



## INFORMATION QUALITY

Guidelines for maximizing the quality, utility and objectivity of CRI information

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### Background introduction

ACCORD<sup>1</sup> developed guidelines and procedures for reviewing the quality of COI (COI = Country of Origin Information) before it is disseminated via their website ([www.ecoi.net](http://www.ecoi.net)<sup>2</sup>) to the public.

These quality guidelines are revised for Country of Return Information, based on the experiences of the CRI project.

The CRI project provides information - including research, reports and studies - to a broad spectrum of individuals and organizations.

The CRI project is committed to following these quality guidelines and agrees with the underlying principle that they apply to a wide variety of information dissemination activities (country fact sheets, helpdesk activities, presentations, ...).

The more significant the information, the higher the quality standards to which it should be held. Quality is thus an encompassing term that includes i.a. utility and objectivity. Where 'utility' refers to the usefulness of the information to its intended users, 'objectivity' deals with whether the disseminated information is accurate, clear, complete and unbiased in both its presentation and substance. To that end the CRI products must be presented in a well-documented manner, using a variety of methods and resources. CRI products are transparent, meaning that the sources, methods and references employed to create the information are provided.

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<sup>1</sup> Austrian, Red Cross; <http://www.roteskreuz.at/28.html>

<sup>2</sup> [ecoi.net](http://www.ecoi.net) provides up-to-date and publicly available country of origin information with a special focus on the needs of asylum lawyers, refugee counsels and persons deciding on claims for asylum and other forms of international protection.

## Prior target groups, the intended users of CRI products

The intended users of CRI products are people considering a voluntary return and -indirectly - their counsellors<sup>3</sup>.

The group of foreigners in need of return advice includes the following categories:

- foreigners (including refugees not having a well-founded fear of persecution any more) voluntarily **willing to return** to their country of origin,
- foreigners (including refugees not having a well-founded fear of persecution any more) **considering the possibility of voluntary return** to their country of origin,
- foreigners facing **forcible return** following a refugee status determination procedure,
- and foreigners facing **forcible return** and not having evoked any fear of persecution or serious harm, but who had previously legalised their stay by other means or who had been staying illegally in the destination country.

In respect of the above, a foreigner in order to be able to return to his/her country of origin shall:

- have access to the country of origin, then
- have safe access to his/her region of origin or the return area of his/her choice, where
- he/she shall not face any considerable risk to his/her physical security,
- he/she must be able to find durable accommodation corresponding to local standards,
- to ensure his/her and his/her family's livelihood and a standard of living corresponding to local standards, and
- to avoid the deterioration of his/her and his/her family's state of health.

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<sup>3</sup> CRI project, Gábor Gyulai (Hungarian Helsinki Committee), Country of Return Information. A brief concept paper, Brussels, July 2006

## Our information strategy

The CRI project seeks its information both on the internet, as well as by interventions of local partners who organize their own fact-finding actions when it comes upon gathering practical and specific information on reintegration possibilities.

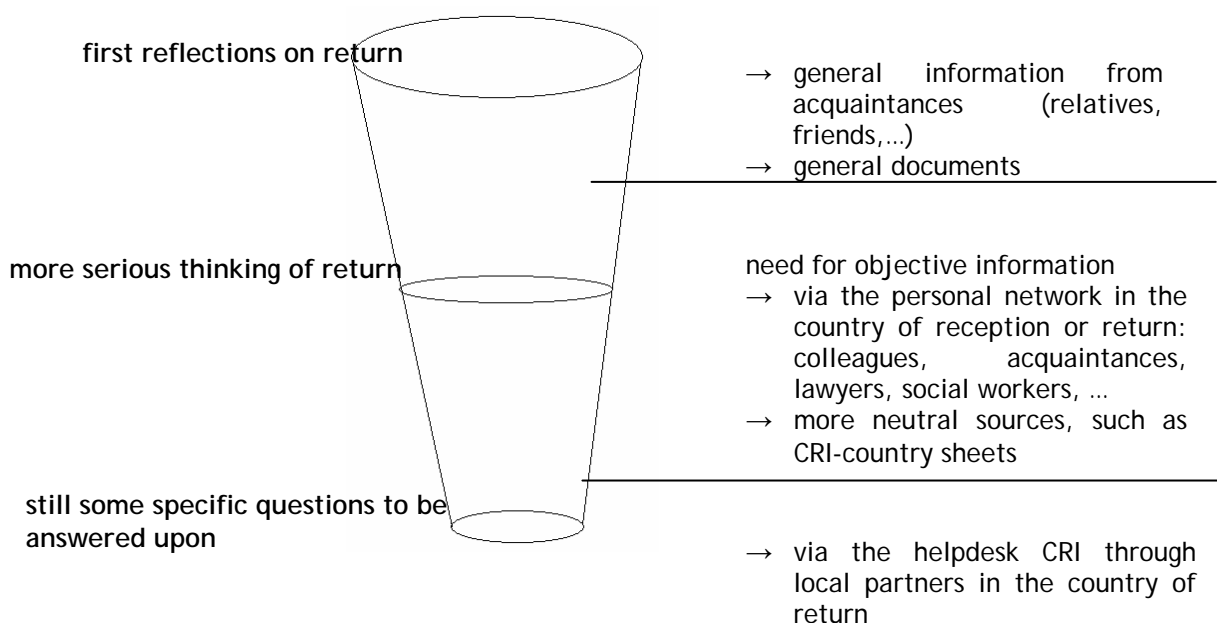
We distinct different sources, relevant for CRI.

