

1st COI Master Class

19 – 21 June, Vienna

Final Report

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The report is based on presentations and minutes taken during the 1st COI Master Class on 19-21 June 2007 in Vienna. The final report was prepared by ACCORD and cleared with the respective chairpersons and experts.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions stated in the report do not necessarily reflect the views of the organisers of the COI Master Class or the Austrian Red Cross. The evaluation (Annex III) has been compiled by Mark Jansen, Dutch Council for Refugees, based on evaluation sheets and a telephone survey conducted with participants of the 1st COI Master Class.

November 2007

Editor: Vanessa Prinz (ACCORD)

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COI Network III – Training, Master Class, Good Practice

The COI Network III project, which took place between 1 November 2006 and 30 November 2007, aimed to strengthen practical cooperation between organisations involved in the research and use of country of origin information (COI) within the refugee status determination procedure. It is based on experiences with and achievements of the previous projects COI Network & Training 2004 and COI Network & e-Training 2005. A comprehensive overview of the project can be obtained under www.coi-network.net.

The project's main targets were to improve an efficient use of COI and thus contribute to a fair and effective RSD procedure in Europe. In order to achieve these goals, five activities focusing on training and evaluation of established practices have been implemented:

- 15 training courses for COI users and professionals (for further information see www.coi-training.net);
- In a Training Course for COI Trainers, 14 COI professionals were trained as COI trainers; a transnational, transinstitutional European COI Trainer Pool comprising 10 COI trainers has been established;
- The 1st COI Master Class as a form of continuous learning for COI professionals;
- The 11th European COI Seminar, focussing on two countries of origin, Afghanistan and Iraq;
- In the framework of the Good Practice project activity, jurisprudence from appeal and higher instances of all EU member states and from European courts were analysed with regard to the use of COI.

The COI Network III project comprised 18 governmental and non-governmental organisations from 15 European countries.

The project was co-financed by ERF Community Action 2005, UNHCR and partner organisations. It was supported by ECRE.

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Executive Summary

The 1st COI Master Class was organised by the Austrian Red Cross/ ACCORD in the framework of the ERF-funded project COI Network III – Training, Master Class, Good Practice. It took place from 19 - 21 June 2007 in Vienna and offered a unique possibility of advanced learning for COI professionals. More than 50 people from the whole of Europe, Canada and UNHCR attended the event and chose from the variety of workshops and lectures offered.

The primary aim of the COI Master Class was to enhance the professional performance of COI units' staff. The main objective was to find a form of continuous training for experienced researchers by training each other, and to allow less experienced COI researchers to benefit from the know-how of their colleagues. Additionally, a number of external experts had been invited to give input.

The pilot project to this form of advanced learning was conducted as a short "summer school" (2.5 days) from 19 to 21 June 2007 in Vienna. More than 50 COI researchers, database coordinators, managers of both governmental and non-governmental COI units and other COI professionals from 22 European countries, Canada and UNHCR participated in the event.

All participants were invited to choose from a diverse range of topics: In 15 workshops and two lectures, all of which were chaired and held by experienced COI professionals and UNHCR experts, issues regarding the production, research, management and use of country of origin information were discussed. A "marketplace" and a rich social programme offered additional opportunity for informal knowledge exchange and networking between participants.

Asked for their feedback, participants evaluated the 1st COI Master Class highly positive, highlighting especially the concept's eligibility for networking and exchange of experience, as well as the sound mixture of topics. They rated both the organisation of the whole event and of single workshops positively. Issues of criticism, however, included the interactivity and applicability of some workshops, as well as the length of the workshops. A majority of those participants who were interviewed for the evaluation expressed a high motivation to participate in a sequel of the COI Master Class.

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I. Objectives and methodology of the 1st COI Master Class

I.1. Objectives

COI professionals constitute a relatively small but nevertheless growing group of professionals in Europe, for whom advanced training has become a crucial issue. What could be offered to experienced COI staff for further education and continuous training? Where and how can COI methodology be further developed in a common way? How do other COI units work? Can there be a common form for continuous training for this group of COI professionals? These were some of the questions which led to the initiation of a process that finally resulted in the 1st COI Master Class held from 19 to 21 June 2007 in Vienna.

In order to meet the needs of the beneficiaries, the form of advanced learning to be developed needed to meet two primary objectives: Firstly, it had to offer a diverse and highly specialised range of advanced learning opportunities for experienced COI researchers, COI database managers and managers of COI units. Secondly, it should function as a platform for transnational and cross-institutional exchange between COI professionals, both from non-governmental organisations and from national authorities. By enabling the target groups to network and to reach a common understanding of COI related issues, both objectives were intended to contribute to the goal of a common European asylum system.

Against this background, the 1st COI Master Class was designed as a pilot project to elaborate a feasible and sustainable form of advanced learning. In order to meet the two objectives, the organisers decided to conduct it as a short summer school, offering a wide range of lectures and workshops, a “market place” for informal information exchange and a rich social programme to allow participants to meet and mingle.

I.2. Methodology

The foremost aim of the COI Master Class was to address COI professionals’ needs. Therefore, both the COI Network III project partners and other COI units in Europe were invited to raise professional issues and questions and identify topics arising from their daily work experience. This information has been analysed and resulted in a broad selection of topics, out of which two were addressed in lectures attended by all participants, 15 in workshops of 10 to 20 participants and the rest, which mainly focused on mutual exchange of information, was transferred into a “market place”. The latter took place in between the workshops and lectures and took the form of extended coffee breaks during which participants could exchange knowledge and share experiences. This information exchange was channelled via “information stalls” where participants had the chance to display brochures of their organisations, leaf through a compilation of European COI Units and databases, initiate staff exchanges and internships or exchange project ideas.

