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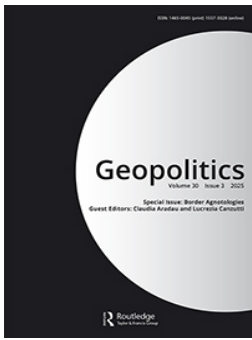
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## Rethinking the International Organization for Migration

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### ABSTRACT

As the introduction to the special issue 'Rethinking the International Organization for Migration', this article reviews the growing literature on this organisation and contextualises the contributions of the special issue. It identifies five key topics in the research on this organisation. (1) Its history and transformation into a leading agency in the current global migration governance. (2) The ideological dimension of this transformation, with IOM's expansion coming along with the emergence of specific worldviews about migration. (3) The 'datafication' of IOM and the central role of research, knowledge and information in its expansion. (4) The nexus between humanitarianism and security in the IOM's activities. And (5) the questions pertaining to power and interest, in a context in which the IOM claims to work 'in the interest of all' while also serving the interests of specific governments. The conclusion analyses the political/epistemological issues underlying cooperation between researchers and IOM.

### Introduction

Once a small and little-known organisation, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) is now at the heart of the global governance of migration. This transformation raises major political, legal and ethical issues, which have attracted growing interest over the past decade. This special issue<sup>1</sup> provides a comprehensive assessment of where we stand in terms of critically understanding the IOM's work while furthering this scholarship through a particular focus on its activities 'in the field'.

In this introduction, we bring together the key contributions of the special issue and situate them within the existing scholarship. We do so by identifying five key topics. First, we go back to IOM's history to understand how the organisation gained its current influence. We then examine the ideological dimension of this transformation: IOM's expansion not only is an institutional process but also comes along with the emergence of new worldviews regarding migration and migration governance. This paves the way for the third

argument, about the ‘datafication’ of IOM and the importance of research, knowledge and information in these worldviews. We then turn to two long-standing issues in research on IOM. Section 4 looks at the nexus between humanitarianism and security: while the IOM regularly puts forward an agenda centred on the protection of migrants in vulnerable situations, its interventions often align with the control agenda of the Global North. The fifth and last argument is about power and interest: although the IOM claims to work ‘in the interest of all’, the governance of migration is embedded in asymmetric power relations between states – which raises the question of who benefits from its interventions.

A crosscutting argument that runs throughout the special issue is that the IOM does not merely respond to the requests of its member-states. As an institution, it has a life of its own and contributes to shape policymaking processes within governments. This questions the relationship between state sovereignty and migration policy that, while unquestionable under international law and central in political rhetoric, leaves room for the interventions of other actors like the IOM. Contributions to this special issue identify at least two major ways through which IOM exerts influence: first through data and the performative effect of expertise in making migration knowable (and hence controllable) and second through its presence in the Global South, where the IOM plays an ambivalent role in helping local governments while also steering their political strategies in connection with the agenda (and funding) of the Global North.

### ***IOM Past and Present***

IOM’s history dates back to 1951, with the creation of the *Provisional Intergovernmental Committee for the Movements of Migrants from Europe* (PICMME). A few months later, this committee was renamed the *Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration* (ICEM). In 1980, it became the *Intergovernmental Committee for Migration* and, in 1989, received its current name: the *International Organization for Migration*. IOM was initially designed as a temporary organisation, mandated to facilitate the resettlement of Europe’s displaced populations, mostly to North and South America: World War II had uprooted millions of people across the continent, and this ‘overpopulation’ was perceived as a threat to Europe’s socio-economic and political recovery (Defrain-Meunier 2024; Rother 2024).

IOM’s founding states<sup>2</sup> were mostly from North America and Western Europe – in an indication of IOM’s close ties to Western states, and to the United States in particular. In the emerging Cold War rivalry, the US saw Europe’s ‘overpopulation’ as an obstacle to the Marshall plan and as a source of unrest that favoured communist influence (Fanning 2023). They were also fearful of communist influence inside the UN, which explains why IOM did

not belong to the UN system and excluded Communist states. This also explains IOM's complex relationship to the UNHCR: whereas the latter is a UN agency with a legal/normative mandate grounded in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, the former was endowed with a technical and operational mandate.

To some extent, this configuration is still valid today. The IOM's relationship to international law remains elusive (Bradley, Costello, and Sherwood 2023). And while it joined the UN in 2016, the IOM retains considerable autonomy through its status as a 'related organization'. Many more states have joined the IOM, but the leadership remains very much Western-centred. For example, almost all of IOM's directors came from the US, while key non-Western powers – like Russia and China – only joined recently (in 2016 and 2021 respectively) and play a relatively minor role in the organisation (Geiger, Kokoeva, and Zhang 2022).

The creation of the IOM (and of the UN at large) also took place in the context of postcolonial independence and changing patterns of Western imperialism. According to a widespread argument, the UN was born out of the ashes of World War II with the mission of ensuring peace and human rights. As Mazower (2009) argues, however, this coexisted with another agenda, as the UN was also expected to perpetuate an imperial/colonial order and a Western-dominated organisation of the world. This objective clashed not only with the universal values promoted by the UN itself (like human rights) but also with the rise of newly-independent countries and the affirmation of their sovereignty.

As far as the IOM is concerned, Bradley (2023) documents how the organisation was instrumental in supporting a racial and colonial agenda in South Africa. Although this country was banned from joining the UN because of apartheid, it joined the organisation (then called ICEM) to organise 'white' immigration from Europe. The IOM's activities thus fitted into a strategy to consolidate racial inequalities and perpetuate a Europe-dominated world order. This agenda necessarily implies the sidelining of universal principles (like the ones that prevent racial discrimination) and its logical corollary, the strong respect for governments' preferences (regardless of their compatibility with human rights). While today's context is very different, Tendayi Achiume (2023), xiii) observes that IOM continues to display a 'remarkably deferential stance to state sovereignty', while Guild, Grant, and Groenendijk (2020) argue that the organisation has yet to fully incorporate human rights in its mandate and activities.