- books or other texts by individuals, experts;
- reports by both governmental and non-governmental organisations;
- news sources, such as the written media or documentaries;
- oral sources, interviews taken from (local) experts.

A hypothesis is that potential returnees go through a whole process in taking a decision. At the start of it, they base their decision on more general information: safety conditions, politics, access to the country, general economic development,...

They can find this information through contacts they still have in the country, through contacts with social workers and lawyers, in country information sheets or other information accessible on the internet.

If after these first steps they still consider to return they are in need for more detailed information. This information will no longer be (easily) available on the internet. Sometimes, returnees can rely on persons they still know at home, for other more sensible information they need more objective sources of information. It is for that kind of information that the project is important.



## Innovative aspects

A first aspect concerns **the introduction of country of origin information (COI) from a return point of view** on a European level. There where NGO's on refugee issues are highly involved in offering COI for the reinforcement of an asylum claim (in helping to prove a well-founded fear of persecution, the ineffectiveness of protection in the country of nationality or the risk of serious harm upon return), it is quite new to use that information in the eye of reintegration possibilities<sup>4</sup>. This becomes quite obvious in the kind of information we provide. The various subjects are not different from the traditional COI (that is: information on human rights, political situation, social situation, cultural background, economic situation and humanitarian conditions), but the information resorting under these issues is. This is not surprisingly since the aim is also different (focused on reintegration and not on the legal relevance of the asylum claim).

Another aspect lays in **the creation of an international network** offering precise information on reintegration possibilities, local safety risks and general human rights situations, by setting up a fruitful cooperation between local and (sub)national refugee organizations in Europe and social agencies on the one hand, and local organizations in return countries on the other hand. This enables us, not only to make "standard" information available to potential returnees and their counsellors, but also to complete this info with local data with "inside information" from local sources (that is: someone who shares the potential returnee's perception and of a local situation).

One of the major innovative aspects here is thus **the involvement of local NGOs as key-actors in information gathering and research**. This permits to adapt the information to the returnee's personal integration project as CRI is designed to increase the extent to which people are reintegrated into society. By doing so we move from an academic research (primarily concerned with the understanding of an issue and a more general desire to increase the sum of knowledge and understanding) to an applied research (characterized by its concern with problems and their solution, resulting in the fact that someone is likely to take action of some kind based on the result of the research).

All actors continuously build relations which each other to create spontaneous or more organized opportunities for joint learning (the common methodology being a good example of this) to improve upon practices.

By creating an online community and network (both a yahoo-group and database, as well as a helpdesk service) we make an important innovation in project development<sup>5</sup>. The innovation here lays in the process of interplay among social actors from relevant social practices (both between European partners as with local partners from third countries). Over time, this network processing may lead to the development of a pattern of more or less durable relationships among a number of relevant social actors.

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<sup>4</sup> This point has also been shared by the local partners, who describe the Country Sheet as an efficient, relevant and above all unique tool in directing and assisting returnees.

<sup>5</sup> Despite this remark, that online communities can play a role in project development, little reflection has been made so far on how they are growing. To that end we plan a more interactive website in the future, as a communication tool between the project partners and its public.

We take advantage of the opportunities offered by the new technology to initiate a network to upgrade the quality of the activities and impacts, to facilitate a collective learning process and to share our products with an international audience. This clearly is something we have to explore further (on opportunities, capacities and efficiency).

## A brief presentation of COI quality standards<sup>6</sup>

COI is used in procedures that assess claims of individuals to refugee status or other forms of international protection. It should help to answer questions by decision-makers and legal advisors about the political, social, cultural, economic and human rights situation as well as the humanitarian situation in countries of origin.

Four substantive standards for high-quality COI research and use were developed by the COI Network coordinated by ACCORD in consultation with UNHCR and ECRE:

1. **Relevance:** The COI used and included in the decision should help to assess whether or not the applicant's fear of being persecuted is well-founded.

