



Return migrants in Sri Lanka

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The re-migration project

This case study of return migration from the UK to Sri Lanka was conducted as part of ippr's re-migration research, exploring emigration among the UK's immigrants. Case studies were also conducted in Ghana, Pakistan, Nigeria and New Zealand. These countries were selected in order to ensure the research reflected a cross section of return experiences and a mix of migration profiles.

Each research team case reviewed existing relevant literature and data on return migration to the country, especially from the UK. They conducted 20 life history interviews with returnees. All the studies aimed to recruit a range of respondents that broadly reflected the profile of returned and onward migrants from the UK in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, nationality, employment status, reason for migrating to the UK and reason for migrating to the case study country.

The case studies provide a qualitative insight into migrants' motivations and experiences of return, and do not seek to provide a comprehensive analysis of the dynamics and impacts of return to these countries.

The interviews explored the following areas:

- Participants' motivation for moving to the UK
- Participants' experiences of living, working and studying in the UK
- Participants' motivations for and experiences of leaving the UK and returning to home country
- Participants' life in their home country since returning
- Participants' sense of identity and links to the UK.

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Introduction

Sri Lanka retains particularly close ties with the UK. Although the political importance of the former colonial power in Sri Lanka's national affairs has been eclipsed by the United States, Japan and most obviously India, at a personal and cultural level ties between the two countries remain strong and friendly. English is the country's third language and for a time after independence had an official status as a 'link language' between the national languages of Sinhala and Tamil. In the 2001 census, about a third of the population in the areas covered reported that they could speak English.

The clearest ongoing ties are through family and education. Family links are common, particularly for the wealthiest but they extend to all sections of society, especially in the Tamil community. The UK continues to enjoy an excellent reputation in the field of education, though only a wealthy, mostly Colombo-based, minority are able to experience it first hand. A growing minority of children are educated at private, English-language 'international schools' and it is common for students at such schools to sit for the 'London A-levels'. For those who can afford university education abroad, which includes a majority of international school students, the UK is a particularly favoured destination, though many now see the US or Australia as more attractive. Many national politicians were educated in the UK and, significantly, many, including the current president, still choose to educate their children there.

The density of these family and cultural ties is reflected in the significance of the Sri Lankan community resident in the UK. The 2001 UK census does not separate Sri Lankan nationals from other South Asians so offers little indication of numbers. However, data from the 2006 Labour Force Survey (LFS) indicates a population of 102,950 Sri Lankan-born individuals living in the UK (ippr 2007). According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), 52,741 Sri Lankans have claimed asylum in the UK since 1980. Only a small minority were granted asylum, though others were provided with some form of humanitarian protection. Combined with the LFS data, asylum data suggests that a sizeable minority of the Sri Lankan-born population of the UK arrived through the asylum system.

There are a limited number of published studies that consider the nature or dynamics of the Sri Lankan community in the UK (for example, Valentine Daniel and Thangarajah 1995, Van Hear *et al* 2004). However, none of these investigations focuses explicitly on return. There is a much larger literature on return migration to Sri Lanka more generally, but similarly none of these studies mention return from the UK; the focus is the much more significant population of returning labour migrants mainly from the oil-exporting countries of the Gulf. The only large-scale statistical sources that indicate the potential significance of return movement from the UK are from the Assisted Voluntary Returns programme administered by the International Organization for Migration (IOM); between 2002 and 2008 920 individuals returned to Sri Lanka under this programme, virtually all of whom had had their asylum claims rejected, so this is obviously only a very partial reflection of the total numbers of people returning, or moving back and forth.

This study is therefore a first attempt to chart the factors that may govern migration of Sri Lankan nationals from the UK back to Sri Lanka. The sample size was relatively small, with 20 return migrants interviewed, but the sample was stratified to reflect as broad a picture of returning migrants as was possible with such a limited number. Half of the sample had returned under the UK's Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) and were contacted through IOM. These individuals were interviewed at locations around the island. The remaining half had all studied in the UK and some of them had gone onto work, before returning permanently to Sri Lanka.

This report falls into three sections: the following section presents a detailed literature review of migration from Sri Lanka, focusing particularly on return migration. The second section discusses the methodology of the study and analyses data from all interviews conducted. Detailed information on all 20 interviewees forms the appendix.

2. Studying return to Sri Lanka: a review of the available literature

Mass migration in modern Sri Lanka is a fairly recent phenomenon. International migration during the colonial period involved relatively small numbers of highly educated administrators who typically found work elsewhere in the British Empire. The policies of the first Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) government, elected in 1956, encouraged the emigration of a growing number of Tamil speakers, but this remained relatively restricted.

The first major emigration took place in 1964 with the essentially forced movement back to India of labourers of Indian origin who had arrived during the colonial period (De Silva 2007). The autonomous, socialist orientation of government in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in significantly less emigration over that period, though an outflow of educated and technically qualified persons was gradually taking place during this time as professionals such as doctors, engineers and accountants were leaving for developed countries.

The much more significant migration of predominantly unskilled workers to the Middle East began in 1976 and increased steadily after the liberalisation of the Sri Lankan economy in the late 1970s (Gunasekera 2006). Another distinct movement followed the large-scale riots of July 1983 which instigated a new phase in the island's enduring ethnic conflict (Valentine Daniel and Thangarajah 1995). The emigration of Tamils seeking protection took on a very different magnitude after 1983 and was no longer confined to the educated or wealthy. Since this time, emigration has become a widespread movement as increasing numbers of people have left Sri Lanka, encompassing all social classes, ethnic groups and geographical regions.

The population of Sri Lankans living abroad is usually estimated at between 1.2 and 1.5 million, which represented about 15 per cent of the total labour force in 2007 (Gallina 2007). These figures are based on the number of individuals registered with the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE), which focuses on labour migration alone and mostly on unskilled workers. It includes relatively few highly skilled workers and totally overlooks those leaving the country for purposes other than work, such as family reunification, education or asylum. The actual number of Sri Lankans living outside the country is therefore likely to be higher, between 2 and 3 million, or 10 to 15 per cent of the entire population.

Migration is often explained in terms of the ethnic categorisation that is so central to virtually all aspects of social and political life in Sri Lanka. The great paradox of ethnicity in Sri Lanka is that despite the obviously socially constructed nature of ethnicity and the substantial literature on the ways in which ethnic categories are crossed and used strategically on a daily basis (for example, Jeganathan 2004) all state institutions treat ethnicity as primordial and inflexible and so citizens are obliged to do the same.

The last national census in 2001 used the seven ethnic categories Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamil, Indian Tamil, Sri Lankan Moor, Malay, Burgher and Other, though these have rarely remained stable from one census to another. Since the last census that included the entire territory was in 1981 there is no reliable recent information on the overall ethnic breakdown of the population but it is widely assumed that about 73 per cent of the population is Sinhalese, 16 per cent is Tamil ('Sri Lankan' and 'Indian' combined), 10 per cent is Muslim ('Sri Lankan Moor' and 'Malay') who mostly speak the Tamil language and the final 1 per cent is mostly accounted for by the tiny Burgher population.

It is relatively common for studies of international migration from Sri Lanka to separate individuals into distinct groups according to their reason for leaving and their choice of destination. Obvious groups arise from the significant unskilled labour migration to the Gulf, which more or less coincides with SLBFE data, and includes people who will eventually have to return and large-scale movements for purposes of seeking asylum, which tend to be directed to Western Europe or North America and are more likely to be permanent. Although neither UNHCR nor the SLBFE, the two significant sources of data for these movements, records ethnicity, it is widely accepted that these two movements also coincide significantly with the ethnic categories Sinhalese and Tamil (Srisankarajah 2002).

It is clearer to consider these movements as distinct, and we will follow this practice, but it is important to highlight the potential drawbacks of this way of understanding Sri Lankan migration sub-systems. The geography of migration from Sri Lanka is not so neatly divided along lines of ethnicity, motivation and permanence. Most obviously this kind of division overlooks the significant Muslim minority, who are well represented among international migrants. The necessary data to support these assumptions is also not available and some recent reports in the Tamil press suggest that as many as 70 per cent of recent labour migrants to the Middle East are Tamil (Thinakkural 20 January 2007) which is usually considered as a 'Sinhalese' migration, though no evidence is offered in support of this. Categories are switched as asylum seekers become labour migrants and students become professional migrants. Migration also offers individuals an opportunity to switch identities and there is plenty of anecdotal evidence for Sinhalese Buddhists or Hindu Tamils taking up Christian or Muslim practices during work contracts in the Middle East to increase their job opportunities and reduce social stresses.

Nevertheless, with the important proviso that these movements are not discrete we will consider them as distinct, at least for the purposes of this review. We consider three categories:

- Labour migrants
- Asylum seekers
- Professionals and students.

Each of these groups returns under broadly different circumstances, for different reasons, though the literature on return migration to Sri Lanka is extremely limited, so these are still poorly understood. This situation reflects the reality that, with the exception of periodic large-scale returns from the Middle East, such as from Kuwait in 1990 or Lebanon in 2006, return to Sri Lanka has been modest over the years due to unfavourable political and economic conditions. Despite the significant out-migration of asylum seekers, professionals and students, the literature available on return migration to Sri Lanka is exclusively focused on the return of temporary labour migrants from the oil-rich countries of the Gulf and neighbouring region.

Government efforts have been similarly focused on returning labour migrants. The Return Migration Branch within the Ministry of Labour was first established in 1981. By 1985 it had been absorbed into the newly created Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE), which has gone through a series of transformations, but remains the primary government-affiliated entity responsible for the promotion of foreign employment, the regulation of foreign employment agents as well as the protection and welfare of Sri Lankans employed abroad and their families. The Bureau requires compulsory registration of migrant workers, provides insurance for migrants, conducts training and awareness programmes, supports reintegration programmes, identifies new markets for Sri Lankan labour and administers labour sections in Sri Lankan embassies.

The following literature review is structured around the three significant categories of migration, focusing specifically on aspects of return and reintegration for each of them.

Labour migration

Labour migrants are primarily female. Women have outnumbered men for all but the first two of the 20 years for which SLBFE has data available (1986–2006). In most years women account for 60 per cent of departures and most of them travel to the oil-rich countries of West Asia (Tables 1 and 2). There appears to be a preference for other destinations; for instance, women paid comparatively high fees to reach Italy (Wanasundera 2001). Women typically find unskilled domestic work (the 'housemaid' category in Table 2) while men tend to find semi-skilled work in factories, in construction sites or in the hospitality industry. Women are mostly between the ages of 20 and 40 at the time of migration and a majority are married with children. Education levels are generally in the primary to middle school range and women are less educated than men.