From the late sixties to the eighties, IOM went through a period of uncertainty and fragility. Like the UNHCR (which also had an initially Europe-centred mandate), it had to prove its usefulness and relevance in a context in which Europe no longer raised migration-related problems. It eventually acquired permanent status and received its current name in

1989. During the first Gulf War in 1990/1991, IOM gained renewed influence by taking care of migrant workers fleeing Kuwait after the Iraqi invasion (to the detriment of UNHCR's traditional role as the main refugee agency). The end of the Cold War opened up a new era for IOM, kicking off a dramatic expansion. In 1991, it had 43 member states and a budget of 300 million dollars; as of 2023, it had 175 member states and the budget had climbed to 2,3 billion dollars. With over 13,800 employees, IOM is also one of the world's largest international organisations (Ahouga 2024).

This expansion is inseparable from the emergence and consolidation of migration as a 'crisis' (Cantat, Pécoud, and Thiollet 2023). In the nineties, the control of migration became a major political issue worldwide. This led to the securitisation of migration and an emphasis on border control, through tightened legislation, the erection of walls or the increased reliance on expulsions, for example. The issues of irregular migration and of migrants' integration were associated with other political agendas, including criminality, terrorism, social cohesion or unemployment. In the face of persistent global inequalities, economic interdependencies and climate change, states felt growingly unable to exercise their sovereign right to control their borders and regulate the entry and stay of foreigners. This motivated new patterns of interstate cooperation, in the form of externalisation strategies, for instance. While these developments date back to the early nineties, the migration crisis in the Mediterranean further exacerbated them as of the early 2010s (Jeandesboz and Pallister-Wilkins 2016).

This crisis-ridden context has proven favourable to IOM. The organisation has managed to conciliate its respect for state sovereignty with the accompaniment – and sometimes conception – of international cooperation over migration control. Already in the early 2000s, Düvell observed that IOM was working to 'spread state of the art migration control policies and technology around the globe' (Düvell 2005, 35, see also Santi Pereyra 2020). In practice, this takes the form of a range of services proposed to governments: the IOM organises voluntary returns, launches information campaigns, provides policy guidance and capacity building, trains border-guards and police forces, and so on. These activities are central to the exercise of state sovereignty over migration, but they also take place across borders. Voluntary returns, for example, require the involvement of both sending and receiving states. Information campaigns or capacity building usually take place in the Global South but are mostly funded by Western states – and hence also require interstate cooperation. In terms of budget, the perception of migration as a crisis has led to greater funding opportunities: the IOM is for example one of the major beneficiaries of the European Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, a 5 billion euro initiative by the European Union launched in 2016 to address the so-called 'root causes' of migration (Bartels 2021b).

One of the clearest indications of the IOM's importance is its institutional transformation into a 'related organization' of the UN in 2016 (Bradley 2021; Lebon-McGregor 2023). The actual implications of this new status, as well as the precise nature of the relationship between IOM and the UN, are not entirely clear (Cullen 2023). But whereas the UN has never had a specialised agency devoted to migration, the IOM now brands itself as the 'UN Migration Agency' (Rother 2020). It was also tasked, by the UN General Assembly, to facilitate the negotiation of the 2018 Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), before becoming the coordinator of the UN Network on Migration, established in 2019 to monitor the implementation of the GCM, and organising the first International Migration Review Forum in 2022 (Ahouga 2023; Panizzon and Jurt 2023).

IOM's new status reflects the interest in migration at the international level. As an issue connected to state sovereignty, migration has never been an easy topic for multilateralism. But since the end of the Cold War, states have started discussing migration in international fora, inside and outside the UN – from the Cairo Conference on Population and Development in 1994 to the adoption of the GCM in 2018. While this has not resulted in binding agreements or in a fully fledged migration regime, it has contributed to turn migration into an issue of international cooperation and to envisage mechanisms of 'global migration governance' (Pécoud and Thiollet 2023). In this context, the UN system has turned its attention to the topic (Dini, Fine, and Pécoud 2024; Geiger and Pécoud 2014). The UN Network on Migration, for instance, brings together almost 40 agencies, including certain leading organisations (like the World Bank, the UN Development Program, or the World Health Organization).

The relationships between these agencies feature a mix of competition/rivalry and cooperation. This is well known in the case of the IOM-UNHCR relationship, as both agencies compete to address situations of forced migration while also complementing each other through their different mandates (see, for example, Elie 2010; Green and Pécoud 2023; Kluth and Jack 2023; Moretti 2021; Rossi 2019; Van Dessel 2019). This is also the case with the International Labour Organization (ILO), another agency with a long-standing migration-related mandate (Piper and Foley 2021).

In this issue, Stefan Rother (2025) provides a comprehensive assessment of how the IOM exercises its leadership in the UN Network on Migration. He shows that the network has enabled much closer cooperation within the UN system, as well as between UN agencies and civil society. This has led the IOM to open up significantly and to change some of its practices: for example, it has joined other agencies to take critical positions towards certain governments – a sharp contrast with its old-standing habit of never criticising its member-states. Rother analyzes these developments as a process of socialisation,

whereby IOM adapts to a new environment and adopts standards and worldviews that come from other UN agencies. But he also shows that the rivalries between agencies have not disappeared with the Network, and that the IOM is keen on maintaining its specific role and identity in migration governance.

In sum, IOM's role in global migration governance is ambivalent. On the one hand, it lacks autonomy, as it was designed – and still functions – as a service-provider for Western states, with no capacity to pursue normative objectives or engage in political debates. This is reinforced by its budgetary organisation (organised around the principle of 'projectization'), which makes the organisation dependent upon a handful of Western states (Georgi 2010), as well as by the absence of an international migration regime, which constrains IOM's authority by granting states a prominent role. In this respect, IOM merely works for states: it does their dirty work and helps the most powerful of them organise migration control worldwide (Pécoud 2018).

