considerations, can play a role in downplaying human rights violations, as can domestic actors' awareness of a large (potential) caseload of asylum-seekers originating from a particular country.

Non-governmental organiations (NGOs)
The reliability of NGOs depends on various factors, including their mandate and reporting methodology. NGOs representing the interest of a particular group, for example an ethnic or religious group, may be more difficult to assess than NGOs that report widely and extensively on a number of human rights issues and regions. Some advocacy organisations may exaggerate the scope and intensity of human rights violations. Some use loaded language to emphasise the need for action (perhaps more so when they themselves are directly affected by a situation). Responsible human rights organisations, however, know that getting the facts right enables them to do more effective advocacy work.

Academic sources and think tanks
Academic sources can be invaluable for gaining a deeper understanding of conflict and persecution in a certain country and for understanding the bigger picture. Information on cultural issues and traditions, or background information which provides context for a particular query or case, is also frequently provided by academic sources.

When assessing academic sources, we have to distinguish between academic institutions (universities or research institutes) and individual scholars. To analyse the work produced by individual scholars, it may be necessary to take other factors into account besides their research methodology. An author's extracurricular activities may give rise to a potential conflict of interests. Issues related to the funding and the purpose of an author's work may also influence the results. For private research institutes, it may also be relevant to enquire into their sources of funding. An important quality indicator is whether the publication has undergone a peer review process. The delay between the time of research or data collection and the publication date must be considered.

Some academics are employed by think tanks which aim to inform a state's policies or carry out political consultancy. In such instances one should try to take note of how the research product might reflect certain state or corporate interests.

Media reports
Media reports can provide valuable information on specific events. It is important to distinguish between news reports, and editorials, commentaries and op-eds. While fact-based news reports are in many ways the foundation of COI, the usefulness of editorials, commentaries and op-eds is more limited.

Media based in the respective countries of origin have the advantage of being close to events on the ground; their journalists may themselves be eyewitnesses. The style of writing or reporting can considerably differ from country to country and is not necessarily an expression of quality or lack thereof. In some countries, the regional context may have a strong influence on the angle of reporting of various media.

It is important to know who the publisher is and who owns a specific medium. Newspapers or broadcasters may have close ties to the government even if they are not directly state-owned, or they might be affiliated with the political opposition, often based in the diaspora. If you do not know a newspaper or broadcaster, read through several of its articles and editorials (or listen to several broadcasts) to see which position it takes. Check media directories (for example the media section of BBC country profiles available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/country_profiles) to find information regarding the ownership and political background of a newspaper, magazine or broadcaster. Finding out information about online media platforms can be challenging. In some instances it may not be possible to determine whether a platform is run by a professional editorial team.

For detailed information on the assessment of expert oral sources, see section 5.6.3.

4.2.3 Assessment of sources that use social media

The questions related to source assessment discussed above fully apply to the assessment of sources that use social media platforms for sharing their content. However, as anyone can post any content on social media, the assessment of the author's identity requires additional scrutiny. The difficulties in clarifying the "who" question are aggravated by identical/similar names, the widespread use of nicknames/pseudonyms and fake accounts.

When assessing a social media channel, try to find a link to the official website of the institution or individual. In any case always try to verify and to assess the account and the information.

> ### EXAMPLE
>
> On X (Twitter), accounts attributed to members of the Taliban de facto government such as a spokesman for the minister of foreign affairs (@HafizZiaAhmad1) can be found. Further research shows that reputable sources reference tweets from this account as official government statements (International Crisis Group, 23 February 2023, p. 16; RFE/RL, 8 April 2022).
>
> **List of references for the example above:**
> Hafiz Zia Ahmad [Twitter], n.d.
> https://twitter.com/hafizziaahmad1
>
> International Crisis Group: Taliban Restrictions on Women's Rights Deepen Afghanistan's Crisis, 23 February 2023
> https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2087714/329-afghanistan-womens-rights.pdf
>
> RFE/RL – Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty: 'Disgusting and Heartbreaking': New Videos Put Spotlight on Mistreatment of Afghan Refugees in Iran, 8 April 2022
> https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2071545.html

You might find various sources on social media platforms which do not maintain regular websites, as many organisations and individuals choose to use social media platforms instead of creating their own websites. Note that organisations might use social media for deliberate misinformation. Some social media accounts only share or reproduce information taken from more established/reputable sources. Therefore, if possible, try to establish where the information originates from and, if possible, reference that source instead.

It is crucial to keep the challenges of source assessment in mind when using social media. Social media platforms can help you stay up-to-date and follow current events in the countries you are working on, but they have their limitations as well.

Tips for assessing sources that use social media

Try to find out more about the user (i.e. source) who uploaded the piece of information you are interested in:

- ▶ Does the user provide information about themselves in their profile?
- ▶ Is the user also the author of the information, or did they upload information produced by someone else?
- ▶ What other content has the user uploaded? Is it related to the topic/location?
- ▶ Where is the user located? Are they in the actual place they are sharing information about?
- ▶ Who are the followers of the user/account? Which accounts does the source follow?
- ▶ When was the account created? When was the most recent activity? How frequently is content posted?
- ▶ Does an official website link to this social media account?
- ▶ Is the source active on other social media platforms/websites as well?
- ▶ Is there WHOIS information available for an affiliated website? (WHOIS provides information about the internet service provider responsible for a particular resource. It uses publicly available information from the domain name owner to their individual registrars. See https://who.is.)
- ▶ Does the information you collected about the account help to verify the authenticity of the source and/or assess its reliability?

See section 5.4 for details on dealing with information found on social media.

4.2.4 Source assessment in practice

The following example shows how source assessment works in practice by applying the questions discussed above to a specific report. The Country Reports on Human Rights Practices published by the US Department of State (USDOS) is chosen for this example, as it is one of the most frequently used reports in COI research.

SOURCE ASSESSMENT QUESTION	SOURCE ASSESSMENT: **United States Department of State (USDOS):** *Country Report on Human Rights Practices*
Who provides the information?	The *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* are drafted by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor of the US Department of State. According to its own description, the "Bureau's work helps bolster democratic institutions, confront democratic backsliding, promote accountability, uphold internationally recognized labor standards, and advance the rights and equity of members of marginalized racial, ethnic, and religious communities, indigenous persons, persons with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ persons." (USDOS, n.d.) The US Department of State is the principal US foreign affairs agency within the executive branch and is the central institution for the conduct of US diplomacy. The US Department of State's mission statement declares its aim to "protect and promote U.S. security, prosperity, and democratic values and shape an international environment in which all Americans can thrive." (USDOS, March 2022, p. 10) The State Department's budget is part of the US federal budget and amounts to 0.5 per cent of its total. (USDOS, November 2022, p. 9)
What information is provided?	The country reports describe the human rights situation in countries (and some territories) worldwide. However, there is no country report on the human rights situation in the United States of America. The country reports do not purport to assess any human rights implications of actions taken by the US government or its representatives. (USDOS, 20 March 2023a) Thematically, all the reports follow the same structure and focus on internationally recognised human rights based on the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (adopted in 1948) and labour rights as defined in the US Trade Act of 1974. (USDOS, 20 March 2023a) The notes on the preparation of the report state that when judging a government's human rights record the report strives to "look beyond statements of policy or intent to examine what a government actually did to protect human rights and promote accountability, including the extent to which it investigated, brought to trial, or punished those responsible for any violations or abuses." The reports seek to describe the reported facts relevant to human rights issues and do not include legal conclusions. (USDOS, 20 March 2023a)

Why **is the source providing this information?**	The human rights reports were introduced in 1976, originally as a means for the US Congress to "keep tabs on recipients of US aid" (Poe et al., 2001, p. 654). They were intended to serve as a key source of information for the evaluation of US foreign policy, foreign aid and military assistance decisions with regard to other countries. Both the scope of reporting and the degree of detail of coverage have expanded since then (Cordell et al., 2020, pp. 4-5). In practice, the reports have more often served as a source of information for US foreign policy than as an instrument to restrict foreign aid (CRS, 14 April 2022, p. 2). Foreign policy priorities of US administrations may have an influence on the reporting (Cordell et al., 2020, p. 7).
	In the preface to the 2022 Country Reports, US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken described the country reports' objectives as follows: "The individual reports cover 198 countries and territories, providing factual, objective information based on credible reports of the events that occurred throughout 2022." (USDOS, 20 March 2023b)
How **is the information generated and presented?**	The notes on preparation of the reports (Appendix A to the 2022 Report) outline the drafting process of the country reports: "Acts of Congress mandate the annual submission of the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices. [...] To comply with the congressional requirement for reporting on human rights practices, the Department provides guidance to U.S. diplomatic missions annually in July for submission of updated reports in September and October. The Department of State updates these texts by year's end. Multiple concerned bureaus and offices in the Department of State provide contributions, and the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor prepares a final draft of each country report" (USDOS, 20 March 2023a). The reports assess each country's adherence to international human rights standards. Countries are not compared to each other or ranked based on their human rights record (CRS, 14 April 2022, p. 1). According to the above-mentioned notes, "[t]he Country Reports are prepared by reviewing information available from a wide variety of credible sources, including U.S. and foreign government officials; victims of alleged human rights abuses; academic and congressional studies; and reports from the press, international organizations, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) concerned with human rights" (USDOS, 20 March 2023a). However, these sources are rarely cited directly. Therefore, the reports are sometimes criticised for their lack of transparency.
	In recent years, the State Department has continued its efforts to focus and streamline the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.* Thus, the number of reported cases was cut and only a few illustrative examples of human rights violations were included in the report. Also, follow-up on cases has been reduced, and it is no longer a requirement to highlight a lack of allegations regarding a certain type of human rights violation if no information of such abuse could be found (USDOS, 20 March 2023a).
When **is/was the information gathered and when is/was it provided?**	*Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* are released on an annual basis and cover the period from 1 January to 31 December (reports for the previous year are usually released in spring of the next year). It is important to note, however, that there are instances where the same information is transferred verbatim from one report to the next, often over a period of many years. While the information may appear to be current, the report may be reusing old information.

List of references for the example above:

Cordell, Rebecca / Clay, Chad K. / Fariss, Christopher J. / Wood, Reed M. / Wright, Thorin M.: Changing standards or political whim? Evaluating changes in the content of US State Department Human Rights Reports following presidential transitions. In: Journal of Human Rights, Volume 19(1), 2020, pp. 3-18

CRS - Congressional Research Service: Global Human Rights: The Department of State's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 14 April 2022
https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF10795.pdf

Poe, Steven C. / Carey, Sabine C. / Vazquez, Tanya C.: How are These Pictures Different? A Quantitative Comparison of the U.S. State Department and Amnesty International Human Rights Reports, 1976–1995. In: Human Rights Quarterly, Volume 23(3), 2001, pp. 650-677

USDOS - United States Department of State: U.S. Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development Joint Strategic Plan FY 2022 - 2026, March 2022
https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Final-State-USAID-FY-2022-2026-Joint-Strategic-Plan_29MAR2022.pdf

USDOS - United States Department of State: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2022, Appendix A: Notes on Preparation of the Country Reports and Explanatory Material, 20 March 2023a
https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices

USDOS - United States Department of State, 2022 Human Rights Reports: Preface, 20 March 2023b
https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices

USDOS - United States Department of State: FY 2022 Agency Financial Report, November 2022
https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/FY-2022-Agency-Financial-Report.pdf

USDOS - United States Department of State: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, n.d.
https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-civilian-security-democracy-and-human-rights/bureau-of-democracy-human-rights-and-labor

Conclusion:
- ▶ All source assessment questions could be answered.
- ▶ Not all answers led to a satisfactory result:
  - o The USDOS is clear about its methodology; the methodology itself, however, is not transparent.
  - o There might be a potential bias due to diplomatic and political interests.

Criteria	Assessment of reliability of the source	
Who	Clear	✔
What	Clear	✔
Why	Clear	✔
How	General information provided, process of drafting is clear, gathering and selection of information not clear, not all information is referenced transparently, selection of information may depend on diplomatic and political interests.	➘
When	Clear	✔

The reliability of a source also depends on the question at hand: For instance, the USDOS will not be considered a reliable source regarding drone strikes carried out by US forces abroad. The first reason for this is the scope of the reports, as the USDOS does not report on any human rights implications of actions taken by the US government or its representatives. Secondly, even if reports did include such information, a potential bias should be taken into consideration.

However, with the purpose of the US administration for producing these reports in mind and notwithstanding their weaknesses regarding the selection and transparency of information included in the report, the source is assessed as being generally reliable. The reports of the US Department of State are widely used in COI research.

Cross-checking information with other types of sources (NGOs, media, academics) to corroborate information is essential. It is the only way to overcome the shortcomings of the source. However, due to the fact that information in the USDOS reports is not referenced in a traceable manner, false corroboration may easily occur. See section 5.10 for more details on cross-checking information.

> Following a debate on structural changes in the USDOS reports under the Trump administration, the UK-based Asylum Research Centre (ARC) published a detailed comparative analysis of changes to the reports covering events in 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020 from the 2016 report (the final year of the Obama administration) with a focus on structure, language, improvements in human rights and omissions:
> ARC: Comparative Analysis; U.S. Department of State's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices (2016–2020) – Summary, September 2021
> https://asylumresearchcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Executive-Summary-2021.pdf

4.3 Dubious sources

Reliable sources form the basis of high-quality COI in procedures for persons seeking international protection. The assessment of sources helps us to determine the degree to which we may consider a source to be "reliable". Source assessment may lead to doubts about the reliability of a certain source. As the *Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information* put it, "[i]t may occur that after consideration of who, what, why, when, how [...], a source has been assessed as being 'dubious'" (Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information, April 2008, p. 10).

In some cases, one or more of the source assessment questions cannot be answered satisfactorily. It may remain unclear who the author is, or a source's motivation or methodology is not transparent. Thus, sources which do not provide sufficient information about identity, background, motives or their methodology can be considered "dubious". This often applies to user-generated content on social media by authors who use pseudonyms, nicknames or fake identities.

There are also sources that are clear about who they are, what their aims are and how they work, but there are doubts about the integrity of their mission (e.g. if they support human rights violations or are affiliated to a disreputable organisation), their methodology (e.g. inadequate research methodology, the use of unfounded statements or propaganda), or because they demonstrate a strong bias.
Biased sources can be considered a specific form of dubious sources, providing a selective point of view on the issues they report on. They inform only from one perspective or take sides with one party to a conflict, or even spread misinformation. Often, they try to influence their readers' perceptions and attitudes, to trigger emotions and convince readers to take certain positions. Biased sources do not report neutrally, they integrate or omit information selectively to misrepresent or distort facts.

Remember, however, that every source has a particular perspective, aims and objectives, and that there is no such thing as a totally objective source (see also note on terminology in section 2.2.1). Especially in the field of human rights, most sources publish information to achieve a particular objective (this includes advocacy organisations). However, most sources adhere to professional reporting standards. Thus, it is important to distinguish a fundamentally biased source from a generally reliable source that simply has a certain perspective and follows its mission with transparency. As this is a sliding scale, we must look carefully into the reporting methodology applied by the source.

This leads us to the question of where to draw the line: Should biased sources be rejected or can a source which displays a certain partiality still serve as a source of COI? In assessing, we have to detect the main objective of a source and to realise where reporting ends and where propaganda begins.

In general, the use of dubious (and thus fundamentally biased) sources should be avoided. An exception to this rule occurs when no other information can be found. In this case, the ground for doubt should be made transparent by mentioning the problematic aspects of the source. The *Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information* recommend a similar procedure where a dubious source is included in a COI report:

> "If information from a 'dubious' source is presented, it should be mentioned explicitly, and an assessment of the source should be made. If this 'dubious' source is the only source found and if the information seems important or particularly relevant, the information can be presented in the report. However, it should be stated explicitly that the source could not be assessed as being reliable and for which reasons." (Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information, April 2008, p. 15)

The following questions can help to decide whether a dubious source should be included or omitted from a research product or legal argument:

- ▶ How is the general reporting situation on the issue in question?
- ▶ Was it the only information found? What other information was found?
- ▶ Is the value of the information high enough to justify the downsides of including a questionable source?

For a COI service provider who decides to include a dubious source into a research product, it is advisable to indicate the problematic aspects of the source and document unsuccessful attempts to find more information on the issue, especially if the information is related to core aspects of the question. In this way, readers are made aware of the reporting situation and are in a better position to evaluate the information and to assess the source.

An RSD practitioner must thoroughly weigh whether a dubious source should be used as a basis for a decision or a legal argument. If the information is considered crucial for the decision, the practitioner should try to formulate additional research questions and undertake another round of research. If no further information can be found, the principle of the benefit of the doubt should be taken into consideration in favour of the applicant if the applicant's account contradicts a dubious source.

4.4 How to build your knowledge of sources

For COI service providers, it is essential to build a knowledge base of sources, to keep track of sources they come across frequently and to stay up-to-date on new sources and publications. COI research implies not only the search for information but also knowledge management plus information sharing and transfer.

> ### TIP
>
> To accumulate extensive knowledge on COI sources, the following tips may be useful:
>
> ▶ Pay attention to persons, organisations and institutions which are cited in reports.
> ▶ Check the sources that are included in online databases.
> ▶ Subscribe to (online) newsletters on countries and topics relevant for your work – they might mention publications by new sources.
> ▶ Follow experts on relevant social media platforms to keep up with their latest publications and other experts that they follow.
> ▶ Share and discuss sources with colleagues.

Keeping track of the wide range of relevant sources is easier if your work context allows you to specialise in certain countries.

Moreover, it is important to know which sources are seen as credible or hold particular weight within your organisation and with national decision-making bodies, and why.

To find lists of sources, see

- Appendix B in this manual
- The COI database ecoi.net provides a list of regularly covered sources featuring a description for every source, see https://www.ecoi.net/en/about/our-sources
- The Asylum Research Centre (ARC) offers a toolkit of thematic COI sources (updated in September 2021) which covers a range of themes: https://asylumresearchcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Thematic-COI-sources_September-2021-Update.xlsx
- The European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) published a COI Research Guide on LGBTIQ including a list of relevant sources on the topic in Annex 2: https://euaa.europa.eu/publications/euaa-coi-lgbtiq-research-guide
- In 2019, UNHRC published a list of partner NGOs containing organisation profiles: https://www.unhcr.org/5d1506927

4.5 Summary of chapter 4

✔ We distinguish between primary and secondary sources. While a primary source provides first-hand testimony or observation, a secondary source reproduces information originating from someone else.

✔ Information is provided by different types of sources including international and intergovernmental organisations, governmental organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other civil society organisations as well as media, academia and think tanks.

✔ Sources can provide information via various channels, including a variety of social media platforms. Since anyone can post anything on social media, particular attention must be paid when assessing the source (i.e. the user who posted the information).

✔ To evaluate whether a source can be considered reliable, the source is assessed by a critical review of the following questions:
  ▶ Who provides the information?
  ▶ What information is provided?
  ▶ Why is the source providing this information?
  ▶ How is the information generated and presented?
  ▶ When was the information gathered and when was it provided?

✔ Sources which do not provide sufficient information about their identity, background, motives or methodology are considered "dubious". Special care needs to be taken when dealing with dubious sources.

✔ To build up a solid knowledge of sources, check COI databases and keep track of sources you come across frequently and discuss them with your colleagues.

PRACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- ▶ Identify where the information originates from: is the source a primary or a secondary source?

- ▶ A primary source is not necessarily of higher quality. Like a secondary source, it may provide false information, on purpose or by mistake.

- ▶ Assess the source you are taking information from.

- ▶ To find lists of sources, see Appendix B of this manual and check the COI database ecoi.net.

For RSD practitioners	**For COI service providers**
▶ An RSD practitioner should thoroughly weigh whether a dubious source should be used as a basis for a decision or a legal argument. ▶ If information from a dubious source is considered central to the decision, additional research questions should be formulated and another round of research should be undertaken. ▶ If no further information can be found, the principle of the benefit of the doubt should be given to the applicant if there are contradictions between the account of the applicant and a dubious source.	▶ When a dubious source is included into a research product, a short description indicating the problematic aspects of the source should be provided. ▶ If the only information found comes from a dubious source, document unsuccessful attempts to find more information on the issue.

5 RESEARCH

The previous chapters dealt with formulating legally relevant research questions as well as identifying and assessing reliable COI sources that can be used to answer these questions.

In this chapter we will delve into practical COI research, applying our previously acquired knowledge of COI standards, research questions, and selection criteria for sources. Developing research strategies enables us to conduct COI research in a methodical manner. It also allows us to continually adapt our research process to the topics and questions at hand. This chapter addresses how search engines and databases function, providing the technical basis for more effective and efficient online research. After presenting observations and reflections on how to deal with information found via social media and on handling quantitative data, we will turn to the issue of consulting oral sources. Related to this issue, organising COI events such as seminars or workshops, and fact-finding missions are specifically addressed. The chapter highlights the importance of cross-checking information. An overview of medical COI and developments of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in COI research complement this chapter.

This chapter offers an overview of research techniques needed to gather accurate and up-to-date information for inclusion in COI products. The practical research tips included in this chapter should be of interest to beginners and experienced researchers alike.

Content of chapter 5

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Having engaged with this chapter, readers will be able to

» develop appropriate research strategies for different types of research questions
» decide on the means to gather relevant information: conducting online research via general search engines, specific databases and social media platforms or consulting books, academic sources or oral sources, or a combination of these
» conduct online research methodically by following a well-conceived strategy: decide where to start; understand how search engines and COI databases work and how to use them efficiently
» handle typical research problems such as dealing with an overload of information or finding only little or no information
» apply the standards of accuracy and currency in the course of practical research
» use cross-checking to achieve accurate and current research results

Note: RSD practitioners who do not conduct COI research themselves may want to skip most of this chapter. Section 5.10 on cross-checking information is, however, highly recommended.

5.1 Research strategy

What is a research strategy and why do we need it?

A research strategy is a planned and systematic approach to research. It helps to produce accurate and up-to-date research results. A well-conceived strategy gives us control over the research process, helps to stay focused on the question at hand and prevents us from losing ourselves in the vast pool of available information. Research strategies help to manage the balance between keeping an open mind to new angles and staying focused on the main issues. A clear strategy distinguishes professional COI research from unsystematic searching.

Research strategies are not static, they can be broadened or narrowed based on the knowledge you have already acquired and the progress made during the actual research process. Consider your research strategy a flexible tool, rather than a rigid work plan which cannot be revised. Moreover, a research strategy enables us to deal with challenges or doubts commonly encountered during research, such as avoiding or managing an overload of information or knowing when to stop a search which yields no results. Last but not least, systematic research strategies promote a more efficient and productive use of time and help to ensure accountability in cases where research results are challenged.

How to develop a research strategy?

The approach to take when developing a research strategy depends on the question you are working on and the availability of information. It is part of your research strategy to decide whether you want to limit research to a particular database or set of sources, whether you want to search online, or whether you need to consult experts. To produce the best possible results, combine different approaches. Knowledge of sources will help you to choose the most efficient research strategy.

Online research skills include knowing which resources to draw upon, being creative when it comes to finding promising search terms, being able to select relevant documents from search results and the ability to quickly find useful information within a text. Technical understanding and background knowledge allow researchers to use research tools efficiently and to develop realistic expectations of what can be found by which means.

Pathways to relevant information – different types of questions require different research strategies

This chapter presents different ways of acquiring information. In practice, online research is often the first approach, and it may also be part of a broader strategy. The various steps of online research (section 5.2) and know-how of search engines and databases (section 5.3) form important elements of online research. This kind of research, moreover, encompasses research within certain types of resources, such as social media (section 5.4) and data collections (section 5.5). In addition to online research, COI research can entail consulting oral sources (section 5.6), COI events (section 5.7) and conducting fact-finding missions (section 5.8). For conducting interviews and getting access to experts and local sources, effective communication skills are needed. For certain types of information, such as medical COI research (section 5.9), specific research approaches are needed. Above all, cross-checking information is a key element of validating research results obtained via the approaches mentioned (section 5.10).

In practice the different approaches will often be combined. General background information found online might be complemented by an expert's statement; a book or an academic paper can deepen your understanding of the subject matter and thus enable you to organise other information found online more logically; consulting country or subject experts can help when there is a scarcity of information; and online research as well as experts' advice can help you find the right oral sources and prepare interviews for fact-finding missions.

The following graph shows various pathways to information. Which of these you select or where the research process should begin depends on the question you are working on and may be influenced by the resources available. You will usually start with online research if you are looking for general COI (e.g. the situation of an ethnic minority, activities of certain political groups, freedom of religious groups, etc.). The more specific the information you are looking for, the more likely you are going to consult oral sources.
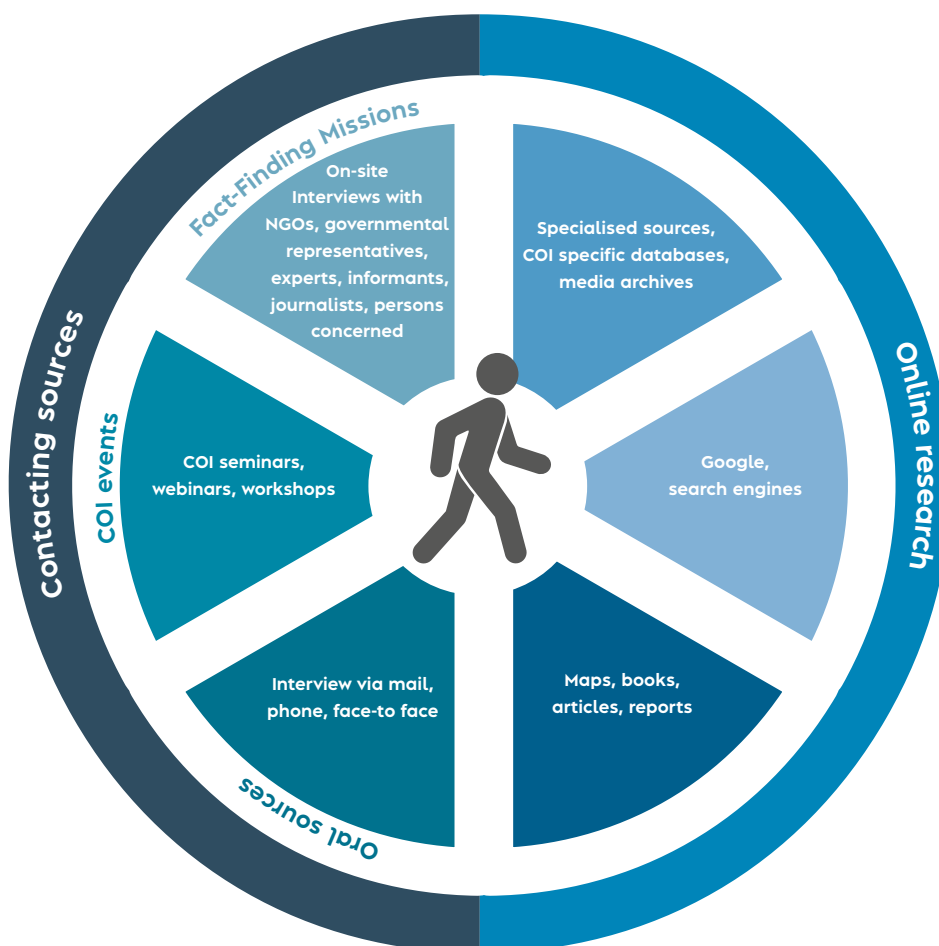
Figure 19: Pathways to information

Examples of research strategies and their starting point

If the issue at hand pertains to <u>core human rights violations</u>, a systematic consultation of reports by the United Nations and major human rights organisations, or an organisation specialising in the issue or based in the country or region you are interested in is necessary. Easy access to such documents is provided by a COI database such as ecoi.net.

If you are looking for information about <u>risks for a particular group</u>, you will need to know which organisations, institutions and individuals provide position papers or expert opinions on particular countries or groups. In such cases you may also start by consulting a COI database.

If you need information on whether a <u>demonstration has taken place</u> on a given date and in a particular place, you might first run a search on Google or in an electronic news database such as LexisNexis, Factiva or allafrica.com, or search directly on a local news website.

If you have doubts concerning the spelling of a name you are researching, first check via a general search engine such as Google whether an entry on a place/organisation/person/etc. with this name exists. If you are not successful, directories which provide listings of places or organisations can sometimes be useful (e.g. Fallingrain's Directory of Cities and Towns, or the US National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency's GEOnet Names Server).

> ## 💡 TIP
>
> When searching online for specific names of persons, organisations, places, etc., be aware that you may leave behind "digital footprints". Owners of the sites you visit may be able to not only retrieve your search terms, but also to identify your organisation. This allows the owner to infer that your activities are connected to international protection procedures. Thus, your interest in that person, place, or organisation might be revealed to the site owners, and potentially draw their attention to whom or what you searched for.
>
> Asylos provides some tips for secure human rights research under https://www.asylos.eu/blog/four-tips-secure-research.

If you need information on a political party, you may either check online country profiles (e.g. the CIA World Factbook), or consult a reference manual (e.g. Political Handbook of the World, Sage; Europa World Year Book, Routledge; or the Economist Intelligence Unit's Country analysis). Because of variations in translation and spelling, names of political parties, as other proper names, need to be carefully cross-checked and multiple search terms should be used.

