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“Forces to migrate from  
Angola to the Netherlands”

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# **“Forces to migrate from Angola to the Netherlands”**

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## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Angola has known civil war since its independency from Portugal in 1975 until 2002. The MPLA-government troops fought the UNITA-rebels for almost three decades and the stakes have changed from political influence during the cold war to the control of resources (oil and diamonds) during the nineties (Hodges 2001). The consequences are that the country belongs to the most corrupt in the world,<sup>2</sup> that in 2000 61 percent of the population lived below the poverty line (Simon 2001, p. 510) and millions of IDP's<sup>3</sup> and refugees have fled the violence. Between October 1992 and October 1994 about three million IDP's sought protection in Angola (UCAH, 1995) and because of intense fighting from 1998 onwards, by 2001 the number of refugees in the neighbouring countries Congo, Zambia and Namibia had risen to 450.000 (UNCHR, 2004). Apart from seeking refuge in Angola or the neighbouring countries, Angolans have been travelling to Europe and applying for asylum as well. In the late nineties of the last century the Netherlands in fact became the leading asylum-county for Angolans. In 2001 more than 4.000 Angolans applied for asylum in the Netherlands. In this paper I will focus on the group of asylum seekers who entered the Netherlands since 1998 and explain why they left Angola and ended up in the Netherlands; a country without any historical or linguistic linkages to Angola. What specific reasons made Angolans leave their country and what rationale was behind their choice to come to the Netherlands? Different empirical studies on push- and pull-factors of asylum seekers have already been carried out (see for instance Barsky 1995, Doornhein & Dijkhoff 1995, Koser 1997, Böcker & Havinga 1997, Doornbos a.o. 2001). It is interesting to note that on the basis of interviews with key-informants Böcker and Havinga (1997, p. 88) conclude that when it comes to choosing a country of asylum "Africans are often said to rely on networks of kinship, friends, political sympathism, tribe and village. This in contrast to asylum seekers from Asia who are said to more frequently use commercial organisations specialised in smuggling people in and out". Most of the above mentioned empirical studies do not focus on asylum seekers from African countries, but rather on migration from Asia. Also in the research-field of human smuggling most of the empirical research focuses on Asia rather than Africa (see for instance: Chin 1999, Staring 2001, Salt 2000, Zhang and Chin 2002). Siegel & Bijleveld (2002) and Liempt (2004) point out that in general the influence of commercial human smuggling organisations on migration should not be overestimated. Because of this it is particularly interesting to elaborate on how Angolans gained entry to "Fortress Europe". Did they indeed rely on networks of friends and kinship, rather than the services of human smugglers? What routes did they use? By thoroughly studying the specific case of one African country - Angola -, I hope new insights can be gained about push- and pull factors and the relation with human smuggling. To complete the picture of the migration-process of Angolans to the Netherlands, I also briefly focus on the unique way the Dutch government tried to counter the increase of asylum applicants from Angola by sponsoring the building of an orphanage in Angola.

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<sup>2</sup> Angola is in the Top Ten of the most corrupt countries in the world; "*Corruption perceptions index 2003*, Transparency International"

<sup>3</sup> Internally Displaced Persons

## 2. *Methodology*

In order to answer the questions addressed above, different research-methods have been used. Official files and data from the Dutch Immigration Services and the Dutch Police have been analysed and interviews are held with key informants like Angola-specialists, social workers and immigration officers. Next to this, the most important body of information is sought from the migrants themselves, friends and family members of migrants and potential migrants. In order to gain “rapport” with the migrants I learned Portuguese, tried to visit as many Angolan parties as possible and read many books about Angolan history and culture. A three months fieldwork trip to Angola has been part of the research and a shorter stay in Portugal is planned. By means of confidential in-depth interviews both in the Netherlands and in Angola, information was gathered about the social background of the migrants, the reasons for migrating and the methods used to migrate. None of the conversations are held in a formal setting like an asylum centre, but in most cases in a bar or other informal venue. With many of the respondents I have spoken several times. All respondents and informants are promised that their information is processed anonymous and confidentially. Most of the information used in this paper is based on the conversations I had with about 60 key-informants, 35 migrants and 30 potential migrants and family-members of migrants. The conclusions are preliminary.