Table 1: Departures for foreign employment by year and sex 2005-2007

2005			2006			2007		
Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
88,113	143,177	231,290	90,170	111,778	210,948	102,629	114,677	217,306

Table 2: Departures for foreign employment, by country and skill level 2007

Country	Professional level	Middle level	Clerical & related	Skilled	Semi-skilled	Unskilled	Housemaid	Total
Saudi Arabia	275	582	554	13,341	554	12,034	32,883	60,223
Kuwait	35	161	239	5,191	209	3,033	32,015	40,883
UAE	509	1,493	1,710	8,957	1,204	11,385	13,497	38,755
Qatar	354	700	964	13,183	1,086	18,442	3,999	38,728
Lebanon	0	26	7	54	5	277	6,521	6,890
Jordan	6	62	231	3,747	26	420	3,894	8,386
South Korea	0	12	8	269	4	2,375	8	2,676
Oman	107	284	208	785	90	517	1,880	3,871
Bahrain	45	89	90	1,038	73	481	3,287	5,103
Maldives	186	233	304	1,516	51	1,177	233	3,700
Cyprus	0	11	4	49	2	324	2,611	3,001
Malaysia	4	9	2	113	88	525	294	1,035
Other	88	173	130	1,366	43	1,201	1,054	4,055
Total	1,609	3,835	4,451	49,609	3,435	52,191	102,176	217,306

Source: Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (2007)

The statistics in Table 1 list only the countries with total departures over a thousand. This data includes only those migrants who have registered with the SLFBE, which is highly selective; there are 20 departures listed to the UK during the year and only one to the United States, for example. Lower skilled workers are much more likely to register, as opposed to professionals and students who are certainly vastly underrepresented. Migrants leaving on tourist visas, or with no visa at all, who may eventually claim asylum, are obviously totally excluded from this data.

SLFBE statistics are not broken down by ethnicity, though pre-departure training programmes are offered widely in the Tamil language, as well as Sinhalese, which suggests a significant proportion of Tamils and Muslims are among those registering with the bureau.

Significant investigations of return migration to Sri Lanka began in the 1980s with a series of studies within the Employment and Manpower Division of the Ministry of Plan Implementation, led by its then director, Korale. These explored methodologies such as disembarkation cards (Employment and Manpower Division 1985) and small-scale surveys (Korale 1986), with largely descriptive results.

In the mid to late 1980s, Sri Lanka was one of five countries included in the International Migration for Employment programme of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), which produced a further range of studies on return (ILO/ARTEP 1985, Athukorala 1986, Rodrigo and Jayatissa 1989, Athukorala 1990). At the same time the Marga Institute in Colombo was establishing its longstanding reputation for expertise in the migration field, mainly through research of its director, Godfrey Gunatilleke who initially used Korale's studies (Gunatilleke 1986) but went on to conduct the largest survey of return migrants to Sri Lanka completed to date, based on a sample of 500 households drawn from all over the country (Gunatilleke 1991).

More recently, researchers based at the Centre for Women's Research (CENWOR), Colombo, have completed an influential series of projects, based around in-depth interviews with smaller samples (Wanasundera 2001, Jayaweera *et al* 2002, Wanasundera and Jayasinghe 2004).

The remainder of this section considers this, and related, literature in more detail, examining institutional support, the process of return and its social and economic impacts.

Institutional support for return migrants

The SLBFE plays a key role in assisting and preparing prospective labour migrants during the pre-migration phase. Since 1995 all labour migrants have been required to register with the Bureau, though there are still many who do not. Pre-departure training has been mandatory since 1996, though again this does not mean that all migrants receive training. Training includes practical elements of domestic service, in addition to financial management and advice on dealing with loneliness or other psychological problems that may be encountered. From 1997 the SLBFE introduced model contracts and in 2007 required translation of contracts (which are typically in English) into a language which the worker could understand. Finally, the Bureau provides insurance cover to all migrants who register.

Successive studies have inevitably identified limitations in the SLBFE efforts, including shortcomings in the training programme such as the lack of training for male workers, dated training curricula, inadequate training on certain areas such as financial management, and the inability of trainees to absorb the content due to their having poor education levels.

The protection and welfare of Sri Lankan labour migrants while they are abroad is the shared responsibility of the Foreign Ministry, the Labour Ministry and SLBFE. The Bureau leads the effort through the Overseas Workers' Welfare fund, which provides safe houses, legal assistance and repatriation of stranded workers, appointing Welfare Officers to Sri Lankan Embassies in all Gulf states and establishing transit homes in Kuwait, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, the three most popular countries for labour migration (Gallina 2007, Gunasekara 2006). In addition there are some parallel initiatives to support migrants' families back home.

The local Sri Lankan embassy takes the responsibility for the return of abused, stranded or otherwise vulnerable workers. In addition, ministerial delegations regularly negotiate for the release of undocumented over-stayers and jailed workers. For instance, the Ministry of Labour successfully negotiated the release of 300 workers in police custody from Lebanon in 1999 (Dias and Jayasundere 2001). The Government of Sri Lanka also plays a crucial role in ensuring the safety of mass returns during crises, as was the case during the 1990-91 Gulf War (Perera 1992) and the 2006 Lebanon crisis, particularly through the Migrant Assistance Centre (MAC) in Seeduwa, very close to the airport.

Several studies suggest that the needs of the returnee have been overshadowed by the needs of the prospective migrant. Attention paid to returnees is reactive more than proactive. Serious action to address the needs of returnees primarily takes place in reaction to crisis situations where mass flows of labour migrants are forced to return to Sri Lanka. At other times, labour migrants return is unnoticed, taking place through regular procedures just like any traveller to Sri Lanka. Unlike departure, there is no scheme to register migrants on return. The only method to gather information on persons entering Sri Lanka is through the Disembarkation Card that is submitted to the immigration officer at the airport, but as a relatively early study discovered, this was not a particularly robust way of gathering information (Korales *et al* 1986, Krishnamurthy 1987).

The Migrant Services Centre (MSC), founded in 1994, is the major local non-governmental organisation focused on migrant welfare and rights. It provides a range of services such as legal support, counselling services and loans for micro-business development. They also coordinate grassroots-level associations that have a wide mandate and the activities include support for income generation ventures as alternatives to migration and awareness campaigns on the issues faced by migrant labour.

In 2000, the MSC and a number of other non-governmental organisations came together to form the Migrant Workers Action Network (ACTFORM). This network also includes representatives from the SLBFE, other relevant government agencies and the media. ACTFORM is a more powerful lobbying organisation and produces a quarterly newsletter.

MSC has also built a network of former migrants through local migrant worker associations. Currently there are six such branches, in Deniyaya, Matugama, Hatton, Kegalle, Gampaha and Seeduwa, which allow potential and former migrants to meet and socialise. The predominantly female returnees of the Kegalle Migrant Worker Centre have developed a programme of activities advocating against migration due to the hardships of leaving family and home. The association utilises street theatre: dramas are written, produced and performed by the women themselves and address the disadvantages of migration as well as the stereotypical images of migrant women as 'immoral' women. In addition to campaigning against migration, they support viable income alternatives, providing loans for a range of income-generating activities (Dias and Jayasundere 2001).

The process of return and reintegration

Financially, the costs of migration are high. Wanasundera's research with female migrants to Greece, Cyprus and Italy found that costs amounted to eight months' wages. Completing the full length of the contract is therefore critical if debts are to be repaid and savings accumulated. However, premature return is relatively common. The respondents in Wanasundera's research cited domestic problems such as sick parents, spouse or children and the appeals of children or family members to return home. Some have also returned to ensure that the children continue with their schooling. Employment related problems such as insufficient salary, workplace issues and unsatisfactory working conditions had also contributed. Marriage, pregnancy, family reunion, ill health, psychological problems and plans for further education were among the major personal reasons that had led to return (Wanasundera 2001). Employers can be very particular about the health of the workers and in some countries they are subjected to periodic medical checks and may be repatriated at the first sign of illness or infection (Dias and Jayasundere 2001).

Some of those who work in more migrant-receptive countries such as Greece and Italy have been able to obtain permanent residence permits after the completion of the initial contracts. But even from these countries, family responsibilities frequently encourage migrants to return, rather than take up longer term residence opportunities: 'Despite the comparatively high standard of living, the relative freedom and mobility...they had not been diverted from their original reason for migration, which was to increase family welfare' (Wanasundera 2001).

An absence of further migration is one of the most widely recognised indicators of successful reintegration, or sustainable return (Black and Gent 2006). In Wanasundera's study a substantial number of returnees expressed their intention to remigrate. Her statistics indicate that 52 per cent of returnees from Cyprus, 45 per cent of returnees from Greece and 33 per cent of returnees from Italy intended to remigrate. The most common explanation was the desire to improve their financial status. Other reasons cited were poor investment of financial resources, unsatisfactory domestic environments, high costs of children's private education, inability to locate suitable local employment and higher levels of consumption at home (Wanasundera 2001). No comparable studies have been undertaken on the desire to remigrate for return migrants from the Gulf.

The respondents who spoke to Dias and Jayasundere reported little faith in the Government to extend any kind of support in their reintegration process as it had done little to change the negative factors that drove them to migrate in the first place. Migrants prefer to rely on personal support mechanisms once they return home (Dias and Jayasundere 2001).

'Policy makers (and indeed migrants themselves) assume that returnees will be able to invest their savings or find remunerative employment, adjust to any changes in their personal and family lives and pick up where they left off with minimal support. The reality is quite different.' (ILO nd)

The widespread remigration in Sri Lanka results from the failure on the part of all actors to promote social and economic integration for returnees.

Social and economic impacts of returning labour migrants

Even as women migrant workers shift into the traditionally male role of family breadwinner, the common understanding is that the husband remains the main decision maker and the head of the family. Some have hoped that the empowerment gained from the labour migration experience could be used to transform the role of women in the family and community. However, a majority of women appear to resume their role as wife, mother or daughter on returning to Sri Lanka.

Male migrant workers also return to their communities and reintegrate into the social life without much transformation. Gamburd notes 'gender relations entrenched in the household still remained extremely powerful' (2001). In their wives' absence, men took over more than the bare minimum of the housework in less than 5 per cent of the families in Gamburd's research sample. In nearly all the cases, childcare and household duties were left in the hands of a female relative. As a result, the women are naturally expected to resume their role in the household on return.

Beyond the nuclear family, migration appears to provoke more significant changes. It is cited by Kottegoda (2006) as one of the factors reversing the modern trend away from extended family structures. Migrant women consistently turn towards their extended family for the support required to enable their migration. Though critics have argued that the extended family would collapse under the strain of migration, Kottegoda asserts that extended families in Sri Lanka play a crucial role by providing childcare, employment agency fees, managing remittances and other support, which in effect strengthen the extended family relationships during the migration experience (Kottegoda 2006).

In the broader community, the impact of migration has little transformative impact. Abella and Atal note that the returnees they met in their research did not stand out conspicuously from the rest of the community. There was no changed manner of speech, dress or marked display of wealth. The returnee had blended back into their rural lives and their stays in modern capitals were just a 'memory, hardly worth discussion' (Abella and Atal 1986). It was also noted that, although religious participation among returnees remained significant, their participation in community organisations was negligible. They had no desire to participate in such organisations as they felt that they were 'designed for the pursuit of self-interest of members' (Abella and Atal 1986).

Remittances to Sri Lanka are extremely significant. Remittances amounted to US\$1.3 billion in 2004, representing 7 per cent of the GDP, but have risen steeply since, doubling to \$2.7 billion in 2006 (the latest year for which figures are available). This figure represents only formal remittances and informal channels are common. The formal banking system is considered inefficient and costly in comparison to informal ones. Up to an estimated 45 per cent of remittances were sent through informal channels in the mid 1990s, though this has certainly fallen in recent years. However, given these high remittance levels, it is surprising that most labour migrants are unable to save adequately to make investments on their return. Some may return indebted if they have not been able to complete their full employment contract or have been compelled to borrow for their own repatriation costs.