If you are looking for information on the cultural or religious practices of a particular group, you might consult websites of associations and institutes, or books and journals specialising in anthropology. Consulting an academic database or a library may also bring fruitful results. Also, query responses from other COI units may contain information from academic experts on cultural or religious practices. You might also consider conducting an interview with a scholar at a university yourself.

Some questions require detailed geographical information. If you want to find information on a certain place, you can refer to online cartographic material (from Google maps to collections of maps provided by specialised databases, such as the UN Maps & Geospatial services). Sometimes, you might have the chance to collect detailed maps on a fact-finding mission that may prove useful at a later stage. As researching information on geography, language and ethnicity poses specific problems, these topics will be given special attention in section B.3 of Appendix B.

Whenever information on a given topic is scarce, highly contradictory, or not sufficiently detailed, consider obtaining information from an expert, COI event or fact-finding mission. These approaches are useful to fill significant information gaps.

5.2 Steps of online research

The most frequently used approach in COI research is conducting online research. An effective and efficient strategy for online research comprises the following steps, linked to specific skills:

RESEARCH ACTIVITY	TECHNICAL KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS NEEDED
Step 1 Clarifying the question	Drawing up a research tree and/or drafting detailed Terms of Reference; reflection and discussion on the question
Step 2 Deciding where to start	Knowledge about function and features of web search engines (e.g. Google) and specialised databases (e.g. ecoi.net, news databases, academic databases)
Step 3 Developing and using search terms	Broadening and narrowing search terms, using synonyms and alternative spellings; understanding search operators; using special search functions
Step 4 Selecting documents from a list of search results	Understanding systems of displaying and presenting search results, including highlighted search terms
Step 5 Searching within a document	Using a range of search functions
Step 6 Keeping an overview of search results	Drafting a list of sources to consult prior to commencing researching; saving tab sessions; using research baskets (if offered by databases)
Step 7 Cross-checking	Comparing and contrasting

5.2.1 Step 1: Clarifying the question

We can only get answers to the questions we ask. Asking the "incorrect" question will not yield the "correct" answer and will be a waste of time and resources. Therefore, the first step of every research strategy is to obtain clarity on the question at hand. What information is needed and why? Is the required information general or specific? Does the question make sense in the context of international protection procedures? Is the question asking for facts or for an interpretation of facts?

In some cases, and especially if you feel unsure, it may be useful and necessary to discuss the questions with another person (e.g. a colleague or the person who has formulated the query). Research trees can be useful tools for reflecting on relevant aspects of a case. For details on questions and the research tree method, see chapter 3.

5.2.2 Step 2: Deciding where to start

Once you have gained clarity about the question(s), you may want to check whether a similar issue has been worked on before by a colleague at your institution or a related product has been published by another COI unit. If so, the results can be used as a starting point or only need to be checked, reviewed and updated. Prior to starting your online research, think about useful online sources that might provide you with relevant information on the topic (e.g. specialised sources dealing with women, draft evasion, sexual orientation, etc.).

The nature of the question and the knowledge you have about sources or experience of using sources often determines the starting point of your research. For many questions, COI databases such as ecoi.net are the best place to start, as they collect information from a broad range of sources selected for their usefulness in international protection procedures. If the question does not concern core human rights issues, a news database or a search engine such as Google might be more relevant, as the information found there is not restricted to any particular topic. If detailed background information (e.g. on political systems, a minority, a language or certain customs) is needed, searching academic databases or university library catalogues to consult relevant journals, theses, and other publications may also be beneficial. It is worth investing time to consider which tool to start with in order to avoid setbacks at a later stage.

EXAMPLE

If you need information about press freedom and the situation of journalists in Pakistan, you are likely to find a lot of relevant information from reliable sources in the more focused data collection provided by ecoi.net, whereas searching via a general web search engine might be more time-consuming and difficult. However, if you want to find out whether a certain person has written an article in a specific newspaper in Pakistan, it is more likely that you will find the answer via a web search engine, as such specific information may not be covered by a COI database.

Search engines and databases

Search engines and (curated) databases can be differentiated by their method of gathering data and by their level of specialisation:

▶ General search engines such as Google collect their data automatically and aim for an extensive coverage of what is available online. Specialised web search engines (e.g. Google Scholar) focus their coverage on certain types of information.

▶ Databases collect data from selected content providers, add various metadata and make the content searchable and accessible. The selection of content can be done automatically (as in the case of news databases such as Factiva or LexisNexis) or by human effort (as in the case of so-called "curated databases"). An example for a curated database in the COI context is ecoi.net. The content of curated databases is selected by staff using specific criteria and is provided with useful metadata (e.g. country, brief summaries, keywords, publishing date, publisher, etc.). Academic databases (e.g. Web of Science, Scopus or DOAJ) or university library catalogues also fall into the category of curated databases.

Which type of search engine or database you use depends on your information needs.

The more knowledge you have about search engines, especially how web search engines such as Google and COI databases such as ecoi.net work, the more efficiently COI research can be conducted. Section 5.3 gives an overview of the modalities of different types of search engines and databases, provides useful examples and introduces internet archives as a research tool.

(Online) book and library research

Resources originally published in print, such as books, magazines, journals and periodicals, may also represent valuable COI sources. This is especially the case when dealing with questions which require a deeper understanding of a topic, background knowledge or an analytical point of view. The boundaries between online and print materials are becoming more and more blurred, however, as the latter are increasingly (also) retrievable online.

Google Books (http://books.google.com), for example, makes many books available online. The service offers full-text searches in books and magazines, which Google has scanned, converted into digital text, and stored in its database. Depending on the agreement with the book's publisher, Google Books displays either parts of the publication or the entire book. Google Books allows researchers to take a preliminary glimpse at a publication to help them decide if it is worth purchasing. Sometimes this glimpse will be sufficient for locating relevant information. However, when doing so, be aware that when only a few pages can be viewed, you may miss contrasting information within the same book, and the content may be distorted by the lack of context. The pages made available may also become inaccessible after a while. Amazon.com also offers full-text searching for an increasing number of books and enables you to preview some of their content.

E-book reading devices are another tool bridging hard copy and digital presentation of information. Details needed in the field of COI research can be found in books more easily when searching through their electronic versions.

The national library of your country as well as university and faculty libraries will often have the most comprehensive collections available, so it is advisable to check their online catalogues for materials. Moreover, the online library catalogue WorldCat (http://www.worldcat.org) comprises more than 2 billion titles and provides access to the collections of over 10,000 libraries around the world. It can help to locate libraries which carry specific titles of interest and provide various services for researchers.

> **TIP**
>
> Libraries may also offer free access to many subscription-based databases that are useful for COI research, e.g., databases of journal articles, news databases such as LexisNexis, the online version of Europa World Year Book, etc.

High quality reference books (e.g. encyclopaedias, directories of ethnic groups, languages or political parties) are essential for COI libraries. Reference books usually provide a good overview of the topics in question. Please note, however, that although many of the major reference books are updated frequently, when consulting printed reference material, it is important to cross-check the information to ensure that it is up-to-date. For a list of reference books and encyclopaedias, see Appendix B.

5.2.3 Step 3: Developing and using search terms

Once you have decided on the tool with which to start your online research, you need to think about the search terms you want to use. Sometimes search terms are self-evident. In many cases the right search term can act like a key to unlock the information.

Think about broadening or narrowing search terms or concepts and using synonyms as well as alternative spellings or verbs instead of nouns. Be flexible with spelling variations and try to become aware of the terms used for specific concepts in the context of the country of origin. Moreover, it is important to remember that words deemed as insensitive or inappropriate in one country or context might not be perceived as such in other countries or settings.

EXAMPLE 1

You want to search for information on whether women or girls in a certain country are forced to marry against their will.

The most commonly used term for this phenomenon is *forced marriage.* This can serve as a first search term. However, consider that this phenomenon can also be described with other words such as *coerced marriage.* Also use the respective verbs such as *forcibly married* or *forced to marry.*

For forced marriage of girls, consider terms such as *child marriage, early marriage, underage marriage or child bride.*

As the phenomenon of forced marriage may occur in combination with the *abduction or kidnapping* of women or girls, these search terms can also be useful.

EXAMPLE 2

You are looking for information on the situation of Pentecostals in a certain country. If you do not find enough information using the search term *Pentecostals,* you can broaden your search by using *Protestantism or Protestants, Evangelicals* or even broader terms like *Christians and Christianity.*

Search operators and functions

In order to effectively use search terms, knowledge of search operators and search engine functions is essential for everyone researching COI.

Most search engines enable you to refine queries by using Boolean search operators (such as AND, OR, NOT) and phrase searches (often represented by quotation marks). These functions enable you to look for exact phrases or to include or exclude words. Wildcards, truncation and fuzzy search are also common. Various search engines might use differing search syntaxes, but they all function in a similar way. All operators can usually be combined, and using parentheses helps to logically structure the search string.

To get you started, here is a list of the most common and useful search operators and search functions:

AND operator

The AND operator is used to combine two or more words. It is usually the default operator. Whenever more than one search term is entered, the search engine will list results containing all of the words entered. Thus searching for *rebels government talks* means that you are effectively conducting a search for rebels *AND government AND talks*, which will produce a list of documents containing all these three terms. The same results will be listed even when *AND* is not entered in between the search terms. AND is the standard operator used by Google and ecoi.net and by other web search engines. Note that Google sometimes chooses to omit search terms (and will indicate that under the respective search results) and will list results containing only some of the entered terms.

OR operator

The OR operator will list documents that contain one or more words combined by the operator. *Tortured OR killed* finds texts either containing the term *tortured* or the term *killed*, or both.

NOT operator

The NOT operator is used to exclude words. Often it is represented by the minus sign (-). The minus sign and the search term you want to exclude must not be separated by a space. For example, use *Guinea -pig* if you are searching for information about the country, not the animal.

Be careful when using the NOT operator as you might inadvertently exclude important documents. For instance, searching for *Georgia* and excluding *USA* with the NOT operator (*Georgia NOT USA* or *Georgia -USA*) can be useful to exclude results about the US state of Georgia when you are actually looking for information on the country Georgia. But it will not be useful if you need information on military cooperation between the USA and Georgia. A better way to narrow down your search is to think about further specific keywords and add them to your search terms, combined with AND/OR operators and parentheses (see below).

Logical grouping of operators by using parentheses ()

Some search engines also allow the logical grouping of operators, usually with parentheses (). For example *(queer OR lesbian) AND discrimination* will list results containing one or both of the terms *queer or lesbian*, and additionally containing the term *discrimination.*

Phrase search using quotation marks ""

You can search for a phrase, a proper name or a set of words in a specific order by putting them in double quotation marks. A query with terms in quotation marks finds pages containing the exact quoted phrase. For example, *"human rights"* finds documents containing the phrase human rights, while human rights without the quotation marks would find documents containing the word *human* and the word *rights* without them necessarily standing next to each other.

Common words, called "stop words" (such as *the, on, where, how,* as well as certain single digits and single letters), might be ignored by search engines, even within phrases.

> **Note:** In addition to the phrase search, Google allows the use of quotation marks with single words. If you surround a single word with quotation marks, Google will look for exactly this word and not for synonyms (see below), and will not omit the word from your search query.

Proximity search

Similar to a phrase search, a proximity search allows you to search for terms that are within a defined distance from each other. For instance, on ecoi.net *"amnesty rebels"~5* finds documents containing the

words *amnesty* and *rebels* within a maximum distance of 5 words from each other. On Google, the same search operation can be conducted by using the search string *amnesty AROUND(5) rebels*. The proximity search can thus help to find a word that appears in the same context as another word. Increasing the number (distance) widens the search.

Wildcards and truncation

Wildcards are symbols that can be used to replace one or several characters within a word, or one or several words within a phrase. Wildcards can be used for words with spelling variations, in particular with proper names transcribed from languages with non-Latin alphabets such as Russian or Arabic. Note that most search engines that support wildcards do not support them at the beginning of words. ecoi.net supports the use of the asterisk (*) for replacing any number of characters (including zero) and the question mark (?) for replacing exactly one character.

> ## EXAMPLES
>
> **Wildcards search**
> On ecoi.net, *defen?e* finds documents containing the word *defence* as well as documents containing the word *defense.*
>
> **karaba?h* finds documents containing the English term *Karabakh* (leading to combinations like Nagorny Karabakh or Nagorno-Karabakh) as well as its German equivalent *Bergkarabach*.

Moreover, wildcards can be used to find various words that share a root word but have multiple endings. This is called truncation. ecoi.net also allows the use of the asterisk (*) for truncation.

> ## EXAMPLE
>
> **Truncation search**
> On ecoi.net, *traffick** finds documents containing words beginning with *traffick*, for instance: *trafficking, trafficked, trafficker.*

Google does not allow the truncation of words. It uses the asterisk (*) within a phrase search as a placeholder for any word. However, Google automatically suggests spelling corrections and alternative spellings. Google also automatically searches for words with the same stem, e.g. *running* will be found when you search for *run.*

Fuzzy search

Fuzzy searches help to find words that are spelled similarly to your search term. This feature is useful if you do not know the exact spelling of a word, or if the spelling variations are too complex to capture using wildcards.

A fuzzy search will return terms that are written similarly to the search term entered. When searching ecoi.net, you have to enter the tilde (~) at the end of the search term to conduct a fuzzy search. When searching on Google, the search engine automatically returns alternative spellings or word endings. To avoid this, you can use the "Verbatim" search. It allows you to search for the terms exactly as you entered them, without automatic modifications by Google.

Fuzzy search

When searching the group *khatm-i-nubuwat* on Google, the search results will return *Khatme Nabuwwat, Khatm-e-Nubuwwat, Khatam-e Nubuwwat,* and other spelling variations.

On ecoi.net, you can search for *khatm~ nubuwat~* in order to get *Khatme Nabuwat, Khatam-e-Nabuwat, Khatm Nabuwwat, khatm-i-nabuwat* or similar variations.

Thesaurus

A thesaurus linked to a search engine enables searches that include synonyms and different spellings of terms, or even terms in other languages.

When searching on ecoi.net, related English and German (and fewer Italian) terms are automatically included in your results and shown at the top of the search results list (e.g. searching for the term FGM includes search results with the terms *female circumcision, female genital cutting, female genital mutilation* and similar terms in German as well). If you want to use a search term exactly as you entered it, this feature can be switched off by disabling the thesaurus function in the search form.

Google offers "did you mean" terms and "related terms" but does not list all the terms that are considered by the search engine. Google also increasingly includes synonyms for your search terms. Google's catalogue of synonyms is built largely automatically by analysing the enormous amount of data collected by Google. Google may also occasionally ignore some of the search terms you have entered. Use Google's "Verbatim" option to search for the terms exactly as you entered them.

Filtering options

In addition to formulating search terms, most search engines allow you to narrow down your search using filters on properties other than the document's text content. For instance, ecoi.net allows you to choose *Countries, Sources, Types of Document, Languages and Publishing Date.* You can select more than one filter, and you can choose how to apply the filters. Google also allows you to further narrow down your results. For example, you can define *language, region* and *last update.* You may also search within a site or domain using Google Site Search. The operator *site:* followed by the website or domain you want to search will render results for a search term found on these websites or domains. You may specify whether the search terms should be found in the title (*allintitle:*), in the text (*allintext:*), or in the URL (*allinurl:*) of a page. Note that "region" usually refers to the region from which the website originates (not necessarily the region you are researching) and that the last update date often refers to when Google last visited the website (as opposed to the actual date of publication).

TIP

For the search functions available on Google and ecoi.net please consult the respective user manuals or help page:

Google search: https://support.google.com/websearch/

ecoi.net: http://www.ecoi.net/help

Google offers its advanced search form if you prefer a web interface rather than directly using search operators: http://www.google.com/advanced_search.
A similar feature on ecoi.net is called "easy search". ✳ Easy search ⬤

Moreover, Google offers some useful tools to complement your research. You may, for example, activate the Google translation engine to have your search results automatically translated (http://translate.google.com).

5.2.4 Step 4: Selecting documents from a list of search results

After running a query on a database or search engine, you will need to decide whether or not a document might be useful in the context of your COI research. Depending on the availability of information, it may not be feasible to examine every document, therefore you will need criteria for deciding when to open a document.

Source, title, publication date and excerpts featuring the highlighted search terms (also sometimes referred to as "words around hits" or "snippets") are the main indicators informing that decision. The source gives a first indication of the publisher's perspective, the title gives you an idea of the scope of a certain document, the publication date helps you to assess the currency of the information, and highlighted search terms show you the context in which they appear in the document. From the information displayed in the list of search results, you can already get a good indication whether a document is relevant for you and whether it makes sense to have a closer look at it.

Narrowing down your search by publication date can be helpful, for example when looking for a specific event or by only focusing on reports published in the last two years to ensure the information is mostly current.

EXAMPLES

You are looking for information on an assault on Hotel Villa Rosa in Somalia's capital Mogadishu conducted by the group al-Shabaab in November 2022. You used the search string *"Villa Rosa" mogadishu 2022* on Google. Among the list of search results you find the following two entries and wonder which one to click on:

Al Jazeera
https://www.aljazeera.com › news › 2022/11/28 › upd... ⋮

Somali parliament moves session, gunfire heard at ...

28 Nov 2022 — Government officials frequently use the **Villa Rosa** hotel in the Somali capital **Mogadishu** for meetings.

Somali Times
https://www.somalitimes.co.uk › al-shabab-is-still-fight... ⋮

Al-Shabab is still fighting the Villa Rosa hotel in Mogadishu

28 Nov 2022 — Al-Shabab is still fighting the **Villa Rosa** hotel in **Mogadishu** ... Since the election of President Hassan Sheikh on May 15, **2022**, ...

In this example, the first document can be identified as an article by Al Jazeera in November 2022 that reported on gunfire being heard which resulted in the Somali parliament moving its session. The second search result is an article by the Somali Times, also from November 2022, but reporting on the continued fighting by Al-Shabab at the Villa Rosa hotel in Mogadishu. By just looking at these search results, it can be assumed that both documents contain information on an assault on Hotel Villa Rosa in November 2022. However, as the second document seems to clearly focus on the hotel assault by the Islamist group al-Shabaab, it seems more relevant at first glance.

Note that not all Google search results contain a date, and the date displayed does not always correspond to the actual publication date, as the dates may not be correctly recognised by the search engine.

5.2.5 Step 5: Searching within a document

After selecting potentially relevant documents, you will have to search within these documents to find the parts of the text that you may want to use. Nearly all document types or web browsers are searchable (e.g. DOC, PDF, HTML). Use Ctrl+F (or Command+F for Apple computers) to scan texts for keywords. Microsoft Word offers numerous advanced options (e.g. match case, use wildcards, find whole words only, etc.). Adobe Reader also offers advanced search options for searching PDF files. Check the help section of the software you are using for detailed information on search functions.

Some documents, however, are not searchable (e.g. scanned reports), because they are based on image formats. In most cases you will be able to solve this problem by using optical character recognition (OCR) software which converts non-searchable text from a scanned report into searchable text. Note that you should not rely solely on the OCR results, as some characters are often not recognised correctly.

Besides searching for keywords, take a look at the table of contents or the index when checking longer texts for relevant information. If there is no table of contents, skim through the text or headings to locate potentially interesting paragraphs. Make sure you read the text thoroughly and understand the wider context.

5.2.6 Step 6: Keeping an overview of search results

There are several ways to keep an overview of your searches and their results:

Saving your search results in internet browsers
Most browsers keep a record of the web pages you visit in the browser history. This record allows you to retrieve previous search results for a certain period of time after your search. Check your browser's settings to change this period. The browser history may also be searched. In most browsers the history is accessed by pressing Ctrl+H.

Some browsers allow you to save research sessions ("tab sessions") and re-load them at a later time. Tab sessions are saved and restored automatically if the browser freezes or closes down. Tabs allow you to work on several research sessions at the same time, providing you with a better overview of your different search histories. Some browsers may require the installation of additional plugins or add-ons to save and restore tab sessions.

Google allows you to save your activity on Google search when you are logged in as a registered user. Your web history is searchable online and keeps track of what you searched for and when, and which of the results you opened: https://myactivity.google.com.

You may also want to routinely copy and paste bibliographical information, web addresses (URLs) as well as relevant quotes into a working document. This will save time when finalising your response or report.

Bookmarks/Favourites
You can save the address of a particular website by creating a "favourite" or "bookmark", in order to quickly retrieve it for future research purposes. Usually, it is more useful to save links to sources rather than links to individual articles/reports. You can structure your bookmarks in different directories: by country, source or topic. Some browsers also allow keywords or tags for bookmarks. The most effective organisation of your bookmarks depends on your personal research techniques and on your working routines.

Saving your search results on ecoi.net
ecoi.net allows users to register and to save individual search results in "research baskets". This allows for later review, or for continuing your work another day. The list of documents in your research baskets is accessible under My ecoi.net. The ecoi.net research baskets contain all necessary reference data in several standardised formats (source, original title, date of publication, link to original document and date of access), which can be printed or copied into your report.

> ## TIP
>
> If you want to be notified when a website of your choosing is updated, you can use several tools and services. Some websites provide RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds for this purpose. For those which do not, here are some other options:
>
> Visualping allows you to enter a website you wish to monitor and sends you an email notification when that site has been changed: https://visualping.io
>
> Browser extensions or add-ons also allow you to monitor changes to websites, alerting you via your browser:
>
> For Google Chrome: Visualping (https://chrome.google.com/webstore/detail/visualping/pemhgklkefakciniebenbfclihhmmfcd).
>
> For Mozilla Firefox:
> Update Scanner (https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/update-scanner),
> SiteDelta (https://addons.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/addon/sitedelta-watch),
> or check4change (https://addons.mozilla.org/firefox/addon/check4change).

5.2.7 Step 7: Cross-checking

After locating several pieces of information, it is necessary to cross-check them to create an accurate, current and balanced picture of a particular event or the prevailing conditions in a specific country. Cross-checking involves comparing and contrasting the information found. Comparing and contrasting information from a variety of different sources assists in forming a balanced picture of what is or was happening in a country (UNHCR, February 2004, para. 5). Each piece of information used as COI should ideally be corroborated by other sources.

As cross-checking information is not exclusive to online research, more in-depth instruction on how to cross-check COI will be provided in section 5.10.

5.3 Search engines and databases

5.3.1 How do general web search engines function?

The most commonly used search engine is Google. Examples of other search engines include Bing and the more privacy-centric DuckDuckGo. We use Google as an example to describe how web search engines function.

Indexing web pages
Search engines such as Google use "web crawlers" (also known as robots, bots, or spiders) to visit and read public web pages. These crawlers are automated programs that browse the Web by following hyperlinks and storing the pages they find. These pages are then indexed for full-text search.

Google (like other web search engines) generally cannot index web pages it does not have access to. Reasons for lack of accessibility might be that pages are available on a payment basis only, that they prevent crawlers from reading the page, that they are not linked to any other site known to Google, or there might be other technical issues preventing access or automatic readability. Copyright as well as privacy laws may also limit a search engine's indexing of some content. On the other hand, Google might know and access a site, but not include it in its index for various reasons, like limited resources, assessed low quality of the site, or duplicate content.

This means that not everything online can be found by search engines. The part of the World Wide Web that is accessible online, but not "crawlable" – and therefore illegible for search engines – is called the "deep web". The line between content accessible to regular search engines and the deep web is not always clear-cut. For instance, Google News and Google Books sometimes also include restricted (for instance fee-based) content in their search results.

It can take a while for crawlers to notice new or changed content; for example, important websites such as the New York Times are checked more frequently than smaller websites such as private homepages. Some search engines index more web pages than others, while other search engines index web pages more frequently than others. The result is that no search engine searches through exactly the same collection of web pages. Search engines may also penalise pages, or exclude them from the index, if they detect that these are "spamming", include illicit content, or for other reasons. This means that depending on the search engine you use, different web pages may appear in your search results. Therefore, if you experience a gap in the information obtained, or not enough specificity using one search engine, consider consulting another search engine.

"standard web", "deep web" and "dark web"

Most internet users will be familiar with using the „standard web", also referred to as the surface web. The „deep web" (also known as the invisible or hidden web) is part of the World Wide Web, but its content is not indexed by standard web search engines. Such content can include information from web pages not deemed important enough, but can also include articles which may have been censored on the „standard web". The „dark web" (also referred to as the darknet) is part of the deep web, but often completely inaccessible to the average internet user, as it is usually encrypted and can only be accessed through special software or with specialised authorisation. Same dark web technology allows for anonymous browsing.

Surface Web
Websites, news/media sites, blogs, youtube, Wikipedia, Google, think tanks, e-commerce / shopping

Deep Web
Private forums, netbanking, databases like factiva, paywalled news websites, intranets, unlinked content, non-readable content, web archives

Darknet
Tor, Silk Road, illicit darknet markets; expression of content that escapes censorship
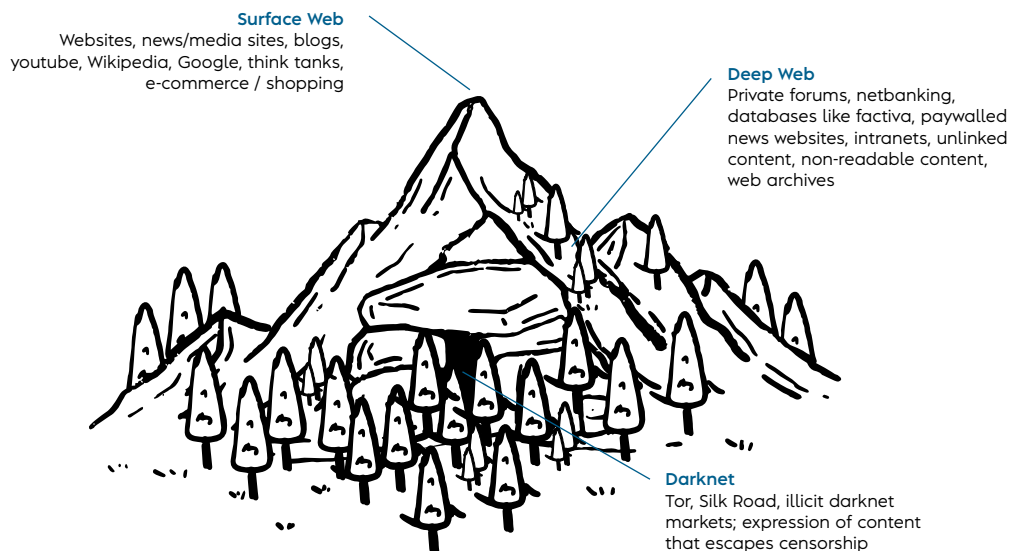
Ranking results

When you search on Google, you will be presented with a list of search results.[11] Most internet users only consult the very first page of search results. However, COI research often requires very specific information that differs from what the vast majority of the search engine's target group is looking for. It is therefore helpful to understand how search engines rank the results and to know whether a particular search result is representative of the information that can be found, or whether you should change your search terms (see section 5.2.3). You should be aware that relevant results may be further down the list rather than on the first page. Search engines are optimised along the information needs of general internet users – not of those researching professionally in a specific field such as international protection procedures.

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[11] As of January 2024, Google (and search engines in general) were in a transition phase due to ongoing advancements in Artificial Intelligence. These advancements might lead to improved understanding of natural language and context, more personalised results, and to a shift from providing a list of search results to directly providing answers. Please note that the specific outcome of these developments was not known at the time of writing.

The following criteria may, among others, influence the ranking of search results:

▶ **Location and frequency of search terms or keywords**
How often, and where, do search terms appear in the document? For instance, when a search term appears in the title or the address of a document, it is given more weight.

▶ **Link analysis**
How often is a document linked to, and by whom? Pages or documents that are linked to by many other pages and/or by pages deemed important/popular by search engines are ranked higher.

▶ **Calculated "quality" of a document**
Search engines analyse the content of web pages and try to calculate their "quality". For instance, they try to rank pages which only contain a collection of keywords and no useful text (spam pages) lower than pages containing meaningful content. They also try to estimate how well the pages correspond to the context of your search. Even the technical quality of a web page can affect its ranking.

▶ **User behaviour: Context, click evaluation, and social media**
Search engines monitor how internet users make use of their results. A user's behaviour can affect the ranking of search results in various ways. For instance, Google has implemented a form of context awareness in search results: if you previously searched for animals, a search for "jaguar" will likely show other results than if you had previously searched for cars. This also depends on whether the user is logged in to their Google account. Another form of context awareness is the user's location. A user in one country may be shown different search results than a user in another country if the search engine considers the location to be of relevance to the current search.

Additionally, how often users click on individual search results has an impact on the ranking of their search results.

All of these user-specific data produce search results that vary from one user to another: what is on page one of your search is not necessarily on page one for another user undertaking the same search. This is one of the reasons why search engines like DuckDuckGo have become increasingly popular. Unlike Google, which generates a significant part of its revenue from targeted advertising based on user data, DuckDuckGo is more focused on users' privacy and does not track or store personal information. Services like startpage.com can be used to avoid search results tailored to the user's behaviour. Startpage.com forwards search queries to Google, which allows using Google anonymously.