Being a unique project to enable advanced training to this target group, an emphasis was laid upon a sound evaluation of the 1st COI Master Class. Therefore, a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods has been applied, both during the event and ex-post-facto. Further information on the methodology, conduct and outcome of the evaluation are laid out in Annex III.



II. Lectures

II.1. COI Quality Standards as Legal Criteria

Speaker: Gábor Gyulai, Hungarian Helsinki Committee (HHC)

In recent years, the research and use of Country Information (COI) has become one of the main issues on the European asylum agenda, partly as a result of the spectacular development of information technologies. Far from its supplementary role in the nineties, its key importance as always available objective evidence is widely recognised by all actors in this field. The UNHCR, non-governmental organisations and the judiciary have elaborated guidelines summarising main quality standards and requirements related to COI, while EU member states are currently in the process of finalising their guidance document. In addition, professional standards have gradually taken root in national and community asylum legislation, as well as jurisprudence in the Union. A study conducted in the scope of the COI Network III project aims to draw an unprecedented picture of how substantive quality standards of researching and assessing COI appear as legal criteria at present, either as binding legal provisions or guiding judicial practice, thus providing a tool and a set of concrete examples for policy- and law-makers, advocates, judges and trainers active in this field. The four standards selected to determine the construction of the report and this lecture have been established in the practice of the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD) and the Europe-wide “COI Network”.

II.1.1. Relevance

Standard: COI must be closely related to the legal substance of an asylum claim (i.e. fear of being persecuted/risk of suffering serious harm and lack of protection) and must objectively reflect (confirm or disprove) the important facts related thereto.

Main findings: Legal relevance is at present only scarcely reflected as legal criterion in the EU, as only Austria and Hungary provide a compact definition of what should be understood as relevant COI in their national asylum legislation. Far from an exhaustive concept, the Qualification Directive sets two criteria that may somehow be linked to this norm: that of individualised processing of claims and that of assessing actual juridical and human rights practices instead of merely looking at legal provisions. Both binding standards are now reflected in the jurisprudence of some senior European courts dealing with asylum cases, nevertheless the reference to individualisation is significantly more frequent, sometimes even explicitly connecting this criterion to an individualised assessment of COI (as opposed to the use of only general, not case-specific information).

II.1.2. Reliability and balance

Standard: Given the inevitable bias of sources, COI has to rely on a variety of different types of sources, with awareness of the political and ideological context in which each source operates, as well as its mandate, reporting methodology, and the intention behind its publications.

Main findings: This norm is now firmly anchored in both asylum-related legislation and jurisprudence in the EU. The main concrete incarnation of this standard is the requirement of using a variety of different sources (including a balance of governmental and non-governmental ones), as foreseen by the Procedures Directive and echoed by several senior courts. Hungarian law provides at present the most concrete requirement in this respect, while the Romanian asylum legislation sets forth a list of suggested types of COI sources.

II.1.3. Accuracy and currency

Standard: COI has to be obtained and corroborated from a variety of sources, with due attention to find and filter the relevant and up-to-date information from the sources chosen, avoiding any distortion of the content.

Main findings: This methodological standard has gradually appeared in both legislation and jurisprudence in EU member states. Being fairly more “technical” than that of relevance and reliability, this standard is more limited in its scope to general requirements (such as “precise and up-to-date information” as set forth by the Procedures Directive), rather than concrete methodological guidance. Currency is a key element of accuracy, which is largely covered in European jurisprudence, even if – once again quite understandably – in rather general terms.

II.1.4. Transparency and retrievability

Standard: Given its role as decisive evidence, COI has to be – as a general principle – made available for all parts involved in refugee status determination, principally through the use of a transparent method of referencing. Original sources and reports should therefore be retrievable, and care should be taken that their content and meaning are not distorted in the process of paraphrasing or translating.

Main findings: This may be the most debated quality standard among those presented in this study. While this norm, together with the preference of using publicly available COI databases, is widely endorsed by professional organisations, EU member states have yet failed to elaborate a joint position on such issues, given their highly varying procedural traditions in this respect. However, the Procedures Directive sets forth some important basic requirements (such as the mandatory justification in fact and in law of negative decisions and the access of counsellors to information included in their client’s file, provided that it is liable to be examined by appeal authorities), while several senior courts have established clear and much higher standards in this respect.

Handouts: COI quality standards as legal criteria

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II.2. Danish Fact-Finding Missions

Speakers: Jens Weise Olesen, Danish Immigration Service (DIS)
Jan Olsen, Danish Immigration Service (DIS)

The Danish Immigration Service started fact-finding missions to countries of origin more than 10 years ago. In their lecture, Jan Olsen and Jens Weise Olesen shared their extensive experience on the organisation, conduct and reporting of fact-finding missions.

Fact-finding missions (FFM) enable COI units to gather both general and specific case-related, transparent and credible information. They allow researchers to quickly react to developments in countries of origin and, by conducting the mission, to establish both durable contacts to COI sources and to FFM partner COI units. Furthermore, public reports produced as a result of FFM can be shared with other COI units and COI users.

The decision to undertake a fact-finding mission can be driven by various factors, among them a general lack of information resulting from incomplete or inconclusive COI, a high number of applications with a simultaneous lack of information or difficult specific cases. The necessity to obtain detailed information quickly might be another aspect, as the results of FFMs are usually a quicker means of obtaining information than waiting for reports produced by other sources. Before deciding to undertake a FFM, the organisers should however clarify the possibility of carrying out the mission by, firstly, assessing the security situation in the country and, secondly, clearing the availability of and the access to sources.