There are a number of reasons for this. Gamburd found that more than half of husbands left in Sri Lanka did no work, so remittances sent by their wives were used for consumption, rather than savings (Gamburd 2000). Abella and Atal, in contrast, argue that the lack of credible investments on the part of the returnee could be due to the fact that migration was considered as a more transitory goal to maximise household income for a short period.

'Accumulation of wealth was not a norm to which an average Sri Lankan family could ever conform and therefore it was not surprising that the returnee could not be induced easily to look beyond meeting basic requirements of the family to sensible investments for the enhancement of the family status in the future.' (Abella and Atal 1986)

Finding alternative employment or some means of economic survival is the principal factor in the reintegration process. Returnees often discover that the labour market conditions and the high unemployment rates that pushed them to migrate in the first place have changed little (ILO nd). Given these difficulties, returnees are more likely to attempt self-employment as opposed to paid

employment. For instance, Wanasundera found that 68 per cent of returnees from Cyprus had worked for pay prior to departure, compared to only 24 per cent on return. In fact, the majority of the returnees, 72 per cent from Cyprus, 81 per cent from Greece and 93 per cent from Italy, did not re-enter the labour force or commence any income-generating activities. Instead, 'they were dependent either on the earnings of their spouses, parents or on their savings for economic support' (Wanasundera 2001).

The self-employment or micro-enterprise ventures of returnees overall do not seem to demonstrate a high success rate. This is largely due to issues with viability and sustainability – lack of capital, entrepreneurial skills and disincentives in the economy are some of the key issues that hinder success. Furthermore, many embark on business ventures without a realistic assessment of the market, opting for types of enterprises in which others are already engaged, regardless of whether the venture optimises their own resources or has market potential. The lack of entrepreneurial, management and financial literacy should be a serious consideration in the development of small enterprise schemes. Providing credit is only one input in such projects (Dias and Jayasundere 2001, Gallina 2007, Wanasundera and Jayasinghe 2004).

The current government initiative directed towards returning migrants is the loan scheme that has been designed by SLBFE and implemented in collaboration with two state banks, the People's Bank (PB) and the Bank of Ceylon (BOC), launched in 1999. These schemes are designed to offer returnees loans for business or housing in proportion to their existing savings, at subsidised rates of interest.

These programmes have had very limited uptake, due to the sole focus on credit. The programs have failed to provide the required support systems such as skills development in business and financial management. Wanasundera and Jayasinghe (2004) note that many of the borrowers they interviewed were unprepared to receive credit and had no prior experience running a business venture. The Government cannot expect a loan alone to make a natural entrepreneur out of the returnee. Gallina adds that 'the lack of skills, motivation and the prospect of investing time and resources in a project that would provide in the very best situation an income close to that of a domestic worker in the Middle East, were the main reasons for the failure of these schemes' (Gallina 2007).

The Sri Lankan government's lack of a specific reintegration policy may partly explain the high rate of remigration of returning migrants. Such policies that have existed are usually in reaction to crises, such as the large scale return from Kuwait in 1990. Government attempts so far have focused primarily on loan schemes as opposed to a more comprehensive approach. As far as skills development goes, the Government encourages returnees to enter mainstream empowerment, training, credit and entrepreneurship programmes. However, few returnees are motivated to join government-sponsored vocational training programmes as they believe that they do not have the required education levels to participate (Dias and Jayasundere 2001). On the other hand, poorly planned reintegration programs alone cannot be blamed for the high rate of remigration; home countries also need to formulate 'effective macro policies that address the root causes of migration and re-migration – importantly, poverty, unemployment and gender discrimination' (ILO nd).

Asylum migrants

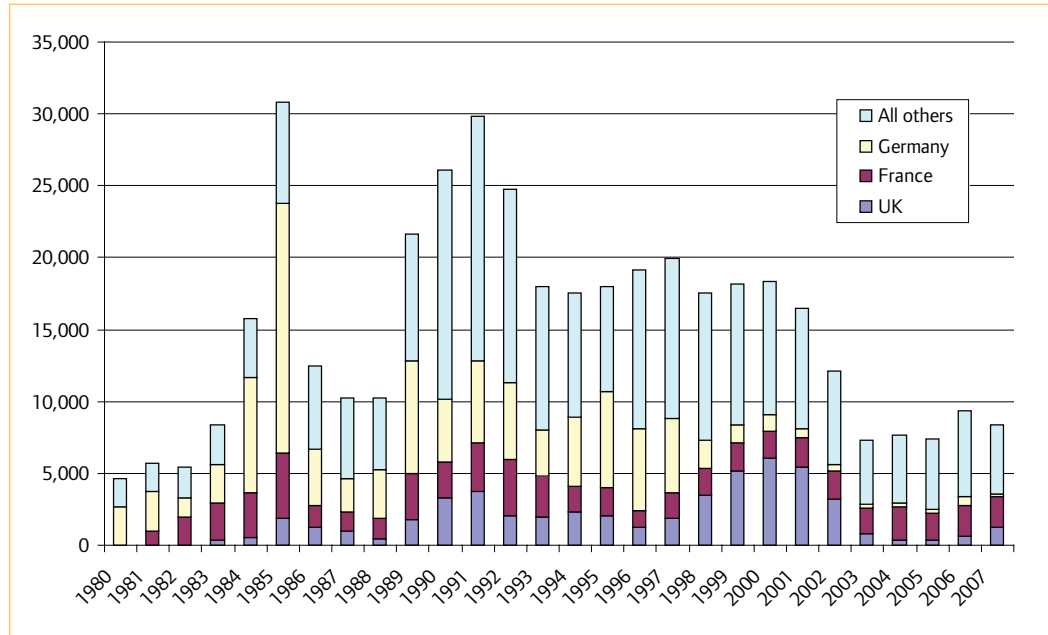
There had been a steady stream of people leaving Sri Lanka since at least 1956 for reasons that would today be considered to be related to asylum. After the Sinhala-only legislation, passed in that year, Tamil speakers (including ethnic Tamils and many Muslims) found it much harder to find work in the government sector and targeted discrimination spread to many other areas of economic and social life. These individuals were difficult to distinguish, however, from the larger movements of mostly well-to-do upper and upper middle class migrants who left Sri Lanka, permanently or temporarily over this period.

In their assessment of refugee movements from Sri Lanka, Valentine Daniel and Thangarajah (1995) argue that the 1960s and 1970s saw a gradual democratisation of this movement, as it spread to other class groups, but the emigration of much poorer individuals did not really begin until the Prevention of Terrorism Act of 1979 and only became significant after the riots of July 1983. Many

people initially (and still do) travel to India, where the population of refugees in the camps in Tamil Nadu had again risen to an estimated 100,000 by May 2008. Beyond India, the most important destinations are UK, Canada, Norway, France, Germany, Switzerland, and Sweden. Another range of countries are important as staging points on the way to these 'prime' destinations, places such as Thailand, Singapore, Russia, Eastern Europe and the Baltic states (Van Hear 2004). In terms of asylum applications received, Germany, France and the UK have received the largest numbers of Sri Lankan migrants over the period 1980–2007 (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Asylum applications by Sri Lankan nationals in industrialised countries, 1980–2007, showing the three most significant destination countries (Germany, France, UK) separately

Source: UNHCR



In the case of the UK, the post-1983 migrants can be further divided into three groups:

- Professionals who used their social capital to enter the UK
- Individuals who could afford to travel and could connect themselves through education, retraining, family reunion or sponsorship
- Poorer people who fled Sri Lanka as refugees, typically travelling illegally and claiming asylum on arrival.

This latter group of asylum seekers has come to dominate Tamil migration to Britain, as elsewhere (Van Hear *et al* 2004). This categorisation is repeated in assessments of predominantly Tamil migration from Sri Lanka to Norway (Fuglerud 2001), and Switzerland (McDowell 1996). The first two groups, like earlier migrants from Sri Lanka, had stronger family ties to their destinations and greater human capital, in terms of skills and education, enabling a more successful transition to life in European destinations, typically including more secure professional or other white-collar jobs. Most of these studies identify a strong status distinction between earlier and more recent and poorer migrants (Van Hear 2004).

Van Hear has done much to re-establish the significance of class in investigations of refugee movements more generally and his research in Sri Lanka has been a key component of that work.

'Asked why some Tamils sought refuge in South India while others fled to other parts of Sri Lanka, one displaced household in Jaffna district observed, 'it depends on money' ... For those trying to escape conflict or persecution, the better endowed can buy a better quality of asylum.' (Van Hear 2004)

In fact, Van Hear notes that there appears to be a hierarchy of destinations that a migrant can select from. Asylum migration to destinations at the top of the hierarchy largely appears to be a more 'luxury' option available only to the privileged.

Asylum migrants are the least likely category to return to Sri Lanka. In addition to the political relationship many asylum seekers have with Sri Lanka, which may make it dangerous to return, it is extremely difficult in practical terms. They have typically paid a high price and run significant risks to reach their destination and unless the situation in Sri Lanka changed radically, most would not be tempted to return. In this scenario, the primary driving factor of return in the case of asylum migrants is the failure of their application for asylum in the host country resulting in either forced return or exhaustion resulting from the difficulties of living illegally.

Readmission agreements with significant countries of origin are an important tool in current strategies to 'manage' migration, certainly in Europe. Several states now have official agreements with the government of Sri Lanka to allow them to return failed asylum seekers or any other individuals found to be illegally resident. These agreements stipulate the procedures to be followed to issue an individual with the necessary travel documents to allow them to return, even if they have no proof of nationality.

In July 2004 the European Commission also signed a readmission agreement with Sri Lanka, which came into force in July 2005. This agreement is one of the rare 'new generation' readmission agreements, covering third country nationals as well as the state's own citizens and there is no data publicly available to determine how they are used. The EU has signed them only with Albania and Hong Kong to date in addition to the Sri Lanka agreement. These agreements are a sign of asymmetric power relations as much as significant migration flows, but they provide some indication that responding to migration from Sri Lanka is seen as a political priority within the European Commission.

The readmission agreement between Switzerland and Sri Lanka provides an older example, which has been much better studied. It was signed in January 1994 between the governments of Sri Lanka, Switzerland and the UNHCR Geneva office. McDowell points out that this agreement set a number of precedents in the area of repatriation. The most important is that for the first time, failed asylum seekers would be returned to a country where a conflict was taking place in certain parts. This was possible as there was an agreement between the parties that southern Sri Lanka was a 'safe flight alternative'. Secondly, the involvement of UNHCR was a key ingredient as it 'sent a signal to other refugee recipient countries that the return of Tamils and Sinhalese to Sri Lanka was acceptable'. McDowell notes that the agreement made it much more difficult for Sri Lankan asylum seekers to prove their cases in host countries (McDowell 1996).

The Swiss agreement was promoted as a voluntary return programme; however, McDowell expresses his doubts over this. He describes that an asylum seeker whose application is rejected and has been selected for repatriation is sent a letter detailing the departure. If the rejected asylum seeker appears at the airport as requested, the repatriation is considered 'voluntary'. If the asylum seeker refuses to cooperate, then the officials would resort to deportation (McDowell 1996). He also argues that the concept of returning 'home' is questionable, in the context of some Tamil refugees who do not have a clear sense of what home is. Few choose to return to the violent North and East while they do not consider the South of Sri Lanka as an alternative 'home' (McDowell 1996).