The ranking of search results will result from a combination of these criteria, and others. The algorithm that is used to determine the ranking of search results is a complex set of rules that is constantly being updated and its outcome is difficult to predict. The best way you can directly influence search results is to refine your search query. The tips provided in section 5.2.3 might be helpful for this task.

> ### TIP
>
> **Staying up-to-date on technical developments with search engines**
>
> Search engines are constantly developing their technology. Google, for instance, tries to "guess" what users are looking for by including synonyms, handling spelling errors, and so on. Search engines may also replace their search syntax over time. Try to keep up-to-date on how search engines work, and what features they offer. Regularly check their help pages and blogs or newsletters.
>
> For Google, the web search help (https://support.google.com/websearch), the official Google blog (https://blog.google) and the official Google search blog (https://blog.google/products/search), as well as unofficial blogs about search engines (such as Search Engine Watch, https://searchenginewatch.com) will help you keep up-to-date.

5.3.2 How does a database function?

ecoi.net and other COI-related databases

ecoi.net is a publicly accessible COI database run by ACCORD, the COI department of the Austrian Red Cross, in cooperation with the German NGO Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. The website gathers, structures and processes publicly available COI with a focus on the needs of persons working in the field of asylum and other forms of international protection. ecoi.net is endorsed by UNHCR as the main global platform for COI. ecoi.net also forms the basis for the official COI database of the Austrian Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum.

ecoi.net's team of content managers screen selected sources for relevant information (news articles, reports, position papers, etc.) on a daily basis, summarise the content in headlines in English and German and include metadata (e.g. the source, the publication date, the country, or the hyperlink to the original document) when adding new entries to the database. The selection criteria are based on the particular needs for country information in international protection procedures.

The data collected are automatically indexed for full-text search. This makes it possible to search for the complete text of all the indexed documents and to use the added metadata for searching and filtering. The ecoi.net search engine automatically includes English and German (and some Italian) synonyms and near synonyms of your search terms. This has been made possible by linking a specifically developed COI thesaurus to the search.

As of January 2024, ecoi.net covered more than 160 sources. Depending on a source's publication cycle, the sources are updated daily (such as The New Humanitarian, UNHCR, or Radio Free Europe), weekly (such as the UN Security Council, Article 19 or the International Crisis Group) or monthly (e.g. Afghanistan Analysts Network, Freedom House, or WHO). Additionally, information from sources which are not covered regularly is included in the database on an ad-hoc basis, bringing the total number of available sources to several hundred. Sources are selected based upon their usefulness for COI research.

Note, however, that ecoi.net does not cover all countries to the same extent – there is a focus on those countries from which most persons seeking asylum originate.[12] For a list of regularly covered sources and country priorities, see https://www.ecoi.net/en/about/our-sources.

Since content is selected systematically with a focus on international protection, there is a lower risk of an overload of information and of irrelevant information. Additionally, the metadata helps to narrow search results: you can restrict results to a specific country, or to a specific date of publication, for instance.

Other relevant COI-related databases include the EUAA COI Portal and databases run by COI units of national migration authorities. The European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) manages the EUAA COI Portal (https://coi.euaa.europa.eu), which collects selected COI authored by the national asylum authorities of EU member states plus Norway, Switzerland, Iceland and Liechtenstein, the EUAA and other EU institutions (for example, the EU External Action Service, the EU's diplomatic service).

The protection information database Refworld (https://www.refworld.org) is managed by UNHCR to support quality decision-making. In 2019, Refworld shifted its focus to its law and policy collections and stopped updating its COI collection. UNHCR recommends using ecoi.net for COI research instead. In 2024 UNHCR launched an upgraded version of Refworld with improved search functionalities and a user-friendly design. Russian and Spanish versions of Refworld continue to collect COI, with regional specialisations. They are available at http://refworld.org.ru and https://www.refworld.org.es.

Another United Nations database frequently used to find COI is ReliefWeb, a database collecting information on the humanitarian situation run by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). While not specifically focused on the COI context, its extensive collection of reports, maps and infographics often deals with information needed in international protection procedures, for instance on the security situation. OCHA also provides the Humanitarian Data Exchange platform HDX (https://data.humdata.org) where users can share data they need to work on humanitarian crises, like geodata or statistics.

News databases
News databases, such as Factiva (https://www.dowjones.com/professional/de/factiva) or LexisNexis (https://www.lexisnexis.com/en-us/professional/nexis/nexis.page), are commercial subscription databases. They systematically collect data from selected content providers and sell access to this data for legal research, newspaper searches, and consumer information. Factiva, for example, covers major global newspapers, industry publications, magazines and reports. While its focus is business news, it can also be used to locate information on a variety of COI-relevant topics, including politics, current events, analyses and government data in a range of languages. Having access to such a database is useful for COI researchers, especially when retrieving information from newspaper articles behind paywalls, or when only scarce information can be found via general search engines.

Academic databases
Academic databases collect and index journal articles, books and conference proceedings and make the content accessible to (in most cases) paying subscribers. Academic databases are usually curated; the editors of the database specifically select the material to be included. This marks the main difference between academic databases and specialised web search engines such as Google Scholar, where the academic content provided is automatically crawled and not filtered. In most academic databases, the search results include metadata (e.g. title, author(s), publisher, abstract). However, some of these

[12] Application statistics of the past 3 years from global governments and UNHCR are taken into account, with an increased weight for application numbers in the European Union, Austria and Germany.

databases may not be full-text databases, meaning it may not be possible to directly access full-text articles. Nevertheless, academic databases may help COI researchers to identify COI-relevant scholarly literature. Articles in academic journals are frequently authored by (leading) scholars which can make them valuable COI sources. Research topics that might be worth searching for academic sources include, for example, a country's political system, minorities, languages, religions, certain customs or medical treatment of diseases.

Examples of widely-used academic databases are: Web of Science (http://www.webofscience.com), Scopus (http://www.scopus.com), PubMed (https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov), JSTOR (https://www.jstor.org), EBSCO (https://www.ebsco.com), or Ingentaconnect (http://www.ingentaconnect.com). Free access to open access journals and articles is offered by the DOAJ database (http://www.doaj.org).

TIP

Internet archives

Broken links are a common problem on the web. When you encounter a broken link, you can try to find a working copy of the document via so-called internet archives.

One of the most popular internet archives is the Wayback Machine (http://www.archive.org), which archives web pages so long as the website does not block the archiving process (many do). When the archiving is successful, it allows you to retrieve earlier versions of websites that have changed, websites that no longer exist, and documents that have been removed from a more recent version of a website. Note that there is usually at least a six-month delay, sometimes more, between the time a page is first found by a crawler and its availability in the archive.

Other examples are Archive.today (available under, e.g. http://archive.is; http://archive.fo) or the copies of pages in caches of search engines, such as Google Cache. For the Russian context, the Russian Independent Media Archive (RIMA, https://rima.media/en), which aims at archiving publications of all major Russian independent media organisations operating since 2000, might be relevant.

5.4 Dealing with information shared on social media

The amount of information available on social media platforms is growing, and so are the expectations that they can be used to find out anything about anyone. For COI researchers, social media platforms provide access to publications, articles, comments, or visual material produced by individuals or institutions (i.e. sources). In this respect, social media platforms are repositories of vast amounts of potentially useful up-to-date information. For information on types of social media see section 4.1.3, assessing sources that use social media is discussed in section 4.2.3.

Keep in mind that on the one hand there are established organisations that use social media accounts as an extension of their other official information channels in order to draw attention to their content. In these cases, you can easily trace back the information to its primary source and the standards for source assessment apply. Social media in this context can further be used to follow selected sources in order to stay up-to-date with their publications.

On the other hand, there are individuals (who may or may not be using their real name) or groups such as grassroots or civil society organisations. These sources may use social media to provide first-hand observations about what they see and experience around them in countries of origin, or they offer their analysis of a situation. In such cases the relevant content can only be found on the social media platform itself. As this type of social media content is often directly generated by users of the various platforms, in procedures for international protection it should be used only in limited circumstances and always be subjected to special scrutiny. This section focuses on this type of content shared on social media.

Social media platforms do not apply the same standards of regulation as professionally edited and established sources. Source assessment of unknown individuals or organisations posting on social media is challenging and evaluation of the information found may often be difficult. Therefore, the added value of social media for COI researchers should not be overestimated. Nonetheless, sources found on social media should not be entirely excluded or discounted as means for gathering potentially valuable information. Social media may be useful in specific contexts, e.g. when looking for corroborative information of where and when a demonstration took place or whether a certain organisation exists. They can also be helpful for following current developments regarding a certain topic or country. In instances where information by news or NGO sources is suppressed, where sources are not well-established or lack funding, or when information is manipulated or filtered by governments, social media platforms can be a cost-free and effective means for persons in these countries to reach their audiences. When you find information from social media that you deem potentially valuable for the case in question, check it against the background of the overall reporting situation and conduct an in-depth source assessment. For more information on this topic, please see section 4.2.3.

Investigations into social media profiles of applicants for international protection as well as screening for potential exclusion cases in the form of single case verifications are, however, not considered part of COI research.

Social media platforms are continually evolving – technical aspects are updated, terms of use and privacy settings are modified, user interfaces are improved, and the user groups engaging with social networks are also constantly changing. Social media therefore can only be useful if you follow these developments closely and if you find ways of integrating the use of sources found on social media in your research routine. To familiarise yourself with the specificities of social media platforms, always read the help sections and manuals provided.

Some of the advantages and disadvantages of social media are provided below:

Advantages of social media	Disadvantages of social media
▶ Sources found on social media platforms can offer very current information (e.g. on security developments or ongoing elections). Releases of new reports etc. are announced on social media by some organisations.	▶ The generally existing problem of information overload might be worsened. It can be time-consuming and difficult to filter the information you need.
▶ You can access information that you might not find anywhere else, such as information on localised events or developments that are underreported or not deemed newsworthy. In some countries, the social media pages of government agencies, political parties or NGOs may be their only significant web presence.	▶ Social media platforms can allow the use of fake identities. It can thus be difficult to verify the identity of an author of a piece of information. ▶ Personal perspectives and opinions are – due to the characteristics inherent to social media – widespread. Some states or organisations even use social media to run targeted disinformation campaigns, using fake profiles to share and disseminate false information.
▶ You may encounter new sources on specific topics or countries via social media.	▶ Content can be changed rapidly or might suddenly be taken offline.
▶ Social media may offer another avenue of finding experts and getting in touch with them.	▶ Social media platforms often require you to create a personal account before you can use them, thereby obliging you to disclose your identity.

Bazzell, Michael: OSINT techniques: Resources for uncovering online information, IntelTechniques, February 2023, Section II

OHCHR - Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights / Human Rights Center at the University of California, Berkeley, School of Law: Berkeley Protocol on Digital Open Source Investigations, 3 January 2022
https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/OHCHR_BerkeleyProtocol.pdf

5.4.1 Safety considerations

Every online search leaves a trace, also known as a "passive digital footprint". A COI researcher should avoid disclosing identifiable elements about themselves or their organisation and be especially careful not to disclose any personal information regarding the applicant or the case they may be researching. Further, it is worth keeping in mind that social media sites are specifically designed to identify and

trace relationships and networks. Researchers should be aware that their search and browsing habits are tracked through various methods designed to capture user activity and behaviour. For example, by using your Facebook profile to look at another person's profile, this person might in turn get your profile suggested to them as a possible friend. LinkedIn similarly tracks user activity in order to suggest connections with other profiles.

Keep in mind that choosing to only look at publicly viewable social media content (which does not require creating any social media accounts) still allows social media sites to create a device fingerprint[13] and thereby potentially recognise the device used to access the site. The following are additional safety measures when accessing social media sites during the research process:

▶ You might consider using a secure browser such as the Tor Browser that prevents others from seeing what websites you access. There are also many providers of Virtual Private Networks (VPN) that hide your IP address.

▶ Some organisations choose to create fake profiles to conduct research on social media platforms. These so-called "sock puppet accounts" try to hide any potential affiliations. However, it requires a lot of work to create a convincing fake profile. Moreover, this raises several legal and ethical concerns, among them the violation of terms of use. In any case, such accounts should not be used to enter private groups or establish direct contact under false pretences.

▶ Familiarise yourself with your organisation's guidance on accessing and using social media platforms, including any restrictions on use.

Please keep in mind that there are social media platforms widely used in some countries of origin which have been known to be subjected to high levels of government surveillance and control, such as the Russian platform vk.com. It is therefore recommended to generally refrain from accessing such platforms.

5.4.2 Verifying content

Assessment of sources publishing information on social media will often lead to the conclusion that the given source is dubious (see sections 4.2.3 and 4.3), since it might not be clear who the author is. This is why it is important to check the accuracy of the information posted by the source.

Try and find out where the information originated. It might have been published at an earlier stage by a different source, ideally by a more established and reputable source, and the information you found was merely reposted without being attributed to the primary source. Google Site Search (see section 5.2.3) may help you find out whether the same content was posted by another source on the same social media platform. Photo and video material found on social media might depict scenes that were in fact recorded in a different location and context. Image searches such as Google images (https://images.google.com), TinEye (https://tineye.com), Yandex (https://yandex.com/images) or the picture analysis tool Google Lens can help in finding out where a photo originated. You can also use these tools for reverse video searches by uploading a screenshot of the video in question. Tools for geolocation such as Google Earth Pro might help you to locate where certain pictures were taken or video footage was made. In general, check whether the post has a timestamp revealing the date and time it was published. Find out whether the platform in question allows posts to be edited and whether edited content will be designated as such.

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[13] Device fingerprinting is a method to identify and track a device based on multiple properties such as its configuration, operating system, installed software, IP address, etc. The combination of these properties can allow the unique identification.

Look at the source's posting history. Does it suggest that the source is knowledgeable on the topic in question, does the information suggest that the author is present on the ground? Do the postings, profile picture, banner or other profile markers point towards any affiliation?

Bellingcat: A Beginner's Guide to Social Media Verification, 1 November 2021
https://www.bellingcat.com/resources/2021/11/01/a-beginners-guide-to-social-media-verification

Note that not everything that is technically possible necessarily leads to useful or meaningful results. While metadata may, for instance, show the geolocation of images or IP addresses, such data may be manipulated and often is simply not available. Verifying the information using technical means is often not possible at all and would require specific skills that are not part of the duties of COI service providers and RSD practitioners. Furthermore, additional time resources would be needed. For these reasons, cross-checking efforts will normally not involve technical skills but will consist of trying to find information on the same subject from other sources.

5.4.3 Guidelines for using social media in COI research

When using social media to gather COI, everything that has been said about source assessment and reliability of "regular" sources applies. However, the following guidelines deal with the specificities of social media. It is advisable to check if your organisation has created a policy or guidelines on the use of social media as a source of information.

When you find information on social media platforms:

- Carry out a source assessment to judge whether the source is reliable, and describe the source (*reliability, transparency*)

- Quote correctly: reference the name of the source/account AND the platform where the information was provided (*transparency*).

- If you conclude from your source assessment that a source is dubious and still decide to use the information, be transparent in your assessment of the source (*transparency*).

- Try to thoroughly cross-check the information with other sources (*accuracy*).

- If including video content or other non-text content, prepare a transcript or describe the content shown (*transparency*).

- Document all social media content you used thoroughly as the content is likely to change or disappear over time. Record date of access and use screenshots if saving the websites as PDFs is not possible. Save copies of audio and video material (*transparency*).

When using social media platforms to contact potential sources:

- Make sure you know exactly who you are corresponding with *(data protection, reliability)*.

- Do not reveal details of the case in question that may lead to the identification of the person seeking protection *(data protection).*

▶ Make efforts to identify who may have access to the correspondence, as conversations and information may be deliberately or inadvertently exposed to third parties *(data protection, source protection)*.

▶ Make sure contact between you (as a person working in the field of international protection) and a source does not endanger that person (or persons related to them) and consider that communications may be monitored by intelligence agencies or others *(source protection)*.

▶ Do not use your private account, a false identity, or pretexts when establishing contact – use official user accounts and state the reason for your questions *(transparency, reliability)*.

▶ Your organisation may require you to use a standard disclaimer for experts or other contact persons. Use this disclaimer for social media contacts as well.

5.5 Handling quantitative data

In addition to the use of textual information, COI products increasingly refer to datasets, or provide an analysis of such data. Frequently employed datasets in this context are data by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) on security-related incidents, UNHCR or IOM data on internally displaced persons (IDPs) or the World Food Programme's (WFP) Global Food Prices Database, to name just a few examples. The use of datasets can greatly enrich COI products, but also requires certain skills from COI service providers in handling and interpreting the data and its possible visualisation.

5.5.1 Advantages and use

Quantitative data can provide a clear and measurable description of a country situation to complement anecdotal information. It can be very helpful in determining risk, providing a geographical and temporal disaggregation of COI-relevant developments. COI service providers can set a precise focus relevant to the respective question at hand, and screen for specific information within a given dataset (e.g. the subnational analysis of conflicts, development of conflict-related IDP numbers in a specific region or the development of food prices at the markets of a particular district). Data also provides a useful basis for visualising relevant information, helping to gain an overview of certain aspects and, from a user-friendliness perspective, making developments easier to grasp.

Various data projects cover a wide range of topics that can be relevant for COI research. For an overview of examples, please see the list at the end of this section.

For the analysis and subsequent visualisation of large datasets, Microsoft's Excel or Power BI offer suitable solutions. Excel, for example, provides a particularly useful feature, the so-called PivotTables, which help to summarise, sort, reorganise, group, count, sum or average data in a data sheet. For more advanced statistical analyses of data, the use of statistics programs (such as SPSS, Stata or R) is recommended. Moreover, some data sources already offer the possibility of using integrated online analysis tools, see for example:

- UNHCR – UN High Commissioner for Refugees: Interactive Maps and Dashboards
  https://data.unhcr.org/en/working-group/14
- UNHCR – UN High Commissioner for Refugees: Data Finder
  https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=2bxU2f
- NRC – Norwegian Refugee Council: Eviction Information Portal
  https://evictions.nrcsystems.net/index.php

In addition, quantitative data increasingly forms the foundation for so-called data-based investigative journalism. This makes use of the large amount of publicly available data and provides resources and tools which may also yield insights into COI-relevant topics. The investigative collective Bellingcat, for example, provides research guides and resource lists and advanced open-data research tools such as its "Auto-Archiver", "Instagram-Location-Search", "TikTok-Timestamp" or "cloud-free-subregion". For further information in this regard, please see:

Bellingcat: Help Bellingcat Build Tools For Open Source Investigators!, 6 July 2021
https://www.bellingcat.com/resources/2021/07/06/help-bellingcat-build-tools-for-open-source-investigators

Non-exhaustive list of data sources useful for COI

Security-related incidents:
- ACLED – Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
  https://acleddata.com
- UCDP – Uppsala Conflict Data Program
  https://ucdp.uu.se
- ICEWS – Integrated Crisis Early Warning System
  https://www.lockheedmartin.com/en-us/capabilities/research-labs/advanced-technology-labs/icews.html
- GDELT – Global Database of Events, Language, and Tone
  https://www.gdeltproject.org

Displacement and eviction:
- UNHCR – UN High Commissioner for Refugees: Refugee Population Statistics Database
  https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics
- IOM – International Organization for Migration
  https://dtm.iom.int/datasets
- IDMC – Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre: Global Internal Displacement Database
  https://www.internal-displacement.org/database/displacement-data
- NRC – Norwegian Refugee Council: Eviction Information Portal
  https://evictions.nrcsystems.net/downloads.php

Socio-economic information:
- UN Population Division
  https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/data-landing-page
- The World Bank
  https://data.worldbank.org
- WFP – World Food Programme: DataViz
  https://dataviz.vam.wfp.org
- FEWS NET – Famine Early Warning Systems Network
  https://fews.net
- Humanitarian Data Exchange
  https://data.humdata.org
- OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
  https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx
- ILO – International Labour Organization
  https://ilostat.ilo.org/data

- United States Census Bureau – International Database
  https://www.census.gov/data-tools/demo/idb
- USAID IDEA – International Data & Economic Analysis
  https://idea.usaid.gov

Other topics:
- WHO – World Health Organization
  https://www.who.int/data
- Migration Data Portal
  https://www.migrationdataportal.org/international-data
- Security Force Monitor
  https://securityforcemonitor.org
- UNODC – United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
  https://dataunodc.un.org

5.5.2 Potential pitfalls

As is the case with other types of information, quantitative data is not free of bias: while data often suggests an impartial approach or some kind of "pure" presentation of facts, every collection of data is based on a methodology, entailing particular research decisions. Moreover, when dealing with data, COI service providers always have to address the question of what is actually being measured in the respective data (see e.g. Lopez, March 2021, pp. 26-28). Thus, COI service providers must always familiarise themselves with the respective data collection methodology and, if accessible, the codebook prior to drawing on data in their products (see the following example for illustration).

EXAMPLE

The ACLED dataset allows for an analysis of security incidents with regard to the involvement of a particular actor. In this context, ACLED records two variables labelled "Actor1" and "Actor2". Although "civilians" are always coded as "Actor2", ACLED points out in its codebook that there is no semantic difference between these two variables. Thus, when focusing on the involvement of a particular actor, all incidents that list this actor as either "Actor1" or "Actor2" should be included in the analysis. To enhance transparency and avoid misunderstandings, this approach should also be clearly communicated in the COI product.

ACLED: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project Codebook, last updated 9 November 2023
https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2023/06/ACLED_Codebook_2023.pdf

Be aware that data collection methodologies vary and thus lead to different outcomes. This becomes apparent when comparing the frequently used conflict data collected by ACLED and UCDP. ACLED and UCDP supposedly measure the same, i.e. conflict-related incidents, yet their figures on incidents and casualties consistently differ (Raleigh et al., 2023; Eck, 2012). Data collection practices, resulting datasets and their reliability and validity are significantly shaped by various decisions made by their creators (including decisions regarding conceptual, coding, and sourcing variations) (Raleigh et al., 2023, pp. 1-3).

In relation to ACLED and UCDP, the reasons for variation in the data are due to differences in (1) the definition of conflict, (2) how the extent of conflict is captured, and (3) the source of information on conflict events (Raleigh et al., 2023, p. 12).

When working with data, it is important to consider that the currency of a dataset may compromise the accuracy or precision of the data it contains. Aspects of an incident might be corrected after the incident has been reported for the first time. ACLED, for example, updates its datasets weekly and corrects previous errors.
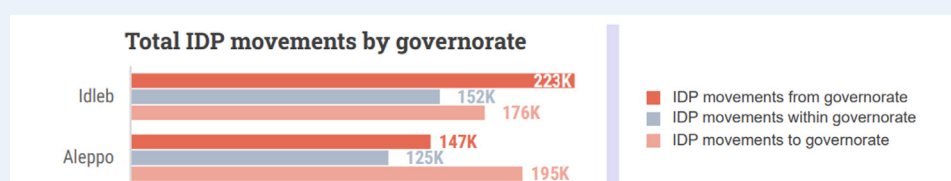
Fatality figures are particularly vulnerable to bias and inaccurate reporting, and ACLED states that it uses the most conservative estimate available (ACLED, January 2023, p. 3). In general, it is advised to employ extreme caution when using fatality numbers. Assessments of the security situation should not be based solely on quantitative analysis of event data.

When dealing with data, especially when data is visualised with the help of charts or when information provided in charts is reproduced in text form, make sure that no relevant information is lost during these "translation processes". This means, for example, that it is important that charts contain all the necessary captions for the data to be interpreted correctly and that the charts are easy to understand. When translating charts into text, care must be taken to ensure that the wording is unambiguous (see the following example for illustration).

EXAMPLE

In its overview of IDP movements in the Syrian Arab Republic, UNOCHA provides the following chart of IDP movements at the governorate level. For each governorate, there are three bars for "IDP movements from the governorate", "IDP movements within the governorate" and "IDP movements to the governorate". In this figure, the bar for IDP movements within the governorate (grey bar) represents a subset of the other two bars. This means that within the bars representing movements from and to the governorate, IDPs who remain in the governorate ("movement within") are also included in these figures. For Idlib governorate, this means that 71,000 IDP movements *out of* the governorate (223,000 minus 152,000), 152,000 within the governorate and 24,000 (176,000 minus 152,000) *into* the governorate were recorded. If included in a written COI product, the subtraction and change in wording ("out of" and "into") might be necessary to prevent the reader from simply adding up all three bars per governorate and arriving at a total number of IDP movements that is higher than the actual count.

Total IDP movements by governorate

Idleb: 223K, 152K, 176K
Aleppo: 147K, 125K, 195K

Legend:
IDP movements from governorate
IDP movements within governorate
IDP movements to governorate

Excerpt taken from UNOCHA: Syrian Arab Republic IDP Movements Overview (Jan – Dec 2021), as of 31 December 2021, 21 March 2022
https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/syr_idp_movements_overview_jan_to_dec_2021_20220321.pdf

5.6 Consulting oral sources

If information on a topic is scarce or contradictory, or if it does not clarify the topic sufficiently, it may be helpful to consult country or thematic experts. In this section, we provide an overview of issues to consider when obtaining information from oral sources.

In the 2013 edition of this manual, this section was partly based on guidelines for interviewing oral sources, authored by the Research Directorate of the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada. This edition also features new aspects and feedback from other experienced institutions.

> **! NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY**
>
> EUAA defines an oral source as a "person who is interviewed/contacted by a COI researcher to obtain specific information about a topic that may not be available in published sources" and includes "experts or individuals with particular knowledge relevant to a topic/issue" in this category (EUAA, February 2023a, p. 35).
>
> Experts are academics as well as persons whose expertise is based on their professional background (e.g. lawyers, doctors, pharmacists, human rights defenders, journalists, representatives of governments, NGOs, or international organisations). When referring to experts, we do not mean persons who act as "expert witnesses" in legal proceedings. Those expert witnesses are commissioned to provide their knowledge in court (Good/Kelly, July 2013, p. 1).

In the context of this manual, "consulting an oral source" refers to communicating with an external person who has expertise or special knowledge in a given subject and who might serve as a COI source. Information from oral sources may be obtained through, for instance, an in-person interview, telephone conversation, video conference or in written form (e.g. email). In this section, we focus primarily on expert oral sources.

5.6.1 When to consult an expert oral source

Expert statements can help us obtain information on situations where documentary material is scarce, outdated, or unclear and it is difficult to find answers by consulting written sources. Oral sources can also be consulted to cross-check COI from other sources. Please be aware that under some circumstances, even contacting expert oral sources may compromise their security.

The following situations or questions might require contacting an expert:

- ▶ it is unlikely to find specific information or it would be very difficult to find in written material
- ▶ no information could be found
- ▶ the information found is ambiguous
- ▶ information could only be found in dubious or biased sources
- ▶ identifying the most important aspects when information is abundant
- ▶ there are difficulties understanding the material found or other uncertainties

▶ information requires interpretation or analysis by a person with the necessary skills, knowledge and/or qualifications (e.g. when working on questions relating to legal issues, cultures, traditions, and practices)

▶ the information found in written material appears dated and by consulting oral sources the currency of the information can be validated

5.6.2 How to find and select expert oral sources

Experts may work at universities or with international, national or local organisations, both in the country of interest or abroad. Government officials, lawyers, or journalists can also serve as experts. Their expertise is based on their professional background or their academic work and affiliations.

Many experts can be found online. The best way to locate academics is to look for publications on the topic at hand or related questions. Most university departments and research institutions have their own websites providing staff contact details.

Professionals who can be consulted as experts can also be found by looking at websites of governmental or non-governmental institutions as well as think tanks. For certain types of questions (such as immigration procedures, rights of residence, or citizenship laws) embassy staff can provide expertise or guide you in the direction of a credited local source, such as lawyers or other experts. Activists and advocacy groups might also be good sources for identifying experts. If institutions do not have their own websites, directories compiled by governments or humanitarian organisations can sometimes assist in identifying appropriate sources. Browsing academic journals or the editorial boards of publications might also locate experts on the topic of interest; sometimes you might find mention of an expert in a newspaper article or an NGO report. Also check existing COI reports, reports on fact-finding missions, or query responses. Who did the researchers interview? Which organisations did they visit? Programmes of conferences and symposiums can be valuable sources for identifying experts as well.

Try to expand your list of expert contacts by "snowballing": academics as well as professional experts have close networks within their (scientific or professional) communities and they may be able to recommend colleagues. A person mentioned as an "expert witness" in case law may also be approached, however, it should be clarified that the role as an interviewee of a COI service provider formally differs from that of an expert witness in court.

Another way to find potential expert contacts is through social media. Many researchers and organisations are active on LinkedIn or X (Twitter). Their feeds may identify other expert sources you may not be aware of. For more information on this, see section 5.4.