## 3. *Why leave Angola?*

Based on an analysis of causal factors for asylum migration to the European Union from 1990-2000, Castles and Loughna (2002, p. 13) identified a number of push-factors in the countries of origin, like civil war, high numbers of IDP’s relative to total population, low ranking on Human Development Index and a low life expectancy. These situations all apply to Angola and might therefore be considered as important push-factors for migrants to leave. In first instance many of the migrants also mentioned how deprived the situation in their own land was. “People are dying on the street”, “We have been in war for more than twenty years now” were some of the general notions they had about Angola. But as the conversation longed and we came to speak about their individual reasons and motives to migrate, more specific push-factors could be derived. Most Angolan asylum seekers typically are part of the middle class and originate from the capital Luanda, but also from provincial capitals such as Benguela, Huambo, Malanje and Lubango. Apart from Huambo and Malanje direct consequences of war just hardly reached the cities and consequently few of the asylum seekers themselves suffered the hardships of war. Almost all of the migrants I have spoken said they didn’t ask asylum because of direct life-threatening war situations, political motives or persecution. However, indirectly most of the push-factors that can be identified from their individual motivations can be seen as consequences of the situation of war. The informants and migrants I have spoken named the following factors as decisive to leave:

- Recruitment for military service
- Lack of study opportunities
- Lack of work
- Trade
- Particular “individual” reasons

It is difficult to quantify what factor was the most important, or to point out what specific reason was of overriding importance to leave. For most migrants it has been a combination of factors that made them migrate.

### Recruitment for military service

During the eighties many young Angolans went to Portugal to avoid military service, because once a member of the Angolan army it can take ten or more years until you can sign out. From 1990 to 1992 there was a ceasefire and therefore active recruitment for military service was on a low level. By the end of the nineties however, the MPLA government troops started a massive operation to for once and for all exterminate UNITA. Because of this, recruitment for the army started to be more stringent again and anyone who turned eighteen was drafted. Peoples' names that had not subscribed yet were broadcasted on the radio and in so called *rusgas* the streets were wiped out in search of young men. Many parents saw recruitment as a reason to send their children to Europe and also young men who had saved enough money themselves did their best to leave the country.

### Lack of study opportunities

Corruption is everywhere in Angola. From the highest politicians to the lowest policemen, from the single public university to most of the public high schools. Students who pay their teachers or have the right contacts can eventually always succeed their exams. Consequently a diploma from an Angolan high school or university doesn't say anything about a person's qualities and the level of education is very poor. Many Angolans have been able to study abroad with bursaries during the eighties and some of them still remember how important this period has been in their lives. They want to offer their children the same possibilities. A man in his fifties stressed the importance to study abroad:

“For every person it is important to discover different places in the world. It is very useful. During my study, because of my work or during my holidays I've been in America, Indonesia and Europe. My children are raised in Angola, but at the moment one of them is in France and another in England. They are in Europe to study.”

Not only Europe is a destination for Angolans who want to study. Also the neighbouring countries Namibia, South Africa and to a lesser extent Zimbabwe have attracted many Angolans for this reason. The quality of education is better than in Angola and it is seen as an advantage that students learn English at the same time. Sometimes students who tried to study in one of these countries ended up in Europe after all:

“When I didn't succeed to be admitted at university in Angola, in 1999 I went to Zimbabwe. A niece studied already studied there. My brother paid the 3.500 dollars of fees for a year and obtaining a visa wasn't difficult. After I had studied law for a year, I actually thought it was too expensive for my brother and I wanted to be responsible for my own life. I went back to Angola and from there to the Netherlands to study there.”

Within Angola, private universities with an academic level do exist, but cost about 300 US dollars per month. Therefore it is cheaper for parents who want their children to study to invest in sending them to Europe and let the children ask asylum.

### Lack of work

Like most African countries, there are few job opportunities in Angola<sup>4</sup> and because of nepotism and old-boy networks the few posts that are available are shared within a small circuit. Not competence but contacts are decisive. Young Angolans complain that a high level

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<sup>4</sup> The CIA World Factbook defined the situation in 2001 as follows: “extensive unemployment and underemployment affecting more than half the population” (CIA 2002).

of education could sometimes only have negative effects on the job market, especially when applying for a position in government. Chefs aren't eager to employ persons with a higher degree than they themselves have; afraid that someday the "smart ass" will take over his job. Lack of opportunities on the national job market has made many young Angolans leave for Portugal and try their luck there on the illegal job market. One respondent notes about the nineties:

"Angolans have always worked in construction in Portugal; that was our market. No people from Cape Verde, nobody from Mozambique, construction belonged to us"

In the end of the nineties however, more and more immigrants from Eastern Europe started to penetrate the construction industry in Portugal (Peixoto 2002). The Angolans lost their monopoly to the cheaper and higher educated illegal Ukrainians, Moldavians and Romanians. In search for other possibilities to survive, Angolans who had been living in Portugal for months or years asked asylum in other parts of Europe.