Aside from an unsafe security situation, fact-finders might be confronted with a number of challenges, among them problems to enter the country, the challenge to identify relevant sources and considerations relating to the security situation and exposure of the interviewed source. Especially when working in a transnational team, differences in national legislation regarding public information and different methodological standards, e.g. quotation issues, should be taken into consideration.

During the preparation phase of a FFM, a proposal – including a sound security assessment of the region – and Terms of Reference should be elaborated and comments and acceptance from relevant stakeholders sought. In a next step, a decision on the number and profile of participants and possible cooperation with other organisations should be reached (as a general rule, FFM groups should be kept as small as possible). All requirements regarding the participants' profile, as well as the necessary labour input need to be clearly communicated. Furthermore, all partners should agree upon a language in which the report will be published, a timeframe for the mission and a publication date. Partners of the Danish Immigration Service for FFMs include the UK Home Office, Landinfo Norway, the Danish Refugee Council, the Swedish Immigration Service, the Finnish Directorate of Immigration, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada. Sources in the country of origin should also be selected and contacted during the preparation phase, meetings should be organised in advance as well in order to be able to start with the FFM without delay upon arrival. Logistics should also be taken care of in advance.

Upon arrival in the country of origin, all participants should be provided with a security briefing. Furthermore, the organisation of meetings and logistics needs to be finalised and confirmed. During the gathering of information, it might be crucial to stick to a sound methodology in order to obtain accurate and useful information: During the whole interview, the interviewer should take notes of all relevant

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information given. If possible, she/he should refrain from using technical recording devices in order to not discourage the interviewee. Despite the focus on the information itself, source protection is of crucial importance; therefore, the interviewer needs to confirm in advance whether the source may be referred to, and whether all information or certain parts of it are disclosable or undisclosable. In order to create a mutual trust between interviewer and interviewee, the aim of the mission should be presented beforehand, along with comparable reports of former missions. During the interview, the interviewee should be asked several times whether the information given may be included into the FFM report (some sources might additionally have to seek approval of the information). If necessary and required by the interviewee, the interview can be transcribed and sent to the source for approval.

Corroboration and balancing of important information need to be taken into consideration as well. Thus, in order to gather balanced information, to validate information or assess new sources or to gain further information or details on an issue in question, the need to identify further sources might arise. In some cases, it might be necessary to ask various sources for the validation of a new source, sometimes it may suffice to contact a source afterwards for the clarification of details.

In correspondence to sticking to a sound methodology during the mission, a clearly defined reporting methodology should be kept: Firstly, all participants need to have the chance to match their notes within the delegation and to agree to the notes taken by others; if it proves to be impossible to reach an agreement of certain sections of the notes, controversial information should rather be excluded. This issue is of crucial importance, as the interviews are not recorded – for the same reason, sources cannot be quoted but only be referenced to. The compared and compiled notes are then summarised into a set of “master notes” on which basis the report will be filed. Before starting to write the report, the delegation has to decide upon whether supplementary information is still needed or whether to include information by secondary sources in the report.

The mission report has to be written as soon as possible. A disclaimer informing about the purpose of the mission and its participants as well as a note that the report is the result of a joint fact-finding mission should be included. Furthermore, the report should contain a transparent list of sources. For an increased readability, it may additionally prove helpful to provide an executive summary and abstracts preceding each chapter, drawing conclusions should however be avoided. After a review of the report by a reference group (e.g. various NGOs that might use the report for their cases), it should be made publicly accessible.

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| Presentation: | Danish Fact-Finding Missions |
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III. Workshops

III.1. Credibility Assessment

Chair: Suzanne Duff, UNHCR

The workshop addressed the appropriate use of COI, in all stages of the RSD examination, to test and make a determination about the truth of statements or other information provided by an Applicant. This has been considered with, and in relation to, the other tasks related to establishing the facts (i.e. using COI to test credibility in the RSD Interview) and the broader principles and standards which apply to assessing credibility in RSD adjudication. The issues covered included identifying the elements of the evidence provided by the Applicant regarding which COI research should be undertaken, either to assess the credibility of the claim generally, or to examine specific aspects of the evidence which raise credibility concerns, as well as identifying factual elements of the claim for which COI is less significant and/or less likely to be available for the credibility assessment, and considering the alternative approaches to establishing the facts in question. It furthermore dealt with how to use specific COI effectively and appropriately in the RSD Interview to test credibility where COI contradicts statements or other information provided by the Applicant and with evaluating the significance of COI, in light of all of the other information and explanations received by the Applicant, for the credibility finding with respect to facts in question. Further details can be obtained from the workshop minutes below.

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| Details: | Workshop minutes |
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III.2. Customer Relations

Chair: Martin Stübinger, independent expert

In order to identify relevant factors to ensure that COI products address the needs of user groups without abandoning high quality COI standards, this workshop focused on two aspects: Firstly, on the main problem areas between COI units and their customers and, secondly, on feedback processes and mechanisms to identify specific problems. In the context of the first question, participants discussed some of the problems arising in their daily work, which included time constraints as well as external and internal pressures, insufficient questions (e.g. too general or specific, irrelevant or unclear queries), the linguistic needs of different target groups, especially referring to the requirement of official or working translations, and illegitimate requirements by inquirers, urging COI researchers to decide upon cases. In general, participants agreed that the main problem areas clustered around differences in COI standards of customers and COI units and resulting different expectations of COI professionals and users. Therefore, a thorough feedback process might be essential to identify diverging expectations. Feedback mechanisms named include user surveys and the development of standardised and regularly applied evaluation forms. Furthermore, participants emphasised the importance of regular contact with their target groups, either formalised via regular stakeholder meetings, or informal.