> ### TIP
>
> The Rights in Exile Programme is a refugee legal aid and advocacy movement that encourages sharing of information and expertise among legal practitioners working in the RSD field (for details on Rights in Exile, which was formerly known as Fahamu Refugee Programme, please see the "about us" section on its website https://amerainternational.org/what-we-do). It offers a list of organisations and individuals in many countries who have agreed to provide country information pro bono to NGOs that do not charge refugees for legal services. The list is available at: https://amerainternational.org/country-of-origin-information-experts
>
> The fee-based Electronic Immigration Network (EIN), a UK based charity organisation that provides information related to immigration and asylum, offers a directory of experts on countries of origin. The directory is available at: http://www.ein.org.uk/experts/?q=experts

5.6.3 Assessing expert oral sources

Oral sources and the information they provide should be assessed using the same critical process applied to any other kind of source used in COI research (see also EUAA, February 2023a, p. 35). If the source is considered reliable, the information they provide still needs to be cross-checked with information from other sources. Conversely, an expert's statement can itself be used to cross-check other sources. For detailed information on assessing sources see section 4.2.

Some specific aspects for assessing oral sources are summarised below:

▶ Proven knowledge: Does the person's professional education and/or career qualify them as an expert?
▶ Publications: Has the person published articles in respected/well-known academic journals? Who is the intended audience?
▶ Tone/style/language: Are the wording and language used in their publications appropriate for the type of text?
▶ Methodology: From which sources does the person obtain their information? Which types of sources does their work utilise? How have they collected the information?
▶ Reputation: What is the reputation of the person and the organisation they represent? Are they an authority in the field in question?
▶ Potential bias: For whom do they work? What are the goals and mission of the organisation? Who/what provides funding?
▶ Expertise and country knowledge: Which topics fall within their expertise? For instance, has the person conducted field work in the country concerned? When did they last live or travel there? For how long did they visit or live in the country?
▶ Language skills: Does the expert speak the language(s) spoken in the country/region of expertise? What is the level of their language skills? Do those skills enable them to conduct field studies and interviews with locals in their native language(s)?
▶ Previous experience with the expert: Have they previously participated as an expert in asylum procedures? On any such previous occasions, were they able to provide reliable, unbiased and up-to-date information?

Are there any other factors that might compromise the expert's knowledge in this particular instance (e.g. having the same or opposing political affiliation as the applicant, connections to the applicant)?

5.6.4 Interviewing oral sources: Preparation, conducting the interview, follow-up

In recent years, technological developments have made contacting sources via online conferencing tools (e.g. MS Teams, Zoom, Skype) much easier. The following considerations apply to face-to-face interviews (including interviews during fact-finding missions) as well as to remote interviews via video conference or phone calls.

Preparation of the interview
Before contacting the source, undertake preliminary research to gain a solid understanding of the topic and to be able to ask meaningful and specific questions. Prepare questions for the interview, for instance in the form of an interview guide. Make sure questions are relevant to the topic and formulated carefully. Do not include basic questions in your interview guide that can easily be answered by consulting written sources.

Approach the expert well in advance of the substantive interview by email or by phone to introduce yourself, to ask for the interview, to present your institution and your position, to explain the context of your work and to give a concise overview of the nature and purpose of COI research. Inform the source about the policy of your organisation regarding the use of public or confidential information. This allows the expert to prepare and will thus improve the quality of the answers you obtain when you do interview them.

If you decide that an interview is not necessary, and you want to forward your questions in written form only, introduce yourself, your institution and the context of the query as mentioned above. If you do not receive a reply to your first request in a timely manner, it is advisable to follow up by sending another email or by calling.

Conducting the interview
At the start of the interview, having already introduced yourself, ask your interviewee if there is anything else they wish to know. Make sure that the oral source is aware of the context of the interview and its purpose. Ask if they agree to have the outcome of the interview published and – if applicable – ask if they wish to be quoted as an individual or as a representative of their organisation. Clarify the procedure of authorising interview notes prior to publication with your interviewee. Explain that they can retract their participation at any time before publication.

Be careful not to influence your interviewee during the conversation. Do not ask leading questions, and avoid showing your opinion or emotional reactions to statements made by the source. If your questions are specific to a certain case, keep in mind the importance of protecting the personal data of the applicant and their affiliates.

Listen attentively and either sound-record the interview (provided the interviewee has consented) or ensure that you take accurate written notes. Once all questions have been addressed, briefly revisit the main points of the interview with the source. If anything is unclear, seek clarification. Agree a timeframe for the approval of the interview notes with the source. Before ending the interview, thank the source for their time and take the opportunity to inquire if they can recommend other potential sources.

Follow-up

After the interview, provide the source with the notes and ask them to correct inaccuracies or add supplementary information if needed. Note that approval by an oral source may take time to obtain. Only information that has been authorised can be attributed to the source.

Information about the source and the interview must be saved and filed so they can be produced and shared with other stakeholders in the asylum procedure if required.

When quoting information provided by the source, be as transparent as possible. Refer to the source using only the agreed reference descriptors and include the date of the interview. Specify how the information was obtained (e.g. telephone interview or online meeting).

If you have a database of experts, add the source's contact details and area of expertise.

> ## TIP
>
> It is a good idea to maintain an internal database of experts. Such a database should contain profiles of the experts, including which countries, regions and topics they deal with. The profile should also contain information about whether the expert has already been contacted, and on the progress and outcome of all interviews. A well-maintained database supports knowledge transfer within the (COI) unit. New researchers can make use of contacts their colleagues have already identified.
>
> Keeping an experts' database may also help to avoid over-consulting one expert. Frequently contacted oral sources may suffer from "source fatigue" (IRB, April 2020a, p. 10). Over-reliance on a small number of experts also reduces the scope of experience and knowledge that experts can add to the research process.

5.6.5 Confidentiality and anonymity

As a general rule, experts should be referenced with their full names, their professional title and institutional affiliation. This allows the users of the COI products to evaluate sources, to contextualise, and to assess the weight of their statements. However, there are instances where experts may wish to be anonymised, e.g. for diplomatic reasons, or circumstances where revealing their identity might put the person or their family in the country of origin at risk. In such situations, the name of the source must be withheld. If identification is still possible based on the description of the position and institutional affiliation, the expert might need to be referred to as an *anonymised* or *confidential source.* In any case, make sure to obtain the source's consent on how to refer to them.

The use of anonymised sources in COI products has also been addressed in the ECtHR ruling in *Sufi and Elmi v. the United Kingdom* (paras. 233-234).[14] The ECtHR said that when anonymised sources are only vaguely described (e.g. "an international NGO", "a diplomatic source" or "a security adviser"), the court cannot assess the reliability of the sources. Thus, "where [the anonymised sources'] information is unsupported or contradictory, the Court is unable to attach substantial weight to it" (*Sufi and Elmi v. the United Kingdom,* 28 June 2011, para. 233-234).

The weight of anonymised material in the assessment of applications was also analysed in another court decision, a July 2013 ruling of the England and Wales Court of Appeal (EWCA), *CM (Zimbabwe) v the Secretary of State for the Home Department.* Paragraph 17 states that "[t]here is no general rule at common law or inspired by the European Convention on Human Rights that uncorroborated anonymous material can never be relied on in a country guidance case or any other case". According to the ruling, the handling of anonymised sources depends on the specific circumstances of a particular case. However, the EWCA clearly acknowledged that in general, anonymity affects the weight given to a statement *(CM (Zimbabwe) v the Secretary of State for the Home Department*, 30 July 2013, para. 17).

To address this issue and compensate for the resulting loss of full transparency, the standard practice of COI units is to describe the source in as much detail as possible without revealing their identity (see e.g. EUAA, February 2023a, p. 15; CEDOCA, May 2022, p. 7; BFA Staatendokumentation, December 2020, p. 18; Landinfo, February 2015, pp. 9-10). Additionally, it might be helpful to describe the reason why the source wishes to be anonymised. Ultimately, the personal safety of the source must always be the primary concern.

In its COI report methodology EUAA stresses that when including statements by confidential sources it is particularly vital to "keep a detailed record of all sources and information gathered". This is in order to demonstrate the "integrity of the research process and the information obtained" in cases where the information is challenged (EUAA, February 2023a, p. 13).

There may be situations in the drafting process where an expert who wishes to remain confidential in relation to the statements made during an interview has, for example, also published a scientific article under their full name. If this article is also to be cited in the COI product, the problem arises that one and the same source must be referenced differently within the product. In general, using anonymised sources increases the risk of false corroboration.

Please note that rules differ from country to country regarding the treatment of confidential sources in court. In some countries, courts can demand to be informed about the identity of the source, while in other countries it is possible for the COI unit to retract the information to protect the anonymity of the source. In any case, it is a key principle to inform the source beforehand about the expected procedure, so that they are well-informed about potential consequences and can agree to a certain procedure under the given circumstances.

5.6.6 Pros and cons of remuneration of oral expert sources

When consulting experts the question may arise as to whether it is acceptable or appropriate for COI units to remunerate them for the time and effort they put into their contribution. Some theoretical and practical implications need to be considered in this regard.

In many situations, an expert will freely provide information and analysis. For instance, if you ask an expert for a brief interview or a short reply to an email, or if you interview a representative of an institution during a fact-finding mission, there is usually neither an expectation from the expert or the readiness from the COI unit for payment to take place. Most of the time, there is a common understanding that there will be no financial compensation for providing information.

[14] See e.g. EUAA, February 2023b, p. 160; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights and Council of Europe, 2020, pp. 118-119; EDAL, 22 November 2016, pp. 2-3

As a matter of principle, some COI units do not remunerate experts. They argue that payment may lead to the creation of a market for information in which experts deliver information even though they may not have access to it or may lack the level of expertise required. The IRB Research Directorate points out that experts may even "feel compelled to provide a certain point of view to justify the payment" (IRB, April 2020a, pp. 9-10). EUAA's COI Sector adopts a policy of non-payment for source interviews to avoid being perceived as compromising its impartiality.

However, there may be specific circumstances in which an expert expects to be rewarded financially, e.g. if the contribution demands a considerable amount of time or engagement which is not part of the expert's paid job, or if the expert makes their living by working as a freelancer (e.g. academic, journalist).

One argument for providing remuneration for freelance expert sources is the recognition of their time, knowledge, and expertise. Moreover, payment for requested services may create incentives for committed collaboration/engagement. Offering financial compensation may also allow access to highly qualified experts who would otherwise be unwilling or unable to invest their time and effort. Arguably, compensation helps ensure that not only those experts who can afford to "donate" their time are consulted. Thus, paying experts for their contribution can lead to enhanced quality and broaden access to information.

As discussed in section 4.2.1 on source assessment criteria, it is important to consider why an expert might be motivated to provide information. One motivation could be to contribute to knowledge creation or to fulfil the mandate of the institution they represent. A source may also be motivated by supporting the dissemination of information about a particular issue or a certain point of view. Another incentive could be to raise one's profile as an expert by being quoted in a particular context.

There are practical examples of COI units cooperating with expert sources on a contract basis, such as commissioning experts to contribute to COI products by drafting or reviewing and commenting or to speak at COI events (seminars, webinars, workshops). In such cases, it might enhance the product's transparency if it is indicated that an expert was commissioned to provide input.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

If paying for oral expert sources is an option within your unit, the following checklist may assist in guiding your decision.
- ▶ In view of the time and effort involved, does payment seem appropriate?
- ▶ Is the time and effort invested by the expert source covered/funded by other resources or institutions?
- ▶ Do the broader institutional policies/regulations permit payments to external experts? Is there a budget available?
- ▶ Are there logistical barriers regarding the mode of payment (e.g. bank transfer, Paypal, Patreon)? Are there restrictions on the international transfer of funds?
- ▶ Has it been clearly communicated to the expert that there is no pressure to deliver if efforts to obtain the information are unsuccessful, and that there is no preferred perspective or answer?

5.7 COI events: seminars, webinars and workshops

COI events such as seminars, webinars or workshops provide interactive formats for producing and gathering information. These event types typically vary in terms of their general objectives (e.g. explanatory background talk under Chatham House rules or generation of quotable new information) and the scope of the audience (non-public or public, for a specific target group or for all target groups). Moreover, COI events can be held face-to-face or as a webinar using online conferencing tools (e.g. MS Teams, Zoom, Skype). Conducting COI webinars online allows a larger number of people to participate regardless of their locations, but this mode of communication may yield lower participant interaction and information sharing than face-to-face contact.

Ideally, two or more experts with established reputations and different backgrounds are invited to present information and analysis on a well-defined topic to an audience of COI service providers and/or RSD practitioners. The presence of more than one expert allows for exchange, discussion, corroboration or contradiction of the information provided. However, events can also be planned around one expert.

Experts presenting at such COI events must be selected carefully and should be briefed thoroughly. The experts should be made fully aware of their role and the role of COI in the asylum procedure. The thematic priorities set for the experts depend on the background and the research priorities of each speaker. For example, a presentation by an academic expert can be complemented by information from a person who has worked for a local, regional or international organisation in the respective country. A journalist or scholar with a specialisation in the country or region in question can contribute observations that are different from those of a staff member of an international organisation. Ideally, the speakers will comment on each other's presentations, agreeing or challenging statements made by other experts and adding details from their own experience.

To meet the target group's information needs, collect questions and topics of interest in advance to share with the presenters so that they can prepare. It is helpful to notify presenters about the anticipated prior knowledge of the audience. The quality of a COI event depends on the experts' knowledge and experience, the ability of the facilitator to steer the discussion, and participants to ask relevant and meaningful questions. ACCORD's experience with organising COI seminars is that it can be beneficial to invite a mixed audience of both COI service providers and RSD practitioners. This allows decision-makers, legal representatives, as well as COI researchers to ask for the information they deem most relevant. Workshops for smaller, more homogeneous groups can also be very fruitful, for example, in explaining or contextualising developments. The EUAA, for instance, coordinates twelve COI country specialist networks where seminars/webinars are organised annually to hear from experts on current developments, share information such as FFM findings, inform the respective groups of COI country specialists and to promote cooperation, joint production, and networking within them.

The biggest strength of such COI events is that they give participants access to information that may not easily be found otherwise. Moreover, question and answer sessions allow for an exchange between the audience and the presenters, giving participants a chance to fill information gaps by focusing on specific issues. At the same time, COI events allow for individual research questions to be placed in a larger context.

For events which have the main objective to provide quotable new information on a certain topic, a written documentation should be shared with the speaker for authorisation. The information provided in the seminar can either be published as a seminar report, as part of thematic reports, or be included in COI query responses at a later stage. For explanatory background discussions under Chatham House rules, there is no publicly available follow-up documentation, as the event aims primarily at providing more in-depth context and encourage open discussion.

As speakers may have to invest a considerable amount of time into a COI event (preparation, travel time, seminar time, post-processing), offering remuneration for their efforts in addition to covering their expenses should be considered.

5.8 Fact-Finding Missions (FFMs)

Fact-finding missions (FFM) to a country of origin are a means to obtain information that is not accessible by other research methods. They also provide an opportunity to build contacts and identify potential sources, obtain documentary information that is available locally, observe processes and events, and to gain first-hand knowledge and insight into the relevant country or region. FFMs allow for COI researchers to visit locations such as IDP camps, which might provide useful context and a deeper understanding of the situation.

The team conducting an FFM usually travels to a country in order to interview informed persons or organisations about issues relevant to the RSD process. FFMs, which are mostly conducted by governmental COI units, often require the support of the respective diplomatic missions. In some cases, it may not be possible to conduct an FFM to the country of origin, e.g. due to security constraints. In such circumstances, an FFM to a neighbouring country which may host refugees and migrants from the country of interest or other relevant sources (e.g. persons from specific parties, ethnic or religious groups, activists or opposition figures) may be considered.

Conducting FFMs is the most resource-intensive form of gathering information and only viable after carefully weighing up the costs and expected benefits, including assessing likely security risks. FFMs need extensive preparation, may take several days or even weeks to do, and documenting the results is usually very time-consuming.

An important advantage of FFMs is that they give researchers the opportunity to collect information from primary and hard-to-reach sources, and to make direct contact with experts in the country of origin. Interviews can be conducted with participants or witnesses of events. During such face-to-face interviews trust with sources is likely to be established more quickly than through online contact.

Conducting such missions requires a certain level of expertise, skills, and experience from the FFM team members. Moreover, the quality of the information obtained during an FFM depends on (1) the methodology adopted during the mission, (2) the extent to which the information is recorded transparently, and (3) on the expertise of the chosen sources. All three aspects must be thoroughly examined and assessed when drafting and reviewing an FFM report. In general, information contained in FFM reports should be critically assessed, using the same standards that are used for other sources of COI. When weighing COI evidence, sources from FFM reports should not automatically be given more weight than information from other sources.

The EU common guidelines on (Joint) Fact Finding Missions were developed in the framework of the European Country of Origin Sponsorship (ECS) project and published in November 2010. These guidelines were created to assist EU Member States in organising (joint) fact-finding missions. They offer extensive guidance on the methodology and the practicalities of conducting such missions. The guidelines will be of interest to COI researchers in countries outside the EU as well. The most important aspects of the *EU common guidelines on (Joint) FFMs* are briefly outlined below. The guidelines are available at https://www.ecoi.net/en/blog/common-eu-guidelines-on-joint-fact-finding-missions-published.

Before going on a mission, terms of reference (ToR) should be developed. The ToR contain the general topics and issues that should be addressed during the FFM; they should be developed in cooperation with the persons and institutions whose information needs the FFM is meant to serve (EU common guidelines on (Joint) FFMs, November 2010, p. 9).

Cross-checking is part of the methodology of a high-quality FFM. Conducting interviews with a variety of sources to cross-check information is key to obtaining an accurate and balanced picture of a specific topic in the country of origin. FFM teams are recommended to "consult at least three different sources that are independent of each other on each main topic of the ToR" (EU common guidelines on (Joint) FFMs, November 2010, p. 11). FFM teams should take a critical approach "to test[ing] or validat[ing] information that the FFM Delegation is provided [with] during the course of a mission. Testing such information will ensure the team obtain[s] accurate, reliable and robust COI" (EU common guidelines on (Joint) FFMs, November 2010, p. 20).

As with all other sources, the assessment of sources interviewed during an FFM is essential. Sources interviewed by the FFM team usually have their own agenda; they may have a particular motivation for meeting and giving an interview, which should be taken into consideration (EU common guidelines on (Joint) FFMs, November 2010, p. 13). The criteria for source assessment given in chapter 4 of this manual should be applied both when conducting FFMs and when referring to an FFM report.

Neutrality of the interviewers is an important factor in determining the accuracy of the information gathered and reported. The EU Common Guidelines on (Joint) FFMs list possible risks which can undermine the integrity of the interview process and thus the trustworthiness of the information obtained through the interview. These risks include:

- Sponsorship influence: influence of "clients" of the FFM, who might prefer a certain outcome of the mission
- Team influence: the drawing of premature conclusions early in the FFM, which may undermine the impartiality of interviewers later in the mission
- Source influence: sources may become overly involved with the problems they are working on, and interviewers may start to identify with interviewees and fail to maintain a professional distance. This can result in the focus of the interview drifting away from the mission's ToR and towards the interviewee's own agenda (EU common guidelines on (Joint) FFMs, November 2010, p. 21).

In October 2012, Jens Weise Olesen and Jan Olsen from the Documentation and Research Division of the Danish Immigration Service published an article in the Irish Refugee Documentation Centre's online publication The Researcher. In this article, authors with extensive experience in conducting COI FFMs discuss aspects of FFM methodology, terms of references (ToR), the identification of sources, the impact of FFMs on procedures for international protection and the benefit of FFMs. The full article can be found at https://www.ecoi.net/site/assets/files/1918/rdc-the_researcher-vol7issue2.pdf.

Apart from the above article, there are no specific publications focusing on FFMs in the COI context. Beyond the field of COI, there are publications on human rights FFMs which might be of interest:
In 2015, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) published the following guidance and prcactice document:
OHCHR – Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: Commissions of Inquiry and Fact-finding Missions on International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law: Guidance and Practice, 2015
https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Publications/CoI_Guidance_and_Practice.pdf

The following publication on methodological considerations for Human Rights FFMs might also be of interest:

Orentlicher, Diane: International Norms in Human Rights Fact-Finding. In: The Transformation of Human Rights Fact-Finding (Eds: Alston, Philip / Knuckey, Sarah), 2016, pp. 501-524

https://academic.oup.com/book/27350/chapter-abstract/197110521?redirectedFrom=fulltext

5.9 Medical COI

Medical COI is information about the availability and accessibility of medical treatments in a country of origin. Such information may be required in protection cases where the applicant has a medical condition which may affect their ability to safely return to a country. The assessment of an applicant's health status and its impact on the applicant is governed by national law but is usually derived from international or regional law, such as the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has made several rulings on how a person's health and the (lack of) availability and accessibility of treatments and care may prevent their return to a country of origin because of a real risk of a breach of the ECHR, mainly in relation to Article 3 and, less frequently, Article 8 (ICMPD, February 2015, p. 12).

In some cases, medical considerations may lead to the granting of refugee status, for instance, if a sick person is denied medical treatments because of their ethnicity or religion, or if the medical condition was intentionally caused by security actors. In other cases, applicants may be granted complementary forms of international protection, for example subsidiary protection status according to the EU Qualification Directive; if medical treatments are not available because of civil war or outbreak of violence. In yet other cases, a person's medical condition and the available medical services in the country of origin may become relevant only once the person has been found not to be in need of international (refugee) protection, but the person's health status means that return to the country of origin would be in breach of the person's human rights. Note that in this regard only very severe conditions are taken into account which, without medications/therapy in the country of origin, could lead to a significant deterioration or even death within a relatively short period of time.

For more detailed information and judicial background regarding the so-called "severity threshold", see the 2016 ECtHR landmark ruling, Paposhvili v. Belgium:
https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre?i=001-169662https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre

In general, medical COI addresses the aspects of availability and accessibility of medications and/or a number of needed particular medical treatments in a specific country of origin:

▶ Availability refers to the existence of certain treatments or procedures and/or medications, and whether the latter are approved/licensed in a particular city of a given country (most, but not always, the capital). Availability of medicines requires information on whether certain medications are in stock, whether supply chains are stable or any interruptions of supply are known, including the timeline of these interruptions.

▶ Accessibility refers to the circumstances under which an individual can obtain treatments/medications, including economic (i.e. costs), geographical and non-discriminatory accessibility (i.e. are all groups able to obtain it?) (ICMPD, February 2015, p. 22).

The research tree method (as outlined in chapter 3) can help to better structure medical COI questions revolving around various aspects of availability and accessibility.

Medical information tends to be rather technical which might make it difficult for a non-medically trained researcher to understand. In some cases, interpretation of medical information may even require the assistance of medical experts, especially for queries concerning individual medical cases. Moreover, there are a number of additional challenges when dealing with medical information:

▶ The information obtained tends to be very case-specific – relating to a particular condition in a patient with a specific age, gender and health profile – and may not be relevant to other cases.
▶ The information may also be of short-term validity because of, for example, rapid fluctuations in the availability of certain medicines.
▶ The variety of sources used for inquiries is often rather limited, therefore cross-checking information is difficult.

The following sources provide general information on medical issues:
• A country's ministry of health or other government agency
• National lists of licensed drugs/essential drugs
• International Drug Names Database
  http://www.drugs.com/international
• World Health Organization (WHO) country reports
  https://www.who.int/countries
• WHO Mental Health Atlas country profiles
  https://www.who.int/teams/mental-health-and-substance-use/data-research/mental-health-atlas
• National support groups for people affected by specific diseases
• Medical journals, retrievable e.g. via PubMed
  https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov

The European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) offers European national migration authorities access to their MedCOI services. MedCOI provides users with medical COI obtained by a network of medical experts in the countries of origin, and desk research by medical advisors and research experts. MedCOI also maintains a database of completed medical COI responses and publishes medical COI country reports. Only specially trained EUAA and EU+ country administration staff have access to the database (EUAA, n.d (c)).

5.10 Cross-checking information

This section introduces the meaning and purpose of cross-checking information and discusses practical considerations regarding techniques, challenges, and mistakes. Reflections on the importance of cross-checking conclude the section.

5.10.1 Meaning and purpose of cross-checking

In the context of COI research, the term "cross-checking" is used to describe the technique of comparing and contrasting information from different sources and different types of sources, highlighting similarities, differences, and contradictions and making them visible in research products.

In its 2004 paper on COI, UNHCR underlined the importance of an objective and transparent COI system for decision-makers, and emphasised the significance of comparing and contrasting information:

> "The underlying philosophy is to facilitate access to a wide range of opinions and information in an objective way. By comparing and contrasting information from a variety of different sources, decision-makers are assisted in forming an unbiased picture of prevailing conditions in countries of concern." (UNHCR, February 2004, para. 5)

EUAA also stresses the importance of cross-checking information in its COI Report Methodology, (EUAA, February 2023a, pp. 16-17).

The process of cross-checking is an essential step in COI research. When information is corroborated by different sources, you can be more confident about its accuracy. When cross-checking information from one source does not lead to corroboration, but to contradiction, it becomes particularly important to assess the reliability of sources and attach weight to them on the basis of this source assessment. Knowing how to cross-check information is therefore a key skill for anybody dealing with COI.

Cross-checking is the main instrument for achieving accuracy and currency. It includes different aspects:

Corroborating – verify the accuracy of information by checking different sources
Relying on a single source is problematic. The more sources you have, which provide the same information independently from each other, the greater the chances that the information is accurate.

We suggest corroborating all information which is central to the question by using three different sources and different types of sources that independently provide information on the issue such as an UN report, international or local human rights organisation, international or local media, or an expert opinion. In practice corroboration will not always be possible nor relevant in some cases. If no corroborating information could be found, this should be indicated. It might also be useful to indicate where you have looked for corroborating information.

Balancing – introduce different perspectives by using diverse types of sources
Using different types of sources helps to counteract the potential biases of each source, and to build up a balanced research result. A source may contain highly relevant information, but the information may be distorted because of the bias of the source, or it may be inaccurate because of flaws in the methodology used by the source to obtain the information.

Updating – ensure information at hand is current
It is important that COI reflects an event or a situation as it stands at the time of researching. Sources with a reliable but quick information turnaround are often particularly useful for issues which are unfolding as you research. Some institutions, however, employ a long clearance procedure which improves the quality of their reports, but may lead to substantial delays in publication. When using such sources, the complementary use of other sources, including media reports or press releases, is important to ensure that you have the most up-to-date information.

Specifying – complement general information with specific details
In COI research we need both a general understanding of the situation plus detailed information on certain events. For example, information drawn from an annual human rights report can provide contextual information but might be less useful when it comes to specific events. Complement general reports with specific details obtained from, for example, media articles or reports produced by local organisations.

5.10.2 Practical considerations regarding cross-checking

Cross-checking techniques

The technique of cross-checking includes the following elements:

▶ Use a variety of sources and look for different types of sources (international/local, government/ non-governmental, human rights reports, the media, academic sources, advocacy organisations, etc.). Try to find three sources, if possible using different types of sources that independently provide information on the same topic. When combining sources, strive for diversity and variety and look for sources which will potentially reflect diverse perspectives.

▶ Whenever useful and possible, try to quote primary sources directly; when secondary sources are used, include a reference to the primary source.

▶ Assess the reliability of each source you are not yet familiar with by conducting a source assessment (see section 4.1.3).

▶ Compare and contrast the information found; focus on details that stand out and on possible discrepancies between reports by different sources.

▶ Combine general and specific information; evaluate whether this produces a consistent or contradictory picture of the situation.

▶ Cross-check statements made by sources which were assessed to be dubious with special care. Try to find out if the same or similar information can be found in sources that qualify as more reliable COI sources.

Cross-checking challenges

When talking about corroboration we talk about the ideal – but not always realistic – situation in which information can be substantiated by various sources. The following challenges can occur when cross-checking information:

Scarcity of information:
If it was not possible to corroborate a piece of information, this fact should be explicitly pointed out and, if possible, a reason should be provided (e.g. lack of access, repression against media, censorship). For users, it is important to know that the information has been derived from a single source. This is particularly important when the only source of information is a dubious source.

Overload of information:
Some topics are so well-documented that a wealth of corroborating information is available. In such circumstances, it is neither possible nor necessary to list all the sources that contain relevant information. In such instances, make sure to select different types of sources, including primary sources, and take care to avoid false corroboration and roundtripping (see below).

Contradictory or inconsistent information:
Contradictions should be explicitly pointed out. Note that in such circumstances, it is not up to the COI service provider to privilege information provided by one particular source or to exclude information provided by certain sources. In many cases the contradictory information is provided by different sources, each of which have their strengths and weaknesses and none of which can be assessed as fully reliable or fully unreliable. In such circumstances, it is important to include the contradictory information from different (types of) sources and to draw attention to the inconsistencies. A short description for each source is advisable, including on how the source obtained the information. This will help the RSD practitioners to assess the information.

Corroboration of sources assessed as dubious sources:
When confronted with information from questionable sources, cross-checking is of utmost importance. However, sometimes even information from a dubious source might be better than no information at all. Include a short description of the source and point out its shortcomings.

Corroboration of an expert's statements:
Information provided by experts also needs to be cross-checked. As experts are usually consulted in situations where written COI is scarce, cross-checking by interviewing other experts might be necessary.

Cross-checking mistakes – "round-tripping" and "false corroboration"

When trying to cross-check a piece of information, "round-tripping" and "false corroboration" are common pitfalls. To avoid them, be aware of who or what the primary source is and consult the source that first reported the information whenever possible.