However, the IOM is not a mere conveyor belt for states. It has gained a prominent role in multilateral initiatives on migration while providing important services to states. In the absence of binding international legal instruments and of an internationally agreed-upon migration regime, the IOM cannot intervene directly in states' sovereign *pré carré*. It must therefore act in indirect – and seemingly 'technical' – ways, through all kinds of cooperation programmes, capacity-building and training activities or inter-governmental dialogues. This calls for analysing IOM's expertise, as well as the worldviews and narratives it has developed to construct migration as an issue of international cooperation.

### **Framing Migration**

Migration has become a highly politicised issue, over which governments are keen on displaying their authority. This does not make it an easy topic for IOs, who 'hate politics' (Louis and Maertens 2021). Migration is also the object of diverging views among governments: some of them promote permanent migration, whereas others prefer temporary migration, and while still others call for no migration at all. These different objectives come along with diverging interests, as migration often makes winners and losers. This is the case with the control of undocumented migration, which matters for receiving countries, whereas sending ones may well need out-migration to alleviate poverty or unemployment. Another well-known example is skilled migration: receiving countries compete to attract highly qualified workers, to the detriment of each other and of their origin countries (Levatino and Pécoud 2012).

In the absence of policy convergence and reciprocity, the first step for inter-state cooperation is the elaboration of shared views about migration. As noted, the intergovernmental meetings on migration that have been taking place since the nineties – including the Global Forums on

Migration and Development, the High-Level Dialogues, or other conferences (like the New York Summit) – have not resulted in binding legal instruments, but they have produced a set of worldviews about migration that provide the basis for cooperation (Pécoud 2015). IOM is a key actor in this process, as one of the organisers of these meetings, and through its own initiatives, like the ‘International Dialogue on Migration’ or the publication of ‘World Migration Reports’ (Robinson 2018).

This has contributed to diffuse a specific language to speak about migration. The above-mentioned GCM provides a number of examples, with the adjectives *regular*, *orderly* and *safe*. While not new in themselves, their application to migration is discursively quite original. They convey the idea that migration should be under control (without, however, explicitly referring to the less consensual objective of border/migration control), while at the same time putting forward the protection of migrants (but in a way that does not refer to the legally more ambitious objective of ensuring their human rights).

The same applies to the concept of ‘migration management’. While less popular today, this notion has played a central role in IOM’s narratives (Geiger 2021; Pécoud 2021b). Here again, the concept of management is hardly new, but its connection with migration makes for an innovation. The notion sidelines the objective of control, while at the same time stressing the need for some kind of monitoring of migration flows. It also borrows from an economic vocabulary, according to which migration should be governed in a way akin to a private enterprise and according to a cost–benefit evaluation (Geiger and Pécoud 2010; Hoekstra, Koolen, and van Faassen 2022).

Such wordings are highly ambivalent. They may support a critical stance towards border control, upon the assumption that states should not prevent migration – but organise it for their own benefit. But they may just as well serve to combat irregular migration, understood as ‘unmanaged’ or ‘disorderly’. In practice, they may therefore accompany and legitimise almost any political strategy, even the harshest ones (Pécoud 2021a). Such ambivalence characterises other concepts that are at the heart of IOM’s activities: as discussed below, this is the case of ‘voluntary returns’, for example, which often constitutes a euphemism for expulsions or deportations (Gauci 2023).

In addition, these worldviews have created – or popularised – a number of ‘new’ concepts, which construct migration in specific manners and lead to specific ways of elaborating migration policies. For instance, IOM has been one of the key promoters of the concept of ‘transit migration’. The notion emerged in the nineties, to designate situations in which migrants are in a country, but with the intention to move further onwards to another destination. As Düvell (2012) argues, however, the concept is ill-defined. It obscures the role of migration control in shaping migrants’ trajectories through transit regions; it is

also western-centric, as it assumes that the Global North is migrants' final destination – thereby reinforcing the representation of all people on the move as potentially irregular migrants (Fine 2017). But the concept proved instrumental in supporting externalisation policies and cooperation between destination and transit countries.

As with any policy discourse, the worldviews promoted by IOM and other international actors rest upon processes of categorisation. People on the move are governed through categories that not only describe them but also grant specific statuses and rights. An obvious example is the migrant/refugee distinction, which mirrors the differences between the mandates of IOM and the UNHCR – but which is extremely complex to implement. Quite a few other categories have emerged over the past decades, like 'forced', 'stranded', 'trafficked' or 'smuggled' migrants. Although they are historicised legal/political constructions, these categories contribute to naturalise reality, as if they 'objectively' reflected peoples' situations. They also vehicle binary oppositions (like between desirable/undesirable, forced/voluntary, temporary/permanent or legal/illegal migration), while also conveying 'hierarchies of worthiness' (Handmaker and Mora 2014): 'trafficked' migrants, for example, are usually thought to be in need of protection, which is not the case of 'smuggled' ones (however unclear the distinction may be in practice).

Another key feature of IOM's narratives is their dynamic relationship and their capacity to connect to other fields of policy and international interventions. Along with several other IOs, the IOM has, for example, contributed to anchor migration-related issues into the development agenda, by stressing the role of migrants as development actors and establishing the 'migration and development nexus' as a central topic in global migration governance (Geiger and Pécoud 2013; Kluczevska 2019). In turn, this has conferred renewed policy relevance to certain notions, like that of the diaspora, presented as a central actor in development policy (Karabegović 2024).

