



# IOM as the New UN Migration Agency: Addressing the Growing Migration Challenges in the EU and Beyond

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*Here below follows the text of the lunch lecture which Mr. Eugenio Ambrosi (Regional Director of IOM Office to the EU, Norway and Switzerland) gave on 08 May 2017. The lecture was organized by the United Nations Association Flanders Belgium (VVN) and the Leuven Centre for Global Governance Studies. It took place at the United Nations Regional Information Centre (UNRIC) in Brussels. We are grateful to Mr. Ambrosi and IOM for taking the time to give this lecture and to UNRIC for its generous hospitality.*

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In this lecture I will tell you a bit more about IOM as a UN Migration Agency, taking into account that while we are a new UN agency, we are not a new organization. We have actually been founded in 1951.

## **Introduction to IOM**

I would like to start with this very short video that takes you through 65 years of IOM history: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5hCBz4Xt0JI>.

As you can see, it has been a long road before we became a new UN Agency for Migration. In 1951, here in Brussels, a few countries decided to create an organization dealing with migration. Our main objective at the time was to assist European governments with their migrants and refugees issues. As you have seen at the beginning of the video, the first operation in which IOM assisted had to do with migrants and refugees from several European countries, including and especially from the Eastern part of Europe which were at that time behind the iron curtain. This is important today because we all need to remember that what we are trying to do now for the wave of migrants coming to Europe and moving in other parts of the world is precisely what we were created to do for European migrants 65 years ago. Maintaining and preserving memory is important when it comes to deciding what to do.

In our mission statement we are committed to the principle that humane and orderly migration benefits migrants and societies. For us, migration, if properly managed, is always a positive force. What we do is upholding the human dignity and well-being of migrants, as well as assisting governments both of origin, transit and destination in handling the challenges that have to do with movement of people, especially when it comes to large movement of people. We do that through the provision of a series of technical and operational services in a variety of areas from humanitarian response to labor migration programmes, capacity building capacities, migration and health, resettlement of refugees, etc.

IOM has grown tremendously. It is fair to say that it is probably one of the international agencies that has grown the most and the fastest, especially in the last 15-20 years. I joined IOM in 1988 and 1991 and when I joined we had 33 member States. As of today we have 166 member States. Africa had one member State at IOM at the time I joined. Now the whole of Africa is part of the IOM membership. It is an organization that has grown tremendously in membership. Internally, we have gone from less than a 1 000 employees to almost 10 000 worldwide. We have 476 offices around the world. Our budget has moved from 200 million dollars per year to 1.5 billion dollars.

## **IOM as a New UN Migration Agency**

Last September we became associated with the UN family. Here the first clarification needs to be made. We are not a UN specialized agency which carries a different legal status. We are an associated agency which allows us to be part of the family while maintaining all the characteristics that IOM has had since its creation in 1951 including its operational modalities, the business model, our financing and the way we are governed. This was an explicit request of the IOM membership when they approved the beginning of the negotiation with the UN Secretariat in New York for our entering in the system. This is reflected in the agreement and means that IOM, while part of the family and formally able to participate in every instance that has to do with the running of the family, we remain independent in the way that we run our

business, the way we choose to do or not to do an operation, of course with an obligation of respecting the UN Charter.

The fact that we maintain our independence and our way of operating is important for us and for our membership. The fact that we are part of the UN system but with a very different nature in operational terms of course requires a certain level of adaptation of the UN family to us and of us to the UN family.

We became part of the UN largely because it was logical for it to happen. Migration has now become a global issue. If you look around, it seems to be the global issue even. There is not one day that goes by without the media talking about something that has to do with migration. It has become a key element of several international developments, including the SDGs. It is also part of the whole discussion on climate change and the measures that need to be put in place to counteract that change. So it has become something that is particularly relevant and very at the top of the international agenda and global discussion. So it was normal and logical that the organization dealing with migration in all its aspects became formally part of the global system at the United Nations. It would have been awkward to have some of the major institutional and international processes (SDGs, COP, etc.) which touch upon migration ongoing without the migration agency not being a part of the system. So the reflection started and the decision was taken by our membership to start negotiations and then finalized them in the UN.