Round-tripping:
We speak of "round-tripping" if a source refers to a secondary source rather than to the primary source or the source that first documented the information. This may lead to information getting distorted or lost, or giving a false impression of currency or authorship. To avoid round-tripping, always try to base your research on a large variety of sources that have first-hand information.

The *Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information* mention the following example of round-tripping:

> "An April 2004 UK Home Office report quotes a section of a report produced by the Danish Immigration Service, which was itself based on some information obtained from a report by the Canadian IRB, which in turn referred to information provided by an earlier (October 2003) UK Home Office Report." (Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information, April 2008, p. 8)

In that example, even the 2003 UK Home Office report is not the primary source but is itself quoting from another source. Thus, it becomes impossible for the reader to grasp who made a particular statement and when.

False corroboration:
In many cases, a piece of information can be found in several sources. If, however, all these sources obtained the information from the same source, an impression of corroboration may arise where in fact there is none.

For example, the US State Department reports on an event based on a report by Human Rights Watch. Corroborating the information provided by the US State Department with a media report that also took all information on the event from Human Rights Watch is worthless, as both base their information on the same primary source. If a source does not state where the information comes from, it can be difficult to identify false corroboration.

5.10.3 Concluding reflections on the importance of cross-checking information

▶ There is no source without bias. Therefore, COI research should avoid relying on only one source. Using information from different types of sources allows for the inclusion of different perspectives.

▶ There is no fixed hierarchy of sources. However, different evidentiary weight will be given to sources as regards their importance for the question at hand and depending on the results of a source assessment.

▶ When the process of cross-checking information produces contradictory or inconsistent information, such contradictions or inconsistencies should be addressed. This information should not be omitted just for the sake of making your product seem more consistent.

5.11 Evaluation of the research process and knowing when to stop

One of the central problems for everyone conducting COI research is the question of when to stop. The vastness of the internet makes it difficult to determine the moment when research has yielded sufficient results, or when to acknowledge that research has been unsuccessful and is unlikely to produce results by investing more time.

This manual suggests two ways of dealing with this problem:

▶ The use of a well-conceived research strategy
▶ Clear organisational guidelines setting out the maximum time which should be spent for one research task

As outlined in section 5.1, a research strategy is a systematic and planned approach to research. It consists of defining the central question(s) of a case; reflecting on the avenues that exist to answer those questions, reflecting on the tools that seem most promising to find relevant information efficiently, devising search terms or preparing interview questions and selecting information from the results without losing sight of the central question. A strategy helps the researcher to approach the question in a structured and systematic manner and helps to decide when the research process is complete. Once you have worked through your research strategy, terminating the research process is justifiable.

Before closing a research session, consider the following questions:

▶ Did you answer the question?
▶ Did you check all sources that monitor and regularly report on the research issue at hand?
▶ Did you consult useful databases, archives and specialised sources?
▶ Did you vary search terms and adapt them to the research purpose?
▶ Did you consider different types of sources?
▶ Did you assess the sources used?
▶ Did you thoroughly cross-check the information?
▶ Did you consult experts and ask them relevant and specific questions?
▶ Did you collect all data necessary for proper referencing?

A research strategy must leave room for flexibility and at times it may need to be refocused. In general, it does not spare us from the difficulties inherent to research. But in cases where there is an abundance of information, it helps us not to get lost in details, to stay on target and to avoid information overload.

A well-designed research strategy can help us to decide when to stop even in cases where no information could be found. Since it is not easy to accept that no information is available, it is often tempting to spend excessive amounts of time and energy trying to find at least some information.

In such cases it helps to work through your research strategy as outlined above. Document each stage thoroughly so it is transparent what work you have carried out. The statement of the asylum-seeker constitutes core evidence in an asylum claim and can stand alone if no further evidence (including COI) is found. It should always be made clear to RSD practitioners that the absence of information does not necessarily equate to the event or violation not having occurred and may depend on the information context (e.g. a country with free media and an active civil society versus a country where freedom of expression is restrained). Consider crafting a disclaimer phrase to indicate a lack of information on a particular aspect of your research question, or a lack of corroboration when information on an important event or subject is limited.

Both in cases of overload and scarcity of information, management of time is essential. Setting a limit on the maximum amount of time that can be spent conducting research on one topic helps the researcher find a balance between the time and resources spent and the quality achieved. COI research is often undertaken in an environment with limited resources and under considerable time pressure. COI researchers do not have the luxury of turning every question into a PhD thesis. A successful research strategy should set out at the beginning what can realistically be achieved within the available timeframe.

5.12 Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the COI research context

Artificial Intelligence (AI) applications have evolved in leaps and bounds in recent years.[15] By mid-2023, so-called "generative (language) models" (such as ChatGPT, Bard or LLaMA) accelerated interest in AI among the general public. As generative AI can process and analyse large amounts of information, it has potential to be a useful tool for COI research and a discussion of its possibilities and limitations is necessary. Such a discussion needs to include the methodological implications of using generative AI and the challenges COI researchers might face due to AI-generated misinformation.

As of January 2024, generative models had already outpaced human performance in some regards. The advantages of speed, efficiency, consistency (or reduction of inconsistencies), and adaptability (called "scalability" in the IT context) are particularly worth mentioning regarding generative models' handling of large amounts of data or written information.

The ongoing advancements in AI are expected to have a great impact on various human working environments, including changes to search engines and the economic incentives for content creation.

> **! NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY**
>
> The term "generative models" or "generative AI" includes Large Language Models (LLMs) and refers to a subset of AI that generates content akin to content produced by humans through text, images, videos, or sounds. These AI models are built on so-called deep learning, a particular method for processing information, where artificial neural networks are used to analyse large datasets.

[15] Please note that the field of Artificial Intelligence is rapidly evolving. The discussion presented here reflects the status quo as of January 2024, but may become outdated rapidly.

The integration of generative models into the field of COI research presents a promising avenue for enhancing the capabilities of COI service providers. Although the exact timeline and extent of its integration remain uncertain, it is conceivable that AI may assist COI service providers in various areas, including source description and evaluation, topic-specific source lists, expert identification, translation of information, the generation of search terms, document summarisation, finding or developing new tools assisting research, cross-checking efforts, and handling quantitative data. Additionally, AI can potentially assist in the presentation of research results through paraphrasing, summarising, synthesising, and proofreading. However, the realisation of these possibilities in the COI domain is contingent on numerous factors, and the practical application of AI remains an evolving landscape.

5.12.1 The issue of AI "hallucination"

While generative AI tools can create and analyse large amounts of data within seconds, they are also prone to errors or biases that need to be identified and corrected. Generative AI models access vast amounts of data held in a wide information repository, yet this repository does not exclusively consist of verified information nor is it exhaustive. Therefore, text-based generative models run the risk of providing flawed or factually incorrect answers (see e.g. Marr, 22 March 2023; Heikkilä, 20 December 2022).

It is important to note that text-based generative models such as ChatGPT are designed to deliver human-like text adapted to the specifics of the user's prompt. To achieve this, these models use a statistical model predicting the next word, sentence, or paragraph based on probability and context. Due to the large size of the source data, compression is necessary, resulting in a loss of fidelity and a "fuzziness" in the final model. As a result, the model is more likely to produce plausible statements rather than truthful ones; crucially, ChatGPT and other generative models have no ability to evaluate the veracity of their own output (Hillier, 20 February 2023). The term used for this problem is "AI hallucination".

AI hallucination and the above-mentioned "fuzziness" certainly raise issues regarding the accuracy of the models' output and their trustworthiness. In this context, reference lists fabricated (or "hallucinated") by the freely available version of ChatGPT (based on model GPT-3) serve as a useful illustration, as ChatGPT creates fictitious references from quite realistic components (e.g. real author names from the respective field, plausible publication years, titles composed of words of titles from similar articles already published), which makes these fictitious references strikingly convincing (see e.g. Hillier, 20 February 2023; Moran, 6 April 2023).

With the introduction of GPT-4, the problem of hallucinations is reportedly reduced. However, OpenAI (the company behind ChatGPT) still warns its users, "Great care should be taken when using language model outputs, particularly in high-stakes contexts, with the exact protocol (such as human review, grounding with additional context, or avoiding high-stakes uses altogether) matching the needs of a specific use-case." (The Guardian, 14 March 2023). As of January 2024, none of the available generative models can rule out the possibility of hallucinations.

5.12.2 The need for interpretation and human supervision

In high-stakes contexts, which include COI research, generative language models thus require human supervision for nuanced interpretation, contextualisation, and validation. Human expertise and critical analysis are also necessary to fully account for cultural nuances and ethical implications of AI implementation, such as potential biases in algorithms as well as the lack of transparency and accountability of algorithmic decision-making within such models (see e.g. The Conversation, 7 April 2023).

Moreover, the intriguing human-like results of generative AI models should be distinguished from actual comprehension. To give some examples, image-generating AI has difficulties correctly interpreting prepositions in prompts; text-based AI tends to struggle with abstracting the chronology of events in a text (Engler, 21 February 2023).

5.12.3 The issue of misinformation spreading on the internet

In the context of COI research, it is not only essential to consider the possibilities and limitations of using AI but, more importantly, to reflect on the challenges that these new advances in AI technology bring to the day-to-day workflows of COI researchers. With generative AI systems, it has become easy to produce large amounts of misleading content, misinformation, and spam that distort the information we consume.

There is no limit to the range of topics covered by AI-generated content (including natural disasters, terrorist attacks, violence against politicians, war, etc.) nor the format in which such content is presented (ranging from newspaper article-like text to photorealistic images, video footage, or sound recordings). Whatever its format, this new technology significantly increases the risk of being confronted with misinformation, rendering fact-checking, evaluating sources, and corroboration even more crucial but also more complex. Misinformation in the form of images, sound recordings and videos, in particular, raises serious concerns about the well-established link between „seeing/hearing with one's own eyes/ears" and trusting or believing in information. Therefore it is all the more important to keep an eye on the development of AI; on verification and validation of content generated by it as well as on source assessment and corroboration in general.

5.12.4 Practical takeaways for the use of generative language models in COI research

When integrating tools based on generative language models, the following points need to be considered:

▶ As of January 2024, generative language models proved useful in terms of their support and time saving capabilities, but were not suitable for tasks requiring factual knowledge or fact checking.

▶ The wording of prompts (so-called "prompt engineering") is crucial when using prompt-based AI. It is important to provide context and clearly state the objective of the task within each prompt. You may need multiple prompts, or refine the wording of your prompts, to obtain suitable results.

▶ In terms of confidentiality and the potential impact on personal data, AI-powered tools may bear risks regarding inadvertently exposing sensitive data. This, however, may generally apply for any cloud-based application.

5.13 Summary of chapter 5

✔ Using a systematic research strategy helps to conduct COI research in a methodical manner and it helps to produce accurate and current research results. A well-designed research strategy also helps to determine when to stop even in cases where no information can be found.

✔ Make sure the question being considered is clear before starting the research process.

✔ Try to identify primary sources and trace information back to its origin as far as possible.

✔ Do not ignore contradictory information.

✔ Cross-checking is the main technique to obtain accuracy and currency. It is achieved by comparing and contrasting information from different sources and different types of sources. Cross-checking includes the aspects of corroborating, balancing, updating and specifying.

✔ Information that is central to the question being asked should be corroborated by using, if possible, three different sources that independently provide information on the research issue at hand.

✔ Take special care to cross-check statements made by dubious sources.

✔ Avoid common cross-checking mistakes such as round-tripping and false corroboration.

PRACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

Decide which pathways to relevant information you want to use: online research, oral sources, or other materials.

When researching online:

▶ develop and use search terms according to your research strategy

▶ select documents from a list of search results by considering source, title, publication date and highlighted search terms

▶ search within a document by using keywords, by taking a look at the table of contents or by skimming through the text

▶ keep an overview of search results by saving your search results and by using bookmarks

6 PRESENTATION

Our tour through the research process is nearly complete. Readers of this manual have learned how to ask relevant research questions, how to find and assess COI sources, and how to conduct COI research effectively. Now that the research is completed, it is time to take the last step: to present, in a transparent way, the information included in a COI product and to employ quality control mechanisms.

Content of chapter 6

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Having engaged with this chapter, readers will be able to

» ensure transparency when presenting research results
» differentiate between quoting, paraphrasing, summarising and synthesising
» use appropriate language and avoid the distortion of information

Note: RSD practitioners who do not compile COI products may want to skip sections 6.3 and 6.5 of this chapter.

6.1 Techniques of presenting COI

In section 2.1.4, the standard of transparency was described as comprising the aspects of clarity and traceability. Clarity refers to a clear structure and concise language. Traceability requires information to be referenced. Both aspects determine the presentation of information in a COI product.

The question of how to present research results has different implications for RSD practitioners and COI service providers:

For COI service providers, meeting the information needs of their clients is key. They should strive to find an optimal format which meets the needs of their clients and is in compliance with COI quality standards. It is useful to talk to clients to establish their needs and to develop a (written) feedback system to help improve products. Typical products of COI units are responses to individual or specific queries, country or thematic reports, information packages, and compilations.

RSD practitioners have to integrate COI as evidence into asylum decisions (both at first instance and, where relevant, on appeal). They have to distinguish between the collection of evidence and the assessment of evidence (legal interpretation of this information which is then used to inform an argument on an individual case or general situation).

This section provides different techniques researchers can use when presenting information collected during COI research. These techniques differ in regard to their distance from the original: for example, text may be quoted word for word, the main points may be summarised or only the main idea may be provided. In the four techniques presented below, i.e. citing, paraphrasing, summarising and synthesising, the distance between the original text and the text included in the COI product gets progressively larger. These techniques are also progressively more time-consuming and sophisticated as the list continues.

> Note: to make the examples below easier to read, we have retained the citation style of the COI unit from which the citation originates and not used the citation style of this manual.

CITING

Description of technique	Formal requirements	Example
Citing (or quoting) is used to convey exactly what a source has said, using the source's own words. Citation is especially useful if there is a risk of distorting the original meaning/wording of the source when rephrasing the information. There is no distance from the original as long as the citation or quote is not taken out of context in a distorting way.	Make sure that the beginning and the end of the text are clearly visible (e.g. using quotation marks and/or indentation) and that references are complete. Readers should be able to go to the source and easily check where the quote was taken from. Only cite information which is relevant. If a citation contains obvious mistakes, you can use the term "[sic]" to indicate that the mistake is part of the quoted text. If you want to add explanations or comments, or omit text within a quote, do so in a discernible way. Often square brackets [ ] are used for this purpose. Square brackets may also be used to adapt the text to its new circumstance, such as changing "you must…" to "[the applicant] must…".	The Country Policy and Information Team of the UK Home Office quotes Human Rights Watch in a report on Myanmar: The HRW report of 24 August 2022, noted 'The junta has imposed new movement restrictions and aid blockages on Rohingya camps and villages, increasing water scarcity and food shortages, along with disease and malnutrition.'[87] [87] HRW, '<u>Myanmar: No Justice, No Freedom for Rohingya 5 Years On</u>', 24 August 2022 **Example taken from:** UK Home Office: Country Policy and Information Note Myanmar: Rohingya (including Rohingya in Bangladesh) [Version 3.0], June 2023, p. 32 <u>https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2094788/MMR_CPIN_Rohingya_including_Rohingya_in_Bangladesh.pdf</u>

PARAPHRASING

Description of technique	Formal requirements	Example
Paraphrasing is the reproduction of content using your own wording while maintaining the original meaning of the text. If done well, paraphrasing gives a thorough account of the content of the original text, often making it clearer and simpler. The distance from the original text is slight.	When paraphrasing text passages, it is important to ensure that the paraphrased version is faithful to the meaning of the original text and that the source is mentioned in the text. The reader must always be able to determine where the paraphrasing ends and where the author's own statements begin. Reproducing the meaning of a text in another language is a specific form of paraphrasing.	In a query response on Sudan, Landinfo paraphrased information retrieved from a local news article: On 25 November 2015, the passport authorities stopped extending the validity of previous handwritten passport types (Sudan Tribune 2015). **Example taken from:** Landinfo: Sudan – Civil Registration, Identity Documents and Passports, 3 March 2023, p. 19 https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2091073/Report-Sudan-Civil-Registration-ID-documents-and-passports-03032023.pdf

SUMMARISING

Description of technique	Formal requirements	Example
Summarising is presenting the core or substance of a piece of text or quote from one source in a condensed form. This technique is applied when you have found relevant information in a text that is too long and detailed to cite or paraphrase. Formulations which draw the reader's attention to the main topic are widely used when introducing summaries: *Report XY describes/deals with/focuses on …* As aspects considered less important can be left out, the distance from the original text can be considerable.	When summarising make sure that the summary is faithful to the original. Be aware that any summary involves reduction and interpretation. Present the aspects of a text that are central to the COI question at hand and strive for neutrality.	In a report on Haiti, ACCORD summarised an article by the InSight Crime foundation: InSight Crime points at recent attacks by rural gangs such as Kokorat san ras and Baz Gran Grif in the Artibonite department. According to the organisation, the gangs' activities in these important agricultural regions negatively affect food production and increase the risk of a hunger crisis (InSight Crime, 27 February 2023). **Example taken from:** ACCORD – Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation: Haiti – COI Compilation, April 2023, p. 28 https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2091510/ACCORD_Haiti_April+2023.pdf

SYNTHESISING		
Description of technique	**Formal requirements**	**Example**
Synthesising is presenting information from different sources in a condensed manner, summing up information that makes similar statements and comparing and contrasting contradictory parts. Synthesising is furthest away from the original text.	Avoid inaccuracies and oversimplifications, and false corroboration caused by quoting several sources that themselves refer to the same primary source. Note that faithfully reflecting information from different sources and putting them in relation to each other requires advanced drafting skills.	In a report on Somalia, the EUAA synthesises information from several sources: At the end of the reference period the military offensive was confronted with a number of challenges, including: - The ability of the government's security forces to keep hold of the territories and towns liberated from Al-Shabaab[151] [151] VOA, Somali Army Dislodges Al-Shabab From Key Stronghold, 6 December 2022, url; Houreld, K., Uprising by Somali clans puts al-Qaeda-linked militants on the defensive, The Washington Post, 14 December 2022, url; Sahan, The Somali Wire, Issue no. 456, 26 September 2022, source requiring registration, p. 1; Sahan, The Somali Wire, Issue no. 482, 30 November 2022, source requiring registration, p. 1; Sahan, The Somali Wire, Issue no. 487, 14 December 2022, source requiring registration, p. 1; Weiss, C., Shabaab continues to lose ground in central Somalia, Long War Journal, 27 September 2022, url Example taken from: EUAA – European Union Agency for Asylum: Somalia; Security situation, February 2023, p. 26 https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2087507/2023_02_EUAA_COI_Report_Somalia_Security_situation.pdf

The different techniques offer distinct advantages and disadvantages. Considering the extremes: citing is straightforward and quick to do, minimises the risk of distortion and ensures a high degree of traceability but can lead to long products that are not easily readable and contain extraneous information. Meanwhile, synthesising contributes to clarity, readability, and, in many cases, user-friendliness of the text but its production is time-consuming and may lead to a loss of nuance and the distortion of meaning. The use of each technique requires considering its respective advantages and disadvantages. Whichever technique is used, the information in the COI product must always be traceable and accurate, and the text must always be readable. With this in mind, COI providers must be wary of skewing or oversimplifying information for the sake of readability. It is likely that a COI product will usually include all four of the above techniques which may not always be clearly distinguishable from one another. Whichever technique is used, complete references to all sources used for every piece of information must be included.

6.1.1 Style and language

How COI is presented is important as indication of the product's quality and ensuring that it meets users' needs.

Stay neutral and check your language for potential bias or distortion
COI research must be presented neutrally, drafters should not comment on the research results, draw their own conclusions, or express judgements or opinions. Avoid appraisal of, or commentary on, the

information, which could influence the reader. It may however be appropriate to provide background about the source to help readers assess what weight to attach to the information. Be especially careful to avoid language that suggests a legal assessment. When summarising information, avoid judgemental expressions and be careful when adopting the labels (e.g. "massacre", "terrorists") used by others.

> ### EXAMPLE
>
> The Research Directorate of the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) gives some examples of such expressions and how to deal with them in its responses to information requests (RIR):
>
> "Personal judgement and opinions include the use of phrases such as [...] 'the only guarantee,' 'the government is clearly,' 'there is no doubt,' 'it is obvious,' 'it seems that,' 'it is likely that,' 'apparently' and so on. Use the analysis provided by your sources, clearly indicating where you have done so. Sources from the public domain are defensible because they can be corroborated. However, they are not infallible and your RIR should reflect this by indicating, for example, that 'the government *reportedly* undertook certain steps,' 'X was *alleged* to be the mastermind behind the hold-up,' 'it is *reported* that,' and so on." (IRB, April 2020b, p. 5)

When paraphrasing, summarising or synthesising be precise about quantities, making sure to accurately reflect what the source(s) stated. For example, if a source says, "many Christians", this should not be paraphrased as "most Christians". If a source reports "12 people were killed", it should neither be paraphrased as "a few were killed", nor as "many were killed".

Be focused and avoid information overload
Query responses by COI service providers should always answer the RSD practitioner's question(s) as precisely as possible. Reports and query responses may vary in length, depending on the questions being asked as well as on the amount of information available to the researcher. COI products should avoid including irrelevant information. However, COI researchers may find that determining relevance is not always clear-cut, as many issues are interconnected.

Arrange information in a way that makes it easy for the reader to understand
COI products should be logically organised and ideas fully developed. Depending on the topic, facts should be presented in order of their (thematic) importance, from the general to the specific (or vice-versa), or chronologically.

The IRB states the following:
> "Good organization reveals a hierarchy of information—the most important points and the supporting details. It also indicates how pieces of information relate, as in a cause–effect relationship, a temporal (chronological) one, or a spatial one." (IRB, April 2020b, p. 5)

Introduction of sources in the text
Readers of COI products will not know all sources referred to. Indicating the type of source (governmental, non-governmental, etc.) and a short introduction to sources that are used infrequently can be helpful. Such additional information can be provided using footnotes.

EXAMPLE 1

According to information provided by the Honduran organisation Cattrachas, a lesbian feminist organisation defending the human rights of LGBTI persons, [...]

Example taken from:
ACCORD – Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation: Honduras: Gang-based violence, criminality and human rights violations against specific groups, December 2022
https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2083691/ACCORD-Honduras-Gang+Violence-December+2022.pdf

EXAMPLE 2

The Florida International University's Center for the Administration of Justice (CAJ), whose researchers specialize in fields such as criminal justice, policing and public policy (CAJ n.d.a), indicates that [...]

Example taken from:
IRB – Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada: Chile: State protection authorities, including whether protection is available from the Office of the Prosecutor General (Ministerio Público) [also translated as Public Ministry or Public Prosecutor's Office] or criminal courts directly; effectiveness of state authorities in investigating crimes, laying charges, obtaining convictions, and protecting citizens (2021–April 2023) [CHL200952.E], 10 June 2023
https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2093155.html

If you have to introduce a dubious source, indicate its problematic aspects and document unsuccessful attempts to find more information on the issue. See section 4.3 for more information on dubious sources.

Make cross-checking visible
Cross-checking is one of the most important methods for testing information and ensuring a high-quality product. It is also important to explain what has been done to cross-check information. You can do this by:
- Including different kinds of sources that provide information on a given research issue.
- Stating clearly which source provided what information.
- Stating where sources corroborate or contradict each other.
- Stating where corroboration was not possible.
- Stating where no information was found and letting the reader know about your efforts. Do not imply that, for instance, the person, place or group in question does not exist or that an event did not happen simply because you were not able to find relevant information in the sources you consulted.
- In case no information or only information from dubious sources was found, document which sources were consulted on the issue (see also section 6.3.2).

EXAMPLE

Sources corroborating each other

A local source told Landinfo that many Sudanese do not have an ID card, as it is expensive to obtain. Instead, they use other official documents containing their national identity number for identification purposes (Source A 2022). Source B (2023) also underlined that the national identity number is more important than the ID card. People use other official documents containing the national identity number on it, such as for example the Civil registration certificate. Sources quoted in the reports of IRB (2013) and UK Home Office (2018) corroborate that, in practice, it is not strictly required to have a national ID card.

Example taken from:
Landinfo: Sudan - Civil Registration, Identity Documents and Passports, 3 March 2023
https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2091073/Report-Sudan-Civil-Registration-ID-documents-and-passports-03032023.pdf

EXAMPLE

No corroborating information found

Among those civil society movements, the same source mentioned various organizations that were behind the Petro Karibe movement, including the Nou pap dòmi, as well as the case of the Konbit, which brings together a variety of social-purpose organizations and political parties on the left of the political spectrum (Project Officer 2023-01-22). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Example taken from:
IRB – Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada: Haiti: The situation of political parties and the treatment of political opponents, including by criminal groups (2021–January 2023) [HTI201333.FE], 16 February 2023
https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2088004.html

EXAMPLE

Contradictory information found

In contrast to InSight Crime's hierarchical distinction between these two groups [InSight Crime/ASJ, 21 April 2016, pp. 16-18], USAID describes banderas (also referred to as punteros) and other collaborators such as tracas and mulas (tasked with transporting drugs and running errands) as being on the same level with paisas (USAID, November 2020, p. 24).

Example taken from:
ACCORD – Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation: Honduras: Gang-based violence, criminality and human rights violations against specific groups, December 2022
https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2083691/ACCORD-Honduras-Gang+Violence-December+2022.pdf

No information found

The local media outlet RUDAW reported in April 2022, however, that the KRG was planning to open three specialised hospitals to treat women with "chronic" mental health issues in the three governorates of KRI. At the time of drafting this report (February 2023), no information is found about the implementation of the plan.

Example taken from:
DIS – Danish Immigration Service / DRC – Danish Refugee Council: Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI); Issues regarding single women, documents and illegal exit, March 2023
https://us.dk/media/10578/report_kurdistan-region-of-iraq-issues-regarding-single-women-documents-and-exit_tilgaengelig.pdf

Which variant of a specific language should be used?
Non-native speakers should be aware that the spelling and use of a particular language may vary from one part of the world to another (e.g. differences between American and British English). When drafting a COI product choose one version and use it consistently.

How to refer to countries?
ACCORD suggests using the latest version of official country names according to United Nations (UN) terminology for the six official UN languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, Spanish):
https://unstats.un.org/unsd/ungegn

If you are unsure of a country's name, the UN Multilingual Terminology Database is a useful resource for checking updated country names: http://unterm.un.org.

For further territorial references, including the names of disputed areas, refer to UNHCR's style companion:
https://www.unhcr.org/it/wp-content/uploads/sites/97/2021/08/4.UNHCR_Style_Companion_2019.pdf

For non-UN languages, it might be useful to check whether reference lists for country names are provided by the respective Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

How to transliterate names from non-Latin scripts?
Choose a transliteration system and strive for consistency.

The online resource http://transliteration.eki.ee supported by the Institute of the Estonian Language provides transliteration tables for many languages, e.g. Arabic, Bengali, Georgian, Hindi, Mongolian, Russian.

EXAMPLE

Complete consistency might not be achievable. The transcription of the Arabic word الجزيرة in English is "Al Jazeera", while in German it would actually read "Al-Dschasira". However, even German media use the transcription "Al Jazeera".

Should names of political parties and groups be translated?
There is no general rule on whether names of political parties and groups should be translated into the language of the COI product. A useful guide is how the domestic media of the COI researcher's country refer to a specific party or group.

> ## EXAMPLE
>
> The Arabic party name حزب الله (Hizbollah) can be translated into English as the "Party of God". This is not widely used as translating the name does not add clarity in the context of COI.
>
> On the other hand, the Russian Коммунистическая партия Российской Федерации (КПРФ) (transliteration: Kommunisticheskaya Partiya Rossiyskoy Federatsii, KPRF) is frequently translated both in English (Communist Party of the Russian Federation) and in German (Kommunistische Partei der Russischen Föderation). In this case, using the translation is advisable.

Using automatic translation tools
Online translation tools (such as DeepL or Google Translate) have improved greatly in recent years, often providing accurate output in a wide range of languages and making them very useful for COI research. As automatic translations can still be prone to errors, it is advisable to use more than one translation tool and check the translated text thoroughly. If in doubt, do not use the automatic translation and get a translation from a qualified translator.

When using online translation it is important to clearly indicate that certain parts of the COI product are based on translations created by automatic translation tools. You can do this by using a disclaimer (see section 6.3). Wherever possible, it is best to have a translation revision done by a person who speaks both languages in order to verify the accuracy of the translation.

6.1.2 Presentation of non-text formats

All COI standards for written text also apply to non-text materials (e.g. pictures, recordings of expert interviews, audio files or videos). When research results contain non-text formats, in most cases the information will need to be transcribed or described. Describe in detail what can be seen in the video you wish to refer to. Turn audio material into text format by either transcribing it verbatim or by paraphrasing it. Non-text material needs to be referenced just like text, with links to the primary source. Where a transcript has been obtained, append it to the report or keep a copy and make this available on request. When you cite such materials, it may be useful to provide the exact timestamp of the section you are citing.