### Trade

Lack of work and meagre salaries forces most of the city dwellers in the capital Luanda to have some sort of *negocio*, a business. Because of the long period of war Angola has very few stores and virtually every product has to be imported. Everyone tries to make a - sometimes extra - living in the so called "buy-and-sell economy". This can happen on a small scale; small traders buy a box of products in a warehouse near the harbour and try to sell the products one by one on the street. But the best of course, is to trade on a bigger scale and be the importer for the warehouse. Importing cars, clothing and Hi Fi products take place by individuals who want to make an extra living next to their ordinary job. But to do so, it is much easier and cheaper to have a contact in Europe. One doctor for instance imports second hand cars from the Netherlands. His old schoolmate lives in the Netherlands and is able to send a car whenever the doctor in Angola has found a client. They split the profit. One other respondent who lives in Angola now, told me that when he entered the Netherlands, the first thing he did was to try to establish contact with local Dutch entrepreneurs:

"After having asked asylum I purposely learned Dutch as fast as possible. I went looking for people who could be interesting for me. I became friends with the chef of a department store in the village I lived in, as well with somebody who works at a big pawnshop in Rotterdam. Direct contacts are important and because I speak Dutch we can communicate very well. I don't need any middleman and order straight at the shops. A few weeks ago I ordered a hundred radios from the department store and some second hand computer games from the pawnshop. I buy the games for fifteen dollars in the Netherlands and sell them here for a hundred dollars each."

This citation clarifies that some Angolans did come to the Netherlands with the specific intention to start a business. Other migrants might have picked up the idea during their stay in the Netherlands.

### Particular "individual" factors

Angolans who reside in Europe send the same pictures to their family members in Africa as Europeans would do when they are in Africa. Anything that does not exist in our own country but is present in the other, we make a picture of. A European photographs poor black children in rags and elephants. An Angolan photographs trains, old buildings and of course his car. During the conversations with Angolans turned out that many youngsters have the urge to

leave Angola just to see the world and experience a different place. A young man I met in Luanda put it like this:

“It crosses my mind a lot to go abroad. Everyone wants to discover new things, see new worlds. Look, here you are in Angola. In that same way we want to go to different countries as well: England, the Netherlands, the USA....”

Where European youngsters have the luxury position to be able to study and rent a room in a different city or study abroad for some months, for many Angolans this is not possible because of financial burdens and severe visa-policies. It is already problematic for someone from a provincial town to move to the capital, because the prices for housing can be skyrocketing high. The only way for Angolans to spend some time abroad is by asking asylum in a European country. Some respondents told me that especially in 1999 and 2000 “*Holanda*” was *the* place to go to. Some parents even considered it as a wise thing to send their children to the Netherlands once they for instance found out that their children didn’t do well on school or were using marihuana. A girl from Benguela told about her cousins:

“They both live in the Netherlands now. They were eighteen and twenty-three when they left four years ago. Their father sent them; they were *bandidos*. They didn’t want to study and were just interested in girls. It happens more often when people have problems with their family. They just leave and go abroad.”

Experiencing the world and being sent away by parents because of misbehaviour are examples I refer to as particular “individual” factors. These reasons do not have much to do with general push factors in a country like war, political oppression or economical depression. They consist of themes you would rather find in adolescent-magazines than in scientific literature. But still, a proportion of the asylum migrants who enter Europe sees such “common” reasons as the primary reason to migrate.