The effect of becoming a part of the UN family on IOM has been small. We maintain our business model, the way we work and our internal governance system. We were already part of several aspects of the UN model already. We were a part of the security system, the humanitarian system and the administrative system. So there are no major changes with regard to that. In operational and other terms, we maintain our independence. The advantage of course is that now we are a part of the system, we have a seat at the table and we are formally somebody that can speak up in the UN bodies and events that take place and that have relevance for migration as part of the family and not just as a guest.

One of the elements that we need to underline and that was important to our membership is that IOM remains what is defined as a non-normative organization. We do not set binding norms on migration for the international community. We provide solutions based on best practice that we have had across the globe but we have no authority and frankly we do not seek to have any authority in setting norms that are binding for our member States or for the international community at large.

As I mentioned before, there are many things that will not change such as our name. The official languages of the organization will also remain English, French and Spanish. Our membership will also continue to elect our Director-General and our Deputy-Director-General. What does change is that it gives us a seat at the table in many institutions of relevance to migration. This is of course a major achievement and a major issue.

The entering into the UN last September 2016 coincided with the Summit of the General Assembly on Refugees & Migrants. This was a big event because it was the first time that the General Assembly organized that level of meeting on refugees and migrants. It never happened before. Even the High Level Dialogue did not gather an audience at the Heads of State level. Having a Summit on Migration and having Heads of State and Government sitting at the table discussing this matter is something that UN Secretary-General's have been trying to do for many

years, starting with Kofi Annan. The Summit was a historic one. The product of it is the UN Declaration which is a particularly important document and an explicit document as for the first time, some very explicit issues are mentioned in it. For example, the clear statement that migrants and refugees must see their fundamental rights respected regardless of their administrative status. This basically means that whoever arrives, even in irregular fashion, has the right to see his or her fundamental rights respected and upheld. For us working in the UN or international affairs, it sounds like an obvious thing but it has not been an obvious thing and it is still not an obvious thing. The fact that the UN Declaration contains this provision makes it a very important document.

The UN Declaration has also to do with the fact that the two Global Compacts were launched; one on refugees and one on migration. These issues are dealt with over two different compacts as they know different processes and a different state of advancement. The refugees aspect is quite well and extensively regulated by the 1951 Refugee Convention and other international instruments, while the migration aspect is not. Therefore we start from two different places but we need to see how we manage to bring the two processes together. Now that IOM is a member of the UN family, the organization has a particular important role in the development of the Global Compact on Migration. We have a leading role next to UN DESA and other organizations but nevertheless a very important and strong role in trying to advance the process.

### **The work of IOM in Europe**

The relationship between IOM and Europe has been growing over recent years quite importantly. Also, our relationship with the EU has strengthened because of our strengthening relationship with the UN.

In terms of our office in Brussels, we cover the European Union 28 member States as well as the two associated States, Norway and Switzerland. We also do have, in addition to the coordination of activities within the EU and the two associated States, a global responsibility of liaising with the EU institutions such as the Commission, the Council, EEAS and the Parliament on behalf of the rest of the organization worldwide. Our portfolio in terms of activities is pretty large because we both cover a large territory as well as the EU as a whole.

We have 29 main offices across Europe as well as sub-offices in many different locations in Greece and Italy. The only country where we do not have an office (yet) is Sweden.

In 2011, IOM and the EU signed a Strategic Cooperation Framework (SCF) which is an arrangement between IOM and five services of the EU; DG HOME, DG NEAR, DG DEVCO, DG ECHO and EEAS. The objective is to create a mechanism and space where IOM and all these services together meet and cooperate to identify strategic priorities. We have had already four senior official meetings and a series of technical meetings. This framework has revealed its importance especially when the EU has started to deal with the flow of migrants arriving in Europe through the Eastern and Mediterranean route. They decided to put together the whole process that led to the Summit between Africa and the EU in Valletta. In that context, the SCF has had a particular relevance because it has allowed us to be very engaged in the preparation work that led to Valletta, it has allowed the EU to use our expertise and institutional relationships and contacts with the African side in order to better shape the whole process and the final documents that were approved and has then allowed both of us to move to the implementation phase with the trust fund in a very relevant and consistent way both financially and in terms of

geography. We work together with the EU in many different areas such as return and reintegration, integration, resettlement and relocation, etc.