You may want to include a picture or map in your text to illustrate the facts you describe. When doing so, make sure the picture or map used corresponds with the content of the text. It should be relevant to the question at hand and originate from a reliable source. Remember that such material may be staged, taken out of their original context or manipulated. For maps, be aware of the possibility of disputed borders, and if necessary, add a disclaimer addressing this issue.

As with text, when using illustrations created by others, you should always make full references to the source and comply with all copyright requirements. Consider providing a separate list of figures when using several pictures, maps or tables.

6.1.3 Avoiding distortions

It is important to carefully review the text you produce in order to avoid the distortion of information. Potential pitfalls are listed below:

Lack of context
Usually, information can only be correctly interpreted when put into its situational context, especially to explain a more complex matter. Context will allow users to assess what weight to attach to the source material. For example, it may help to be aware of potential bias in the source, limits in the information or why it might be inconsistent with other sources.

Presenting an opinion as a fact
It is essential not to mix factual information with expressions of opinion. When quoting an expert's analysis or commentary, make sure to indicate it as such and to ascribe it to the expert.

Ignoring information for the sake of consistency
Be aware of a natural tendency to ignore information that does not fit into your understanding of the factual situation in the country concerned, or even contradicts the information you have already collected. Strive to provide a complete and balanced picture of the situation at hand, drawing on a wide range of (reliable) sources in order to answer the question. Remember to also reflect the different points of view which you have come across and point out contradictions.

Inappropriate use of quoting, paraphrasing, summarising, and synthesising
It is important to always show the reader whether you are writing in your own words or reproducing somebody else's statement. Carefully use the techniques of quoting, paraphrasing, summarising, and synthesising, and mark text passages correctly (see section 6.1). The beginning and the end of direct quotes should be clearly marked (with quotation marks or indentation).

6.2 Referencing

Referencing is a standardised method to show which information comes from which source. Referencing allows readers to trace the sources used and consult them directly. Furthermore, it acknowledges the source and thus helps to respect copyright and intellectual property rights. Referencing is key to transparency.

Make sure that you always clearly indicate the source from which information was obtained. Every piece of information needs to be referenced completely and correctly. A clear and consistent referencing system is essential, irrespective of how COI is presented.

6.2.1 Metadata needed for correct referencing

Regardless of the referencing method (see section 6.2.2) you should collect the following details for all of the sources used for each piece of information to obtain an accurate record of what you have researched:

- ▶ Name of the source (author and/or institution)
- ▶ Title of the publication
- ▶ Date of the publication (additionally, if applicable, period covered)
- ▶ Page(s), paragraph(s) or section heading of the specific piece of information
- ▶ Internet link (URL), preferably with date of access

For some materials, additional information about the source should be referenced: For instance, provide the name of the journal, title of the article, volume number when citing journal articles. For audio or video material, it is advisable to provide timestamps.

Regarding the name of the source, make sure to attribute the information correctly (see section 4.1.1 on primary and secondary sources). The reader must be able to identify where the information originated and where you obtained it. The same applies to citation of media archives or other databases. Make sure you reference the original publisher.

> ### EXAMPLE
>
> Jane's Information Group: Sentinel Security Assessment – North Africa Somalia – Security, 18 September 2020, cited in: UK Home Office: Country Policy and Information Note Somalia: security and humanitarian situation in Mogadishu [Version 1.0], May 2022, pp. 37-38
> https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2073775/SOM_CPIN_Security_and_humanitarian_situation_in_Mogadishu.pdf

Regarding the date of publication, you might be confronted with undated content. For example, webpages are often undated or do not specify when they were last updated. You may look for the most recent source cited or the latest entry in the undated document to estimate its date. You can then use this fact when introducing the source in your text. When citing an undated source, indicate this by stating "undated" or by using the abbreviation "n.d." (for "no date").

> ### EXAMPLE
>
> UNRWA – United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East: Sbeineh Camp, n.d.
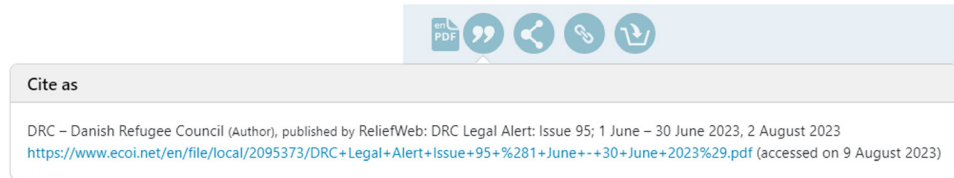> https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/syria/sbeineh-camp (accessed 30 August 2023)

6.2.2 Referencing styles

Depending on the academic tradition of your country, there are various referencing styles. The two most commonly used referencing systems are the Oxford (using footnotes) and the Harvard (using in-text citations within round brackets) style. It does not matter which style is used, as long as it is applied consistently throughout the document.

Examples of referencing styles using footnotes and in-text citations by COI units are described below:

Using footnotes
Footnotes can either contain the full bibliographic information (author, title, date, page, URL, and date accessed) or less detailed short references (author, date, page). In the latter case, it is necessary to provide a complete bibliography with all cited sources at the end of the text. In some cases, endnotes are used instead of footnotes. Endnotes are included at the end of the document or at the end of each section rather than at the bottom of each page. Using endnotes makes it more difficult for the reader to locate the references and is therefore not advisable.

EXAMPLE

Vietnam Human Rights Networks annual report for 2021-2022 noted that: 'The constant surveillance and stalking of dissidents increased on special occasions such as visits by foreign delegations, Party Congress, National Assembly elections, and dissidents' trials...[48]

[48] Vietnam Human Rights Network 'Report on Human Rights in Vietnam 2021-2022', 24 June 2022

Example taken from:
UK Home Office: Country Policy and Information Note Vietnam: Opposition to the State [Version 4.0], August 2023
https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2096847/VNM_CPIN_Opposition_to_state.pdf

Using in-text citation

References are provided directly in the text. They can precede or follow the piece of information referenced. This reference usually consists of the name of the source, the publication date and the page number. When using in-text citation, a complete bibliography at the end of the text is required.

> ## EXAMPLE
>
> Al Jazeera reports in October 2022 that protests continue over the ongoing economic crisis and the "brutal suppression of previous demonstrations" by president Ranil Wickremsinghe who was elected into office by the parliament in July 2022 and shortly afterwards declared a state of emergency, "which granted sweeping powers to the military and resulted in a series of crackdowns on protesters, with several protest leaders arrested" (Al Jazeera, 27 October 2022).
>
> At the end of this query response, the reference list includes the following corresponding entry:
>
> Al Jazeera: Protests in Sri Lanka over economic crisis and police brutality, 27 October 2022
> https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/10/27/protests-in-sri-lanka-over-economic-crisisand-police-brutality
>
> **Example taken from:**
> ACCORD – Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation: Sri Lanka: Situation of Tamils who participated in past protests; Query Response [a-12075-2], 10 February 2023
> https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2086810/a-12075-2.pdf

Whichever referencing style is selected, it should always indicate where the information was taken from and present this meta-information in a clear and traceable way.

6.2.3 Referencing oral sources

For information collected from oral sources, whether in the course of fact-finding missions, in telephone interviews or via email, full referencing is necessary.

> ## EXAMPLE
>
> Hansen, S.J., Online interview, 6 January 2023; Dr Stig Jarle Hansen is Professor at the Institute for International Environmental and Development Studies, Noragric, Norwegian University of Life Sciences.
>
> **Example taken from:**
> EUAA – European Union Agency for Asylum: Somalia; Security situation, February 2023
> https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2087507/2023_02_EUAA_COI_Report_Somalia_Security_situation.pdf

For additional information on referencing confidential sources, see section 5.6.5.

6.2.4 Referencing user-generated content from social media

State the social media platform where the information was found and make sure the reader is able to understand where the information came from.

> ### EXAMPLE
>
> In a footnote, EUAA references X (Twitter) posts and provides additional information about the source. The note reads:
>
> > M.Mubarak, [Twitter], posted on 17 November 2022(a), url; M.Mubarak, [Twitter], posted on 17 November 2022(b), url. Mohamed Mubarak is a political and security analyst based in Mogadishu. He is the founder of anticorruption NGO Marqaati (Marqaati.org).
>
> **Example taken from:**
> EUAA – European Union Agency for Asylum: Somalia: Defection, desertion and disengagement from Al-Shabaab, February 2023
> https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2086343/2023_02_EUAA_COI_Report_Somalia_Defection_desertion_disengagement_Al_Shabaab.pdf

6.2.5 Bibliography (list of references)

To ensure transparency, full bibliographic information on all sources referenced in the text must be provided within the product. If not already included in the foot- or endnotes, a complete list of references in alphabetical order (by source name) must be provided at the end of the product.

Many formats are possible for a bibliography. It does not matter which one is applied, as long as the format used includes the requisite information – source, document title, date, weblink and access date – and is consistently applied.

> ### EXAMPLE
>
> ACCORD uses the following general format for referencing sources in the list of references:
>
> Abbreviation of source – full name of source: title of publication, date internet link (access date)
>
> - TNH – The New Humanitarian: In Burundi, returning refugees face mixe fortunes, 14 June 2023
>   https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2023/06/14/burundi-returning-refugees-face-mixed-fortunes (accessed 30 August 2023)

The bibliography includes only those sources actually referred to in the text. Some COI products offer a list of "further reading" or "additional sources consulted" in addition to the bibliography.

The following is an example of a list of references at the end of a Response to Information Request published by the IRB:

EXAMPLE

References

Angola. 2020. *Lei n.o 39/20 de 11 de Novembro*. Excerpts translated by the Translation Bureau, Public Services and Procurement Canada. [Accessed 2023-06-21]

United States (US). 2023-03-20. Department of State. *"Angola." Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2022.* [Accessed 2023-06-23]

Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Angola – Forças Armadas Angolanas, Ministério do Interior, Polícia Nacional de Angola, Tribunal Constitucional; Associação OMUNGA; law firms based in Angola (4); Legis Palop Angola; Ordem dos Advogados de Angola.

Internet sites, including: Africa Defense Forum; African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights; Africanews; Amnesty International; Angola – Forças Armadas Angolanas, Ministério do Interior, Polícia Nacional de Angola, Serviço de Investigação Criminal, Tribunal Constitucional; Associação OMUNGA; Associação para Desenvolvimento da Cultura e Direitos Humanos; Australia – Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade; Belgium – Commissariat général aux réfugiés et aux apatrides; defenceWeb; Denmark – Danish Immigration Service; *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; EU – EU Agency for Asylum; France – Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides; Global Voices; Human Rights Watch; International Bar Association; INTERPOL; *Jornal de Angola*; Legis-PALOP+TL; New York University – Hauser Global Law School Program; Norway – Landinfo; Ordem dos Advogados de Angola; Portal de Angola; Thomson Reuters – Practical Law; Transparency International; UK – Home Office; UN – Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights; US – CIA, Embassy to Angola and São Tomé and Príncipe, Library of Congress, Overseas Security Advisory Council, US Africa Command.

Example taken from:

IRB – Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada: Angola: Documents issued by the Angola National Police (Polícia Nacional de Angola, PNA) and security services, including wanted notices, arrest warrants, and notices to appear; content, appearance, and security features; issuance procedures; samples (2021–June 2023) [AGO201526.E], 30 June 2023
https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2095426.html

In its section *Additional Sources Consulted,* the Research Directorate of the IRB lists oral sources that were contacted but did not provide any information, as well as websites consulted but not quoted in the research product. Such a list of (additionally) consulted sources at the end of the document makes the process in which research was conducted more transparent and enables readers to assess the scope and limitations of the COI product.

ACCORD, on the other hand, does not mention all sources consulted in a separate section. However, in cases where no or limited information on the topic could be found, ACCORD mentions the databases, search engines and search terms used.

6.3 Structure and examples of COI products

The following text elements are often found in query responses by COI units:

> **Short title summing up the main aspects of the query** (including the country and file number of the query response for internal documentation purposes)
> _____
>
> **Date** of publication
> _____
>
> **Disclaimer** delimiting the scope of the document (see below for details)
> _____
>
> **Text body** containing the research findings
> _____
>
> **Bibliography** or **list of references** listing all written and oral sources included in the document (with links and dates of access)

Depending on the requirements of the target groups, you might want to attach the materials used for a response. In such cases, you should list the attachments as part of the response.

Even though COI products comprise most elements mentioned above, they vary in style and structure, as the following examples of query responses illustrate.

6.3.1 Examples of query responses and reports

For examples of different styles of COI query responses see:

- ACCORD – Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation: An-fragebeantwortung zu Syrien: Detailfragen zum Vorgehen der syrischen Grenzbehörden bei der Einreise eines registrierten Reservisten nach mehrjährigem Auslandsaufenthalt [Query response on Syria: Questions on border guard procedures upon entry of a registered reservist] [a-12132-2], 14 June 2023
  https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2094281.html
- Asylos: Kenya: Treatment of Homosexual Men and their Relatives, May 2023
  https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2092639/final_edited_kenya_-_afr2022-25_pdf.pdf
- BFA Staatendokumentation: Anfragebeantwortung der Staatendokumentation zu Nicaragua: Demonstrationen 2019, Korruption, „Männer in Schwarz" [Query response of Staatendokumenta-tion on Nicaragua: Demonstrations 2019, corruption, „men in black"], 26 June 2023
  https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2094008/NICA_ALL_Korruption_Demonstrationen_M%C3%A4nner_in_schwarz_KE.odt
- DIDR – Division de l'information, de la documentation et des recherches (OFPRA): Turquie : Ven-detta et conflits familiaux dans la province de Şanlıurfa [Türkiye: Vendetta and family conflicts in Şanlıurfa province], 24 March 2023
  https://www.ofpra.gouv.fr/libraries/pdf.js/web/viewer.html?file=/sites/default/files/ofpra_flora/2303_tur_vendetta_et_conflits_familiaux_sanliurfa_158224_web.pdf
- EUAA – European Union Agency for Asylum: Democratic Republic of the Congo; Treatment of the Banyamulenge by society and the state in North Kivu and Kinshasa; state protection available [Q31-2023], 31 August 2023
  https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2096805/2023_08_EUAA_COI_Query_Response_Q31_DRC_Treatment_of_Banyamulenge_North_Kivu_and_Kinshasa.pdf
- IRB – Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada: China: Monitoring of Chinese citizens outside of China, including Falun Gong (Falun Dafa) practitioners, by Chinese authorities; consequences upon return to China (2020–September 2022) [CHN201173.E], 12 October 2022
  https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2081240.html
- Landinfo – Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre: Sudan: Tilgang til pass etter krigsut-bruddet i april 2023 [Access to passports after the outbreak of war in April 2023], 4 July 2023
  https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2094928/Sudan-respons-Tilgang-til-pass-etter-krigsutbruddet-i-april-2023-04072023.pdf
- SFH – Schweizerische Flüchtlingshilfe: Myanmar: Mitglieder der People's Defence Force, 26 May 2023
  https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2093391/230526_MM_Members_of_PDF.pdf

COI reports comprise the same text elements as query responses and often contain additional elements like a table of contents, a list of abbreviations, remarks on methodology or annexes. For examples of different styles of COI reports see:

Examples for fact-finding mission reports:

- DIS – Danish Immigration Service: Syria: Military recruitment in Hasakah Governorate, June 2022
  https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2075255/syria_fmm_rappport_military_recruitment_hasakah_governorate_june2022.pdf

- Finnish Immigration Service: Somalia: Tiedonhankintamatka Mogadishuun maaliskuussa 2020, Mogadishun turvallisuustilanne ja humanitääriset olosuhteet [Fact-finding trip to Mogadishu in March 2020, security situation and humanitarian conditions in Mogadishu], 7 August 2020 https://migri.fi/documents/5202425/5914056/Somalia+FFM+raportti+maaliskuu+2020.pdf/f58d6cd5-271a-55fd-9b89-b3d32e4ff80b/Somalia+FFM+raportti+maaliskuu+2020.pdf?t=1596797440011

Examples for reports with substantial input provided by experts through interviews:

- Asylos: Lebanon: Stateless Palestinians, March 2023 https://www.asylos.eu/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=8b037676-765d-4906-80a6-563ad17faa2a
- EUAA – European Union Agency for Asylum: Somalia: Defection, desertion and disengagement from Al-Shabaab, February 2023 https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2086343/2023_02_EUAA_COI_Report_Somalia_Defection_desertion_disengagement_Al_Shabaab.pdf

6.3.2 Disclaimer

A disclaimer describes the scope and limits of a product. It expressly mentions the circumstances under which the product was created, its purposes and limitations. According to the *Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information*, a disclaimer is:

"a written statement append[ed] to a document in order to 1. limit under certain conditions the responsibility for the possible lack of exhaustiveness or for certain (side) effects of the use of the information contained in a document and/or to 2. limit the right of use of that document to a copyright or to a certain circle of clients." (Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information, April 2008, p. 32)

Examples of disclaimers and the topics covered:

TEXTS OF DISCLAIMERS

EUAA	IRB	ACCORD
This response to a COI query has been elaborated according to the EUAA COI Report Methodology and EUAA Writing and Referencing Guide. Query responses are produced in response to COI information requests received from asylum authorities within EU+ countries or initiated by EUAA based on COI information needs. Query responses are produced within a limited time period, typically within 5 to 10 days. Within these time constraints, the information provided in this response has been researched, evaluated and processed with utmost care. All sources used are referenced and cited in the bibliography section. A quality review has been performed in line with the above mentioned COI methodology. This document does not claim to be exhaustive or conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to international protection. If a certain event, person or organisation is not mentioned in the report, this does not mean that the event has not taken place or that the person or organisation does not exist. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position. The information in the response does not necessarily reflect the opinion of EUAA and makes no political statement whatsoever. The target audience is caseworkers, COI researchers, policy makers, and decision-making authorities. Any event taking place after the reference period is not included in this query response. (EUAA, August 2023)	This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request. (IRB, 21 July 2023)	This document was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to ACCORD as well as information provided by experts within time constraints and in accordance with ACCORD's methodological standards and the Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information (COI). This document is not and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status, asylum or other form of international protection. We recommend to directly refer to original materials used in this product. Original language quotations are provided for reference in the document or upon request. (ACCORD, August 2023)

Topics covered:
Remark on methodology (product was drafted in accordance with COI standards)
Sources used
Remark concerning time constraints
Delimitations concerning the scope of the product
Remarks on the use of the product
Reference to the list of sources consulted
Remark concerning non-English information

In some cases, it might be necessary to include a more specific disclaimer alerting the reader/user to certain research challenges faced. For example, when integrating user-generated information from social media in your COI products, you can indicate this explicitly in a disclaimer. Further uses for disclaimers might be, among others:

▶ to explain that online translation tools were used to translate content from a language not spoken by the researcher, or
▶ to indicate that the fact that no information was found should not be interpreted to mean that the issue at the core of the COI question does not exist or did not happen.

6.4 Internal documentation

In order to ensure transparency and to be able to retrieve the information used, consistent documentation and archiving is indispensable. Copies of all source material integrated into a COI product, an asylum decision, or an appeal decision should be stored in your internal documentation system to ensure that access to the information will be possible in the future. Websites may change over time or might be taken offline. If it is not possible to locally save a pdf version of a document or a website, you can save screenshots instead. Notes or transcripts of interviews held with oral sources should be filed and made internally accessible.

Beyond ensuring the retrievability of information for the RSD practitioner, it may be necessary for COI units to put the COI product onto an internal database / documentation system. This ensures that it can be easily found and resupplied to clients if needed. Consistent documentation is also a prerequisite for quality control as well as for the retrieval and reuse of information that has already been collected.

A documentation system / database should fulfil the following criteria:

- ▶ Clarity on what exactly needs to be documented
- ▶ Consistency in the documentation process
- ▶ Retrievability of the information
- ▶ Reusability of the information

EXAMPLE

ACCORD's internal documentation

An internal database for query responses is used to ensure an overview of the queries and their processing status. This database includes the following parameters:

- · Number of request/case (file number)
- · Country/region
- · Topic
- · Date of request
- · Name of client
- · Deadline
- · Date of response
- · Name of researcher
- · Information related to the query type
- · Additional statistical information
- · Name of person responsible for quality control
- · Information related to communication with clients or experts

Copyright permitting, copies of all material used in a query response or report are stored together with the response in a file system organised by country.

6.5 Quality control in COI units

Well-defined quality standards form the foundation for ensuring the quality of COI products. Formalised guidelines for the research process and for the presentation of COI help to maintain these quality standards and support their application. They can further assist individual researchers with the evaluation of their work even when time is limited.

Peer review and evaluation by team supervisors are important mechanisms for upholding or enhancing the quality of COI products. The guidelines for the research process should correspond with the evaluation criteria used by potential reviewers in order to ensure effective quality management.

Internal quality control can be organised as peer review or carried out by a senior researcher, the manager or by a quality control or editing division of the COI unit. It is important to decide how often quality control will be carried out and what will be evaluated. Depending on the resources available, quality control can be carried out for every single COI product, for randomly sampled COI products, or only in especially complex cases. It is also possible to evaluate only parts of the research and presentation process, e.g. checking the sources used, checking the research strategy, checking the style of presentation, etc.

External quality control can be undertaken by professional evaluators. Whether you opt for external evaluation will depend on the organisational structure and principles of your institution. Feedback by clients can be obtained through informal (meetings) or formal (questionnaires) evaluations and is useful in order to ensure that the work of the COI unit meets the needs of its clients.

Additionally, the publication of COI products can also contribute to quality assurance. It allows public scrutiny of your products, which may generate direct or indirect feedback.

This section introduces examples for quality control mechanisms in COI units based on peer review, proofreading and external quality control.

6.5.1 Examples for peer review and proofreading

> ## EXAMPLE
>
> **Research Directorate of the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB)**
>
> Responses to Information Requests (RIR) are researched and drafted by a Research Analyst (RA) and then reviewed by a Research Specialist (RS) to check the text from the reader's perspective. The RS determines whether the topic has been adequately addressed, and checks the text for clarity, consistency, and impartiality. The RS does not rewrite the text, but provides corrections and suggestions, which are then implemented by the RA. The RIR is then forwarded to the internal editing unit, where an editor fact-checks every sentence, evaluates each source and suggests additional information or sources, if necessary. These suggestions are then either implemented by the RA or discussed with the editor to find a solution. After this process, the RIR is proofread by an editor.

EXAMPLE

ACCORD

All query responses and reports undergo peer review. Due to limited resources, additional research in the course of peer review is undertaken only in exceptional cases; quality control focuses on formal aspects:

▶ Has the question been answered? Is too much/too little context or background information included?

▶ Is the product easy to comprehend? Does it have a clear structure and layout? Has the question been reflected correctly in the title? Are grammar and spelling correct?

▶ Are the summaries and translations correct, is the synthesising accurate? Is the information in any way distorted? Is the language used neutral?

▶ Are citation rules applied correctly? Is every piece of information referenced? Are all sources included in the bibliography?

▶ Was a disclaimer added where required, for example if no or only little information could be found?

The researcher in charge of the query response decides whether a suggestion made by the colleague who did the quality control will be integrated into the research product.

6.5.2 Example for external quality control

EXAMPLE

European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA)

Prior to publication, EUAA reports undergo a peer review process carried out by COI researchers at the EUAA, at national member states' COI units and sometimes additionally by external experts. External experts "are selected on the basis of their proven expertise in COI methodology, knowledge of the country of origin or specific topics. Such experts may include NGOs, academics, and international bodies" (EUAA, February 2023a, p. 27). Furthermore, EUAA reports undergo internal quality review processes by the COI Sector editorial board and management.

All reviewers are required to adhere to the *EUAA Rules for Review of COI Reports and Review Checklist* and provide feedback on the report in accordance with the *EUAA Country of Origin (COI) Report Methodology.* Reviewers do not modify or authorise the content of the report but enhance the report's quality by providing comments on any content or quality matters, by checking sources, and suggesting additional information. All reviewer comments need to be considered; however, the drafters decide whether to accept comments and suggested changes (EUAA, February 2023a, p. 27).

6.6 Summary of chapter 6

✔ Each piece of information must be fully referenced and must be retrievable in both a COI product and a decision.

✔ Information can be presented in a research product or in a decision by quoting, paraphrasing, summarising, or synthesising.

✔ When paraphrasing, summarising, or synthesising, use neutral language, check expressions for potential bias and avoid distortions of the text.

✔ Do not mix factual information with expressions of opinion. When quoting an expert's analysis or commentary, make sure to mark it as such and to ascribe it to the expert.

✔ Do not ignore information for the sake of consistency just because it does not fit into your understanding of the situation in the country concerned, or even contradicts the information you have already collected.

✔ Information from non-text material such as audio files, images or videos needs to be transcribed or described.

✔ Copies of all source material integrated into a COI product or an asylum decision should be stored in an internal documentation system.

✔ There are different models of quality control within COI units based on peer review, proofreading and external quality control.

PRACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

▶ Arrange information in a way that makes it easy to understand for the reader; use headings and sub-headings; structure the text in a logical manner.
▶ Use a disclaimer to inform the reader of the scope and the limitations of the product.
▶ Make corroboration of information visible, as well as any contradictions.
▶ Make cross-checking visible to the reader; point out where corroboration was not possible.
▶ Point out where no information was found and let the reader know about your efforts.
▶ Provide a short introduction for sources that are not well-known.
▶ When a dubious source is included, indicate the problematic aspects in the short description of the source.
▶ If the information found is solely based on dubious sources, document unsuccessful attempts to find more information on the issue.

APPENDIX A: INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Researching country of origin information (COI) is closely connected to the international legal framework on the rights of refugees and other persons in need of international protection. Those who engage in COI research should thus be equipped to understand the different steps of their work in light of relevant international law.

However, COI service providers do not necessarily have a professional background in international refugee or human rights law. Therefore, the following introduction offers a basic overview of selected international law documents. Domestic law, although similarly relevant for COI research, is beyond this manual's scope.

This manual is not a legal course. Several institutes offer introductions on international refugee law or international human rights law, including online courses and distance-learning courses. In addition, the literature listed in the manual's bibliography can be consulted.

Content of Appendix A

A.1 Introduction

A.2 Protection of refugees
    A.2.1   The 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol
             relating to the Status of Refugees
    A.2.2   Regional refugee protection

A.3 Complementary forms of international protection
    A.3.1   Subsidiary protection in the EU
    A.3.2   Non-refoulement obligations in international human rights instruments
    A.3.3   Non-refoulement obligations in regional instruments

A.1 Introduction

The body of international law on the rights and obligations related to refugees and other persons in need of international protection is multifaceted and fragmented. It draws on a variety of sources from different areas of law and geographical and organisational contexts.

International refugee law governs the status of a particular category of individuals, namely those no longer protected by their country of origin. The 1951 Refugee Convention is the central instrument of refugee protection at the international level, containing criteria for qualification as a refugee and related rights and obligations of the contracting states. Furthermore, there are instruments of regional scope which similarly address the status of refugees.

Individuals can also receive protection beyond the refugee law framework. Such protection is mainly based on instruments of international human rights law. It is often referred to as complementary protection.

In addition, on 19 September 2016, all 193 Member States of the United Nations unanimously adopted the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, which sets out the key elements of a comprehensive refugee response framework (CRRF). The New York Declaration was followed in 2018 by the adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.

A core principle of both international refugee and human rights law is the obligation of non-refoulement. It protects individuals from removal to a country or territory where they may face serious violations of their rights.

"Asylum" denotes the protection a country provides to refugees. Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides that everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.

A.2 Protection of refugees

A.2.1 The 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees

The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951 Refugee Convention) is the cornerstone of the international refugee protection regime. It defines who is a refugee, the rights and duties of refugees, and the obligations of states.

The Convention was originally limited in its temporal scope to events occurring before 1 January 1951, while signatory states could elect to limit the geographic scope to events in Europe. Many states removed these limitations through the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees (hereafter 1967 Protocol).

The 1951 Refugee Convention provides for a supervisory role of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and requires states to cooperate with it.

The Convention is interpreted according to the principles established in Article 31 of the 1969 Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, namely "in good faith in accordance with the ordinary meaning to be given to the terms of the Treaty in their context and in the light of its object and purpose." Amongst others, the UNHCR's published positions, including its Handbook on Procedures and Criteria For Determining Refugee Status and Guidelines on International Protection, can be consulted as an aid to understanding the Convention.

The texts of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol are available at:
http://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.html

A list of States parties is available at:
https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetailsII.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=V-2&chapter=5&Temp=mtdsg2&clang=_en, and, for the Protocol, at:
https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=V-5&chapter=5&clang=_en

The UNHCR's Handbook on Procedures and Criteria For Determining Refugee Status and Guidelines on International Protection are available at: https://www.refworld.org/docid/5cb474b27.html

Definition of "refugee"

Article 1 A (2) of the 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as a person who

> "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence [...], is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it."

This definition comprises a single holistic test that can be broken down into different elements: 1. outside the country of origin; 2. well-founded fear; 3. persecution; 4. nexus to race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion; and 5. failure of state protection.