#### 4. *Entering the Netherlands*

Most Angolans prefer to travel via Portugal to the Netherlands. Especially by the end of the nineties when more and more asylum seekers from Angola started to enter the Netherlands it became very difficult to obtain a visa from the Dutch embassy. Many of the respondents told me that at the Portuguese embassy however, it wasn’t considered as a big problem to arrange the right paperwork. Some respondents already had family members living in Portugal and could for that reason easily obtain a visa to visit them. Those without family members in Portugal used informal ways to arrange their visa. Many respondents told me that in the capital Luanda everyone knows someone who can arrange Schengen-visa. Different words are used to refer to this middleman: *esquema*, *canal*, *cambalagem*, *porta de carvalho*. These words do not exclusively refer to someone who arranges visa or helps in the process of migrating.<sup>5</sup> They are used to name middlemen who arrange any service; from a driver’s licence or a housing plot, to a job or a shipment of cheap products. When it comes to delivering visa, the middleman himself works at the embassy, or he knows people who know people who somehow can arrange something. This means that once you have found someone who operates as a middleman, you don’t know how close this person is to the person who really arranges the visa. A rule of thumb is that the cheaper the visa is, the closer you are to the source:

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<sup>5</sup> In contrast for instance with “snakeheads” from China or “coyotes” from Mexico whose main job it is to assist people to migrate.



“Anyone who knows a *esquema* starts his own business by using the service of the *esquema*. But then you for instance put 50 dollars on his price. “I can arrange visa for you, it costs....”. Everyone involved has to earn some money and therefore the prices of visa can differ.”

Some people who did have family abroad stated that it takes months to arrange a visa formally and that they therefore made use of a middleman after all:

“A normal visa at the Portuguese embassy costs about 130 dollars. But if you pay that amount, you will never receive a visa. So therefore you’ll have to search for a *porta de carvalho* whom you pay 1000 dollars and be sure it is delivered within weeks.”

As reputed to me many times a person who arranged a visa like this, could fly without any problems on an illegally obtained, but formally correct Schengen-visa to Portugal. Once in Portugal he stayed a few days or weeks with family members, friends or friends of neighbours who lived there. People who did not have any contacts slept in pensions. From Portugal they could easily travel by train, car or bus to the Netherlands while making use of their Schengen-visa.

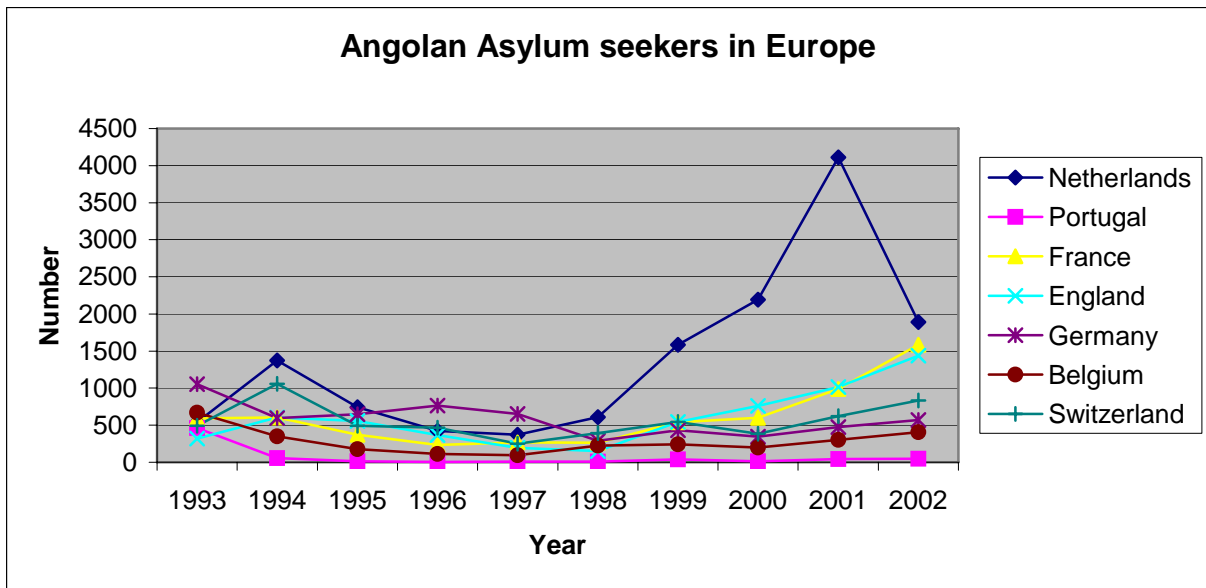
Most of the respondents I have spoken have with did not make use of services from organized groups who arranged the whole route from Angola to the Netherlands. The majority bought their own flight tickets, but others preferred the middleman to take care of that aspect as well. Many people already knew someone in the Netherlands and just arranged their own trip. Whenever they encountered obstacles in their preparations or during their trip they sought ad-hoc help. This could mean that they had somebody arrange their passport and paid him just for this service, or they slept in the house of a friend of a friend in Portugal and paid for those services. Some migrants for instance also paid for the service of being transported by car from Portugal to the Netherlands instead of using the bus or train. Organizations who arrange the whole trip do occur, as one migrant told me he had made use of such an organization. Yet from the current information I have, I would conclude that in comparison with the migrants who use ad-hoc services, only a marginal proportion of Angolan asylum seekers have used services of well-organised groups who specialize in assistance during the migration process.