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III.3. ecoi.net – Search and Personalisation

Chair: Hans Lederer, ACCORD

ecoi.net features 67.000 documents, regularly covers 120 sources and provides its users with topics and issues files on specific topics in 11 countries. In 2006, ecoi.net registered more than 350.000 visits, approximately half of them from European countries. The presentation given during the workshop explained general features of ecoi.net as well as website features open to personalised users, such as an alert system on countries selected by the user, research baskets which enable users to cluster relevant documents of a research and a personal file folder to save especially important documents. The second part of the presentation explained how to conduct full text search by employing different search features and how to refine the search by applying advanced search features.

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| Details: | ecoi.net presentation |
| Links: | Personalisation on ecoi.net Search Tips (pdf) |

III.4. External Experts

Chair: Nancy Drozd, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB)

Over the past 18 years since the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada was created, the Research Directorate has developed and refined its processes and methodologies for creating and maintaining contact with external experts. The COI Unit relies extensively on external experts to fulfil its mandate. During the workshop, the chair provided an overview of oral sources, including types of oral sources, reasons for and strategies of contacting them, techniques of assessment of oral sources, details on how to contact and interview a subject-matter expert and ways of encouraging the use of oral sources in organisations. Templates and checklists applied by the IRB offered additional insight into the use of oral sources for COI research. Further details can be obtained from the presentation and the resource material below.

| | |
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| Presentation: | The Use of Oral Sources in Country-of-Origin Information Research |
| Resources: | Sample letter initial contact Interviewing Oral Sources Weighing Documentary/ Oral Source Information Contact database – record details Research guide checklist |

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III.5. Fact-Finding Missions

Chair: Jens Weise Olesen & Jan Olsen, Danish Immigration Service (DIS)

Following their lecture on fact-finding missions, the chairpersons arranged an open questions and answers session, dealing with queries relating to the organisation, funding, and conduct of Fact-Finding Missions. In detail, the chairs provided answers on how to find key sources, how to cope with logistical and security concerns, as well as on questions relating to research methodology and transparency of the research.

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| Details: | Questions and answers (minutes) |
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III.6. Gender Issues

Chair: Bethany Collier, Asylum Aid

Research in the field of COI hardly ever focuses on women's human rights: General human rights reports reduce information on women to paragraphs or very short sections, which don't reflect the fact women are 50% of the population, information relating to women is marginalised on COI sites and does not appear at all on mainstream portals or under limited categories, which makes it hard to search for this information on sites holding COI. Generally, less information is available on issues affecting women as asylum seekers, which complicates to help substantiate their claims. Therefore, the aim of the workshop was to enable participants to identify specific types of gender related harm, to identify appropriate sources for researching COI and to develop a gender related harm research strategy. Employing practical examples and research exercises, the workshop explored issues raised in relation to women's cases and country of origin information, types of gender related persecution and their impact on women, research strategies for addressing gender related claims and strategies to improve access to country of origin information in relation to women.

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| Presentation: | Gender issues – Strategies for improving COI research in relation to women |
| Resources: | RWRP Case Research Guidance COI Sources Exercises and Case Studies (1 – 3) |

III.7. Judges' View on COI

Chair: Andrew Jordan, International Association of Refugee Law Judges (IARLJ)

During the workshop, the chairperson discussed the role and use of country of origin information by judges from his view as Senior Immigration Judge and vice president of the UK Asylum and Immigration Tribunal (AIT), which is a member of the Advisory Panel on Country Information (APCI). He highlighted various aspects of the methodology used in relation to COI employed to substantiate decisions, among them questions of reliability and accuracy of sources, the importance of a neutral approach to sources and issues of reference to COI. Furthermore, he gave insight into the structures of

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AIT and APCI. In a concluding questions and answer session, participants had the chance to discuss details relating to country guidance cases and COI material used by judges.

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|------------|--|
| Details: | Paper by Andrew Jordan Minutes |
| Resources: | Asylum and Immigration Tribunal (ed.): Tribunals Service – Case Law; Practice Directions and Chief Adjudicator’s guidance notes. In: http://www.ait.gov.uk/practice_directions/case_law.htm#2 ; 2007/11/14. Minutes and working materials of all APCI meetings: www.apci.org.uk ; 2007/11/14. |

III.8. Knowledge Management

Chair: Michael Kirschner, Swiss Refugee Council (SRC)

Despite the necessity of managing their expert knowledge, COI units are often confronted with the task to manage their organisational, research related or procedural knowledge as well. Besides, especially COI units also need to gain access to the knowledge of external institutions. However, apart from its function to secure knowledge, techniques of knowledge management can contribute to better deal with limited resources and to motivating people. The workshop highlighted the difference between information and knowledge, defining the latter as a form of accumulated information or meta-information, and provided a brief overview of knowledge management tools, techniques and technology – ranging from simple handbooks and Excel databases to organisation specific WIKIs (open online sources). Divided into working groups, participants exemplarily designed “knowledge maps” for one country or region of origin, reflected the current employment of tools of knowledge management in their own organisations and discussed the possibilities of introducing new tools to their organisations.

| | |
|------------|--|
| Resources: | Communities of Practice - from Own to Shared Knowledge: www.communityofpractice.ch/ ; 2007/11/14 Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (ed.): Knowledge Management – on the Road to becoming a Learning Organization. In: http://162.23.39.120/dezaweb/ressources/resource_en_24549.pdf ; 2007/11/14. |
|------------|--|

III.9. Media Archives

Chair: Ulrich Hofmeister, ACCORD

Presentations: Hans van Oosterhout, Dutch Council for Refugees (DCR)
Boris Panhoelzl, ACCORD

Which are the most important media archives? Which features do they offer? How much does an inscription cost? During the workshop, the media archives LexisNexis®, Factiva®, AllAfrica, BBC Monitoring and World News Connection (WNC) were presented and discussed. The presentations included the quality and number of sources covered, prices and payment modalities and search

functions. Additionally, the performance of all media archives was practically demonstrated by means of typical search examples. Handouts of all presentations can be downloaded below.