Section A.2.1 of this appendix addresses the notion of "persecution". For further details on other elements particularly relevant in the COI context, namely the nexus to persecution grounds and the failure of state protection, see chapter 3 of this manual.

Non-refoulement

Among the many rights and obligations contained in the Convention is the principle of non-refoulement in Article 33 – often considered the most fundamental obligation under international refugee law. It essentially entails that refugees must not be removed to a place where their lives or freedom would be threatened on account of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

The prohibition of refoulement also implies that a state must not send an individual to a country from where he or she would be at risk of further removal to another country where there is a risk of serious harm ("chain refoulement"). The protection against refoulement applies before formal recognition of refugee status. Thus, individuals should not be removed before the conclusion of respective procedures.

While the Convention excludes from this principle those who can be considered a danger to the security or community, international human rights law provides an absolute non-refoulement principle that applies to all individuals, including those who cannot be considered refugees.

Cessation and exclusion

Individuals can cease to be refugees for six reasons defined in Article 1 C of the Convention: 1. by voluntarily re-availing themselves of the protection of the country of nationality; 2. by voluntarily re-acquiring a lost nationality; 3. by acquiring a new nationality and enjoying that country's protection; 4. by voluntarily re-establishing residence in the country where persecution was feared; 5. if they can no longer continue to refuse to avail themselves of the protection of the country of nationality because the circumstances in connexion with which they have been recognised as refugees have ceased to exist; and, 6. if, in the case of stateless persons, they can return to the country of habitual residence, again, because the circumstances in connexion with which they have been recognised as refugees have ceased to exist.

The two latter reasons relating to "ceased circumstances" are particularly relevant for COI research. Note, however, that individuals continue to be refugees if they can invoke "compelling reasons arising out of previous persecution" for refusing to avail themselves of the protection of the country of nationality or, in the case of stateless persons, to return to the country of former habitual residence.

While these provisions ("cessation clauses") refer to situations in which someone is no longer a refugee, the "exclusion clauses" in Articles 1 D, 1 E and 1 F place persons outside the protection of the 1951 Refugee Convention.

According to Article 1 F, the Convention does not apply to those with respect to whom there are "serious reasons for considering that" they committed "a crime against peace, a war crime, or a crime against humanity", "a serious non-political crime outside the country of refuge prior to admission to that country as a refugee"; or they have been "guilty of acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations."

Furthermore, Article 1 D stipulates that the Convention shall not apply to those who are "at present receiving" protection or assistance from organs or agencies of the United Nations other than UNHCR (1951 Refugee Convention, Article 1 D). At present, Article 1 D applies to Palestinian refugees, for whom the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East ("UNRWA") was established in order to respond to their situation. However, the second paragraph of Article 1 D operates as an inclusion paragraph, and provides that once UNRWA's protection or assistance has ceased, those very same Palestinian refugees are entitled ipso facto to the benefits of the 1951 Convention. As refugees already recognised by the international community, no separate or additional assessment under Article 1 A(2) is required for them to qualify for Convention protection. Claimants need only demonstrate that they fall within the terms of Article 1 D (UNHCR, February 2019, p. 240 [Guidelines on International Protection No. 13, 20 September 2017, para. 1-3]).

Persecution

As noted above, the notion of (well-founded fear of) persecution is a key element of the 1951 Refugee Convention's refugee definition. Beyond the critical role that the statements of individuals and their credibility play in assessing well-founded fear of persecution, refugee status determination also includes the evaluation of the risk of persecution upon return to the country of origin based on available COI.

The Convention does not explicitly specify the meaning of persecution, and different jurisdictions interpret it with a degree of variance. However, there is agreement in practice and scholarship that persecution involves serious violations of generally accepted human rights norms. In addition, forms of harm that may not in themselves be serious enough to amount to persecution may reach the required threshold when they are combined with other adverse factors. For example, different forms of discrimination may reach the threshold of persecution on a cumulative basis.

It follows that knowledge of international human rights law is crucial for determining refugee status. Therefore, primary international human rights instruments will be briefly introduced in the following.

Although not legally binding, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) embodies the essence of human rights and provides the basis for other documents. Many rights articulated in the UDHR were subsequently included in the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Together, these three documents constitute the so-called International Bill of Rights.

Further treaties on more specific issues complement the International Bill of Rights. They are the 1965 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the 1984 Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (ICRMW), the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), and the 2006 International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPED).

Regional human rights instruments may also be relevant for identifying persecution. These include the American Convention on Human Rights (ACHR), the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (ACH-PR), and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

Some of the human rights established by these documents are considered "non-derogable", meaning that they must be upheld even in time of war or emergency. These include the right to life; the prohibition of torture, or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; the prohibition of slavery and servitude; the prohibition of imprisonment due to an inability to fulfil a contractual obligation; freedom from retroactive criminal laws; the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law; and the freedom of thought, conscience and religion. In contrast, where a lawful state of emergency exists, non-securement of derogable rights may not necessarily constitute persecution if the adopted measures are strictly required by the exigencies of the situation (UNHCR, February 2019, p. 222 [Guidelines on International Protection No. 12, 2 December 2016, para. 16]).

International and regional human rights treaties have established bodies to supervise state compliance. The practice of these bodies, including their general comments or case-law, contribute to clarifying the meaning of the treaty.

A.2.2 Regional refugee protection

Beyond the 1951 Refugee Convention, instruments and systems of regional scope govern the status of refugees, particularly in Africa, Latin America and Europe.

Africa

The Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa from 1969 (hereafter 1969 OAU Refugee Convention) was established by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), the predecessor of the African Union (AU). It is binding on the 46 Member States of the AU that have ratified it so far (August 2023).

Article I (1) of the Convention defines a refugee in the same terms as the 1951 Refugee Convention. However, Article I (2) expands the definition to those who flee "owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality".

The 1969 OAU Refugee Convention, according to its Article I (4), ceases to be applicable if, among other reasons, a refugee "has committed a serious non-political crime outside his country of refuge after his admission to that country as a refugee", or "has seriously infringed the purposes and objectives of this Convention". Regarding exclusion clauses, Article I (5) of the Convention is practically identical to Article 1 F of the 1951 Refugee Convention.

Unlike the 1951 Refugee Convention, the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention provides an absolute prohibition of refoulement.

The 1969 OAU Refugee Convention and a list of States that have ratified is available at:
https://treaties.un.org/pages/showDetails.aspx?objid=080000028010432f

Americas

In the Americas, the Caracas Convention on Territorial Asylum affirmed the principle of asylum in already in 1954. Later, the 1985 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees was adopted. In its Conclusion 3, the Declaration states that it is necessary to consider enlarging the concept of a refugee to those "who have fled their country because their lives, safety or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order."

While the declaration itself is legally non-binding, many Latin American countries have incorporated the principles of the Cartagena Declaration – including its definition of a refugee – into their national legislation.

The Caracas Convention on Territorial Asylum is available at:
https://www.oas.org/juridico/english/treaties/a-47.html

The Cartagena Declaration on Refugees is available at:
https://www.oas.org/dil/1984_cartagena_declaration_on_refugees.pdf

Europe

In the European Union, the relevant instrument is the so-called EU Qualification Directive (2011/95/EU). Article 2 (d) follows the definition of a refugee of the 1951 Refugee Convention, as applied to nationals of non-EU countries or to stateless persons. Similarly, the cessation and exclusion clauses in Articles 11 and 12 of the EU Qualification Directive are based on the 1951 Refugee Convention.

The 2011 EU Qualification Directive is available at:
http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2011:337:0009:0026:EN:PDF

Other regions

In Asia, no regional refugee convention or treaty-based definition of the term "refugee" exists. As early as 1966, however, the Asian-African Legal Consultative Organisation (AALCO) adopted the declaratory and non-binding Bangkok Principles, revised in 2001. In its Article 1 (1) and (2), the Bangkok Principles expand the definition of a refugee found in the 1951 Refugee Convention.

The Bangkok Principles on the Status and Treatment of Refugees are available at:
http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/3de5f2d52.pdf

The non-binding Declaration on the Protection of Refugees and Displaced Persons in the Arab World amongst others recommends the adoption of a broad concept of "refugee". In 1994, the League of Arab States adopted the Arab Convention on Regulating the Status of Refugees in the Arab Countries, which also contains a broader refugee definition.

The Cairo Declaration on the Protection of Refugees and Displaced Persons in the Arab World is available at:
http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/452675944.html

The Arab Convention on Regulating the Status of Refugees in the Arab Countries is available at:
http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4dd5123f2.html

A.3 Complementary forms of international protection

Individuals can qualify for international protection that is complementary to the specific form of protection reserved for refugees in international law. Such protection, which often entails a less favourable legal status than for refugees, may be based on international human rights law, regional arrangements or domestic legislation.

This section provides a brief overview of key international and regional instruments from which such obligations can be derived. Given its central role in triggering the responsibilities of States to provide complementary protection, the section will focus on provisions related to the principle of non-refoulement.

Note that domestic systems are outside the scope of this section. Moreover, it does not address the temporary protection of groups of people without individualised procedures to determine refugee or other protection status.

A.3.1 Subsidiary protection in the EU

Article 2 (f) of the 2011 EU Qualification Directive provides for the granting of subsidiary protection to a person when there are substantial grounds for believing that he or she would face a real risk of suffering serious harm upon return. The Directive includes in its definition of serious harm the death penalty or execution, torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, or serious and individual threat to a civilian's life or person in situations of armed conflict.

Note that individuals who do not qualify for subsidiary protection nevertheless cannot be removed if this violates the non-refoulement principle under international and EU law.

> The EU Qualification Directive is available at:
> http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2011:337:0009:0026:EN:PDF
>
> The EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), the CoE and the ECtHR's handbook on European law regarding asylum, borders and immigration is available here:
> http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2020/handbook-european-law-relating-asylum-borders-and-immigration-edition-2020

A.3.2 Non-refoulement obligations in international human rights instruments

As noted, the principle of non-refoulement essentially provides that individuals must not be removed to a country or territory where they would face a risk of serious human rights violations. This principle is provided in a variety of human rights documents. Unlike the non-refoulement provision of the 1951 Refugee Convention, the prohibition of refoulement in international human rights law is absolute – individuals cannot fall outside its scope through their previous (criminal) conduct or the dangers they may pose to the security of the country they are in.

Article 3 of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment and Punishment (CAT) establishes that states must not remove an individual if there are substantial grounds for believing that he or she would be in danger of torture. Article 1 defines torture as "any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or

a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity."

The CAT is available at: https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-against-torture-and-other-cruel-inhuman-or-degrading

Other sources for the non-refoulement principle include Article 16 of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICCPED), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and, in the context of armed conflict, Article 45 of the Fourth Geneva Convention. More broadly, international human rights law, international humanitarian law and customary law prohibits States from transferring or removing individuals from their jurisdiction or effective control when there are substantial grounds for believing that the person would be at risk of irreparable harm upon return.

For more information see: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Migration/GlobalCompactMigration/ThePrincipleNon-RefoulementUnderInternationalHumanRightsLaw.pdf

A.3.3 Non-refoulement obligations in regional instruments

Furthermore, several regional human rights instruments prohibit refoulement, thus forming the basis for complementary protection.

African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights – ACHPR (1981)
The basis for the non-refoulement principle in the ACHPR can be found in Article 5, which provides the right to respect for a human being's inherent dignity and prohibits all forms of exploitation and degradation. According to the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights' Robben Island Guidelines, states must not remove anyone to where they is at risk of torture.

The ACHPR and a list of state parties is available at:
https://au.int/en/treaties/african-charter-human-and-peoples-rights

American Convention on Human Rights – ACHR (1969)
The ACHR provides for an explicit prohibition of refoulement. Article 22 (8) establishes that states must not remove any individual to where they right to life or personal freedom is at risk because of his race, nationality, religion, social status, or political opinions.

The ACHR is available at:
http://www.oas.org/dil/treaties_B-32_American_Convention_on_Human_Rights.htm

Inter-American Convention on the Prevention of Torture (1985)
According to Article 13 of the Inter-American Convention, individuals should not be returned when there are grounds to believe that his or her life is in danger, or there is a risk of torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.

The Inter-American Convention on the Prevention of Torture is available at:
https://www.oas.org/juridico/english/treaties/a-51.html

European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR)

The absolute prohibition of non-refoulement in the context of the ECHR is implicit. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has particularly drawn on Article 3 ECHR (the prohibition of torture and inhuman or degrading treatment) in its rich case law, starting from *Soering v. the United Kingdom,* to establish that removing individuals from the territories of states can violate the Convention under certain circumstances. For example, in the case of *M.S.S. v. Belgium and Greece*, which dealt with the transfer of an asylum-seeker to Greece by the Belgian authorities in applying the EU's Dublin Regulation, the ECtHR found a violation of Article 3 ECHR because of the risk of chain refoulement to Afghanistan and the deficiencies of the asylum and reception system in Greece.

The ECHR is available at:
http://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Convention_ENG.pdf

APPENDIX B: SOURCES

This Appendix provides short descriptions of sources widely used in COI research. They are helpful for gaining an overview on a certain country or topic and they can act as a starting point for research. There are a number of sources that are commonly used in COI research, and which are considered to be generally reliable. While some of them have narrow thematic mandates, others cover a wide range of human rights issues relevant for COI research or provide current background information on the situation in countries of origin.

We distinguish between sources that produce information separately from procedures for determining international protection needs and sources that specifically compile and research COI for these procedures, such as UNHCR or COI units.

Additionally, this appendix provides an overview of sources and research techniques with regard to information on geography, language and ethnicity.

This overview is not meant to be an exhaustive list of reliable COI sources.

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B.1   Sources that produce information separately from procedures
      determining international protection needs
    B.1.1   International and intergovernmental sources
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B.2   Sources that produce and compile information specifically for
      procedures for determining international protection needs
    B.2.1   United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
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           by Ministries of Foreign Affairs and embassies
    B.2.4   COI databases

B.3   Researching geography, ethnicity, language

B.1 Sources that produce information separately from procedures determining international protection needs

This section is organised by type of source as introduced in section 4.1.2:

- ► International and intergovernmental sources
- ► Governmental sources
- ► Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other civil society sources
- ► Media sources
- ► Academic sources

B.1.1 International and intergovernmental sources

Organisations such as the United Nations or the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) publish reports, position papers, findings of special rapporteurs or human rights experts, background information, etc. on many countries.

The international community has set up various human rights monitoring mechanisms, committees, institutions or persons and mandated them to monitor and report on human rights violations.

In addition to UN human rights monitoring mechanisms, regional human rights instruments and compliance monitoring systems have been put into place. Some produce reports on a regular basis.

United Nations (UN)
For a detailed description of the UN documentation and reference system, see the United Nations Documentation Research Guides at https://research.un.org/en/docs.

- · United Nations Secretary-General, https://www.un.org/sg
  The Secretary-General publishes a variety of reports and press statements on the work of the UN. Most important for COI research are the reports to the Security Council and to the General Assembly. In particular, the Secretary-General regularly informs the UN Security Council about UN peacekeeping missions and the situation in countries that are of concern to the Security Council regarding security and other issues like the rule of law and the situation of women.

- · United Nations Security Council, https://www.un.org/securitycouncil
  The functions and powers of the Security Council are to maintain peace and security. It is mandated to investigate alleged threats to peace or acts of aggression and to recommend methods of adjusting or settling such disputes. Reports cover countries involved in armed conflict or in situations which might lead to such conflict.

There are different human rights monitoring mechanisms in the UN system. There are, first, UN Charter-based bodies, including the Human Rights Council, and second, treaty bodies created as a result of international human rights treaties. Information about these two mechanisms can be found on the website of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (see below).

UN Human Rights Council (HRC)
The Human Rights Council is an inter-governmental body based on the UN Charter and was established by the UN General Assembly in 2006, replacing the UN Commission on Human Rights. It is responsible

for addressing human rights issues and make recommendations on them. Human Rights Council documents and resolutions are available at https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/about-council.

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) is a state-driven process under the auspices of the Human Rights Council to review the human rights record of all UN member states once every four and a half years. The reviews are based on state reports, reports of independent human rights experts mandated by the UN Human Rights Council ("special procedures"), UN human rights treaty bodies and other UN entities, as well as on information from other stakeholders such as NGOs and national human rights institutions. All UPR-related documents are available at https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/upr-main.

The Human Rights Council may mandate experts, known as "special procedures" to address situations related to a specific country or a thematic issue. Special procedures can either be an individual person (called "Special Rapporteur" or "Independent Expert") or a five-member working group. These experts, who are not UN staff members and receive no remuneration from the UN, are mandated to monitor human rights problems and publicly report about their activities and examinations. As of October 2022, there were 14 country-specific mandates and 45 thematic mandates. All documents related to special procedures are available at https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures-human-rights-council.

Human Rights Treaty Bodies

State parties who have signed and ratified core international human rights treaties are obliged to submit regular reports to the treaty bodies (i.e. committees composed of independent human rights experts) that monitor the implementation of these instruments. Based on these "state party reports", the Committee formulates its concerns and recommendations in public reports called "concluding observations". Some oversight procedures also allow national human rights institutions, NGOs, UN entities, other intergovernmental organisations, professional groups and academic experts to submit their own reports on the steps taken by state parties.

Reports by the following UN treaty bodies can all be found on the OHCHR website:

- The Human Rights Committee monitors the implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). State parties must report whenever the Committee requests, usually every eight years. https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/ccpr

- CESCR - The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights monitors the implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. State parties must report every five years. https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/cescr

- CERD - The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination monitors the implementation of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. State parties must report every two years. https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cerd/index.htm

- CEDAW - The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women monitors the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. State parties must report periodically whenever requested by the Committee. The Committee may, on its own initiative, initiate enquiries if it has received reliable information containing well-founded indications of serious or systematic violations of the convention by a state party. https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/cedaw

- CAT - The Committee against Torture monitors the implementation of the International Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. State parties must report every four years. The Committee may, on its own initiative, initiate

enquiries if it has received reliable information containing well-founded indications of systematic violations of the convention by a state party. https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/cat

The Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture instated the Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture (SPT) which undertakes visits to detention facilities. The SPT communicates its recommendations and observations to the relevant state party in a confidential report; however, state parties can request the SPT to publish the reports. https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/optional-protocol-convention-against-torture-and-other-cruel

- CRC - The Committee on the Rights of the Child monitors the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. State parties must report every five years. State parties to one or both of the Optional Protocols to the Convention, on "Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict" and on "Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography", must also report to the Committee in relation to their obligations under the Protocols. https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/crc

- CMW - The Committee on Migrant Workers monitors the implementation of the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. State parties must report every five years. https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/cmw

- CRPD - The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities monitors the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. State parties must report every four years. https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/crpd

- CED - The Committee on Enforced Disappearances monitors the implementation of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. State parties must first report within two years of ratification of the treaty and may later be requested to submit follow-up reports by a specified date. https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies/ced

UN Organisations
The following UN organisations regularly publish information which is frequently used for COI research. This list is non-exhaustive; UN organisations which are not included here may also have information relevant for specific questions.

- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
  The OHCHR is mandated "to work for the protection of all human rights for all people" (OHCHR website, n.d., https://www.ohchr.org/en/about-us/mission-statement). It is the agency with the principal responsibility for UN human rights activities. The OHCHR maintains around 30 country and regional offices and deploys human rights advisers to dozens of countries to monitor and analyse the human rights situation. These representatives in the field advise the UN country teams and have close working relationships with governmental bodies, national authorities, and NGOs. The OHCHR website provides links to a wide range of human rights-related resources. Information by country can be accessed through this page: https://www.ohchr.org/en/countries

- United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)
  OCHA coordinates humanitarian action. Its reporting focuses on conflict-related humanitarian crises (including forced displacement), natural and environmental disasters and complex emergencies. OCHA administers ReliefWeb, a database collecting information on humanitarian crises: https://reliefweb.int

- International Organization for Migration (IOM)
  IOM is an intergovernmental organisation that joined the United Nations in 2016. It works on matters relating to migrants of various types, including refugees, IDPs and labour migrants. It offers research, advice, technical cooperation and operational support to states, international organisations and NGOs. IOM is also tasked with providing humanitarian assistance to migrants in need and facilitating integration as well as voluntary returns. IOM's reports, papers and migration data can be accessed at https://www.iom.int/data-and-research.

Other UN programmes and funds or agencies frequently used for COI research

- FAO - Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, https://www.fao.org
- ILO - International Labour Organization, https://www.ilo.org
- UNAIDS - Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, https://www.unaids.org
- UNDP - United Nations Development Programme, https://www.undp.org
- UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, https://www.unesco.org
- UNFPA - United Nation Population Fund, https://www.unfpa.org
- UN HABITAT - United Nations Human Settlements Programme, https://unhabitat.org
- UNICEF - United Nations Children's Fund, https://www.unicef.org
- UN Women, https://www.unwomen.org
- UN peacekeeping operations and special political missions. Information published based on such missions can be found at https://www.unmissions.org
- UNRWA - United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, https://www.unrwa.org
- WFP - World Food Programme, https://www.wfp.org
- WHO - World Health Organization, https://www.who.int

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) will be presented in section B.2.1 on sources that produce, compile or collect information specifically for international protection.

Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)
The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) was established in 1961 and comprises 38 Member States including many European states, Australia, Chile, Japan, Israel, South Korea, Mexico, Türkiye and the United States. It aims at "establishing evidence-based international standards and finding solutions to a range of social, economic and environmental challenges" worldwide (OECD, n.d., https://www.oecd.org/about). The OECD publishes the Social Institutions and Gender Index, SIGI, which provides information related to gender inequalities in 180 countries: https://www.genderindex.org

Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)
The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), https://www.osce.org, works on a wide range of security-related concerns affecting its 57 participating states in Europe, Central Asia and North America. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) focuses on election observation and democratic development, the rule of law, human rights, tolerance and non-discrimination. Their findings are available at https://www.osce.org/odihr.

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)
The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), https://www.icrc.org, is mandated to ensure and monitor the protection of civilians in armed conflicts or other situations of violence. Its findings are confidential. Any concerns regarding violations of international humanitarian law are raised in direct exchange with the governments and actors concerned. ICRC shares information on specific findings only in exceptional cases. However, general information about activities and other information can be accessed at https://www.icrc.org/en/resource-centre.

Regional intergovernmental organisations

Africa
- ACHPR - The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (including its special mechanisms), https://achpr.au.int, is tasked – among other things – with the protection and promotion of human and peoples' rights and the interpretation of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

- ACERWC - The African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child monitors the implementation of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, see https://www.acerwc.africa.

Americas
- OAS - The Organization of American States created the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) in 1959 to – among other things – monitor the human rights situation in its 35 member states. IACHR publishes annual reports as well as country reports and thematic reports, see https://www.oas.org/en/iachr.

Europe
COE - The Council of Europe (https://www.coe.int) comprises 46 member states and has set up the following institutions:

- The Commissioner for Human Rights is an independent institution that monitors the human rights situation in the Member States by conducting country visits. Country reports including recommendations are available at https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/documents.

- The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) visits places of detention. The Committee's findings, its reports to the government concerned, and the latter's responses are, in principle, confidential. Most states, however, have chosen to make the reports public; these and other documents are available at https://www.coe.int/en/web/cpt/resources.

- The European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR) monitors the implementation of the European Social Charter. State reports, comments by civil society organisations, the Committee's conclusions and decisions are available at https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-social-charter/country-profiles.

- The Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) monitors the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. Evaluation reports are available at https://www.coe.int/en/web/anti-human-trafficking/country-monitoring-work.

- The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) monitors racism, various forms of discrimination as well as xenophobia, antisemitism and intolerance. The commission is made up of independent experts from all CoE member states who draft reports and make recommendations to the states concerned. ECRI country monitoring reports are available at https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-commission-against-racism-and-intolerance/country-monitoring.

- The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) came into force in 1998. It is legally binding for the states that have ratified the Convention. The implementation of the FCNM is monitored and evaluated by an Advisory Committee, which examines reports

submitted by the state parties. Conclusions and recommendations are presented to the respective state. Reports and documents drafted in this process are available at https://www.coe.int/en/web/minorities/country-specific-monitoring.

- The Group of States against corruption (GRECO) aims at reducing and preventing corruption. Established in 1999, GRECO comprises 50 member states. Monitoring is organised in an evaluation procedure that leads to recommendations and in a compliance procedure to assess the measures taken. Reports from these procedures are available at https://www.coe.int/en/web/greco/evaluations.

European Union
- The European Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) collects and analyses information regarding the state of fundamental rights in the EU. Publications are available at https://fra.europa.eu/en/products/search.

- The EU observes elections around the world on a regular basis, with the exception of countries covered by OSCE election observations. Reports about the findings of EU election observation missions (EU EOMs) are available at https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/relations-non-eu-countries/types-relations-and-partnerships/election-observation/mission-recommendations-repository/home.

B.1.2 Governmental sources

The source type "governmental organisations" comprises administrative as well as legislative and judicial bodies. Various Ministries of Foreign Affairs provide background information and overviews of current events in other countries. However, the emphasis is usually on information for business travellers and tourists. The following governmental sources offer information that might be relevant for COI research:

- The US Department of State publishes several relevant reports. Most important for COI research are the annual *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* (https://www.state.gov/reports-bureau-of-democracy-human-rights-and-labor/country-reports-on-human-rights-practices) and the International Religious Freedom Reports (https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports). The Department of State also publishes annual reports on trafficking in persons (https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-civilian-security-democracy-and-human-rights/office-to-monitor-and-combat-trafficking-in-persons) and on terrorism (https://www.state.gov/country-reports-on-terrorism-2).

- The US Congressional Research Service (CRS) is a research entity within the Library of Congress that provides policy and legal analysis as well as reports on issues of interest to the Congress. Many of the CRS reports are accessible via its public portal: https://crsreports.congress.gov

- The CIA *World Factbook* is another US publication that is widely consulted for background information in the context of COI research. It provides an overview of 266 countries and other entities, including general information on geography, people and society, government, economy, communications, transportation, military, and transnational issues: https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries

Government sources like the United Kingdom Home Office that specifically produce or compile or collect information for procedures for determining international protection needs will be introduced in section B.2.2 of this Appendix.

Governments may also provide policy instructions containing COI, such as in the "assessment" section of the UK Home Office's country policy and information notes, but these are not considered a source of COI.

Legal provisions form an important part of COI research. Legislative and administrative bodies in countries of origin produce and publish the text of national laws and regulations. There are a number of websites providing links and/or information on parliaments, laws and administrative bodies in various countries.

- The Constitute project, developed at the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Chicago, publishes constitutions from countries around the world in English: https://constituteproject.org

- GlobaLex is an electronic legal publication of the Hauser Global Law School Program of New York University School of Law dedicated to international, comparative and foreign law research. The information and articles published by GlobaLex include both research and teaching resources. Information on specific countries can be found under "Foreign Law Research" at https://www.nyulawglobal.org/globalex.

- The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), https://www.ipu.org, is the international organisation of parliaments; it was established in 1889. Data on national parliaments can be accessed in the IPU Parline database: https://data.ipu.org

- Legislationline, https://legislationline.org, is a free-of-charge online legislative database maintained by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). It contains national constitutions, penal codes, criminal procedure codes and legislation related to issues such as elections and citizenship of the OSCE participating states. Legislationline is available in English and in Russian.

- The United Nations' International Labour Organization (ILO) maintains a database of national legislation on labour, social security and related human rights domains (NATLEX) which is available at https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.home?p_lang=en.

- The US Library of Congress runs a Law Library that offers links to many legislative, administrative and judicial bodies in countries of origin under https://guides.loc.gov/nations-world.