As I mentioned before, the SCF has allowed very close work in the implementation of the Valletta Plan of Action and the implementation of the Trust Fund. We are at the moment the largest recipient of funding from the EU Trust Fund for Africa in terms of activities that have to do with three windows: North Africa, East Africa and West Africa. Our activities are largely focusing on tackling the root causes of migration and using return of migrants not simply as a way of reducing pressure in Europe but as a factor of development of the local community where they come from. It is a relatively innovative approach that we are taking and that the EU is supporting.

The next upcoming area where we are closing ties in terms of cooperation with the EU is the issue of Libya which is one of the top priorities for Europe right now in trying to bring the flows under some level of control. We are currently negotiating with the EU Trust Fund for North Africa. The bottom line of all this is that there is an increase in our work in relation with the EU on a variety of aspects.

### **Today's Migrant & Refugee "Crisis"**

What we are witnessing right now in Europe is very similar to what Europe has witnessed at the time it was decided to create an organization to deal with those issues. We hope to be able to keep the memory of what Europe's migrants and refugees needed alive so that they use the criteria that they wanted to be used and applied to them to the refugees and migrants that are arriving now in Europe.

The reason why I mention "crisis" between quotation marks is because everybody refers to the refugee and migration "crisis" in Europe but we, at IOM, and I personally refuse to refer to it as a crisis for a variety of reasons. The first is that the numbers of people arriving and that have arrived since 2014 in Europe are not justifying the use of the word "crisis" because about 1.4 million people have arrived. This means that 1.4 million people have arrived in a space that is populated by half a billion people. The percentage of arrival to the percentage of the population is a minimum. Furthermore, we are talking about the most developed space in the world, the largest market, containing four of the seven most industrialized countries in the world. If these numbers constitute a crisis for this political and economic crisis, then we need to figure out what word we have to use for 1.7 million displaced people in Nigeria because of Boko Haram, to explain what is happening in Yemen, etc.

What it has been and has created is a political crisis within the EU for whatever reason. The result of that is that some of the fundamental values on which the EU is based, have been questioned by some of its own members. You have seen walls coming up, both physical as well as non-physical. We even have right now a huge debate in some of the EU member States as to whether or not saving lives at sea by NGOs is something that should be allowed or not.

This so-called crisis consists of two different groups of people that are coming which is why we talk about a mixed migration flow. You have a majority of refugees coming through the Eastern route from Syria, but also Afghanistan, Iraq and even Pakistan. Then you have a group of people coming from countries where you would not immediately recognize them as refugees. So you have a mixed group of people coming which complicates the response.

It cannot just be said that refugees can stay and non-refugees cannot. Among the non-refugees, you have people that are victims of trafficking, people that are escaping a harrowing situation in Libya or elsewhere, people escaping severe environmental degradation of their own place of origin or poverty, soon we will see people escape famine and drought in the Horn of Africa. So the response is not that clear-cut. The flows are much more complicated than that.

Since January 2015, 1.4 million people have arrived. Roughly 40 000 people have arrived last year and 10 000 this year have died at sea. Something that should be important for all Europeans to consider (and maybe also a bit to be ashamed of) is that the Central Mediterranean route is the most deadly route for migrants in the world. The estimation is that from the year 2000, close to 20 000 people have died in the Central Mediterranean. That is a lot of people. Only this weekend 6 000 people have been rescued at sea and brought to Sicily. The majority of rescuing at sea is at the moment being carried out by NGOs which should make us reflect.

On the Eastern side, after the launch of the EU-Turkey statement and the closure of the Western Balkan route, we have ended up with more than 72 000 stranded migrants and refugees in several countries such as Greece, FYROM, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Bulgaria and Hungary. In Greece, the situation is particularly difficult because a small number of people continue to arrive on the islands. Because of the EU-Turkey agreement they cannot be moved from the islands except to go back either to Turkey or home which means that even if the flows through Greece have dropped with 98%, on the islands the situation has continued to grow even if by only small increases.

### ***Who is arriving?***

The people arriving consist of a mixed flow. You have a different set of categories of people each needing a specific response. One important element is that among the arrivals, there is a large percentage of unaccompanied minors, from very young to close to 18 (including kids below 10 years of age). Last year, the percentage of unaccompanied minors was close to 25%.