2. **Reliability/ Balance:** No source provides complete and fully objective information as their scope and focus of reporting will be influenced by their mandate or mission, their methods of collecting or presenting information and even by their financial situation. COI researchers and users should therefore be aware of the bias of sources and should not rely on one single source, but consult many different sources and many different types of sources (e.g. international organisations, government sources, NGOs and media sources) in order to achieve the most complete and balanced picture of a country's situation as possible. They should be aware of the political and ideological context in which a source operates, their mandate and reporting methodology and the intention behind their publications, and assess the information provided accordingly.

3. **Accuracy/ Currency:** Accurate COI is obtained and corroborated from a variety of sources, with due attention to find and filter the relevant and up-to-date information from the sources chosen, without distorting the content.

The most common method to ensure accuracy of information is **corroboration**. Every piece of information should be corroborated by at least two, better three sources, ideally, by three different types of sources (UN report, governmental report, international or local human rights organizations, media report, expert opinion) that do not quote each other. Researchers should - if possible - refer to original sources rather than rely on secondary or tertiary (multi-sourced) reports. The less reliable a source is considered to be, the more work needs to be done in terms of corroboration.

Currency is a key element of accuracy. This does not mean that reports older than a certain date should no longer be used, but rather depends on the specific issue. In some cases, a report or assessment from three years before may still be accurate while in other cases yesterday's newspaper article will already

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<sup>6</sup> As presented by ACCORD, Barbara Svec, document: Research and Documentation of Country of Return Information, at the transnational CRI meeting, Brussels, 12/13.07.2006

For more detailed information on the COI standards listed above, we recommend the Training Manual "Researching Country of Origin Information" which was published by the Austrian Red Cross in September 2004 and can be downloaded from [http://www.ecoi.net/file\\_upload/432\\_tmpphpF3uX9s.pdf](http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/432_tmpphpF3uX9s.pdf) .

have been made irrelevant by more recent events. When coming to cultural, historical or religious issues, currency is not always a strict requirement, since these facts (e.g. a historical event, an ancient religious rite, etc.) do not change quickly with time.

**4. Transparency/ Retrievability:** COI should be presented by using a transparent method of referencing the information, i.e. source, title, date of information (and eventually the period to which the source refers to) and Internet address. Page or paragraph number can significantly facilitate the access to the information in question. While summaries of research results, often in the national language of the asylum system, may be more user-friendly (or may even be required by the national legislation of a given country), care must be taken that the meaning of the original sources is not distorted in the process of paraphrasing or translating. The original sources used to draw up a report or a summary should always be attached or made available, in order to allow the accuracy of the summary to be checked or to look for more detailed information.

## The applicability and value of COI quality standards for CRI

We already pointed out that the target groups for COI and CRI are different. The beneficiaries of return counselling do not - *in theory* - face a real risk of persecution, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, death penalty or generalised violence upon return to their country of origin.

Consequently, efforts shall be made in order to avoid any unnecessary overlapping between CRI and COI. If a legal counsellor thinks that a future returnee would be persecuted or otherwise ill-treated upon return to his/her country of origin, he/she shall find the means to obtain the necessary form of international protection for his/her client. To do so, he/she will have to refer to relevant, balanced, accurate and transparent COI, and will not have to obtain the necessary information from CRI reports and fact sheets.

The existence of well-defined quality standards for CRI research presents both an opportunity and a challenge for other people working in the field of information gathering on refugee-related issues.

In order to make the necessary adaptations of the quality standards used for COI, the CRI partners (both European and local) decided to start using them for the redaction of country fact sheets and helpdesk queries. This enabled the CRI project to test them on their value.

As from a theoretical point of view the CRI project can not make any objections to these standards, their applicability in practice proves to be another story. Much of this as a result of the practical - and often case-related - nature of the information wanted.

Quality information means that it is:

- tailored to the needs of the client
- authoritative
- objective
- timely
- accurate

## Relevance of information

Relevance means that the information is tailored to the needs of the client, that it answers his/her question specifically. The information must enable a potential returnee to make a choice for a (prolonged) stay in Europe or a well-prepared return.

In order to evaluate the relevance of the information we have the immediate reaction of the client (in case of a helpdesk query) or we screen it on its usefulness when considering a return.

Relevance of information is a key standard.

## Reliability and balance of information

Unbiased, objective information is a key quality standard.

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<sup>8</sup> CRI - [return@vluchtelingenwerk.be](mailto:return@vluchtelingenwerk.be)  
INFORMATION QUALITY. Guidelines for maximizing the quality, utility and objectivity of CRI information disseminated to the public.

This quality standard relates to the authoritative character of the information source. The dictionary defines authoritative as official, reliable, because it comes from an expert or one who is properly qualified.

We are looking for facts and analyses that are presented in a balanced manner. Given the practical nature of CRI and its target group, this is not always that obvious. We deal with individuals who have personal ideas, observations and feelings when it comes to assessing facts (even for extreme issues, such as if an area is 'safe' to return to or not, the perception of people - which is decisive for their motivation - may differ much from one person to the other).