Details: AllAfrica (www.allafrica.com)
 BBC Monitoring (www.bbcmonitoring.com)
 Factiva® (www.factiva.com)
 LexisNexis® (www.lexisnexis.com)
 World News Connection (WNC; <http://wnc.dialog.com>)

III.10. Medical Issues

Chair: Gerald Dreveny, Federal Asylum Office Austria (FAO Austria)

The workshop identified and discussed research problems related to information queries regarding medical treatment opportunities for certain diseases, most frequently PTSD, HIV/AIDS, diabetes, TBC, hepatitis C, heart diseases, cancer, kidney diseases and mental diseases, in specific Countries of Origin. The workshop focused primarily on the exchange of experience with research related to medical issues, in order to provide a base for finding best practice solutions in the future. Furthermore, participants exchanged probable solutions to problems arising out of medical queries and compiled a list of sources frequently taken into account for information requests relating to medical issues. Details on research problems and solutions, sources, countries of origin frequently mentioned in relation to medical queries and a list of diseases often inquired about in medical queries and can be obtained from the minutes below.

Details: Workshop minutes

III.11. Source Assessment

Chair: Gábor Gyulai, Hungarian Helsinki Committee (HHC)

Distorted by interests and mission of their editors and actors, no source can be ex ante seen as absolutely objective and reliable. Thus, source assessment is a crucial necessity in the process of COI research. It should consider the five main criteria of *who* edited the source (e.g. government, NGO, media, academic institution, international organisation), *what* topic or scope does the source cover, *when* has the source been published (publication circle), *why* is it being published (intention) and *how* has the source been compiled (working methodology). On the basis of two case studies, participants of this workshop assessed various sources and discussed suggestions on how to deal with biased or dubious sources.

Reference: Austrian Red Cross/ ACCORD (ed.) 2004: Module B – Reliability and Balance. In: Researching Country of Origin Information – a training manual. In: <http://www.coi-training.net/content/doc/en-COI%20Manual%20Part%20I%20plus%20Annex%200060426.pdf>; 2007/11/14; pp 62 – 69

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UNHCR (ed.) 1992: Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status under the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of

Refugees; HCR/IP/4/Eng/REV.1. In: <http://www.unhcr.org/home/PUBL/3d58e13b4.pdf>; 2007/11/14.

Case studies: Scarabantia case study
How to deal with dubious sources – The case of Free Prangari

III.12. Staff Management & Quality Assurance

Chair: Andrea Jakober, ACCORD

Based on available job descriptions (job profiles) for researchers and documentalists of participating organisations, the workshop participants discussed core competencies of COI unit staff as one aspect of quality assurance. Minimum requirements of skills and competencies before starting the job as a COI researcher were identified. Among others, the working group discussed necessary levels of language skills, whether knowledge on the region or country in question is a prerequisite and the most important personal skills essential to good performance in a COI unit.

Furthermore, participants introduced their various procedures of job induction, ranging from 3-week work-shadowing and 6-months supervision to a 6-months introduction into organisational procedures accompanied by a one-year supervision phase. New researching staff of all participating organisations additionally received COI specific training and/or IT training.

Details: Workshop minutes documenting the result on the discussion concerning minimum core competencies for COI researchers before starting the job

III.13. Styleguides Assessment

Chair: Agata Ewertynska, Office for Repatriation and Aliens (ORA)

Analysing existing styleguides, or elements thereof, participants of this workshop discussed the various components and general role of styleguides. Styleguides are generally understood to provide a set of rules for the production of printed materials for distribution and should hence offer standardised guidance for the uniforming, referencing, quotation, text processing, wording, employment of glossaries, transcriptions and disclaimers of text and other means of communication. Styleguides discussed include the six sources mentioned below (for details, also see workshop minutes). Participants furthermore discussed the advantages of quotation versus summarising of sources in COI products, whereby it became clear that most units usually employ summaries, followed by original quotes. Additionally, disclaimers of various COI units' products were analysed according to the rules set out by the EU Common Guidelines and the Training Manual "Researching Country of Origin Information" by ACCORD and the COI Network.

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Details: Workshop minutes

Existing styleguides/ elements of styleguides:

1. International Organisation of Refugee Law Judges (ed.) 2006: Judicial Criteria for Assessing Country of Origin Information (COI): A Checklist - Paper for 7th Biennial IARLJ World Conference, Mexico City. In: <http://www.iarlj.nl/cms/images/stories/forms/WPPapers/Hugo%20StoreyCountryofOriginInformationAndCountryGuidanceWP.pdf>; 2007/11/14.
2. Mason, Elisa 2002: Features - Update to Guide to Country Research for Refugee Status Determination. In: <http://www.llrx.com/features/rsd2.htm>; 2007/11/14
3. Austrian Red Cross/ ACCORD (ed.) 2004: Researching Country of Origin Information – a training manual. In: <http://www.coi-training.net/content/doc/en-COI%20Manual%20Part%20I%20plus%20Annex%2020060426.pdf>; 2007/11/14.
4. Austrian Red Cross/ ACCORD (ed.) 2006: Researching Country of Origin Information – e-training course. In: www.coi-training.net (login required); 2007/11/14.
5. Department of International Protection UNHCR (ed.) 2005: Style Guide, 2nd edition. In: <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain/opendocpdf.pdf?docid=42d67b3a4>; 2007/11/14.
6. Common EU Guidelines for processing Country of Origin Information (COI) – final draft (version dated April 5, 2007); ARGO project JLS/2005/ARGO/GC/03