In addition to questions over the safety of Sri Lanka at this time, protests from European NGOs highlighted inadequate reception facilities, poor monitoring capacity at UNHCR and poor integration once returned. There was an assumption that returnees would be able to reintegrate by utilising their own resources in Sri Lanka. There was also a fear that 'over-mothering' would unfavourably set the returnees apart from the rest of the community, possibly sparking accusations of privileged treatment (McDowell 1996). McDowell also questions the sensibility of returning 'thousands of disaffected and disappointed Tamils to an island which remained in a state of war, economic decline and political turmoil'.

The real function of the agreement was possibly to deter asylum seekers rather than set the stage for actual mass deportation. Of the 12,000 Sri Lankan asylum seekers who were 'liable to deportation' only 700 were deported between May 1994 and May 1996 (McDowell 1996). However, since return policy is inconsistent across Europe, Swiss Tamils liable to repatriation can avoid repatriation by crossing the border to other European countries.

Professionals and students

The brain drain of professionals and students from Sri Lanka began in the postcolonial era and picked up pace during the sluggish economic period of the 1960s and 1970s. Demand for qualified professionals in the West, limited jobs and pay at home and higher quality education abroad encouraged these migrants to leave Sri Lanka. This group consisted of mainly upper class and upper caste Sinhalese and Tamils who possessed a solid education and fluent English language skills. They made up a substantial section of the early Sri Lankan diaspora.

This movement was further encouraged by the discriminatory education and employment policies of the then government as well as the deterioration of the ethnic conflict in the early 1980s. Even today, political and economic instability continues to lead professionals to leave in search of better opportunities. Intense periods in the ethnic conflict cause these outflows to rise sharply. In fact, a *Sunday Times* article in October 2001 reported that diplomatic missions had called on the Sri Lankan public to ease up on applying for visas, as they were getting inundated with applications (Fernando and de Silva 2001).

Limited educational opportunities and the lack of faith in the higher education system are some of the key reasons that drive Sri Lankan students to look abroad for better options. The respondents in the *Sunday Times* article also note that the instability of the country and doubts over the potential of a secure future pressurise students to emigrate. Furthermore, unrest in local universities, where frequent strikes cause universities to close for long periods resulting in delays in completing degrees, is a major driving factor. The frequent closure of local universities since the original breakdown in the system in 1988/89 due to the JVP insurrection has resulted in a backlog of batches awaiting admission. This causes students to waste precious years waiting to complete their studies.

The *Sunday Times* reports that 945 students had obtained visas for Australia in 2001, up from 880 in 2000. This compares to 1936 students who obtained visas to the UK in 2000, while 875 students had received UK visas of the 2,412 applications received up to August 2001. Foreign universities encourage this fast growing trend of foreign students and they conduct frequent information sessions to attract potential candidates. The British Council in Colombo has a special coordinating office to arrange information evenings on UK universities.

Although these numbers are rising, those going abroad make up only a small proportion of students registering in Sri Lankan universities and even those attending university represent only about 4 or 5 per cent of their age cohorts in the country. Van Hear notes that migration for professional and educational advancement requires large outlays and is restricted to the wealthy. Successful student applicants in Australia are allowed to apply for migration upon graduation, paving the way for permanent settlement as professionals in the host country, though other countries have not yet gone quite this far. From 2000, students graduating with a Masters at Scottish universities were able to extend their visa to remain in the country and this has been extended to all UK universities more recently. In certain subjects, such as Physics or IT, or for those students who perform extremely well, the extension of visas and the granting of work permits is virtually automatic.

Most English-language newspapers in Colombo, particularly the substantial Sunday editions, contain at least a page of advertisements by consultants and law firms offering services to potential migrants, usually with an emphasis on student migration. Education consultants offer services to students who seek admission to foreign universities, and also add the extra incentive with guarantees that the students can remain abroad upon completion of studies. The 'Student Placement Center' of Canada in its advertisement offers 'employment authorization with immigration in Canada after successful completion of studies'. The 'London Student Centre' among many others offers '100 per cent Visa Success!' in the largest type size on its advert. Quality of education, subject of studies, or even studying at all is distinctly secondary in these adverts. The most important is the guaranteed visa. Fees are not mentioned, though enquiries suggest that they are upwards of LKR 20,000 (about £100, a reasonably good monthly wage) and assurances are given that applications will not be rejected.

Those who migrate as students or those who are successful in their asylum applications may eventually become sufficiently well established to join a professional class of well established migrants

who have used their migration to improve their human and financial capital. These migrants form an influential and wealthy segment of the diaspora that countries such as Sri Lanka are increasingly interested in engaging to assist development projects of post-conflict reconstruction. Return is an important component of this involvement, though it need not be permanent. Just as working class labour migrants to the Gulf frequently establish circular migration patterns based in Sri Lanka, more privileged members of the diaspora may be able to establish similar circulation patterns rooted elsewhere, based in permanent residency rights or citizenship of other countries.

Wolfram Zunzer notes that first generation asylum migrants and economic migrants still hope to return to Sri Lanka one day. However, second and third generation migrants are only interested in returning on a limited time basis, though Zunzer believes that these generations have the greatest potential to make a contribution to the development of Sri Lanka. Overall, Zunzer says: 'given past experience, it can safely be assumed that the majority of the diaspora will not return, but will instead participate in this process on the basis of "circulation"' (Zunzer 2004).

The involvement of diaspora groups in short return projects and fundraising initiatives following the December 2004 tsunami provides a clear example of the potential of this type of engagement. Following an appeal by the Sri Lankan President, many medical professionals returned to assist with the relief work, demonstrating the valuable potential of migrant professionals during crisis situations at home. Moreover, professionals and other well established Sri Lankan migrants are also seen investing in property and homes in Sri Lanka, thereby creating a base for circulation. An article by the Sri Lankan property developer Ceylinco Homes notes that more than 50 per cent of buyers of condominiums in Sri Lanka are expatriate Sri Lankans. The well-to-do Sri Lankan migrants 'form a sizeable focus group – and property developers on their own initiative are conducting direct marketing programs while also conducting corporate road shows in those countries' (Ceylinco Homes 2008).

The ceasefire in 2002 provided the first opportunity in many years for many individuals from the North and East of the country to return to their homes. The pause in violence was characterised by a rush of travel into the conflict zones. Cheran estimates that between 25,000 and 30,000 diaspora Tamils circulated in the year following the ceasefire (Cheran 2003). He terms the first phase of this wave of circulation as 'homeland tourism' and the second phase as the 'return visit' which is slightly longer than the first. The lack of housing is a key reason why returnees could not stay very long. Rebuilding homes and selling property took place in the second phase, though larger scale investment did not seem to take off (Cheran 2003).

Van Hear observed that the Tamils who returned after the ceasefire mostly engaged in 'look and see' trips. They returned to inspect and repair their properties and reconnect with remaining relatives. Even though the return seems superficial at best, he notes that the 'money and resources they bring with them to give to relatives to repair houses and recover properties probably represent a significant injection of funds and a significant boost to the local economy'. A prominent issue that arises in the case of returning diaspora to the conflict zones is property disputes. Many migrants return to find that the properties they have left behind have been long occupied by poor internally displaced people who no longer have a place of their own to go to (Van Hear 2004).

Due to the needs of the conflict zones, schools, universities, hospitals and technical organisations are in severe need of qualified personnel. There are some instances where professionals from the Tamil diaspora have returned to fill these gaps. For instance, the Medical Institute of Tamils (MIOT), a diaspora group based in England, Canada and Australia, systematically circulates members between London, Jaffna and Vanni. Circulation of Tamil doctors from the diaspora is also facilitated by the Asian Medical Doctors Association (AMDA) of Japan. The doctors stay from three weeks to three months (Cheran 2003).

Tromso Tamil Sangam in Norway together with the University of Tromso was involved in setting up a faculty of medicine in the Eastern University as well as a faculty for Fisheries in Jaffna. The plan was to provide teachers and experts to these faculties on a rotational basis while the training of local staff members was to be a major component of these projects.

In Kilinochchi IT training is the major venture of *Vannitech*, an institute founded by three members of the diaspora in the US, whose vision is 'to effectively utilise the expertise and resources available in the diaspora' (Cheran 2003). Some diaspora members in Australia have also launched English language training in remote areas in Jaffna. The project planned to bring ten to 15 young Tamils from the diaspora for a period of two to three months to conduct the courses (ibid).

In spite of the increased skills circulation seen in the post-ceasefire period, financial investment in the region has been negligible. Cheran notes that diaspora members who are able to invest in small and medium projects have adapted a cautious wait-and-see attitude: 'As diaspora communities transform themselves into transnational communities and gain power and wealth, the mythical concept of return gives way to much more practical return: return from their investments.' He points out that the LTTE tax system is one major deterrent while facilities such as sound banking systems are also nonexistent (Cheran 2003). Though return or hope of a return is a major defining moment for the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, it is highly unlikely that a majority of the Tamil diaspora will return on a permanent basis. The rapid deterioration in the political situation since 2006 has made significant return less likely.

Media coverage

Part of this research involved a survey of media coverage of migration issues. Sri Lanka has ten significant daily papers: three in English, four in Sinhala and three in Tamil. We selected one non-government paper in each language, *Daily Mirror* (English), *Lankadeepa* (Sinhala) and *Thinakkural* (Tamil) and searched through every day in 2006 and 2007 for news stories related to international migration. All three papers are available to the Sri Lankan community in the UK, either online or sold directly in a limited number of shops in London. The results are similar to the academic literature review, suggesting that return migration from anywhere other than the Gulf is not a significant issue, though they also reveal a significant difference in coverage between language groups.

There was virtually no coverage of issues relating to Sri Lankan migrants in the UK during these two years. Two papers covered the hunger strike of Sri Lankan Tamils initially at Harmondsworth detention centre but later in Tinsley House, Oakington and Haslar, in July 2007. The most significant coverage occurred in *Thinakkural* which ran three articles. The first (22 July 2007) under the headline 'Do not send us to Sri Lanka: 28 Tamil youths hunger strike in London' described the first 28 people who went on hunger strike at Harmondsworth in largely sympathetic terms: 'If they return to Sri Lanka, they will be affected by the uncertain situation and they risk cruelty and arrest.' *Thinakkural* followed up the next week with an article describing the expansion of the hunger strike to other detention centres (27 July 2007) and finally in August with an article on the British court judgement that 'Tamil refugees who have been rejected by the British government should not be neglected and not sent home' (9 August 2007). The *Daily Mirror* caught the expansion of the hunger strike on July 26, following the request of the Sri Lankan Foreign Ministry for 'a detailed report from the Sri Lankan Embassy in London'. *Lankadeepa* did not cover the story.

Return migration from the Gulf was covered in most detail in *Lankadeepa*, though coverage focused in most detail on plans for increasing remittances and a number of individual stories of migrants who had been mistreated. *Lankadeepa* also featured two stories on migrants in Italy, including one of the elections of a Sri Lankan migrant in the Rome local elections, which portrayed a positive picture of a successful and patriotic Sri Lanka émigré. The *Daily Mirror* also ran occasional reports on the economic contributions of migrants in the Gulf, based on the annual release of reports from the SLBFE.

The most significant coverage of international migration issues was in *Thinakkural*, which provided a total of 19 articles on the situation of Tamil refugees in Southern India. A single article in *Thinakkural* considered labour migration, though its claim that '70 per cent of migrant workers are Tamils' was not substantiated with any real evidence (20 January 2007). Migrants are depicted most frequently as victims, either through the abuse they face in the Gulf, or as a result of being forced to return from the UK, or as poor and impoverished migrants to India. A smaller group of articles consider the financial contributions of migrants, but no indication that migrants may contribute skills and capital by returning was found. The *Lankadeepa* article on the election of the migrant in Rome was the only genuinely positive endorsement of the activities of the emigrant community.