##### 5. *Angolan asylum seekers in the Netherlands*

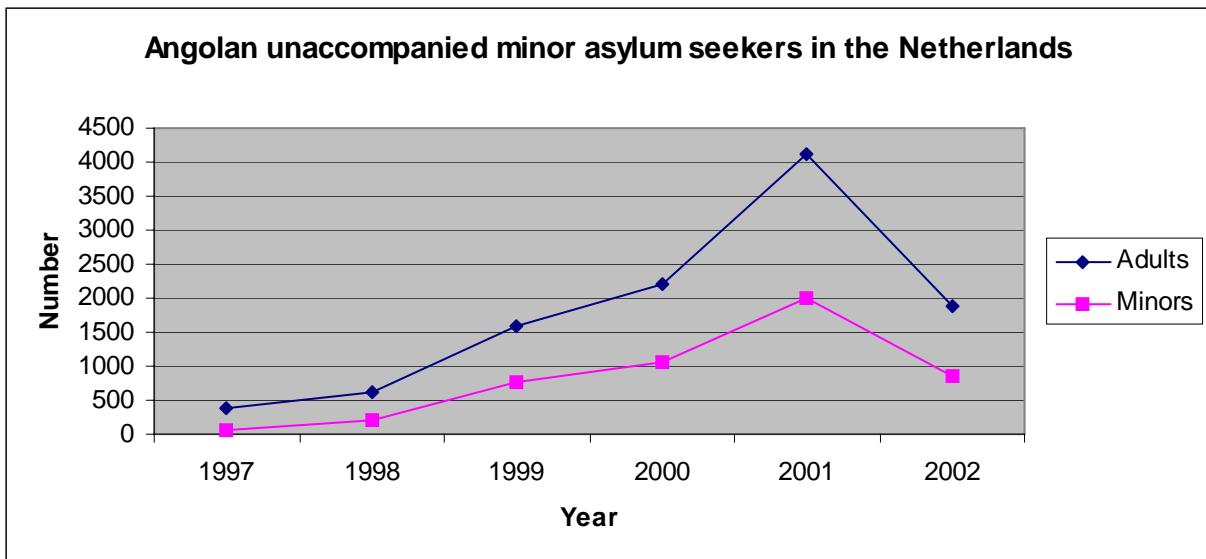
As can be seen on the graph below, from 1993 onwards the Netherlands has been the most popular destination for Angolan asylum seekers in Europe.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For readers who only have this paper in black and white; the dark line that climbs steeply from 1998 to 2001 describes the influx to The Netherlands.



Especially from 1998 until 2001 many Angolans asked for asylum in the Netherlands in comparison with other European countries. The rise of outward migration can partially be explained because of the increased recruitment efforts for the military during this period. This hypothesis is supported by the second graph, since almost half of the Angolan asylum population in the Netherlands consists of so called “Unaccompanied Minors”<sup>7</sup> who claim to be under the age of eighteen and therefore ran a high risk to be recruited.