III.14. Transparency & Traceability

Chair: Anna Ladurner, ACCORD

Transparency can be defined as an attitude of a COI product which enables the COI user to trace where the information provided derives from, to distinguish between text produced by the COI researcher and text which is quoted from COI sources and to comprehend and reconstruct how the research has been conducted. As transparency of a COI product can be considered to be inversely proportional with the readability of the same, i.e. a high level of transparency resulting in a low degree of readability and vice versa, the main objective of the workshop was to discuss the balance between transparency and readability. After a short theoretical introduction in the text linguistic background of transparency, the participants were invited to bring in their own concepts and ideas concerning transparency and readability. By analysing UK Home Office Country reports from different years, an institution's policy concerning the transparency and readability of its product was shown in an exemplary way. In a next step, participants were invited to assess the work of their own organisations concerning the balance between the two textual features in question. Using a number of fictitious research situations (e.g. "I couldn't find any information on the issue in question", "I could find one piece of information but I couldn't corroborate it"), the participants of the workshop developed best practices of dealing with these situations and found corresponding wordings which could be included in answers to information requests.

Presentation: Transparency and Traceability

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III.15. UNHCR's Refworld

Chair: Mignon van der Liet-Senders, UNHCR

Refworld provides COI professionals, and those involved in refugee status determination decision-making and policy development, with a balanced selection of information. The information comes from a wide variety of sources and organisations recognised as authoritative and reliable by UNHCR and others. Refworld includes country and legal information, as well as policy and reference documents. The newly established website (www.refworld.org), launched in June 2007, offers several browsing and (advanced) search possibilities and special (thematic) features. In her presentation (see below), the chairperson also explained the optimised use of the website. In a subsequent questions and answers section, she commented on Refworld's staff resources, available languages, its relation to ecoi.net and possibilities of feedback (see minutes below).

Presentation: UNHCR's Refworld

Details: Questions and answers (minutes)

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Annex I: Timetable and agenda

Tue, 19 June

| | | | |
|---------------|--|-------------------------------------|------------------------|
| 9:30 - 10:30 | Registration and Welcome | | |
| 10:30 - 11:20 | Lecture: COI quality standards as legal criteria | | |
| 11:30 - 12:45 | Judges' View on COI | Knowledge Management | Credibility Assessment |
| 12:45 - 14:00 | Lunch | | |
| 14:00 - 15:15 | Styleguides Assessment | UNHCR's Refworld | |
| 15:15 - 16:00 | Market Place | | |
| 16:00 - 17:15 | Staff Management & Quality Assurance | ecoi.net – Search & Personalisation | Credibility Assessment |
| 18:00 | Social Event: Vienna Fact-Finding Mission | | |

Topics to be discussed in workshops:

- *Credibility Assessment*
- *Customer Relations*
- *ecoi.net - Search & Personalisation*
- *External Experts*
- *Fact-Finding Missions*
- *Gender Issues*
- *Judges' View on COI*
- *Knowledge Management*
- *Media Archives*
- *Medical Issues*
- *Source Assessment*
- *Staff Management & Quality Assurance*
- *Styleguides Assessment*
- *Transparency & Traceability*
- *UNHCR's Refworld*

Wed, 20 June

| | | | |
|---------------|--------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| 9:30 - 10:45 | Lecture: Fact-finding missions | | |
| 10:45 - 11:30 | Market Place | | |
| 11:30 - 12:45 | Fact-Finding Missions | Knowledge Management | Gender Issues |
| 12:45 - 14:00 | Lunch | | |
| 14:00 - 15:15 | | External Experts | Source Assessment |
| 15:15 - 16:00 | Market Place | | |
| 16:00 - 17:15 | Customer Relations | Medical Issues | |

Market Place

Info desks to enable exchange among participants on the following topics:

- *Ecoi.net – Questions & Answers*
- *Databases & COI Units*
- *Sources*
- *Staff exchange, internships, exchange of project ideas, finding project partners*

Thu, 21 June

| | | | |
|---------------|--|-----------------------------|-------------------|
| 9:30 - 10:45 | Media Archives | Transparency & Traceability | Source Assessment |
| 11:00 - 12:00 | Summary, Conclusions, Wrap up Market Place, Feedback | | |
| 12:00 - 12:45 | Lunch | | |

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Annex II: Participants

| Country | Organisation | First name | Last name |
|----------------|---|----------------|------------|
| Austria | Federal Asylum Office | Mr. Roland | Darazs |
| Austria | Federal Asylum Office | Mr. Wolfgang | Hochmüller |
| Austria | Federal Asylum Office | Mr. Gerfried | Koini |
| Bulgaria | State agency for refugees | Mr. Alexi | Alexiev |
| Bulgaria | State agency for refugees | Mr. Grischa | Takov |
| Canada | Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada | Ms. Nancy | Drozd |
| Czech Republic | Society of Citizens Assisting Migrants (SOZE) | Ms. Hana | Tothova |
| Denmark | Danish Immigration Service | Mr. Jens Weise | Olesen |
| Denmark | Danish Immigration Service | Mr. Jan | Olsen |
| Finland | Directorate of Immigration/Country information | Ms. Sirpa | Ranta |
| France | Forum Réfugiés | Ms. Magalie | Santamaria |
| Germany | Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Germany) | Ms. Michael | Buettner |
| Germany | Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (Germany) | Mr. Alfons | Graus |
| Hungary | Hungarian Helsinki Committee | Mr. Gábor | Gyulai |
| Hungary | Office of Immigration and Nationality, COI Unit | Ms. Diana | Balassa |
| Hungary | Office of Immigration and Nationality, COI Unit | Ms. Zsuzsanna | Tóth |