3. Returning migrants

This research is intended to generate new data on return migration from the UK to Sri Lanka. In addition to the extensive literature review, newspaper analysis and discussions with a selection of governmental and non-governmental key informants the bulk of the new research comprised semi-structured interviews with 20 Sri Lankan nationals who have recently returned from the UK to live in Sri Lanka.

Following the ceasefire signed between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE (Tamil Tigers) on 22 February 2002, the political conditions for return appeared more favourable than for many years. In a spirit of renewed optimism, international and internally displaced migrants began to return in significant numbers. However, the peace process began to falter in August 2005 and during 2006 the conflict slowly reasserted itself. By August 2006 the UNHCR reported that all of the returns of refugees from the camps in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu that had taken place over the previous few years had been cancelled out by new displacement. The conflict intensified throughout 2007 and in January 2008 the Government formalised the end of the ceasefire by officially withdrawing from the agreement. At the time of writing, May 2008, the number of people returning to Sri Lanka is now understandably much less than at any time since 2002.

Profile of the individuals interviewed for this research

All of the individuals interviewed for this research returned to Sri Lanka since 2002 and most of them returned in the last few years when the situation was already beginning to deteriorate.

Individual returnees were selected in two ways in an attempt to give as broad a picture as possible of return migration to Sri Lanka:

- The first group returned with the assistance of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which operates two return programmes funded by the UK Home Office. Since 2002 920 people have returned with the support of these programmes. A selection of 10 of these returnees were interviewed for this research, based on a random sample, stratified to ensure representation from across the country. Only one woman was included in the IOM returns but this reflects the dominance of men among all IOM returnees. For simplicity this group will be referred to simply as 'IOM migrants' (even though they only returned with IOM).
- The second group of ten interviewees were students who had completed some or all of their university studies in the UK. These individuals were contacted through a network sample with a variety of entry points. The lack of a comprehensive sampling frame for student migrants meant that a random sample was not possible. The only control on this sample was to ensure an equal proportion of men and women among the interviewees. Although a number of the people who attended university in the UK also went onto work there, this group will be referred to as 'student migrants'.

Table 2: Ethnicity and sex breakdown of the two groups of migrants interviewed

	Sinhala		Tamil		Muslim		Burgher	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Students	3	3	1	1	1	-	-	1
IOM	1	-	5	1	3	-	-	-
Total	4	3	6	2	4	-	-	1

It is useful to distinguish these two groups, since they are clearly distinct in important ways. Firstly, demographic characteristics: the IOM migrants were an average of 38.3 years old, all were married and nine had children, though in many cases children had been born since they returned. In contrast the student returnees averaged 29.4 years old, two were married and only one had children.

The sex and ethnic breakdown of the groups also differed (Table 2). As mentioned, the students were sampled to ensure equal groups of men and women. No attempt was made to influence the sex origins of IOM migrants within the random sample and only one woman was interviewed. This reflects the overall proportion of women among IOM returnees: of the total 920 returnees, 83 or about 9 per cent were women.

The ethnicity of returnees under the IOM programme is not systematically recorded so there is no overall data available. However, since our sample was random it must be assumed that it provides a reasonably accurate reflection of the overall breakdown of ethnicity, as with sex. Tamils were the most significant ethnic group (six returnees), followed by Muslims (three returnees) and one Sinhalese. Since all of these individuals were asylum seekers, the dominance of Tamils offers partial support for the assumptions, raised in the literature review, that most refugees are Tamil. However, it also suggests that other ethnic groups are also significantly represented among communities of Sri Lankan refugees and asylum seekers.

There was also a significant education and class difference between the two groups. Although six of the IOM migrants had completed their A-levels and one had a diploma before leaving, none had attended university and none had received English medium education. Not only were all of the student migrants graduates, but the fact that seven of the ten had received most of their education in English, largely in the international schools frequented by the country's social and economic elite, suggests an important class distinction too. These two groups therefore represented different stages in the life cycle but also corresponded reasonably clearly to well-defined social groups in Sri Lanka.

This translated into different migration strategies. All of the student migrants travelled directly to the UK with a legally obtained visa, whereas only one of the IOM returnees did, on a 10-day tourist visa which he subsequently overstayed. All of the IOM returnees claimed asylum in the UK, were all rejected and all stayed on in the UK for varying periods of illegal residence. The student migrants were all extremely careful to respect all immigration regulations, aware of the implications for future travel to the UK if they did not do so.

In other respects, however, the two groups are less contrasted. It was not surprising that eight of the ten student migrants had family in the UK before they arrived, though this was also true of five of the IOM migrants, supporting detailed evidence in the literature that family links to the UK and elsewhere are common across economic and social classes in Sri Lanka (for example, Spencer 2004). Once they had arrived in the UK they lived in similar places in similar shared housing arrangements and there were even a few members of each group with similar work experiences, such as work in care homes. The reported positive and negative experiences of the UK did not correspond directly to established social groups, particularly experiences of racism. All returnees left close members of their family in Sri Lanka and in almost every case, family provided the most compelling reason for return.

In contrast to existing understandings of return migration in post-conflict settings none of the returnees cited the political situation in Sri Lanka as a major consideration in their decision to return. Given the long history of conflict in Sri Lanka, most individuals and families have developed coping mechanisms and a deterioration in the national situation only influences the absolute parameters of existence for communities in the zones directly affected, mostly in the North and East of the country. For the rest, although it is inevitably significant, life goes on. Presumably close family members in the country would have advised against return if the situation was desperate, but otherwise the larger political framework did not prevent people making family-related decisions.

Finally, all returnees share a broadly positive, even extremely positive vision of the UK. All have continued contacts with friends there and all but two would be very happy to live there again.

Table 3 provides brief biographical details for all individuals interviewed. In the text that follows, individuals will be referred to by their first name or by the full biographical detail in the case of verbatim quotes.

Table 3: first name, age, sex, occupation and location of interview for all 20 individuals interviewed

IOM returnees				
Name	Age	Sex	Occupation	Location of interview
Abdullah	39	Male	Textile shop owner	Polonaruwa
Srikantha	28	Male	Grocer	Batticaloa
Mohammed	35	Male	Jeweller	Kattankudy
Ali	42	Male	Agricultural supplier	Batticaloa
Ramesh	45	Male	Jeweller	Batticaloa
Kumudu	57	Male	Clothes shop owner	Homogama
Kumar	34	Male	Grocer	Chilaw
Prakesh	33	Male	Chef (unemployed)	Colombo
Suburaj	35	Male	Construction worker	Colombo
Radha	35	Female	Communications shop owner	Colombo
Student returnees				
Sunil	33	Male	Researcher	Colombo
Rajaya	37	Male	School teacher	Colombo
Ramani	28	Female	Advertising executive	Colombo
Jayanthi	27	Female	Environmental consultant	Colombo
Gamilla	29	Female	Sales manager	Colombo
Susan	34	Female	Actor and director	Colombo
Rukmal	24	Male	Management consultant	Colombo
Kesevan	25	Male	Management consultant	Colombo
Iqbal	29	Male	Researcher	Colombo
Priya	29	Female	Doctoral student	Colombo

The remainder of this section presents the primary data from this research in more detail. The first section gathers background information on the two groups of migrants, from key informant interviews and related sources. The following three sections then consider the returnees' experience of migrating to, living in and returning from the UK, in chronological order.

Background to the returns

Data on returnees from the two IOM programmes is detailed and comprehensive and served as a sampling frame which permitted a random sample of this group. Data on student return migrants is much more limited. Although the British Council in Sri Lanka offers some services to student returnees, there is no comprehensive database illustrating numbers and profiles.

Assisted Voluntary Return through IOM

Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) programmes have a long history going back to the mid-1970s when the Dutch and French governments began experimenting with financial packages to encourage migrants to return. IOM implements a variety of different programmes in partnership with home and host countries of asylum seekers.

In the case of the UK, IOM implements two programmes for those wishing to return to Sri Lanka:

- Voluntary Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) – initiated in March 2002, offers return and reintegration support for asylum seekers.
- Assisted Voluntary Return for Irregular Migrants (AVRIM) – focused on illegal migrants and, except for a few cases such as victims of abuse, does not offer reintegration assistance. (IOM 2006)

VARRP is an extension of the Voluntary Assisted Return Programme (VARP), which has been operating since 1999. It was introduced in recognition of the importance of reintegration in a sustainable return initiative. It assists individuals or families with return travel arrangements, obtaining travel documentation, providing departure, transit and arrival assistance, giving advice throughout the application process and providing reintegration assistance in the home country. The reintegration component consists of assistance for education, vocational training, and the establishment of small businesses (IOM 2004). Uptake of the programme has risen following the decision of the UK government to increase the integration assistance package to £3000 per family member since January 2006 (IOM 2006).

According to IOM, the reintegration assistance is personalised according to the needs of the returnee and the resources and circumstances of the home country. It is also aimed at helping the community in which the returnee is settling back into (IOM 2004). During the 2004 self-evaluation, 42 per cent of the returnees who had embarked on small businesses reported that their local community was also benefiting from the assistance. Buying goods for the business from the community and employing local people are examples of how the community has benefited. In fact, the employment of community members was a key characteristic of the businesses set up the Sri Lankan returnees interviewed for the IOM self-evaluation (IOM 2004).

Sri Lanka is among the top five return destinations in the AVR programme since its inception. In 2003, 68 returnees to Sri Lanka received reintegration assistance, the highest of any country that year, followed by Albania (52) and Iran (37) (IOM 2004). From 2002 to 2004 Sri Lanka was the third most significant country to which migrants returned (ibid).

Table 4: Numbers and percentages of returnees from UK supported by IOM, by district

District	Number of returnees	Percentage
Kalutara	23	2.5
Killinochchi	24	2.6
Ampara	32	3.5
Trincomalee	33	3.6
Vavuniya	51	5.5
Kandy	57	6.2
Gampaha	59	6.4
Batticaloa	61	6.6
Puttalam	66	7.2
Colombo	178	19.3
Jaffna	232	25.2
All others	104	11.3
Total	920	100.0

IOM evaluations suggest that these programmes are widely appreciated within the Sri Lankan community. A mapping exercise conducted by the IOM London office found that the Sri Lankan community in the UK is the most well informed migrant community on the work being done by IOM. According to the IOM self-evaluation 88 per cent of the returnees responded that they were very satisfied with the assistance that they received (IOM 2004). In 2004, 44 per cent of returnees reported that they would consider remigration if the need arose.

IOM Colombo supplied its entire database of 920 returns which have taken place from the UK since 2002 for this research. This included information on sex of returnees, district of return (though not district of residence before migration) and date of return (though not date of migration). District of return provides some indication of ethnicity. Almost half of the returnees supported by IOM have returned to the districts of Killinochchi, Ampara, Trincomalee, Vavuniya, Batticaloa and Jaffna in the North and East of the country, which have suffered the most severe instability due to the ongoing

conflict. The majority of the population in these areas is Tamil and Muslim. The majority of returnees to the South have returned to Colombo, which is also an area where the national minorities together are in a majority (Table 4). This suggests that Tamils and Muslims are significantly over-represented among this returnee group. Data is available on the sex of 889 returnees and of these 803, just over 90 per cent, are male. Females account for just under 10 per cent of returnees.