In this issue, Sophie Schriever (2024) analyses another telling example, namely the relationship between climate change and migration. The exact nature of this relationship is unclear: at times, climate change is considered a key driver of migration, while other interpretations question the very connection between the two (Piguët, Pécoud, and de Guchteneire 2011). In a context in which climate change is a major issue for the international community, IOM has nonetheless developed expertise and projects addressing the climate-migration nexus (see also Jonin 2023; Lakeman 2022; Lakeman and Oakes 2022). In particular, it has actively contributed to promote an 'adaptation' approach to climate change, which contrasts with a 'mitigation' approach. In the latter, the objective is to reduce climate change to prevent its social consequences, including migration. By contrast, according to the former, migration helps people adapt to climate change by enabling them to move to regions less impacted. Such an argument positions the IOM on the

climate change agenda, thereby expanding the scope of its mandate. Yet, the IOM has no mandate to set up a new legal status or provide protection to this category of migrants, thereby making for a tension between the ‘soft’ narratives to increase its opportunities and the lack of ‘hard’ agreements in this field.

The IOM has also proved capable of seizing another emerging issue, namely migrant deaths in the context of the migration crisis in the Mediterranean. While not new, migrant deaths became politically salient in the 2010s, with intense media coverage and the launch of ‘search and rescue’ (SAR) interventions by civil society organisations. IOM reacted by setting up the *Missing Migrants* project (MPP), whose objective is to collect data to provide evidence-based recommendations. IOM thus positioned itself as the expert voice on the topic and as the most reliable and quoted source of data (Al Tamimi, Cuttitta, and Last 2020). But it also changed the political meaning of these deaths. Whereas they used to be mobilised by civil society to challenge border control, IOM uses these statistics to combat smugglers (deemed responsible for the deaths) and to tighten border surveillance (Heller and Pécoud 2020) – thereby framing migrant deaths as a problem for law and order (Fine and Lindemann 2024)

IOM’s narratives are therefore ambivalent. They are quite vague, but support all kinds of apparently ambitious policy agendas. They display a neutral research- or data-oriented nature while providing conceptual tools akin to those of social sciences. Yet, they also serve political objectives, as well as IOM’s own interest: for IOs, framing is also a self-serving activity, because efforts to shape the way in which states conceive of policy ‘problems’ are inseparable from proposing ‘solutions’ to these problems (Barnett and Finnemore 2019).

### ***IOM and ‘Datafication’***

As the migrant death example above illustrates, narratives are inseparable from data. This is far from specific to IOM. According to the logic of ‘evidence-based policymaking’, good data is necessary for efficient policies and IOs systematically put forward data and empirical evidence to ground their narratives, which they then present not as political (or ideological) positions, but as ‘objective’, or truth-based, policy recommendations. This simple logic is not without problems, however, as the relationship between data and policy also works in the inverse direction: policy narratives function as a lens through which reality is rationalised and documented, and therefore lead to the production of supportive data. From that perspective, the search for migration data reflects a political context in which migration is perceived as a problematic issue – and about which data must therefore be collected.

As far as the IOM is concerned, the organisation has long been involved in data collection and its data practices have gained in momentum over the past

years, with the creation of new institutions such as the Berlin-based Global Migration Data Analysis Centre (GMDAC) in 2015. As with many IOs, one of the key characteristics of IOM's data is its global nature: unlike governments (which tend to look only at the migration dynamics that take place in their territory), IOM gathers worldwide data, thereby constructing migration as a global phenomenon. In addition, this contributes to identifying a number of equally 'global' problems: smuggling and trafficking, for example, are documented in virtually all countries, in a way that disregards local realities and contextual variations. IOM further conceives data as a condition for effective 'migration management': in order to properly control or steer migration flows (and to evaluate and monitor their policies), states should have exact and real-time knowledge of the volume, direction and composition of migration flows. Data is also supposed to help diffuse reliable information in the media and the public opinion, upon the assumption that public perceptions of migration are excessively negative and that this could be corrected by better information.

It is worth recalling, however, that migration data is notoriously complex. There is no universally agreed definition of who is a 'migrant': figures vary greatly, depending upon one considers the country of birth, the nationality, the duration of stay, etc. The same applies to other categories and phenomena, which are equally difficult to define and measure with enough precision to make data meaningful: this is the case with irregular migration, for example, or with migrant deaths (as in the above-mentioned MPP). Migration trajectories are often complex, with people pursuing long and uncertain journeys across several countries, sometimes in a shadow manner. Describing the 'global' statistics on trafficking, Feingold thus concludes that they are the result of 'the pursuit of the unknowable by the unknowing' (Feingold 2010, 56) – an observation that probably applies to quite a lot of the IOM's data. In a more detailed study, Scheel and Ustek-Spilda (2019) show that, in order to produce real-time and easily readable data, IOM over-simplifies migration realities – and even deliberately omit certain pieces of information. The production of knowledge is therefore inevitably selective, and sometimes entails the production of ignorance on certain aspects of migration.

A number of IOM's data projects are worth mentioning (Ahouga 2022). Launched in 2017, the Counter-Trafficking Data Collaborative (CTDC) collects individual data on people considered as victims of trafficking. It is based on cooperation with NGOs and aims at bringing together country-specific data produced by national actors. Its open-access and real-time dataset contains tens of thousands of cases, which are accessible to all actors in the field. The objective is to provide state and non-state actors with data to improve anti-trafficking efforts.

Another landmark is the Migration Information and Data Analysis System (MIDAS). MIDAS is a biometric border management information system, which enables governments to gather and store data on

border-crossings, including migrants' biographical and biometric data, travel document information, entry/exit data, visa data and vehicle/flight/vessel data. IOM runs and manages this system, providing it free of charge to some 20 governments in the Global South. This is especially the case in Africa and in countries that lack the capacity to create such monitoring systems (or the money to buy them from private companies). MIDAS is funded by Northern countries, which has inspired fears that it could be used to contribute to support the externalisation of border control.