| Country | Organisation | First name | Last name |
|-----------------|---|----------------|------------------|
| Ireland | Refugee Documentation Centre | Ms. Elisabeth | Ahmed |
| Italy | Italian Council for Refugees | Ms. Raffaella | Pascarella |
| Latvia | Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs /Refugee Affairs Department | Ms. Ligita | Geidane |
| Lithuania | Asylum Affairs Division Migration Department under the Ministry of Interior | Ms. Dalia | Dzimidienè |
| Luxembourg | Ministère des Affaires étrangères et de l'Immigration, Direction de l'Immigration | Ms. Anouk | Kirpach |
| Netherlands | Dutch Council for Refugees, COI Unit | Mr. Robert | IJsseldijk |
| Netherlands | Dutch Council for Refugees, COI Unit | Mr. Hans | van Oosterhout |
| Netherlands | Office for Country Information and Language Analysis | Ms. Mark | van Elzaker |
| Poland | Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights | Ms. Agata | Forys |
| Poland | Office for Repatriation and Aliens, COI Unit | Ms. Agata | Ewertynska |
| Poland | Office for Repatriation and Aliens, COI Unit | Ms. Malgorzata | Rachfal-Kaminska |
| Romania | CNRR | Mr. Catalin | Albu |
| Romania | CNRR | Mr. Stefan | Leonescu |
| Romania | CNRR | Ms. Bianca | Tampau |
| Romania | Ministry of Interior and Administration - National Refugee Office | Mr. Eleodor | Pirvu |
| Slovak Republic | Human Rights League | Ms. Katarína | Fajnorová |
| Slovak Republic | Migration Office, Ministry of Interior, Slovak Republic | Ms. Petra | Galadova |
| Slovenia | Mol; Asylum Section; COI Unit | Mr. Žiga | Tomc |
| Spain | ACCEM | Ms. Marta | Sainz de Baranda |

| Country | Organisation | First name | Last name |
|----------------|--|----------------|----------------------|
| Spain | Spanish Asylum Office | Ms. Inmaculada | Vidal Torregrosa |
| Sweden | Swedish Migration Board / Country of Origin Information Unit | Ms. Sylvia | Hagman Hoffmann |
| Sweden | Swedish Migration Board / Country of Origin Information Unit | Ms. Ingela | Waller |
| Switzerland | Swiss Refugee Council | Mr. Michael | Kirschner |
| UNHCR | UNHCR | Ms. Suzanne | Duff |
| UNHCR | UNHCR | Ms. Mignon | van der Liet-Senders |
| United Kingdom | International Association of Refugee Law Judges (IARLJ) | Mr. Andrew | Jordan |
| United Kingdom | Asylum Aid | Ms. Bethany | Collier |

ACCORD staff at venue (organising and participating)

| | | | |
|--------------|------------|-------------|----------|
| Mr. Ulrich | Hofmeister | Mr. Boris | Panhölzl |
| Ms. Andrea | Jakober | Ms. Vanessa | Prinz |
| Mr. Reinhold | Jawhari | Mr. Martin | Peichl |
| Ms. Anna | Ladurner | Ms. Yerivan | Saleh |
| Mr. Hans | Lederer | Ms. Barbara | Svec |



Annex III: Evaluation of the 1st COI Master Class

Annex III.1. Methodology

The 1st COI Master Class has been designed as a pilot project for a form of continuous advanced learning for COI professionals from NGOs and governmental organisations. Being a unique project to enable advanced training to this rather small target group, an emphasis was laid upon a sound evaluation of the project.

Therefore, all participants of the Master Class were given evaluation sheets and asked to note down their impressions throughout the duration of the event. In order to enable participants to express their thoughts as openly as possible, the evaluation sheets were divided into two parts, the first of which only comprised headlines of the guiding aspects we were interested in (learning concept, networking concept, organisation and conduct, administration, workshops, marketplace, lectures), whereas the second part was designed to evaluate the single workshops the participants attended in half-open questionnaires. 38 of 52 participants (73 percent) returned the evaluation sheets at the end of the Master Class.

The first part of the questionnaire was analysed employing Mayring's qualitative content analysis; for the workshop evaluation quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis were combined (basically methods of statistical computation and qualitative content analysis).

Additionally, a randomised group of 18 participants has been contacted two months following the Master Class to be interviewed about the long-term impact they felt the Master Class has had on their work. In 15 cases, the contact tries were successful. These interviews were also analysed qualitatively.

Annex III.2. General impression

In general, participants were enthusiastic about the Master Class as a whole. They particularly highlighted the efficient organisation of all activities and the choice of workshop topics. The Master Class was regarded as an event that meets a need amongst COI practitioners.

Many participants said to go home with many newly made contacts, with new ideas and with lots of information, gained from the workshops and lectures and from the people they had met.

Annex III.3. Evaluation of the concept

The Master Class' learning concept is regarded by the participants as a unique concept, which should be continued on a regular basis. Especially the possibility of an exchange of knowledge and ideas and the chance to meet colleagues were strongly appreciated. Participants who were interviewed two months after the event expressed a high interest in attending a second Master Class.