B.1.3 Non-governmental sources

Some NGOs focusing on human rights act on an international level. They publish, among other things, annual reports, papers and statistical data on specific countries or issues. The following list highlights a few examples most commonly referenced in the field of COI:

- Amnesty International advocates for human rights; its headquarters are in London. Annual reports document the situation of human rights abuses in more than 150 countries and territories. Furthermore, thematic reports, news releases as well as calls for "Urgent Action" are published regularly. https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries

- Freedom House advocates for freedom and democratic change around the world. It publishes periodic country reports on political rights and civil liberties, internet freedom and on nations in transit as well as thematic reports and analysis. Its headquarters is in Washington, D.C. https://freedomhouse.org/reports

- Human Rights Watch (HRW) investigates human rights violations and publishes its findings in annual World Reports as well as thematic reports, news releases and dispatches. These publications cover 140 countries, including many countries of origin of asylum-seekers. HRW is based in New York, with offices around the world. https://www.hrw.org/publications

- The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), established by the Norwegian Refugee Council and based in Geneva, monitors internal displacement worldwide. IDMC runs an online database providing comprehensive data and analysis on internal displacement due to conflict, violence, and natural disasters in dozens of countries. https://www.internal-displacement.org

- The International Crisis Group produces detailed analysis and policy advice relating to conflict or potential conflict situations around the world. Crisis Group publishes in-depth reports and briefing papers as well as the monthly *CrisisWatch* bulletin, which informs about the current state in countries or regions in conflict or crisis. Its global headquarters is in Brussels. https://www.crisisgroup.org

- The International Federation for Human Rights (Fédération internationale pour les droits humains, FIDH), based in Paris, comprises some 190 national human rights leagues and non-governmental human rights organisations around the world. FIDH denounces human rights violations through dissemination of reports, open letters, statements and media releases. http://www.fidh.org

- The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) is a federation of over 1,700 LGBTIQ+ organisations from more than 160 countries and advocates for the protection of the human rights of sexual and gender-based minorities. Its website provides news and information on the legal and societal situation in many countries. https://ilga.org

- The World Organisation against Torture (Organisation mondiale contre la torture, OMCT) is an association of non-governmental organisations around the world fighting against torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. It informs on a range of human rights issues including the situation of human rights defenders, issuing (jointly with the FIDH) an urgent appeals and an annual report of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (https://www.omct.org/en/resources/news/the-observatory-for-the-protection-of-human-rights-defenders). The International Secretariat is located in Geneva. https://www.omct.org

- The Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Human Rights in Vienna and HURICODC in Geneva jointly run the Atlas of Torture project. Its public database provides access to publications on torture from a variety of sources including UN, government, and civil society organisations. https://atlas-of-torture.org

- The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) collects, analyses and maps information on crisis and conflict and provides datasets on conflict-related incidents. https://acleddata.com

- The World Justice Project (WJP) is an independent organisation that seeks to enhance the rule of law on a global level and compiles the Rule of Law Index, which assesses 140 countries and their jurisdictions. https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index

- Transparency International (TI) is an international NGO present in more than 100 countries working to fight corruption. TI publishes the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) which ranks 180 countries and territories by their perceived levels of public sector corruption and runs the survey-based Global Corruption Barometer. https://www.transparency.org/en/research

- Minority Rights Group International (MRG), an international NGO specialised on minorities and indigenous peoples, publishes the World Directory on Minorities and Indigenous Peoples (https://minorityrights.org/programmes/library/directory). Other publications are available at https://minorityrights.org/programmes/library.

National human rights organisations

There are more than 115 national human rights organisations (NHRIs) around the world that are represented in the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI). These NHRIs monitor and report on their country's human rights situation. The website of GANHRI includes country-specific and thematic reports on human rights, as well as a directory of NHRIs. https://ganhri.org

B.1.4 Media sources

Media sources comprise international, national and local newspapers, TV and radio stations, news websites and news agencies. They are indispensable for gathering up-to-date information and can be used for answering questions on specific events that might not be included in human rights reports. It is beyond the scope of this manual to offer comprehensive lists of newspapers and broadcasters, however, some news services and media archives are presented below:

News services covering international news
- Agence France-Presse (AFP) is a French news agency reporting in English, French and four other languages. Operating in over 150 countries, AFP covers many aspects of international news including politics and international relations. https://www.afp.com

- The news agency Associated Press (AP) is a not-for-profit cooperative of US newspapers. It operates in 250 locations across 100 countries. https://apnews.com

- BBC News, a department of the British Broadcasting Cooperation (BBC), headquartered in London, is a public service broadcaster, gathering and broadcasting news. https://www.bbc.com/news

- Deutsche Welle (DW) is a German public international broadcaster producing multimedia news content from around the world in 32 languages. Its focuses on topics such as human rights, democracy, good governance, social justice, and environmental protection. https://www.dw.com

- Reuters is one of the largest international news agencies. It is part of the Canadian private media company Thomson Reuters. It has a comprehensive network of professionals who report daily on worldwide events. https://www.reuters.com

There are of course many more media sources, including sources whose primary focus is on particular parts of the world. A number of these provide information in English, such as the following:

- Al Jazeera, an international news outlet reporting in English and Arabic, is part of the Al Jazeera Media Network owned by the state of Qatar. https://www.aljazeera.com

- Anadolu Agency (AA) is a Turkish state-run news agency that reports in 13 languages. It mainly focuses on the Middle East, Africa, Europe and Central Asia. https://www.aa.com.tr

- Nikkei Asia is an English-language news magazine owned by the Japanese media company Nikkei Inc. Its coverage focuses on political, economic, and business-related developments in the Asia-Pacific region. https://asia.nikkei.com

Specialised and regional news services

- AllAfrica collects stories from newspapers and news agencies across Africa. It offers general news and information on African countries on a range of topics, including sustainable development, governance, business, and technology. It aggregates and distributes content from over 140 African news organisations, plus more than 500 other sources, which are responsible for their own reporting and views. Moreover, it produces or commissions its own articles and commentaries. The latter publications identify AllAfrica as the publisher. https://allafrica.com (English), https://fr.allafrica.com (French)

- Caucasian Knot is an online media outlet founded by Memorial, a now-dissolved Moscow-based independent human rights NGO. It aims to provide information on the Caucasus about human rights violations, the situation in armed conflict zones, ethnic or political discrimination, and the situation of refugees' problems. Caucasian Knot publishes in English and Russian. https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu

- Current Time, a digital television network jointly operated by RFE/RL a Voice of America, broadcasts for Russian-speaking audiences in 30 countries. https://www.currenttime.tv For countries in the Asia-Pacific region, see Radio Free Asia (RFA). https://www.rfa.org

- The Diplomat is a magazine that focuses on the Asia-Pacific region covering geopolitical trends, defence and intelligence, human security and development, social trends, and popular culture, among other topics. https://thediplomat.com

- Eurasianet is a news organisation based at Columbia University's Harriman Institute (New York City) that provides reporting and analysis on political, economic, environmental, societal and security-related developments in Eastern Europe (including Russia), Central Asia and the South Caucasus, as well as Türkiye and Southwest Asia. https://eurasianet.org

- Middle East Eye (MEE) is a London-based news website that reports on events in the Middle East and North Africa, including news on human rights issues. https://www.middleeasteye.net

- The New Humanitarian (TNH) (formerly IRIN News) is a non-profit news organisation based in Geneva that provides humanitarian news and analysis. It has correspondents in dozens of countries affected by crisis or disasters and regularly publishes reports on a wide range of issues, including conflict, migration and natural disasters, as well as on responses by humanitarian actors. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org

- Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) is a news organisation funded by the U.S. Congress and aims "to promote democratic values by providing accurate, uncensored news and open debate" (RFE/RL website, n.d.) in countries in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia, as well as Russia, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. It reports on 23 countries and in 27 languages. https://www.rferl.org

- Thomson Reuters Foundation News is a free news service run by the Thomson Reuters Foundation that covers humanitarian crises worldwide. The website provides English-language news and information on topics such as women's and LGBTIQ+ rights, human trafficking and forced labour, property rights, and climate change. Content comes from around 50 staff journalists and 300 freelancers around the world. https://news.trust.org

BBC country profiles (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/country_profiles) include an overview of the media landscape with details and links to newspapers and magazines and to television and radio broadcasters, including their political allegiance. See for example the 'media profile' tab of the Sudan page at
https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14095119.

News databases (fee-based)

News databases collect information produced from various news sources and make it available online and thus searchable. Access is usually tied to a subscription fee. Media archives can be a valuable tool, but can be costly.

Examples of such media archives are:

- AllAfrica is freely accessible for current information. The archive function and the advanced search can only be accessed via subscription.

- BBC Monitoring offers news, information and comments collected from more than 3,000 radio, TV, press, internet and social media sources around the world, translated from over 100 languages.

- Dow Jones Factiva comprises more than 33,000 news and business sources from more than 200 countries, in 32 languages.

- LexisNexis offers searches of over 40,000 media sources (newspapers, magazines, TV news, and journals).

Note: When using news databases make sure you cite the original publisher of the article, not the media archive, as source of the article.

B.1.5 Academic sources and think tanks

This category includes public and private universities, colleges and research institutes, as well as think tanks – and the researchers who work there. Scholars with a particular expertise on a specific topic or country can be very useful for COI research, both because of their in-depth knowledge and because they are generally (if based outside the country or region of origin) not affiliated with any of the power structures in the country of origin and thus do not have a personal stake in the events or situations which they analyse. A few examples are:

- Brookings Institution, https://www.brookings.edu
- Chatham House, https://www.chathamhouse.org
- CMI – Chr. Michelsen Institute, https://www.cmi.no
- CFR – Council on Foreign Relations, https://www.cfr.org
- CSIS – Center for Strategic and International Studies, https://www.csis.org
- Insight Crime, https://insightcrime.org

- ISS – Institute for Security Studies, https://issafrica.org
- ISW – Institute for the Study of War, https://www.understandingwar.org
- RAND Corporation, https://www.rand.org/about.html
- Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, https://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk
- RUSI – Royal United Services Institute, https://rusi.org
- Small Arms Survey, https://www.smallarmssurvey.org
- SWP – German Institute for International and Security Affairs, https://www.swp-berlin.org

Scientific publications, journals and articles

Open access journals can be found, for example, on:

- The Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) aims "to increase the visibility, accessibility, reputation, usage and impact of quality, peer-reviewed, open access scholarly research journals globally" (DOAJ, About DOAJ, n.d., https://doaj.org/about). It is funded by voluntary donations. https://doaj.org

- SSRN (formerly Social Science Research Network) allows researchers to publish scholarly content relating to the social sciences, humanities, life sciences physical sciences and applied sciences. This content is assembled into subject-defined e-journals which users can subscribe to for free. The SSRN database includes abstracts on nearly 1.2 million research papers and more than 1 million downloadable full text papers. (SSRN, n.d., https://www.ssrn.com)

Fee-based databases that offer scientific articles are, for example:

- Ingenta Connect, https://www.ingentaconnect.com
- JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org
- Scopus, https://www.scopus.com
- Taylor & Francis Online, https://www.tandfonline.com
- Web of Science, https://www.webofscience.com

The following basic reference books can be useful for COI research:

- *The Continuum Complete International Encyclopedia of Sexuality*, edited by Robert T. Francoeur and Raymond J. Noonan, Continuum, 2004

- David Levinson: *Ethnic Groups Worldwide,* Oryx Press, 1998

- *Encyclopaedia of the World Muslims,* Volumes 1-4, edited by N.K. Singh and A.M. Khan, Global Vision Publishing House, 2001

- *Ethnologue; Languages of the World,* edited by Raymond G. Gordon, SIL International, 15th edition, 2005 (see also the online edition at https://www.ethnologue.com)

- *Political Parties of the World,* edited by D.J. Sagar, John Harper Publishing, 7th edition, 2009

- *Religions of the World:* A Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Beliefs and Practices, edited by J. Gordon Melton and Martin Baumann, ABC-CLIO), 2010

- Routledge publishes the nine-volume *The Europa Regional Surveys of the World* covering, for example, Africa South of the Sahara; the Middle East and Nord Africa; Eastern Europe, Russia and Central Asia; the Far East and Australasia. The publications are updated every year.

- The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc. publishes historical dictionaries on many countries of origin. For a list see https://rowman.com/Action/Search/RL/Historical%20Dictionary

- Sage publishes the *Political Handbook of the World* in a 2-year interval. https://sk.sagepub.com/cqpress/series/political-handbook-of-the-world

- *The Times Comprehensive Atlas of the World*, HarperCollins Publication, 15th edition, 2018

- *World Encyclopedia of Political Systems and Parties,* Volumes 1-3, edited by Neil Schlager, Jayne Weisblatt and O.J. Pérez, Facts On File, 2006

Information from experts may be found in their publications or they may be contacted directly to obtain information that may answer a specific COI question. For details on how to proceed with expert contacts, see section 5.6 of this manual.

B.2 Sources that produce and compile information specifically for procedures for determining international protection needs

The following sources specifically produce, collate, or collect Country of Origin Information for use in international protection procedures.

B.2.1 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

UNHCR's primary mandate is to ensure that refugees have access to international protection in countries of asylum. UNHCR (https://www.unhcr.org) does not have a mandate to monitor and report on human rights violations in countries of origin. However, the provision of accurate and reliable country of origin information to decision-makers, both in state-run asylum determination procedures and in UNHCR refugee status determination procedures, is part of UNHCR's efforts to ensure that bona fide refugees are recognised as such through high-quality decision-making. To this end, UNHCR commissions COI reports that are based on information in the public domain.

UNHCR also publishes International Protection Considerations and Guidance Notes on the protection needs of asylum-seekers from major countries of origin. These position papers feature profiles of groups that UNHCR considers to be at risk in the country of origin, based on available COI.

Refworld (http://www.refworld.org) is the protection information database managed by UNHCR to support quality decision-making on claims for international protection. In 2019, Refworld shifted its focus on its law and policy collections and stopped updating its COI collection. UNHCR recommends using ecoi.net for COI research instead.

B.2.2 COI units

Many states have established bodies that are specifically tasked with researching COI for international protection procedures. Most COI units are part of the respective government agency or ministry responsible for asylum and international protection issues. However, several courts operate their own COI service, and some services operate independently from national asylum decision-making authorities.

While a number of COI service providers make their COI products available online for public use, others restrict their publication. A large variety of products of COI units can be found on ecoi.net or on the website or database of the respective institution. The EUAA COI Portal offers a collection of EUAA's COI products and national EU+ countries' COI production.

The following is a non-exhaustive list of units that produce publicly available COI documents:

Austria
Staatendokumentation, the COI department of the Austrian Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum (BFA) produces query responses, reports and analyses for Austrian authorities and courts, mainly in German. The products are published on their database https://www.staatendokumentation.at which is maintained in cooperation with ACCORD's ecoi.net.

ACCORD, the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation, is the COI department of the Austrian Red Cross. It provides COI services to all actors involved in RSD in Austria and is commissioned by the EUAA and UNHCR on a regular basis. Most of the research products are in German; some are available in English. ACCORD runs the bilingual (English and German) COI portal https://www.ecoi.net, where its COI products are published. For more on ecoi.net see section B.2.4 of this Appendix below.

Belgium
The Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS) is a Belgian federal administrative body responsible for conducting RSD procedures. Its COI research unit CEDOCA serves Belgian asylum authorities. It employs researchers specialised in various regions who are tasked with collecting and analysing information and drafting query responses ("COI Case") and reports ("COI Focus") in French and Dutch. The COI Focus reports are made publicly available via the CGRS website at https://www.cgrs.be/en/country-information.

Canada
The Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) is an independent administrative tribunal established by the Parliament of Canada and mandated to decide on immigration and refugee matters. COI research is provided by the IRB's Research Directorate. It publishes *Responses to Information Requests, National Documentation Packages, Issue Papers* and *Fact-Finding Mission Reports* in English and French. The IRB's COI products are made available on the IRB website at https://www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/country-information/Pages/index.aspx.

Denmark
The Danish Immigration Service (DIS) is a directorate within the Ministry of Immigration and Integration of Denmark. Its Centre for Documentation and Counter Extremism comprises a COI unit that frequently undertakes fact-finding missions (FFM), the reports of which are published in English and made available via the website of the DIS at https://us.dk/publikationer.

European Union
The European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) (known as the European Asylum Support Office, EASO, until January 2022) is an EU agency mandated with assisting the EU+ Member States (EU Members states plus Switzerland and Norway) in applying the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), i.e. the package of EU laws governing international protection, asylum and reception. The EUAA has a dedicated COI sector (https://euaa.europa.eu/country-origin-information), producing COI reports, including in cooperation with the Member States. These reports are based on the EUAA COI report methodology and aim to support Member States in reaching fair and accurate decisions in RSD procedures. Member States are obliged to take into account these reports in their decision-making. Among other tasks, the EUAA's COI

Sector, in collaboration with the EU+ Member States' asylum authorities, also manages the EUAA COI Portal. The portal provides public access to selected COI reports authored by EU+ Member States, EUAA and other EU institutions under https://coi.euaa.europa.eu.

France

The French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA) runs a division for information, documentation and research (DIDR). OFPRA's *Fact Finding Reports* and desk-based COI reports are available in French at https://www.ofpra.gouv.fr/publications/publications-pays.

Germany

The Information Centre for Asylum and Migration (IZAM) at the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) provides information on refugee and migration movements as well as on countries of origin and transit countries in English and German. Selected documents are publicly accessible via BAMF's information system MILo at https://www.bamf.de/DE/Behoerde/Informationszentrum/MILo/milo-node.html.

Ireland

The Refugee Documentation Centre (RDC) is an independent library and research service within the Irish Legal Aid Board. It provides a research and query service for all organisations involved in the asylum process in Ireland. RDC query responses are only accessible via ecoi.net and the EUAA COI Portal.

Norway

Landinfo, the Norwegian Country of Origin Information Centre is an independent body within the Norwegian immigration authorities. It is responsible for collecting, analysing and presenting COI to various immigration actors. Selected reports are published in English. Landinfo's query responses and reports are made available via the Landinfo website at https://landinfo.no/id/2224.0.

Sweden

The Swedish Migration Agency (Migrationsverket) publishes query responses and reports, mostly in Swedish and a small number in English. They are published on the Swedish Migration Agency's Lifos website at https://lifos.migrationsverket.se.

Switzerland

The Country Analysis service of the Swiss State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) produces reports on key countries of origin, mostly in German and French. Selected COI products are published on the SEM website at https://www.sem.admin.ch/sem/de/home/international-rueckkehr/herkunftslaender.html.
The non-governmental Swiss Refugee Council (OSAR/SFH) runs a country analysis division and publishes its research products in German and French. The products are made available via the OSAR/SFH website at https://www.refugeecouncil.ch/publications/country-of-origin-reports.

United Kingdom

The UK Home Office has specialist country officers who compile various COI documents and produce country assessments (or country policy). Most COI products including country policy and information notes and fact-finding mission reports are published on the GOV.UK website: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/country-policy-and-information-notes.

The Home Office COI products are subject to review by the Independent Chief Inspector for Borders and Immigration through the Independent Advisory Group on Country Information (IAGCI), see https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/the-independent-advisory-group-on-country-information-iagci.

Asylos is a global network of volunteers that provides COI for legal representatives of asylum-seekers in several countries. Asylos' COI products are available in its database at https://resources.asylos.eu/available-research, for which a login is necessary. Asylos' core target group, those "helping refugees, asylum-seekers, or protection claimants through the refugee status determination procedure" can register on the database to access the products. State officials or public officials involved in asylum procedures do not have access.

The Asylum Research Centre (ARC) dissolved as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation in January 2022; however, Asylos has taken over its key projects. ARC continues to operate as a consultancy and provides research, e.g. for UNHCR. Selected research products are published on their website at https://asylumresearchcentre.org/publications.

There are various other COI units which have not been presented as they do not publish their research products; for example, the Netherland's Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND), the Refugee, Asylum and International Operations Directorate of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), or the Country Research & Open Source (CROS) team of the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) in New Zealand.

B.2.3 Reports and query responses drafted, and information collected, by Ministries of Foreign Affairs and embassies

Many countries of asylum ask their embassies to provide information directly from countries of origin. Embassies of various countries are involved in writing asylum-related reports and/or in gathering information based on specific queries. Most countries do not publish these reports and/or query responses. However, there are exceptions:

The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) publishes country information reports at https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/country-information-reports.

Reports produced by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which are based on publicly available information as well as on information provided by Dutch embassies in countries of origin, are publicly available (in Dutch, with some reports translated into English) at https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten.

In Germany, the asylum reports published by the Federal Foreign Office play a central role in decision-making. Although not publicly available, they are shared with asylum-seekers and their legal representatives during the individual procedure.

In Austria, selected query responses that include information from embassies and/or liaison officers are published in German and are made available for state officials at https://www.staatendokumentation.at.

B.2.4 COI databases

COI databases or portals collect information from many different sources. Most of the documents in COI databases have not been produced specifically for RSD. However, they are considered to be of interest in the context of international protection procedures. COI databases are a key tool for COI research. Nevertheless, no database is complete, and you should not rely exclusively on one database alone.

ecoi.net

The European Country of Origin Information Network (https://www.ecoi.net), gathers, structures and processes publicly available COI from more than 160 sources on 172 countries. The portal enables users to search through the full-text of the collected documents, supported by a COI thesaurus. ecoi.net is updated every working day. While most of the collected documents are in English, ecoi.net also collects documents in some other languages, and provides brief summaries for each document in English and German. It is run by ACCORD, the COI unit of the Austrian Red Cross, in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration, Germany. ecoi.net is co-funded by the Austrian Red Cross, the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund of the European Union (AMIF), the Austrian Ministry of Interior, the Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration, and Caritas Austria.

EUAA COI Portal

The European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), in cooperation with the asylum authorities of the EU+ Member States, manages the EUAA COI Portal (https://coi.euaa.europa.eu), a public database that gives access to COI reports produced by national authorities in the Member States as well as by EUAA and other EU institutions.

Other COI databases

In addition, there are COI databases run by states for internal use only. Some states open their databases in full or in part for public use. Some non-state databases are open to the public on a subscription basis. Here are some examples:

- The Electronic Immigration Network (EIN) is based in the UK. It provides information on immigration and refugee law and COI for immigration practitioners and for others with an interest in immigration. Access to the database section that contains COI reports is fee-based: https://www.ein.org.uk

- LIFOS is the COI information system of the Swedish Migration Agency (Migrationsverket). It collects reports from various sources and publishes the research results of the Agency's COI unit in Swedish. Most of the database is open to the public free of charge: https://lifos.migrationsverket.se

- MILo is a database run by the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF). Parts of the database are publicly accessible. Most documents are in German: https://milo.bamf.de

- The Austrian Federal Office for Immigration and Asylum (BFA) runs the database https://www.staatendokumentation.at in cooperation with ecoi.net. Access is free of charge for administrative and judicial bodies. NGOs and others can get access by paying a small semi-annual fee.

- Vluchtweb of the Dutch Council for Refugees is accessible on a subscription basis. Beyond COI, the database includes information on Dutch and EU laws and jurisprudence: https://www.vluchtweb.nl

- The Romanian COI Portal is jointly run by the Romanian government's General Inspectorate for Immigration and the Romanian National Council for Refugees. It offers COI and jurisprudence in Romanian language: https://www.portal-ito.ro

B.3 Researching geography, ethnicity, language

This section seeks to give an overview of sources and research techniques with regard to information on geography, language and ethnicity.

Geographical information
Researching geographical information can be one of the toughest tasks in COI research. Place names coming up in asylum procedures are often only spelled phonetically, and Latin spellings vary depending on the transliteration of words originally written in non-Latin script. In some languages like Arabic or Persian, it might be a good idea to familiarise yourself with the spelling patterns and compare them to the way they sound. Also try out different spelling variations.

Useful sites that provide spelling variations of place names
- EKI – Institute of the Estonian Language: Place Name Database (KNAB),
  http://www.eki.ee/knab/knab.htm
  The place names database (KNAB) of the EKI provides the name and spelling variations of place names. It is not complete, but can be useful if a place is not only sometimes spelled differently, but has different names depending on the language used. No maps are displayed.

- Fallingrain's Directory of Cities and Towns, http://www.fallingrain.com/world
  Fallingrain's *Directory of Cities and Towns* does not display a detailed map of the surroundings of a place. But it does provide an alphabetical list of places by country, taking into account spelling specificities of languages written in non-Latin script, alternate names and spelling variations. It can be very useful if you are not sure of the exact pronunciation or spelling of a name.

- GeoNames, http://www.geonames.org
  GeoNames is a free online database containing more than 27 million geographical names of some 4.8 million inhabited places. Maps are provided by Google Maps, but the geographic data come from a variety of sources, ranging from official sources (such as the above-mentioned NGA and various countries' national mapping agencies), to tourist information services and Wikipedia. Registered users may also edit the data.

- NGA - National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency: GEOnet Names Server (GNS),
  https://geonames.nga.mil/geonames/GeographicNamesSearch
  The GNS is the official database of standard spelling of foreign place names for use by the US government, sanctioned by the US Board on Geographic Names. Besides information on the location and administrative division of places, it also contains variant spellings and, increasingly, the native spelling of place names.

Useful map sites
Reliable and detailed maps for countries of origin are often difficult to obtain. Digital maps, including interactive ones, that highlight different aspects of geography (e.g. topography, political geography) are available for many countries of origin, but not always in great detail. Also note that regime changes might have led to the re-naming of streets and major buildings that are not yet reflected in maps.

As a rule of thumb, we suggest getting an overview of the country by looking at one of the country maps produced by the UN, identifying names of major cities and provinces, and then moving on to more detailed maps. Humanitarian agencies often produce very detailed maps for regions they work in, as does the military.

Bing Maps, http://www.bing.com/maps
Bing Maps is another online mapping service application that allows you to search for geographical information. It offers features similar to Google Maps (see below). Bing might offer more detailed data for a place than Google Maps, and vice versa.

Google Maps, https://maps.google.com/maps
Google Maps is an online mapping service application. You can search for cities, towns, states, provinces, addresses, roads, mountains, lakes and even businesses. The search results are displayed in the left panel of the page and as markers on the map itself.

While you will not find a map of one single country on Google, you can type in a place name and the search engine will come up with a list of places or with what it sees as the most likely result. Google enters partnerships with different types of organisations (national, state/provincial and local governments, non-profits, educational institutions, commercial entities, etc.) to incorporate mapping data. Note, however, that for many countries of origin there may not be as much data available as, for example, for most Western countries.

Google will automatically modify its search and show the location with the most likely spelling if your original search was not successful. This feature can be useful when you are not sure about the correct spelling of a place name.

The system offers satellite or aerial images; however, they are not updated in real time. They can be several months or even years old. You can also view topographic features and other data.

OpenStreetMap, http://www.openstreetmap.org
OpenStreetMap (OSM) is a free editable map of the world inspired by sites such as Wikipedia. The maps are created using data from portable GPS devices, aerial photography, other free sources or from local knowledge. Users can edit the contents of the maps. You may find data on OSM that is not available on Google Maps.

PCL Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection at the University of Texas,
https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps

ReliefWeb updates and maps, https://reliefweb.int/updates?view=maps
(provides a list of maps and infographics on the ReliefWeb database)

Statoids, http://www.statoids.com/statoids.html
Shirley Usry manages the Statoids website created by her late father Gwillim Law as a supplement to his book *Administrative Divisions of Countries,* 1999. You can select a country for a list of its administrative divisions (separated by level of division), with information on names, area and population, as well as links to maps where available.

UNHCR Operational Data Portal, https://data.unhcr.org
(click on "Maps" to access a page with UNHCR maps searchable by country)

United Nations Geospatial, https://www.un.org/geospatial/mapsgeo
(maps by region, country, theme)

Ecoi.net also collects maps (click on Maps on each country page or select "Map or infographic" under "Document type" in the search mask).

Languages and ethnicity

As with geographical information, information on languages and ethnic background is often sought to establish an applicant's credibility and/or an applicant's nationality. COI research will usually be conducted by persons with little or no expertise in applied linguistics. COI research can therefore be expected to supply information on the general use of particular languages and dialects by country and region, but it cannot be expected to provide information on the link between an individual's use of a particular language and their nationality.

This being said, using language directories to identify a particular ethnic group and its areas of settlement, or vice versa, can be helpful.

Language directories are a good source to find out whether a particular language exists, whether there are spelling variations regarding the language's name, and where it is known to be spoken. Language directories may cover the whole world or specialise in particular regions (see below for examples).

Ethnologue: Languages of the World, https://www.ethnologue.com
This very useful online database offers language directories by region and country, with numerous cross-references and an extensive bibliography that may help with locating an expert on a particular language. Maps give an indication of where a particular language or dialect is spoken. *Ethnologue* is published by SIL International, a US-based Christian non-profit organisation. The data is provided by more than 2,200 contributors and is updated annually with the release of each new edition.

L'aménagement linguistique dans le monde, https://www.axl.cefan.ulaval.ca/index.html
L'aménagement linguistique dans le monde is a website authored by Jacques Leclerc and hosted by the Chair for the Development of Research on French-Speaking Culture in North America (Chaire pour le développement de la recherche sur la culture d'expression française en Amérique du Nord, CEFAN) at Université Laval. It presents the language situations and policies of different states and territories around the world.

Minorities at Risk, http://www.mar.umd.edu
The Minorities at Risk Project of the Center for International Development and Conflict Management at the University of Maryland produces minority group assessments and chronologies based on human rights reports and news articles. The assessments offer historical background to particular ethnic groups, while the chronologies list conflict-related events affecting the group. The information provided in the chronologies and group assessments can be helpful. However, information has not been updated since 2008.

The Red Book of the Peoples of the Russian Empire, http://www.eki.ee/books/redbook/introduction.shtml
A. Humphreys and K. Mits (eds.), *The Red Book of the Peoples of the Russian Empire,* (October 1991) covers peoples, tribes, dialects and languages in roughly the territory of the former Soviet Union. The criteria for inclusion of peoples are as follows: not yet extinct, main area of settlement is on ex-Soviet territory, numbers are below 30,000, less than 70% speak their mother tongue, minority on their ancient territory, settlement is scattered rather than compact, no vernacular school, literature or media. The site also contains background information about the various ethnic groups. Be aware that information can be outdated as the publication is more than 30 years old.

It can also be well worth browsing the websites of language institutes affiliated with universities and independent research institutes. Many feature background information on selected languages, offer online publications and bibliographies, and provide contact details for language experts.

As an example, the French National Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilisation (INALCO, Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales) provides instruction in the languages, geography, history and politics of Europe, Russia, the Middle East, Africa, and the Asia-Pacific. In total over 100 languages and civilisations are covered. http://www.inalco.fr

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