MIDAS is the object of a growing body of critical research. In a context in which governments are reluctant to let IOs interfere with sovereign security/border issues, MIDAS enables the IOM to have access to key sensitive data (Frowd 2018). It concomitantly contributes to changes in the perception of migration. In West Africa, for example, freedom of movement is a long-standing policy objective, and intraregional mobility has long been unproblematic. However, by enabling (or improving) data collection, MIDAS feeds an increased scrutiny of this reality – hence transforming its political significance and leading to the securitisation (or even criminalisation) of migrants (Dauchy 2023; Singler 2021). MIDAS also involves capacity-building: in order to use it, states are required to develop their border infrastructure and administrative capacities and to adopt specific ways of collecting and organising data. By favouring the use of common tools, MIDAS also supports cooperation and the exchange of practices between governments. In line with the narratives analysed in the previous section, IOM connects 'orderly' migration with the reliance on tools like MIDAS and, more generally, with the development of technologies to measure and monitor migration flows.

In this issue, Samuel Singler (2024) examines the Nigerian context to explore how the deployment of MIDAS allows IOM to simultaneously reinforce its status as a global authority on migration management and neutralise potential criticisms relating to its political role in a post-colonial context. He highlights two dynamics: the transfer of accountability to local governmental actors through IOM's role as a mere 'teacher' (with no political responsibility) and the depoliticisation of border control through the reliance on a seemingly technical device. In addition, by integrating migration control with the criminal justice system, MIDAS frames migration as a matter of security, risk management and law enforcement.

The Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) offers another illustration of IOM's data practices. It collects information on displaced people in crises, by tracing the routes and numbers of people moving within and across countries, in order to better identify their needs and the ways to help them. It was first applied to situations of internal migration following natural disasters in Africa and Asia, thereby bridging humanitarian relief and data collection. This was deemed efficient and contributed to IOM's legitimacy in the humanitarian

field. The DTM then enlarged its scope to address international displacements in the wake of the 2015 Euro-Mediterranean migration crisis, while also progressively incorporating migrants' biometric data (Cohen and Llewellyn 2019).

The latest data project launched by IOM is MigApp. While still in its infancy, the technology is designed as a kind of social network that allows migrants to inform each other in real time about the dangers of their journey (Ahouga 2024, 150–151). From a governmentality approach, MigApp appears as a strategy to simultaneously empower and steer migrants, through a virtual community space in which migrants on the move assist each other and are assisted from a distance by IOM. It echoes the growing politics of information in migration/border control (Pécoud 2023) and presents itself as a service provided to migrants. It also enables massive data collection, presented as a humanitarian endeavour (as IOM can provide assistance and inform local authorities in case of dangers).

These examples testify to IOM's 'datafication' and raise a number of questions. As suggested above, the most obvious one regards the reliability of data. However, regardless of its precision or accuracy, IOM's data circulates widely and contributes to the visibility and prestige of the organisation. Data collection also makes for 'data wars' between organisations: IOM is in competition with other IOs, like Frontex or the UNHCR, which collect data on similar topics (Dini 2023).

In this issue, Philippe Frowd (2024) further emphasises the transnational inflections of the 'datafication' of migration management and border security. He argues that within a global context of migration datafication, IOM combines its entrepreneurial service-provision approach with a collaborative one centred on developmental capacity-building and a delicate fusion of personal and aggregate/statistical data. This provides evidence of the growing role of IOs in data collection and management

Data collection also raises technological issues. The spread and generalisation of certain technological instruments, like cell phones or social networks, enables the production of massive quantities of data. In turn, the 'packaging' of this data – that is to say, its collection, analysis and dissemination – requires sophisticated technologies. This leads to new kinds of partnerships: the CTDC, for example, builds upon a partnership between IOM and Microsoft<sup>3</sup> and there are many ongoing projects in which IOM works with tech companies (at times with little concern for issues of privacy and data protection, see Koch 2023). Another rising issue lies in IOM's reliance on artificial intelligence (AI) to develop predictive tools and anticipate migration flows (Blasi Casagran et al. 2021).

Another question regards the objective posture of data. According to IOM, data enables evidence-based, rational and efficient policymaking, in contrast to the political (or electoral) interests that guide states' policies. As is well

known, this fits into the argument according to which data is a neutral instrument, as well as into the IOMs' self-proclaimed depoliticised nature, as a technocratic actor that does not infringe upon state sovereignty. However, data is inherently political. Data-collection indeed implies the creation of categories (or data-shaping). A challenge to global data is that states differ in the way they organise and collect information. To produce cross-country information, IOM must therefore encourage states to harmonise their categories, or even design them. While this sounds technical, it implies intervening in the way governments apprehend their own country and population – with far-reaching consequences on the relationship between states and non-citizens, and therefore on their very statehood (Dini 2018). For example, with MIDAS, states are able to better identify and quantify migrants, which has consequences not only for the situation of these migrants but also for the way in which states exercise their sovereignty. Data also enables new kinds of benchmarking exercises. The IOM has, for example, set up a Migration Governance Index (MIG), which assesses the extent to which migration is 'well-governed' by states: this enables the organisation to set itself up as the 'judge' of migration policies worldwide (Robinson 2020).

Finally, data production confers a central position to IOM in the field of migration research. There is evidence that the IOM's staff act at times as de facto researchers, by producing data and publishing their findings in academic journals (see, for example, Lopez-Ekra et al. 2011; Schininà et al. 2010; Yanni et al. 2013), which blurs the boundary between the research community and the organisation. In addition, even when they work as independent academics, researchers often rely on data produced by IOM – and are therefore led to take for granted the categories and policy frameworks that come along with this data. This is the case with research on trafficking, for example, in which the community of researchers and experts routinely mobilise IOM data (see DiRienzo 2022).

### ***IOM and Humanitarian Borderwork***

IOM claims to protect vulnerable migrants and to fight the abuses and sufferings that characterise contemporary migration dynamics. As suggested above, this fits into a narrative that associates 'orderly' migration not only with control but also with 'safety' – and sometimes even with 'humanity' (as indicated by one of the IOM's slogans, calling for 'humane and orderly migration for the benefit of all'). This makes for well-known ambiguities between the control and the protection of migrants, and for the somewhat counter-intuitive argument according to which border control is necessary to ensure migrants' well-being.