Based on the figures it is clear that somehow the Netherlands attract many Angolans. Various researchers have already published about the rationale why asylum seekers end up to travel to a particular country (see for instance: Böcker & Havinga 1997, Koser 1997, Robinson & Segrott 2002, Koser & Pinkerton 2002). Most researchers identify an existing network of fellow countrymen in a receiving country as one of the main pull-factors for other migrants to select that country. Next to that, there are indications that at least for some asylum seekers the location of family and friends no longer influences their migration destinations, but that smugglers have taken over this role, because they have detailed knowledge about asylum policies in the areas in which they operate (Koser & Pinkerton 2002, p. 26, 31). Robinson & Segrott nuance the importance of knowledge about asylum policies and conclude on the basis

<sup>7</sup> Asylum seekers under eighteen years of age who claim they do not have of know any adult family members.

of interviews with asylum seekers that “detailed knowledge of asylum procedures or perceived weaknesses in these procedures were less important reasons for the respondents coming to the UK than the perception that the UK is a tolerant country” (2002, p. 47).

In the case of Angola, social networks have played a key role in the decision making process to migrate to the Netherlands. In paragraph 4 I already stressed that very few migrants used the services of well-organized human smugglers to enter the Netherlands. Although the number of Angolans living in the Netherlands prior to the migration wave in 1998 was limited – 2.594 in 1996 (CBS 2003) – on the basis of the conversations I had with the migrants no other conclusion can be drawn than that they have chosen to come to the Netherlands because friends or family already stayed there. Most migrants heard from relatives and acquaintances who lived in the Netherlands that their lives were good, and many young Angolans left on the basis of sole information like “life here is good” or “I am studying”. About the asylum-system itself – the living conditions, the judicial elements, the position of asylum seekers in the receiving country, sometimes even the word “asylum” – they knew nothing. Many Angolans between 18-25 years of age thought for instance they could study for free if they simply said they were from Angola. Some even brought their diplomas and hoped to enter university. Many of them didn’t know anything about asylum and only heard from their friends who already were in procedure what to say and what to do:

“Before I left I had heard something about asylum, but I had no idea what it was. I just thought that I had to go to Dutch government, tell that I’m from Angola, show them my passport and tell them that I want to study. Here we live in the third world; we just think Europe is rich and that they want to help us.”

In so far, the quote of Robinson & Segrott earlier stipulated is applicable to the situation of Angolan asylum seekers who come to the Netherlands. They do not have any detailed knowledge of asylum procedures or perceived weaknesses in these procedures. This however, does not mean that the asylum-system itself has not been of mayor importance as a pull-factor. At the individual direct level the migrants might not have known anything about the asylum-system, but indirectly the specific Dutch asylum-laws and –procedures have attracted them. Probably without knowing it themselves. The mere fact that almost every Angolan who went to the Netherlands between 1998-2001 did not return to Angola, gave friends and family in Angola enough reason to suppose that the Netherlands somehow must be a good country. Potential migrants in Angola considered the Netherlands therefore to be a “tolerant” nation just as the respondents of Robinson & Segrott said about the UK.

But in reality tolerance was not the reason why Angolans could stay in the Netherlands; it was the fine-tuning of their stories on the asylum-laws and policies that gave them the possibility to stay. An Angolan who told his true identity and motives to migrate, in most cases didn’t stand a chance to be granted a status, so therefore most of the migrants reputed they had a different background. Coming from the province of Cabinda where continued fighting was going on was for instance a “good” thing to say, just as being politically active for the rebels of UNITA.

“We had to lie and tell our parents died and that we were not from Luanda but from the province. If I had known beforehand that I had to lie about these things, I would have never gone away”

During the conversations with parents whose children have asked asylum in the Netherlands, they told me that their children were “studying.” This perception was based on false information from the children, because many of them didn’t tell their parents about the

conditions they really lived in. Most of the children in the Netherlands studied on a level that was much lower than they had been studying in Angola. Some persons who almost finished university in Angola had to follow a low level of education with sixteen year olds once they were in the Netherlands, because they had told the immigration services they grew up in a village and were five years younger than in reality. Actually they are frustrated about their situation, but they tell their relatives in Angola things are fine, because they don't want their parents to worry. The result could be that their niece or friend is coming over as well. It even happens that children who came back after their period in Europe or Canada kept completely silent about their life abroad:

“Up to this day my father doesn't know I have asked for asylum. It would be a shame to the family!”

Angolans coming to Europe to trade are well of in the Netherlands. Especially second-hand cars from the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany sell very well in Angola, because they are said to be of good quality. Those Angolans who came to the Netherlands in search of work mostly didn't really find what they were looking for. Because the Dutch government grants every asylum seeker free housing and a weekly allowance for food and clothing, they can live an easy life. But it's boring and marginal. In the Netherlands asylum seekers do not have the right to work in the formal sector and compared to other migrant-groups who work on the illegal market - Turks, Moroccans or Ghanaians - the Angolans don not have a wide network to help them search for jobs. Next to that, over the years the Dutch government has taken very strict measures in order to try and ban out the illegal job-market.