The networking concept was evaluated highly positively. Many participants had not realised before that so many people across Europe are indeed working with COI. They felt they were given the chance to meet other COI professionals and thus exchange experiences they cannot always share with their colleagues at home. Many participants indicated to have established important contacts which they were keen in maintaining.

Annex III.4. Evaluation of the Master Class activities

Annex III.4.1. Workshops

The participants of the 15 workshops were asked to rate content, structure, interactivity, practicability and interest in follow-up on a scale from 1 to 4. A specification for follow-up and an overall assessment of the workshop could be provided in text.

The quality of the workshops was generally evaluated as good. The overall rating for all workshops and for all aspects is 3.23 out of 4. The three workshops receiving the highest rates were on transparency and traceability (3.73), customer relations (3.55) and source assessment (3.52). Only two workshops scored below 3.

The main criticism was that there was too little time to discuss issues in depth and that the level of some workshops was not as advanced as expected.

| Workshop | Content | Structure | Interactivity | Practicability | Follow-up | Average |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|---------------|----------------|-------------|-------------|
| Transparency & Traceability | 3.86 | 4.00 | 3.57 | 3.57 | 3.67 | 3.73 |
| Customer Relations | 3.40 | 3.60 | 3.80 | 3.20 | 3.75 | 3.55 |
| Source Assessment | 3.72 | 3.78 | 3.50 | 3.61 | 3.00 | 3.52 |
| External Experts | 3.73 | 3.53 | 3.20 | 3.33 | 3.13 | 3.38 |
| UNHCR's Refworld | 3.63 | 3.47 | 2.84 | 3.79 | 3.00 | 3.35 |
| Staff Management & Quality Assurance | 3.38 | 3.38 | 3.50 | 3.00 | 3.20 | 3.29 |
| Media Archives | 3.77 | 3.50 | 3.13 | 3.14 | 2.63 | 3.23 |
| Knowledge Management | 3.41 | 3.00 | 3.17 | 3.04 | 3.30 | 3.19 |
| Medical Issues | 3.19 | 3.12 | 3.41 | 2.82 | 3.29 | 3.17 |
| Style guides Assessment | 3.33 | 2.89 | 3.11 | 3.11 | 3.14 | 3.12 |
| Fact-Finding Missions | 3.64 | 3.09 | 2.91 | 2.91 | 3.00 | 3.11 |
| ecoi.net - Search & Personalisation | 3.25 | 3.44 | 3.11 | 3.22 | 2.50 | 3.11 |
| Credibility Assessment | 3.39 | 3.17 | 3.00 | 2.86 | 3.25 | 3.00 |
| Gender Issues | 3.33 | 3.17 | 2.83 | 3.00 | 2.33 | 2.93 |
| Judges' View on COI | 3.27 | 2.80 | 2.13 | 2.36 | 3.38 | 2.79 |
| Average all workshops | 3.49 | 3.34 | 3.15 | 3.15 | 3.09 | |

Table: The average scores given by workshop participants. The workshops are ordered descending on the average score per workshop.

It is interesting to note the difference in scores between the five elements that were evaluated. Participants were positive about the contents of the workshops and also the structure was rated quite positively. The interactivity and practicability of the workshops however were rated less well, and the interest in a follow-up on the workshops received the lowest score.

Since interactivity is an essential element of the set-up of a workshop and practicability was one of the objectives of the Master Class, this is something which should be taken into consideration by organising a second COI Master Class. Chairs of future workshops should receive clear guidelines on these two aspects of the workshops; they should be asked to pay more attention to involving the participants and should also include as many practicable examples and case studies as possible.

The workshops were generally assessed to have had a measurable impact on the daily work of the participants. During the telephone interviews conducted two months after the Master Class, a wide variety of effects were mentioned, ranging from new rules for customers of COI units to the revision of work methodology. The highest impact was noted on the use of sources and the style of writing query responses. The workshops on external experts, knowledge management and Refworld were mentioned most often in respect to their impact on the participants' daily work, credibility assessment, and ecoinet were also mentioned more than once.

Annex III.4.2. Lectures

Two lectures were included in the programme, one on how to organise and conduct a fact finding mission and one on the preliminary results of a study conducted in the scope of the COI Network III project on legislation and jurisprudence of appeal and higher asylum authorities of EU countries and European courts which contain provisions relevant to the use of COI standards.

Both the format, the number of lectures and the choice of topics were positively evaluated. There were some negative remarks, however, on the level of interactivity, the possibility of discussion and the structuring of the presentations themselves.

For a future Master Class, the objectives of the lectures should be reconsidered with an emphasis on the exact purpose of the lecture as a form of knowledge exchange and on more precise instructions for the lecturers regarding the level and format of the presentation.

Annex III.4.3. Marketplace

The marketplace was set up in between lectures and workshops to offer participants the possibility and timeframe for informal exchange and a place where they could present COI products from their organisations.

The concept of the marketplace was generally seen as being good and useful. In practice, it was mostly used as a place to network during coffee breaks, some participants even agreed upon staff exchanges. The idea of having a marketplace where people could “sell” and “buy” information products did not work out as planned. More attention should be paid to this concept in a potential second Master Class.

Annex III.5. Continuation of the Master Class concept

The question if the first European COI Master Class was a successful event and should be continued has been generally answered affirmatively. All participants were very positive about the concept and the initiative taken by the COI Network III project. The Master Class seems to fill up a gap in the needs of COI professionals across Europe to extend their knowledge and to expand their networks. Since there is no other platform where COI professionals normally meet, the Master Class could fulfil an important role in the ongoing education of COI professionals and add to the professionalisation of COI practice across Europe.

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