As noted in section 2, this also makes for linguistic innovations, sometimes akin to a kind of Orwellian 'newspeak' - with oxymoronic notions such as

‘humanitarian border management’ or ‘dignified return’, through which IOM claims to achieve largely contradictory objectives (De Blasis and Pitzalis 2023; Fine 2018). This *mélange des genres* must be understood in the legal/normative framework in which IOM operates. As recalled in section 1, the organisation initially developed outside the UN, and with no commitment to international human rights law – a situation that has only been marginally affected by the IOM’s new status as a ‘related agency’. IOM’s Constitution does not refer to human rights and establishes that the organisation must respect the law of the countries in which it operates – thereby placing domestic law above international standards, in contradiction with the UN Charter (Chetail 2022; Chuang 2022; Pécoud 2022). The IOM therefore has no mandate to protect migrants and one may therefore wonder why it nevertheless claims to do so.

According to Bradley and Erdilmen (2023), this is a matter of strategy: IOM puts forward protection/humanitarian objectives in order to expand its missions, funding and opportunities. At times, this leads the IOM to embark on projects that have only a loose connection to migration, like providing food and shelter to populations displaced by natural disasters. In addition, its claimed protection agenda enables the organisation to work with a variety of actors (and especially with NGOs and civil society), and it most probably facilitated its move into the UN system. This instrumental use of the humanitarian agenda has nevertheless led to criticisms from NGOs, which perceive IOM as a competitor on the ‘humanitarian marketplace’.

Beyond its aspirations for material growth, IOM’s humanitarian posture is also of a symbolic nature (Fine 2023). As noted, migration remains a matter of sovereignty: in this context, interventions in the name of humanitarian (and therefore purportedly neutral/apolitical) values are likely to be more acceptable to states. This is all the more the case when IOM operates in so-called transit and sending states, and with funding from the Global North: while very common, such situations could potentially represent a violation of the sovereignty of these countries (Ashutosh and Mountz 2011; Bartels 2021a). From that perspective, the humanitarian agenda makes migration control more acceptable – and sometimes even desirable, precisely because border control is deemed necessary to migrants’ protection (Flahaux 2020). Frowd (2018) nuances this cynical interpretation by showing that, however opportunist, IOM’s humanitarian narratives genuinely reflect the worldviews of its staff and their desire to aid the vulnerable.

It remains that, regardless of the confusing narratives that mix control and protection, the two agendas stand in a paradoxical and mutually-reinforcing relationship. This has been well documented: by reinforcing states’ capacity to control migration, IOM supports border security regimes; this impels migrants to resort to risky routes and to smugglers; and IOM then claims to address these situations of vulnerability. The control/protection agenda thus vehicles the representation of migrants as both threats and victims –

a contradiction that lies at the heart of many of IOM's activities (Geiger and Pécoud 2020).

This is the case with so-called 'voluntary returns', a well-established field of activity for IOM (as well as an object of a growing scholarly interest). The organisation presents these returns as 'a core activity of IOM [which] has provided vital assistance to tens of thousands of migrants returning home every year' and as 'an essential component of an effective and humane migration management framework'.<sup>4</sup> According to their advocates, these returns constitute an alternative to forced deportation, by replacing coercion by persuasion and by allowing migrants to return in a 'humane' and 'dignified' manner. Critics rather consider them as 'soft deportation' or 'self-deportation', because the voluntariness of migrants is questionable when forced return is the only alternative (Robinson 2022; Spathopoulou, Carastathis, and Tsilimpounidi 2022). From this perspective, voluntary returns make for an extension (or transformation) of the deportation apparatus (Bhat 2023; Fine and Walters 2022; Maâ 2021; Rozaku 2022). The amplitude of voluntary return makes for a 'return migration industry', in which the IOM is a central actor, and from which it secures substantial funding (Schreier 2024). The IOM has in particular managed to reframe such returns, moving away from the violence associated with expulsion and rebranding instead 'return' as a joyful homecoming in the interest of migrant wellbeing (Barone 2024; Pécoud 2023).

The same applies to IOM's anti-trafficking campaigns. As suggested in section 2, the very concept of trafficking features the dual aspiration of preventing people from migrating and of protecting them from abuses, like forced labour or sexual exploitation (Chuang 2021; Hastie 2010). In this issue, Inke Bartels (2025) points to the way the IOM presents anti-trafficking projects as a humanitarian mission to save individuals from criminal networks, thus placing the organisation on the side of women's empowerment and rights – and, more generally, of legality (and even morality). Drawing on Bourdieu, she demonstrates how this has conferred symbolic capital to IOM in North Africa, while enabling the organisation to distinguish itself from European actors like Frontex (which are associated with the 'bad' job of enforcing border control). IOM has achieved this through research and expertise that have set up trafficking as a policy issue in the region. Expertise contributed in particular to delineate the social category of 'Victims of Trafficking' (VoTs) and to establish it as the target group for anti-trafficking policies. By emphasising the humanitarian nature of these policies, IOM also legitimises its interventions and manages to secure the adhesion of local actors to its leadership.

The same control/protection confusion characterises another burgeoning field of IOM's activities, namely information (or 'awareness-raising') campaigns. Initially designed to inform young women of the dangers of trafficking (Nieuwenhuys and Pécoud 2007), they have progressively targeted all

‘potential migrants’ - that is to say any person thought to consider leaving his or her country at some point in the future. The humanitarian/protection objective of these campaigns rests upon the premise that these people are, by nature, safer and better off ‘at home’ - an assumption that ignores the abuses that take place in home countries (Gilbert 2023; Marino, Schapendonk, and Lietaert 2024).

Finally, its humanitarian agenda has led IOM to affirm its role in governing categories of population that used to be outside its realm. This is in particular the case with internally displaced persons (IDPs) in cases of natural disasters: while these are not situations of migration in the strict sense of the term, IOM has launched emergency responses and reconstruction efforts following earthquakes or tsunamis, for example. This led to a formalisation of the IOM’s role: in 2015, the UN created the Global Camp Coordination and Camp Mechanisms Cluster (CCCM), co-led by the UNHCR and IOM, and in which the latter is responsible for natural disaster situations (and the former for conflict situations).