The majority of persons who came to Europe for particular “individual” reasons, found in the Netherlands what they were looking for. No parents to look after them, no need to work, enough possibilities to smoke marihuana, go to parties, visit friends in other places in Europe and buy trendy clothing. With the coming of peace many Angolans will have to return. This latter group does not consider that a nice thing, but at the same time they can look back at an interesting time in Europe.

## 6. *Reaction of the Dutch Government*

Above I stated that coming from Cabinda province or being politically active for UNITA were “good” stories to tell in order to be granted a status. The best story however, was to claim to be an Unaccompanied Minor. In practice, any minor Angolan asylum seeker who claimed he didn't have or knew family members was granted a special temporary status as an Unaccompanied Minor. No matter if the immigration services believed his migration motives or not. This “golden rule” existed because in the Dutch asylum policies it was stated that Angola lacked “adequate reception facilities” for children. In other words; there were no sufficient safe orphanages in Angola to accommodate children once they were sent back and therefore they could not be repatriated. The Angolans who stayed in the Netherlands knew this rule, so many new asylum seekers told the immigration services they were minors without any family members. In reality though, many of them had contact on a regular base with their parents and were between 18 and 25 years old. Some of the asylum seekers themselves reported this to me. This - apart from the recruitment activities for the army in Angola - is another explanation why the number of Unaccompanied Minors from Angola is that high. Although truly young asylum seekers did ask asylum, in reality a fair proportion of the group of Unaccompanied Minors in the second graphic consisted of persons above eighteen years of age.

To counter this misuse of the procedure, the immigration services introduced the use of bone-scans to determine if someone had told his true age during the interviews. The biggest experiment however, was the financing and building of the orphanage “Mulemba” in Luanda, the capital of Angola. By building this orphanage, the Netherlands themselves created an “adequate reception facility” for minors in Angola. This gave the immigration services the possibility to start repatriating Angolan minors. The Dutch minister of Immigration and Intergration officially opened the orphanage in September 2003, but when I visited the orphanage in June 2004 no returned asylum seeker had made use of the services. In the meantime the project is still seen as a success by the Dutch authorities, because the goal is reached; from a judicial point of view there are no constraints for Unaccompanied Minors to return to Angola. Any Unaccompanied Minor from Angola who asks asylum can be denied a status with reference to the existence of “Mulemba”. The project is seen as a success by other European countries as well: Belgium and Switzerland are considering financing some beds in Mulemba.

## 7. *Conclusion*

Most of the push-factors in the country of origin can at the same time be regarded as pull-factors in the receiving country. In the case of Angolan migration to the Netherlands this is not different. Angola was a corrupt country in war where virtually nothing functioned. The Netherlands is one of the richest, least corrupt and most peaceful countries in the world. More specifically the respondents named recruitment for military service, study, trade and “to see the world” as main reasons for migration. Angolans who migrated earlier to the Netherlands convinced friends and family members to join them. Social networks played a decisive role in the decision making process of the migrants. The specific Dutch asylum procedures and laws did not directly influence migrants to go to the Netherlands since they had no knowledge whatsoever about this when they left for the Netherlands. Yet indirectly the asylum-system was a mayor pull-factor because it gave the migrants the possibility to stay and attract other Angolans to come to the Netherlands. Services of middlemen were used to illegally obtain visa to enter Europe, in most cases via Portugal. Organizations who organise the complete trip from Angola to the Netherlands do seem to exist, but operate on a marginal scale. After having asked asylum in the Netherlands a fair proportion of migrants however did not find what they were looking for. Those who came to study hardly made it to an academic level and illegal work is difficult to obtain. A large number of Angolans in the Netherlands claimed to be Unaccompanied Minors, because this gave them a sure chance to stay in the Netherlands. The Netherlands financed the building of an orphanage in Angola in order to create a safe reception-facility for this group and thus be able to deny any new asylum requests and to start repatriating Angolan Unaccompanied Minors. In doing so, in my opinion the first concrete steps to establish a system of reception in the region have been taken.

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