Student returnees

The British Council provides the only institutional support for students interested in studying in the UK. Throughout the year, it hosts evenings for UK further education institutions to provide information on the courses they offer and other attractions they hold for prospective students. Such events are in the interests of the higher education institutions (who pay for the time) as much as the prospective students. They also host information events over the summer which allow students who have been accepted into UK universities for entry in the autumn to meet current and former students. These events provide an informal way in which returned students can meet and keep in touch with each other, but that is not their principle purpose. The British Council also hosts events specifically targeted at returned students, but they are not held every year and are typically the result of requests from former UK students who continue to be members of the British Council or from official alumni organisations of individual universities. The British Council keeps no record of returned students, though it is the ideal institution to do so.

Leaving for the UK

The IOM returnees' journeys were far more complex and fragmented than the students', and not all of them even intended to get to the UK. They arrived in the UK between May 1999 and March 2002. Only one of the ten arrived by a direct flight from Sri Lanka with a valid visa (Kumudu). It is significant that he is the only Sinhalese individual in the group, the other nine IOM returnees being Muslim or Tamil; the assumption that Sinhalese do not claim asylum is shared by British immigration authorities and visas are much harder to obtain for Tamils and Muslims, though it also helped that Kumudu was almost 50 and had a job and family in Sri Lanka when he obtained his. Only two others even applied for visas, and were refused.

All of the others took indirect routes to the UK, typically through Eastern Europe, but three stand out as taking particularly extended journeys. Prakesh left Sri Lanka in 1994 at the age of 18 and travelled via Moscow to Germany, where he claimed asylum. Once that claim was exhausted he went on to Switzerland and claimed again. At the beginning of 2000 his asylum claim was rejected and he was concerned that he would be sent back to Sri Lanka (under the 1994 readmission agreement, discussed above) so he left immediately. He was able to move on to the UK, arriving at the end of May 2000 and claiming asylum for a third time.

Another man left Sri Lanka in 2001, when he was 27 (Kumar). He travelled to Germany and claimed asylum but after 11 months he was so depressed at the constant racial abuse he received in the East German village where he was staying that he left and arrived in the UK in April 2002 to claim asylum there.

Finally, one woman left for India with her husband in December 2000. After more than a year living together in Mumbai, they accepted that they would not be able to travel together to the UK, so she went on her own, on forged documents, via Italy to land at Heathrow in February 2002. Her husband was able to follow six months later.

For the IOM returnees, there were three key reasons for coming to the UK: language, family and 'human rights'. Two migrants claimed not to have chosen the UK:

'Any human rights country would do.' (Mohammed, 35 years old, male, jeweller, Kattankudy)

'I didn't plan for UK, I tried to go to any country, but some of my relatives are there.' (Suburaj, 35 years old, male, construction worker, Colombo)

The overwhelming concern for anyone wanting to claim asylum is to try to find a country where they will be accepted and for the above two individuals that was the overwhelming concern. It was their agent who selected the UK. The others were keen to come to the UK because they knew they would be able to get by speaking English. Family was mentioned, but was not always a significant reason for coming and some, such as Suburaj who had family in the UK, did not make it a priority. Kumudu, who came directly to the UK, had no family there but two brothers well established in Italy and Prakesh, who went via Germany and Switzerland had no family in those countries, but an aunt in the UK.

Family was highlighted most significantly by the only woman interviewed (Radha) who stayed with her 'cousin-sister' (a common term in Sri Lanka to indicate a cousin, since cousins are often raised together and are as close as siblings). Even so, she only stayed in her relative's house for 20 days, until it was clear to her that she would have to move elsewhere. However, other migrants reported much longer stays with their relatives, as long as five-and-a-half years in the case of Srikantha who eventually moved out when his uncle had a baby and there was no more room. The standard assumptions around social capital providing a significant attraction do not appear to hold in all cases, though such contacts may still save migrants money.

Although none of these migrants was particularly clear about their intended length of stay, these were long-term moves. No one was prepared to admit that they had wanted to leave Sri Lanka permanently, but all had plans to establish themselves and their families in the UK when they claimed asylum and several described their ambitions in terms of their (in some cases unborn) children's education and future so these were effectively permanent migrations, in terms of migrants' intentions.

Students were generally clearer that they initially intended to stay for the duration of their studies. In contrast to IOM returnees, student movements were clearly directed, migrations of strictly limited duration. All student migrants had obviously intended to travel to the UK for their studies, though this was not always their first visit to the UK. Three of the ten student migrants had visited the UK before and two had been very regularly from a very young age, though for all three their decision to study was the first trip to the UK in which they had been the main decision-maker, since they had accompanied their parents on previous visits. Their studies began between September 1993 (Susan) and September 2006 (Ramani) (Table 5).

Table 5: Courses, institutions and dates of the 10 student migrants

Name	Date started	Place	Course
Sunil	Sept 2005	Edinburgh University	MSc Social Anthropology
Rajaya	Sept 2004	Worthing College	Theatre and Drama Diploma
Ramani	Sept 2006	Cambridge University	MBA
Jayanthi	Sept 2000	Birmingham University	BSc and MSc in Environmental Engineering
Gamilla	Sept 1997	Nottingham University	BA Law
Susan	Sept 1993	Goldsmiths, London	Drama
Rukmal	Dec, 2005	Sheffield University	Information technology diploma
Kesevan	Sept 2003	UCL	Engineering
Iqbal	Sept 1998	LSE	International Relations
Priya	Sept. 2005	University of Sussex	Development MA

For the students, selection of the course and the university were more important considerations than going to the UK. All of the eight students with family in the UK also had family in Canada, Australia or the US and frequently in all three locations. Ramani had no family contacts to the UK but an aunt in the US but decided to study in the UK despite those family connections elsewhere. For students educated in English, the UK is an obvious choice and a UK education carries a high status in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, there are a huge range of options at both undergraduate and graduate levels and all ten individuals interviewed also considered universities in other countries such as India, Australia, the US, Netherlands or Norway, though it is significant that none of the ten considered attending university in Sri Lanka.

They also expressed an attachment to specific places. The reputation of Cambridge had been important to Ramani, as had class sizes, the international make-up of the course and the personal attention she received from the moment she accepted their offer, but actually visiting Cambridge for the first time for interview had convinced her. Two students who studied in London were also familiar with life in the capital and found it exciting and stimulating. Iqbal was persuaded to apply there rather than the US having made a short summer visit the year before, and Susan ended up staying in London for three years after graduation.

Finally, personal touches from universities proved to be important. Individual phone calls to enquire about decisions and friendly personable approaches had helped to persuade a particularly footloose group to study and live in the UK.

Life in the UK

It was particularly difficult for all the returnees to consider their expectations or initial impressions of the UK. It is hard to give a fair reflection of the inevitable complexities and contradictions observed, in any country, in a few sentences. To many, the contrast with Sri Lanka was so obvious it did not need making:

'Well, it's a developed country, so obviously I had expectations of what it would be like, you know, efficient, clean, modern...' (Sunil, 33 years old, male, researcher, Colombo)

Those who had intentions of claiming asylum inevitably had notions, albeit fairly vague ones, that the UK was 'a human rights country', making an implicit comparison to Sri Lanka. Few people expressed disappointment with the reality compared with their pre-conceptions. Surprisingly, even many of those who had seen the UK as an upholder of human rights and were eventually not granted asylum reported that their opinion of the UK had not significantly changed. There were understandable criticisms of the way the Home Office had reached decisions, or the error of judgement of certain judges but individuals were careful to distinguish between those who were at fault and the population as a whole.

'If they don't give us asylum, and they don't give us any work permit, how do they expect us to live there? Now I have a doubt about the humanitarian of the UK. I don't say that all the people are like that, but the people in the Home Office are like that.' (Srikantha, 28 years old, male grocer, Batticaloa)

It is possible that the reticence to pass generally negative judgements about the UK was a result of the fact that all the interviews were conducted by a white Englishman, but it also seems likely that in several years of living there people were able to appreciate that the negatives were not universal.

The fact that things *worked* was a widely repeated comment. Public transport was singled out by a few people for special mention:

'This was a big revelation for me, that this was public transport that you could use and that's what people did. It was great, I felt quite independent, because you could get about on your own.' (Gamilla, 29 years old, female, sales manager, Colombo)

Freedom was a further significant issue for enthusiastic praise, as people listed the things they had enjoyed about living there:

'I'm very [free] over there. Here, after 6 o'clock I can't move. But there night time 2 o'clock, left the night club, I can go home. Actually I love it, I love the UK.' (Mohammed, 35 years old, male jeweller, Kattankudy)

Women in particular underlined the fact that they were able to go out at night by themselves without fear.

'My only problem was really overconfidence. I was walking along in London at about 10:30 one evening on a fairly quiet street. I had my mobile in one hand and my wallet in the other and suddenly a woman ran past and grabbed my wallet, out of my hand. I suddenly felt much more vulnerable and after that I was much more careful, but it

shows how confident I was after about six months there. I'd just stopped thinking of dangers.' (Ramani, 28 years old, female, advertising executive, Colombo)

This freedom was not only a freedom from fear or violence, but a freedom from social pressure. One woman commented that in Colombo, if you go somewhere everyone in your neighbourhood knows where you have been before you get back.

'In London I could do what I wanted and not get any comments.' (Radha, 35 years old, female, communications shop owner, Colombo)

Radha was clear that this did not cover anything immoral or even at all daring, but she just felt able to do what she wanted without constantly thinking how people would react and this was a tremendous relief.

Administration was universally seen as reasonably efficient. People came to expect authorities to be courteous and helpful, and other members of the public behaved in what was seen as a 'disciplined' way:

'And the other thing is I like the queue life. When you go to the shop, you know, queue, that's nice.' (Mohammed, 35 years old, male jeweller, Kattankudy)

Despite having lived on minimal incomes of asylum support and the odd few hours of illegal work the levels of inequality in the UK were not widely commented on. Having rarely earned more than £2.00 an hour helping out in a small shop, Radha commented that: 'We can earn there. I don't think that there are many lower people there.' But even though she did not think there were many poor people:

'There are so many ways in which they are helping people. For example, if you go to Tesco, they are giving buy one get one free. In Sri Lanka, you never see that, to help people.' (Radha, 35 years old, female, communications shop owner, Colombo)

The notion that Tesco provides buy one, get one free deals out of a commitment to helping the poor suggests a certain willingness to interpret events in the UK in the best possible light, as opposed to events in Sri Lanka which are seen overly negatively.

Several returnees recounted anecdotes to illustrate their positive impressions of people they met as friendly, welcoming and helpful. One of the most touching was related by Ali:

'After about seven months in the UK I had a bicycle accident, in Southall. I got my coat caught in the wheel and I fell over the top onto the road and there was blood everywhere. At that time a British woman came and asked "do you want any help?" She's Scottish lady. And she called an ambulance. After they put me in the ambulance, I just started crying. And she saw and she said "Why are you crying", I said "No one is here to take care of me. I am alone here" and she said "first your god is there and second I'm here. So don't worry." She came to the hospital and when I was discharged she asked whether I could go alone or would I like a lift. I said no I can go alone she helped me to take bus and gave me £10. I can't forget her help until I die.' (Ali, 42 years old, male, agricultural supplier, Batticaloa)

The readiness with which this story was remembered and the warmth with which he recounted it, show the impression that the encounter had made on him. 'That is the main reason why I'd like to go back' Radha concluded a similar story, 'the friendliness of the people' (Radha, 35 years old, female, communications shop owner, Colombo). Such random encounters appear to have enormous impacts on the way in which people view their entire experience in the UK.