This points to IOM’s reputation as an organisation with strong logistical and operational capacity. In this issue, Megan Bradley (2024) re-examines IOM’s history and highlights how logistical expertise has from the start been vital to its development. The organisation has long presented itself as a cost-effective, efficient and flexible ‘people-mover’, which nuances and complements its role as a producer of knowledge, research or information. Yet, this has attracted criticisms, as the IOM has been accused of privileging efficiency to the detriment of respect for rules and procedures (even when rules and procedures serve to protect people and safeguard their rights). Governments also valorise the IOM’s logistical expertise, in contrast to the UN’s traditional reputation as an excessively bureaucratic entity – an asset that, according to some, may be jeopardised by IOM’s new role as a UN agency.

### ***In Whose Interest?***

In 2023, after a fierce campaign, the Biden administration ousted former IOM Director Antonio Vitorino from Portugal and replaced him with its own American candidate, Amy Pope, who became the 9<sup>th</sup> Director General to come from the US in the history of the organisation (out of the 11 Directors General so far). However unsurprising, this episode serves as a reminder that IOM is a strategic organisation at the heart of high-level power struggles. This challenges its conventional mantra according to which it would work ‘in the interests of all’ and calls for an examination of the traditional *cui bono* question.

There is an obvious tension between the IOM’s ‘triple-win’ rhetoric and its reliance upon a handful of wealthy countries in the Global North for political and financial support (Jegen 2024; Trauner et al. 2019). There is also an

ambiguity underlying IOM's claim to work in the interest of 'beneficiary countries' (especially in Africa and the Middle East), as this portrays them as lacking capacity and resources – and therefore in need of IOM's support. This raises a double question, first in terms of funding states' influence on IOM's activities in the Global South, and second of IOM's role in determining the needs and interests of the countries in which it intervenes.

In this issue, Oelgemöller, Lenoël, and Black (2024) examine the 'ownership' of the IOM's projects in Africa. Investigating who is in a position to define the content and the orientation of these projects, they refer to the principle of 'beneficiary ownership', which was established in the development industry to ensure that underprivileged countries are in control of the projects that take place on their territories (thereby reducing the influence of donor countries). Accordingly, the IOM's projects should align with what African countries need, rather than on Western states' expectations (or on what Western states believe Africa is in need of). However, evidence suggests that the IOM's activities do not always match the preferences and agendas of local actors. This is due to the enduring influence of donor states in the Global North, but also to the fact that IOM has acquired the expertise and authority to identify and define the needs of its beneficiary countries by itself. In other words, its expertise enables the IOM to claim that it knows what beneficiary countries need – and even that it knows better than local governments.

There are therefore at least three possible answers to the *cui bono* question: IOM may act in the interest of beneficiary countries in the Global South, in the interest of Western donor states or in the interest of IOM itself. The process through which the IOM identifies the needs of less-developed countries stands in continuity with colonial history, during which European states argued that their interventions were in the interests of colonised populations. As suggested in section 1, the long-silenced (post)colonial nature of IOM is progressively being unearthed (Gaibazzi 2024). This fits into a growing body of research on the coloniality of global migration governance: according to Bakewell (2008a), contemporary migration and development governance perpetuates the colonial objective of 'fixing people in their place', while Spijkerboer (2018) argues that international migration law consolidates the unequal access to mobility granted to Europeans and non-Europeans.

In this issue, Sabine Dini (2025) ethnographically documents the (post)colonial power dynamics underlying IOM's interventions in Djibouti. Exploring how IOM shapes the sovereignty practices of states, she highlights how the organisation influences the subjective understanding of sovereign power among local staff, a key element in erasing the asymmetrical relationship with the international level in the daily operations of the intervention. The IOM's influence extends to shaping the values of local staff to align with its own, effectively turning them into mediators with local political entities. IOM thereby integrates itself

into local power dynamics to gain legitimacy in addressing sensitive sovereign issues, ultimately promoting a nationalist agenda that widens the gap between national citizens and illegalised migrants from the Horn of Africa.

Drawing on the Marxist tradition, Georgi (2010) develops another perspective on the *cui bono* question, according to which the *raison d'être* of IOM is to overcome the contradiction between a global economy and a world divided into separate states. Under capitalism, the search for profit has supported the openness of national economies and the mobility of labour. Yet, this coexists with an unequal world order and with the existence of borders to perpetuate the predominance of highly developed countries. In this context, migration governance is about organising mobility without challenging borders and inequalities between states. From that perspective, the binary narratives discussed in [section 1](#), for example, between 'orderly' and 'disorderly' migration, resonate with a materialist approach that privileges economically useful migration. This is also in line with the 'migration management' slogan, which conveys a similar cost–benefit approach.

To sum up, IOM participates in a world order characterised by its post-colonial, unequal and capitalist nature. The movement of people from poor to rich regions represents a major challenge to this global order – which calls for organisations like IOM to support the capacities to control peoples' mobility. This being said, and while IOM's role should not be underestimated, it is of course not the only institution to act as a guardian of this state of affairs. It would also be unrealistic to expect the IOM to challenge this world order. Rather, the point is to situate its work into a broader picture.

This finally questions the value of cooperation in migration governance. In world affairs, cooperation is a pillar of multilateralism and is valued as an alternative to rivalries and conflicts between countries. As far as migration policy is concerned, multilateral cooperation would challenge states' propensity to design policies in a unilateral manner and in their sole interest. But from a critical perspective, cooperation may just as well lead to increased control over people's freedom – and hence to the reinforcement of national borders and the exacerbation of state-centred (and sometimes xenophobic) political agenda (Aust and Riemer 2023).