### Accuracy / currency of information

As CRI researchers we are much concerned by strategies that can be used to add value to the information by insuring its authoritativeness, currency and accuracy.

There's a saying "information is everywhere, but knowledge is hard to get by". Electronic resources make information accessible 24/7. Anyone with internet access can get basic questions answered at any time of day. The availability of information increased exponentially but much of it is of dubious origin or quality. More information is not necessarily better information. While the volume continues to explode, quality, reliability and authenticity of information comes into question. Therefore, the CRI project has 2 major channels of information gathering to its use: information by desk research and information by local research, conducted by local partners.

By passing through local partners, the information from a source is peer-reviewed, which makes it more complete, precise and free from mistakes.

It is a basic principle that a returnee does not simply return to his/her country of origin, but does return to a specific area thereof.

Considering this and the fact that serious regional differences may be witnessed in the countries observed in respect of security, unemployment, health care, etc., country of return information applies - where relevant - a regional approach, limiting it on sources publicly available on the net.

When it comes upon corroboration, as a way to improve the accuracy, this is less important for practical return information.

We want to introduce the concept of 'sensitivity to bias'. Some pieces of information are less sensitive to bias (e.g. price of a doctor visit) and therefore need less corroboration, while other - more sensitive - information evidently needs some sort of confirmation by different sources.

Using different and many sources is one way of raising the level of accuracy, but unfortunately this is not always possible or manageable for CRI-related issues. However, this difficulty can easily be overcome by a good choosing and assessment of available sources. For CRI the emphasis lays much more on local contacts information and on fieldwork than it is on internet-sources.

Not only are the sources assessed, but the information as well. Since the (mostly practical) information is researched by local partners who question local sources in a precise time, this problem of accuracy poses itself less than for external researchers who search information they may not necessarily manage or live.

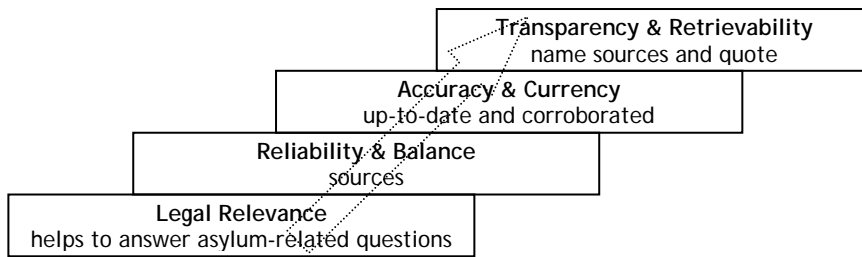
#### Transparency / retrievability of information

This quality standard of information also applies to CRI.

In addition, due to its special character, country of return information includes various **contact lists** to local organisations and authorities (including address, telephone number, e-mail and website if available).

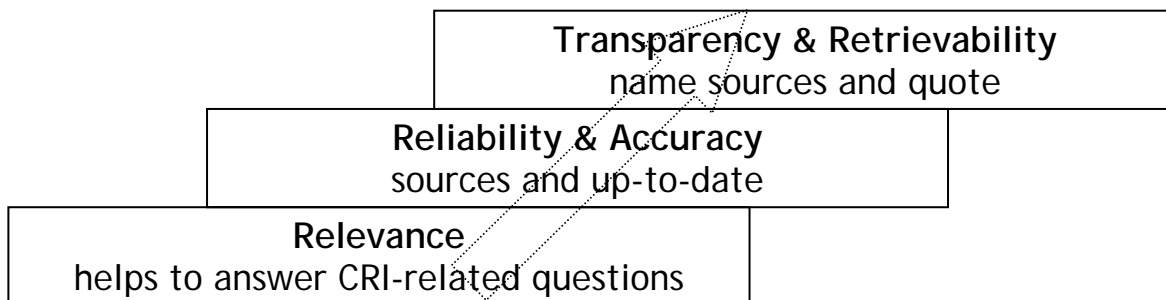
## A schematic comparison of the applicability of quality standards

COI



These standards are based on each other, e.g. even an accurate research of current information based on reliable and balanced sources will not help if it is not based on legally relevant case-related questions.

CRI



*Note:*

The same standards apply one way or the other for COI as they do for CRI, but they weigh differently. Where the CRI project presents COI-related data, much more effort is spent in corroboration. For more specific return-related questions (as is the scope of the CRI project) the reliability and expertise of the source are much more of interest.

However, although COI and CRI concerns different types of information, sometimes it's a thin line. E.g. when a potential returnee wants to know if his chronic illness can effectively be treated in his country of origin, this is - upon positive answer - clearly a CRI question that can - upon negative answer - possibly become a COI issue. The precise motivation of the question plays a central role, as well as the eventual response to the question.



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