In terms of nationality, besides Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis have been coming through the Eastern European route. Through the Central Mediterranean route we have Eritreans and Nigerians arriving. Of the Nigerians, at least 30% are trafficked women for sexual exploitation. We have an increase in the numbers of people arriving from Ivory Coast. We had a lot of people arriving from Gambia during the presidential and constitutional crisis but now that has subsided a bit. Over the last few weeks we have seen a large increase in arrivals from Bangladesh. Moroccans have been a sizeable number a few months ago but now it has decreased completely. The vast majority of people arriving are young men, mostly alone.

### ***What is driving people?***

The hundredth million question that everybody asks, even politicians and journalists is why people are arriving. It is very difficult to answer this question because migration is an individual choice. Some overall factors that push people to move apply to different nationalities and situations. There are security reasons for those fleeing war zones or dire situations such as the drought and famine in the Horn of Africa or Boko Haram in Nigeria. You also have economic reasons that push people to leave because they simply cannot sustain themselves and their family where they are so they try to look for options somewhere else. There are social and political drivers as well as environmental and climate change related drivers.

What is important to underline here is that these drivers push people to move primarily within their own region of origin. Europe has a great deal of people arriving from West Africa. West Africa is the largest region in the world in terms of internal movement so the vast majority of West Africans are not coming to Europe, but are moving around their own region. This is important because we hear this fairytale that “the whole of Africa is coming here” and “the whole Muslim World is coming here”. That is simply not true. In fact only a very small proportion is coming to Europe.

What we sometimes fail to understand when we try to put together responses to these factors, is that most of these drivers are far stronger than any obstacle we might try to put in their way, be it physical or otherwise. If you reach the conclusion that the only way to sustain yourself and your family is to try and go somewhere else (Europe in this case), you will do that. We would all do that. Trying to handle the situation just by stopping and blocking them somewhere, is a lost situation. It will not work because the push factors are too strong. We know this from them by the way. When we interviewed survivors of shipwreck, we asked them whether they knew they risked to drown, most of them replied that they knew but that where they came from, they would for sure have died anyway. For them, crossing the Mediterranean carries a risk but it also carries a chance.

### ***Main challenges for countries of origin and for countries of transit and reception***

The main challenges that we are facing for countries of origin are political, social and economic, conflicts, internal displacement for a variety of reasons, a certain level of misinformation whereby you have a lot of people who might fall into the trap of traffickers or smugglers.

From the side of the countries of transit or reception, the challenges are the issue of dealing with proper reception and accommodation, making sure that we can provide for basic needs especially for the most vulnerable such as unaccompanied children. Of course, one of the largest challenges is to counteract traffickers and smugglers which are often connected through powerful and rich transnational criminal organizations having the luxury not having to follow the law. The tackling of this phenomenon is becoming more and more of a challenge for Europe. Another challenge is to make sure that the people arriving, received protection. Not necessarily refugee protection but protection in general in order to ensure that fundamental rights of everyone are respected.

The whole issue of the increasing migratory flow to Europe has spurred a very strong level of action and activities on the EU side. From the beginning of 2015 until now 21 different policy instruments were created that have to do with migration and its different aspects. This is good and confusing at the same time. Good because there is now a clear interest from the European side and its member States to actually deal with migration. Confusing because it seems to be going a bit too much in the same direction and not all these policy instruments are coherent amongst themselves.

In this whole debate, a recent statement was made by European Council President, Donald Tusk: *“I want to appeal to all potential illegal economic migrants wherever you are from: do not come to Europe. Do not believe the smugglers. Do not risk your lives and your money. It’s all for nothing.”* Of course, while we understand the motivation behind it and the attempt to make migrants understand the risk they run, it risks to pass a misleading message. It seems to pass the message of “we want you to stay out and please do not come, there is no space for you here”. This is the

type of approach we need to work on in the EU in order to make the EU member States understand that in fact we do need the migrants to come and we do not need for them to come the way they come. We need to make sure that we can offer them a proper channel to come legally to our space and not having to resort to fake job intermediators or smugglers to reach Europe and try to find an alternative. The sad aspect of all this is that out of the 21 policy documents on migration that have come out since 2015, not one deals with improving legal channels which is a commitment of the EU taking in the Global Agenda. As long as legal channels are not part of the EU response, we will not be able to reasonably and effectively tackle the issue of irregular migration.

Of course you are all scared about the overall political climate and level of discussion that we see and hear in public opinion. We need to ask ourselves how much of this negative climate and negative speech is actually generated by our own way of talking about it and how much is genuinely part of the way the public opinion speaks.

Thank you.