The reverse of these positive encounters is the widely experienced problem of racism. There was a clear difference between the student migrants and the group of IOM returnees here. Only one of the IOM returnees reported having experienced any racism in the UK, whereas only one of the student migrants reported that they had not directly experienced racism. The difference is in understandings of racism. The IOM migrants were much more willing to explain away even relatively brutal attacks. One man worked the night shift in a petrol station in central Leeds. The petrol station was robbed and he

was beaten. On another occasion he was held up with a gun, but he did not interpret these events as racist incidents.

'If I was there, they robbed me, but if there was another white man there, they still rob the place.' (Kumudu, 57 years old, male, clothes shop owner, Homogama)

Another IOM returnee was willing to explain away racism too:

'When you compare it to what happens here [in Sri Lanka], one going to kill others, it's a small thing.' (Suburaj, 35 years old, male, construction worker, Colombo)

Student migrants had a very different understanding of racism. Even though many were expecting it, it was always described as a surprise or a shock when they actually realised what had happened.

'Of course you know that all Asians get called Paki, regardless of where they're from [...] It actually happened to me only once.' (Gamilla, 29 years old, female, sales manager, Colombo)

A middle aged woman had said to her 'Go home, Paki', which Gamilla said she didn't realise was aimed at her until afterwards. Others reported similar experiences, none of them physically violent, usually involving one or two incidents of being told to 'go home' in the street, during their time there. Another 33-year-old man had been refused service in a pub in Edinburgh when he was with a Kazakh friend, though a white American they were with was served.

Beyond these experiences of racism, student migrants had a much more subtle understanding of the ways in which racism alters behaviour:

'There's things you wouldn't do, obviously I'd never have gone into a pub when there was a football game on, for example.' (Iqbal, 29 years old, male, researcher, Colombo)

Those who were living in the UK at the time of the London bomb attacks in July 2005 typically described it as a significant, memorable event. Again, there was a distinction between the responses of the IOM returnees and those of the students. One man was living in London and expected to have serious problems as an outsider, as he would expect to happen as a Tamil man following an explosion in Sri Lanka, but he mentioned specifically that this did not happen:

'There was no any problem for us. Everything cleared within a few hours.' (Kumar, 34 years old, male, grocer, Chilaw)

In Worthing, one of the students had a very different experience, however:

'Because the picture on the TV had shown four Asians, after that being Asians, we automatically went into that category [...] One evening I was coming home after work and a group of men on the other side of the street yelled out "Bomber! Bomber!" at me. That obviously never happened before July.' (Rajaya, 37 years old, male, school teacher, Colombo)

Again, this is a matter of chance encounters, which whether positive or negative leave a lasting impression. On this occasion though, this student felt that something changed more generally after these attacks, which influenced his desire to return to Sri Lanka a few months later.

As with other official institutions all returnees reported that their experience of the immigration authorities and the police was generally positive, though it was again one of the student migrants who was able to read beneath this surface:

'There is always an anxiety when you come into the UK, past immigration. Even if you've got the visa you still have a concern that they might not let you in. When I first arrived I think I even had an x-ray of my lungs as I'd been told that they may stop me to check that I had TB, so I carried that in my bag, but I never needed it.' (Iqbal, 29 years old, male, researcher, Colombo)

The man who worked in the petrol station in Leeds that was regularly robbed considered the immigration authorities separate from the police and, even once his asylum claim had expired, he reported that he was not concerned about reporting such attacks to the police:

'I think the police doesn't have any contact with immigration matters. My friend told me that in France or Germany, they will look at you first. Before searching for the robber, they are looking at your things. But in England, it's a very good country. They doesn't want to see my ID or anything.' (Kumudu, 57 years old, male, clothes shop owner, Homogama)

Several people, including this man, felt much the same about work:

'If you don't have any trouble, if you're not involved with the police you can stay without papers, even, there. If you work in the normal way. My case was rejected, after four years, but I stay there another four years, no problem, because we pay tax and we just work.' (Kumudu, 57 years old, male, clothes shop owner, Homogama)

Others, however, were much more hesitant about working without authorisation. Some simply reported that they had not worked and had stayed with family members, though this may be provoked by their continuing concerns around discussing these issues with the interviewer. Even when reassured that there was no problem in admitting to having worked illegally, they maintained that they had not worked and that this had affected them very significantly:

'For the first year it was good [...] I feel like I'm starting a new life. But then after one year, everything changed. After one year my case was refused and then they stopped all the help. I don't have any work permit.' (Srikantha, 28 years old male grocer, Batticaloa)

Those who did work were realistic about the difficulties and dangers of illegal work. Although such work was typically found through social networks, often within ethnic communities. These communities could be defined in different ways depending on the context; individuals would see themselves as 'Sri Lankan Tamil' with other Sri Lankan Tamils, but as 'Tamil', 'Sri Lankan', or 'South Asian' in different contexts and bonds of solidarity developed accordingly. Some saw this as exploitation rather than solidarity:

'Until I got to the UK, I didn't know about the work permit or the visa or those issues [...] When I went to ask the British for work, without a work permit they said "sorry, we can't give you work". But the Asians were different. They are the people who are taking us as half wage. They are using us as cheap labourers. When the people who have the work permit, when they receive 6 or 7 pounds per hour, they give us only 3 pounds.' (Ali, 42 years old, male, agricultural supplier, Batticaloa)

Six of the student migrants did some form of work during their studies, typically of a similar nature to the IOM returnees, working in shops, bars, restaurants and in one case in a care home. For all of them, their main focus was their studies which fully lived up to their expectations.

'As a student, you don't know what to expect, but you do expect... a sort of endless excitement and novelty. And I can't say that I was disappointed at any point.' (Gamilla, 29 years old, female, sales manager, Colombo)

The quality of facilities, teaching and the administrative support they received was universally praised, though one student who went on to do a Masters in the US did contrast the level of engagement of his lecturers in the UK with the much more forthcoming relationship he had with lecturers in the US. Two students were able to find work after their studies that was appropriate for their level of qualification. Five others were able to arrange the necessary visas to continue working but could not find the right job:

'I tried a number of places, but they always told me that they preferred EU nationals as it was simpler. I waited for one month after the end of the course and I didn't want to stay around getting depressed, or to do any jobs just for money, like a lot of my friends were doing. I came back to Sri Lanka and got a great job in a week.' (Ramani, 28 years old, female, advertising executive, Colombo)

Looking for work at an appropriate level was a main reason for return of the student group, though reasons varied.

Return to Sri Lanka

All of the individuals, students and IOM returnees alike, were living in the UK alone, and returned as individuals. Radha had been living with her husband, who had also claimed asylum, but he had been forcibly removed to Sri Lanka once his asylum claim had expired. Everyone had close family in Sri Lanka, parents, spouses and in some cases, children, and they did not have the additional complications of travelling with family or having to consider accompanying family members in their decision to return. Family remaining in Sri Lanka was a very significant, and for IOM returnees probably the dominant, reason for return:

'My parents are so aged. My father 78 years old and mother 65 years old. I'm the elder one in my family, my parents always used to call me and asked me to visit them before they die. So I decided to go back to Sri Lanka.' (Ali, 42 years old, male, agricultural supplier, Batticaloa)

Prakesh (33 years old, male, unemployed chef, Colombo) was the migrant who had been away longest, 14 years in total, and he wanted to come home because he missed his mother, despite the fact that his parents advised him not to come back. He had not seen them since he was 18, and was 32 when he returned. Others had been away from their wives and in three cases, their children for many years too, although typically they had been able to support them financially while away. The suffering caused by family separations that result from migration, particularly irregular migration, exerts tremendous pressures on family units. In several cases illness of family members provided the necessary impetus to return.

Separation from family members was compounded by difficulties in finding work and, for the IOM returnees, rejection of their asylum claim. This was particularly acute for those migrants who had relied on friends or family in the UK since they had been unable to find work without the necessary authorisation:

'At that time my friend took care of me and he covered all my expenses. I didn't want to keep bothering him. And my family was in Sri Lanka, which was another reason for my return from the UK.' (Ramesh, 45 years old, male, jeweller, Batticaloa)

The continual anxiety of living illegally also gradually wore people down. The possibility of being stopped by the police was a continual worry. All IOM returnees stayed following their final rejection but two left very soon afterwards and no one remained in the UK for more than four years.

'When I left this country [Sri Lanka], I left because it wasn't peaceful. Then when my case was rejected there [in the UK], it was the same. I wasn't peaceful, so I decided to come back.' (Mohammed, 35 years old, male jeweller, Kattankudy)

'Lifetime was passing and there was no positive reply. I thought that I was losing my life.' (Suburaj, 35 years old, male, construction worker, Colombo)

All the IOM returnees had made the decision to leave before they had heard of the IOM programme. Two people heard of the programme on the UK Tamil TV channel, two others saw advertisements in newspapers and the remaining six were taken to IOM by friends. Suburaj reportedly left one week after his first meeting at IOM. The longest was five months between interview and final return as one man pulled out of the initial plans due to last minute concerns about return. IOM London explains that there are certain advantages to being in the programme: potential returnees are eligible for subsistence support even while they are waiting, and during this time the Home Office cannot issue a removal order in their name. Individuals are therefore only allowed to apply twice and each application is valid for three months.

Those who had returned with IOM were extremely happy with the procedure and could not have imagined an alternative way of returning. The only area where advice could have been improved was in the re-claiming of tax, one man suggested:

'I have paid the tax, but I didn't receive my money back. The people who are leaving the country, they give that money back. I applied for that, but I didn't get my money.' (Kumudu, 57 years old, male, clothes shop owner, Homogama)

The IOM's own assessment of the high degree of satisfaction for the programme felt by the Sri Lankan returnees is supported by this research. However, in terms of intended returns or further migration, the 44 per cent who reported that they would consider migrating again if given the chance has gone up substantially since 2004. Only one individual of the ten interviewed reported that not only would he not go himself, but he would advise others not to go either:

'I am always telling people who want to claim asylum "don't go to the UK". The Home Office will reject your case, you can't work, you can't stay there after they've finished your case, so you don't want to go to the UK. I am always telling that.' (Srikantha, 28 years old male grocer, Batticaloa)

All other IOM returnees, however, reported that they would be keen to return to the UK if the opportunity arose. Two individuals were actively planning to leave (Abdullah and Ali).

The reason for this almost universally experienced desire to leave among those who had returned on the IOM programme was the deteriorating economic, social and political situation in Sri Lanka. Many people compared the freedom they enjoyed as an undocumented migrant in the UK with the difficulties they faced having returned. This was most significantly the case for minority groups and Tamils and Muslims felt particularly unsafe, though even Kumudu, as the only Sinhalese individual among the group, was also a journalist who worked for a non-government paper and so also felt individually threatened. These concerns affected all aspects of their lives, prevented movement and affected their opportunities for finding work.