Recalling some of the infamous projects run by the IOM (for instance in the field of immigrant detention), Tendayi Achiume suggests that IOM should 'repair' some of the harm it has done: 'before the institution can truly turn the page on its past, the questions of compensation and reparation for the practices it has enabled must be addressed' (Tendayi Achiume 2023, xiii). While this calls for addressing the IOM's history, there is also a need to investigate the IOM's current role in some of the problematic outcomes of migration governance.

### **Conclusion: Working for, on or with IOM?**

To conclude this overview of IOM's history, ideology and practices, we address the role of research in contributing to a critical reflection on this organisation. This is necessary because of two interrelated factors: on the one hand, and as this article makes clear, the growing influence of IOM has transformed this once-neglected organisation into an object of increasing scholarly interest; but, on the other hand, migration research may fit into IOM's strategy and has become an activity of its own for the organisation. Three key patterns can be outlined in the relationship between IOM and the research community.

The first is to do research *for* IOM. This is a standard pattern for virtually all IOs, which engage with scholars and experts in their field of competence. IOM maintains a network of researchers who write reports, attend conferences, do consultancy work, and so on. A brief look at its *World Migration Reports* or its journal, *International Migration*, makes clear that many leading academics in migration studies provide direct input to the IOM's publications. As noted, certain staff members in the organisation themselves do research and publish. This pattern of cooperation is understandable: after all, IOM addresses key social and political problems, with an openness to researchers and civil society that is uncommon among governments. For migration scholars who genuinely want their work to be useful, it is therefore tempting to engage with IOM and other UN agencies.

Yet, cooperation between IOs and researchers is not simply a matter of intellectual exchange, or of increasing the usefulness of research. It constitutes a strategy to enhance the visibility, legitimacy and authority, not only of researchers but also of IOs. The UNHCR, for instance, has surrounded itself over the years by a kind of epistemic community of refugee researchers. While not entirely uncritical, this community tends to value the UNHCR's role in protecting refugees' rights and acting as a counterweight to governments' exclusionary policies. This fits into a widespread argument in scholarly research on the UN, according to which IOs may display shortcomings but are nevertheless worth supporting. The reasons for this political/epistemological state of affairs are beyond the scope of this article but probably have to do with IOs' reputation as actors working in the name of the common good, in favour of universal standards and international law, and according to principles of multilateral cooperation. However sensible, this position is not without problems: Chimni (2009) argues, for example, that the refugee research community protects the UNHCR from more fundamental criticisms of its role in the refugee regime; in addition, the predominance of researchers from the Global North prevents the emergence of critical voices from the South.

IOM does not entirely fit into this pattern. As noted, it does maintain a community of migration researchers, but this has not prevented critical academic research. Reviewing research *on* IOM, Bradley et al. write that

‘much of the existing scholarship on IOM is highly critical, reflecting concerns about the ways in which IOM enables states’ restrictive migration management goals’ (2023, 4). This is quite unsurprising in the light of what has been discussed in this article: lack of a binding human rights framework, alignment on the agenda of the Global North, deliberate confusion between control and protection, etc. As Johansen writes, IOM is characterised by ‘its weak association with global public goods’ and does not therefore correspond to the ‘ideal type’ IO (Johansen 2023, 104). Compared to other IOs, IOM thus faces a substantial amount of critical research. This may be changing, however: according to Bradley, Costello, and Sherwood (2023), for example, researchers should work on IOM, but from a less critical perspective, and in a way that would help the organisation improve itself (especially as far as its respect for human rights is concerned).

A third pattern is research *with* IOM: this can be defined as research that is not commissioned or paid by the IOM, but which is nevertheless loosely embedded in its activities, or which aims at being relevant to the agency. This is, for instance, the case with research on trafficking: as noted above, it relies on IOM’s data, works with IOM’s definitions of the ‘problem’, and aims at providing IOM and other actors with ‘solutions’. Even if realised outside the IOM, with no formal institutional connection to the organisation, such research is hardly autonomous and fits into predefined institutional views. Scalettaris (2007) makes the same point about refugee studies, in which even research disconnected from the UNHCR displays an adherence to its agenda, data and policy frameworks. Yet, ‘policy irrelevant’ research is not only an important objective in its own right, as a matter of academic independence, but it may also help challenge policy assumptions and categories – in a way that leads to a better understanding of reality, and therefore to better policy-making (Bakewell 2008b).

Future prospects for IOM are uncertain. On the one hand, the organisation has long proved resilient and, in a global context in which migration is more than ever a major political issue, it should be able to continue its expansion. This calls for further critical research to understand the ways in which the IOM accompanies – and sometimes makes possible – the restrictive migration policies designed by governments in the Global North. On the other hand, multilateralism is in crisis and the re-election of Donald Trump in 2024 came as a reminder of the obsession of many governments to close themselves to immigration: this will not facilitate the work of the IOM and the whole UN system, whether on migration or on many other issues. In this context, and as it has constantly done throughout its history, IOM may need to reinvent itself and rethink its role.

Beyond its denunciatory nature, the critical and ‘irrelevant’ research produced outside IOM may then become useful, as it develops outside institutional and political frameworks and could help envisage alternative patterns of

migration governance and policy interventions. This will certainly make for complex scholarly and political dilemmas, to which there are no easy solutions. Whatever one's position in this debate, however, research *for, on, with* or *outside* the IOM requires a comprehensive assessment of the past and present of this organisation, of its worldviews and practices, and of its embeddedness into the complex power games that underlie migration governance – a task to which this article has hopefully contributed.

## Notes

1. This special issue builds upon a workshop organised in Paris in June 2022, with the financial support of the *Agence nationale de la recherche* (project ANR-18-CE41-0013 on 'The Politics of Asylum Crises in Europe').
2. Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, France, Germany (Federal Republic), Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Turkey and the United States.
3. IOM-Microsoft Collaboration Enables Release of Largest Public Dataset to Bolster Fight Against Human Trafficking | International Organization for Migration.
4. <https://migrantprotection.iom.int/fr/resources/leafletbooklet/assisted-voluntary-return-and-reintegration-avrr-eu>.

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