'When I was in the UK, I used to travel all the time, and here I'm too afraid to travel. Even if you've got an identity card, sometimes people disappear.' (Prakesh, 33 years old, male, unemployed chef, Colombo)

Prakesh and two other Tamil migrants had returned to a different part of the country. They had originally left from Jaffna and during the time they had been away, their family had moved to Colombo, to escape the ongoing conflict and related hardships of life in Jaffna. Their return international migration was therefore accompanied by an internal migration. Since the overall IOM returns database only includes district of return, there is no information on how common this sort of movement is, but the fact that 30 per cent of our random sample experienced it suggests that it may be a widespread experience among returnees. Internal migrations, particularly of minority groups, are particularly significant since they may also involve crossing into a region where a language other than their own is spoken.

All three of these returnees faced difficulties speaking Sinhala, which is very widely spoken in Colombo, particularly by police and military personal. They also faced particular difficulties in obtaining new National Identity Cards (NICs). NICs are supposed to be issued within six months following a change of address, allowing internal migrants to register in a new electoral district. Tamil migrants, particularly in Colombo, face tremendous suspicion in this process and many local officials simply refuse to register them. Without an NIC travel is extremely difficult as checkpoints and road blocks have multiplied since 2006. Even with an NIC problems are still likely if the bearer is identified as having been born in a Tamil majority area, such as Jaffna, and even worse if they are registered as still officially resident there.

Although all other returnees (seven IOM returnees and all student returnees) returned to the district from which they had left, their experiences on return related closely to their ethnic group. All Tamils and Muslims, like Prakesh, reported that they preferred not to leave the house and did so only for essential business or work.

In the case of Ali, this was particularly severe and although he was registered in the IOM database as having returned to Batticaloa, our first discussions with him were over the phone to Trincomalee and we then spoke to him in person at a friend's house in Colombo. He had thought that the problems that had prompted his initial departure from Sri Lanka had disappeared and he had therefore returned but the day he got back he was visited by armed men at his house and he had not returned since, moving between addresses of friends around the country and desperately trying to contact the Home Office to see if it was possible to reactivate his claim, but receiving no response.

All Tamil speakers, from both the IOM and student returnee groups, reported experiencing racism after returning to Sri Lanka in much more significant ways than they had ever experienced it in the UK. This was not the case for any of the Sinhala migrants, however. When asked if he had experienced racism since returning, Suburaj (35 years old, male, construction worker, Colombo) gave the kind of smile that suggested he considered it a stupid question, or at least indicated the distance between the reality of the questioner and his own, and replied 'every day'. He was not alone in this, particularly among returnees to Colombo. Radha (35 years old, female, communications shop owner, Colombo) described common situations in which she would pretend not to be Tamil and would keep silent in public so that her accent in Sinhala would not expose her origins.

Jayanthi (27 years old, female, environmental consultant, Colombo) described conversations at her majority Sinhalese workplace which would abruptly end when she entered the room, or the increasingly common outspoken criticisms of Tamils in general. She was planning on leaving for Canada, yet she wanted to avoid Toronto which she grouped with London, as another big city, where she had not felt comfortable in the politically charged atmosphere of the Tamil diaspora. When asked why, she explained:

'You know...I have Sinhala friends here...they [Tamil friends/family in London] don't know anyone Sinhala.' (Jayanthi, 27 years old, female, environmental consultant, Colombo)

Despite the difficulties she faced in Colombo, and her desire to leave, she also saw mono-ethnic communities as a problem and she wanted to avoid the kinds of enclosed, isolated diaspora communities she had experienced in London.

The deteriorating economic situation increased the pressures felt by all returnees and had caused the businesses that many of them had established with the support of IOM to run into difficulties. Suburaj had been given financial support to follow a vocational training course which had led to a job in the construction sector. Another man had found a job in a local NGO in Batticaloa province and was prospering. All others had been supported in establishing a business and were facing varying levels of difficulty. Only two businesses (those of Srikantha and Mohammed) were genuinely functioning well and providing enough profit to support the returnee and family.

Like the IOM returnees, students did not want to remain in Sri Lanka; nine individuals representing all ethnic groups were making active plans to leave again and these were much more concrete than the vague intentions of the IOM returnees. Only two were planning to leave for the UK (Sunil and Gamilla) and only three others reported that they would be keen to return to live there. Seven stayed on in the UK briefly following graduation and although all seven had secured the necessary work permits, only two were able to find jobs at a level they were interested in within the time they had allowed themselves. Susan had secured a work permit through a family link and worked in various theatres in London and Iqbal returned on a working holiday visa and found work in a research centre at the London School of Economics.

The remaining five returned to Sri Lanka after a month or two of job searches and found work very quickly there. Of these, Rukmal and Kesevan are involved in the process of applying for residency in Australia, Priya has recently left to start a PhD in Australia and Ramani has secured a job with the United Nations in Geneva. Finally, Jayanthi returned to Sri Lanka immediately following her studies and is now in the final stages of the visa application to Canada. Only Rajaya has no plans to leave Sri Lanka in the immediate future.

To an extent, the fact that only a small number of students have returned or planned to return to the UK is simply a reflection of wanting to try other things and certainly does not indicate them having had negative experiences of the UK. Susan is following an opportunity that arose to work in the US for a limited period, but would be equally interested in returning to the UK. Jayanthi is interested in moving to Canada since most of her family is living in the UK and she feels that she would still be held to standards of behaviour expected in Sri Lanka by the large number of her uncles and aunts living there. Ramani has a job with a UN agency that followed directly from her MBA at Cambridge and she

remains closely associated with the University. The remaining three, Rukmal, Kesevan and Priya, are all hoping to move to Australia, where beginning graduate education already puts a person on the path to guaranteed permanent residency.

'I love Sri Lanka, and at the moment, I don't want to leave but given the uncertainty of the situation it is a real advantage if you can get permanent residency somewhere else. It gives you an escape route, if you need it.' (Rukmal, 24 years old, male, management consultant, Colombo)

Kesevan recounted the story of a friend who had worked in the UK as a doctor for four years after graduation. He was planning to stay and had invested a lot in the country. Recently, the UK authorities told him he had to leave, that he was no longer able to work. This story was interpreted as a wasted investment:

'Four years he put into that, and now what does he have? Nothing.' (Kesevan, 25 years old, male, management consultant, Colombo)

This apparent unreliability of the UK system, which can affect people with no warning, contrasts with the predictability of the Australian system.

None of the returnees felt British, at any stage. There was little hesitation in answering this question and even some surprise that it was asked. All of them had gained considerably from their time in the UK and all retained close friends from that period that they remained in touch with and although 13 out of 20 expressed a clear desire to return, and only two said that they would not like to return, it seems unlikely that many will. The UK as a whole is too large and too political an entity for people to identify with personally. In contrast, all migrants expressed much clearer feelings of attachment to the immediate areas in which they had lived: 'I won't miss the UK. But I will miss Cambridge' (Ramani). London, Brighton, Edinburgh, Birmingham, Sheffield, Nottingham and Reading all evoked similar feelings among people who had lived there.

For students, the university provided a focus for this attachment and seven of the ten students had been in contact with the alumni association of their university at least once in the previous year. Three of the students had attended alumni meetings held in Colombo. The IOM returnees had no such possibility, though several of them thought of IOM as some kind of focal point, and although they would be much more unlikely to be able to travel back to the UK, even assuming that they got a visa, they expressed equally strong feelings of attachment to the neighbourhoods where they had lived.

Despite not feeling that it had become part of their identity, life in the UK left a significant impression on all returnees. The student migrants all felt that, even if their subsequent jobs did not relate directly to their studies, the fact that they had studied in the UK had been key to finding the employment they did. In professional terms, the IOM returnees were in a very different situation and they were all in very similar circumstances, doing similar work to before they had left.

4. Conclusion

The vast majority of return migration to Sri Lanka concerns the mostly female migrants returning from temporary labour contracts in the Gulf. Though there is no doubt that labour migration dominates both emigration and return, it is difficult to form an accurate impression of just how significant this movement is compared to other migration, as the data collection techniques are skewed to exaggerate labour migration and within that, to emphasise lower skilled migrants. In contrast, there is very little information on those who travel for other reasons or to destinations other than the common destinations for labour migrants. The most significant movements other than labour migration concern overwhelmingly poor refugees travelling to the South of India and migration for a variety of reasons to Europe and North America.

The Government of Sri Lanka has had specialised departments working specifically to assist and support migrants travelling to and from the Middle East since 1981 and detailed information on these movements from a few years earlier. Recent analysis of initiatives to support female migrants has highlighted a number of problems with this programme. The focus of government efforts is still on preparing migrants who are leaving, rather than supporting migrants who are returning, or even protecting migrants who are abroad. The main reintegration efforts involve provision of cheap credit to returning migrants, though provision of credit alone is not sufficient to ensure a smooth transition back to life in Sri Lanka. The relevant government department and associated NGOs are focused exclusively on returning labour migrants and there is no government involvement with returnees from elsewhere.

This research has attempted to contribute to the process of filling these information gaps with an analysis of a selection of return paths from the UK. There is no published research on return from the UK and little information about return migrants outside of the Middle East. Newspaper reports over the past two years have only referred to return from the UK once, during July 2007 when there were a number of Sri Lankan migrants on hunger strike in detention centres across the UK. The sample of 20 people who were interviewed for this research was split equally between those who claimed asylum and then lived on illegally and those who studied and in some cases went on to undertake professional employment in the UK. These two groups were distinct in many respects, and broadly correspond to different social groups in Sri Lanka.

Summary of findings

The findings of the research may be summarised in four key points.

First, the large majority of returnees had family in the UK, but this was not always a determinant of their decision to come. Those individuals seeking asylum were more concerned about where they may be able to stay. Students were much more focused on which university to study in and their choices were not so much between the UK and India or the UK and the United States, but between the London School of Economics and India's Jawaharlal Nehru University, or between Cambridge and Yale.

Second, returnees did not form any real attachment to the UK or to Britain but to much more locally defined places, such as particular neighbourhoods in London, regional towns, or even to a University campus and its immediate surroundings. As a result none of them even thought about feeling British.

Third, the experience in the UK has had very different impacts on the two groups. None of the IOM returnees is in a significantly different position from their situation before their first migration, though two of them have reliable work and a further two have profitable businesses. None of them was able to send back more than subsistence support for their families and in eight cases the money they received from IOM was significantly less than their initial payment to an agent. In contrast, all the students thought that they owed their current professional positions to their studies in the UK, suggesting that their education has made a real impact on their quality of life.

Finally, once returned most people have continued to be internationally mobile, or at least have intentions to be. None of the IOM returnees have been able to leave the country, though two have plans to do so. In contrast nine of the student returnees have left Sri Lanka since returning from their

studies. Two have now left for further long term assignments, either studying or work, three more are about to do so and a further four have intentions to leave over the next year or so.

In the context of a range of locally defined feelings of attachment to places that all happen to fall within the UK, a UK sponsored initiative to stay in contact with former residents is not likely to be particularly successful, unless it was able to offer definite benefits, such as visa facilitation arrangements. Those people who wished to continue their contacts did so either through individual friends and family or through alumni associations of their former universities. The limited national level associations that do exist, such as the Sri Lanka-UK friendship association were rejected by everyone who knew of their existence as remote, elitist and extremely conservative. There appears to be a need to encourage people to maintain their links, since the UK is increasingly in need of skilled migrants and most returnees who are moving elsewhere are not coming back to the UK, but this would have to be managed in a way that supports the links in which people are already invested and encourages local-level belonging.

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