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**'Taking the "E" out of ICEM'?**

**Extending the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration's Work to the World in the Long 1970s**

Attempts to establish international agencies to regulate both economic and forced migration go back to the end of World War I. However, the enormous humanitarian crisis caused by mass population displacements during and immediately after World War II led to the creation of successive international agencies which administered and resettled displaced persons and refugees on a large scale. One of the most lasting of these was the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM).

As its name suggests, however, the organization was concerned with Europeans – at least until the period of the long 1970s. This era saw the transformation of the institution's focus if not its formal, legal commitment. It moved toward a focus on non-European refugees as the number of perceived crises beyond Europe surged. Yet the organization's purpose as a means to fulfil Western Cold War goals and US foreign policy concerns persisted, while its ability to fully transform itself was limited both by its structure as a principally Western club independent of the UN and by concerns about non-European immigration into its member states. In short, the exclusive nature of ICEM made moving beyond its European heritage difficult.

*Establishing ICEM: Addressing "Overpopulation" in Europe and "Underdevelopment" Elsewhere*

With the end of the war in Europe, economic difficulties and poverty, fuelled by what was seen as 'overpopulation' and by high unemployment rates, plagued several countries in the continent, endangering the transition to peace. Many Western actors viewed democracy's existence as predicated on a basic level of economic wellbeing, and the security of the 'free world' on the economic reconstruction and growth of Europe – which might otherwise turn to communism – and they came to believe that the interconnected issues of 'overpopulation' and poverty had to be addressed. President Eisenhower declared in 1953 that "a solution of Europe's overpopulation problems would be worth as much as several divisions in strengthening the West in the

face of the Communist Threat.”<sup>1</sup> The Cold War transformed Europe’s refugee and “overpopulation” crisis into an issue that transcended humanitarian or economic considerations, as it explicitly linked the social and political impact of unemployment to international security (Clayton 2004: 587).

On the other hand, period actors viewed the redistribution of workers between areas with unemployment and those with manpower shortages as imperative for the acceleration of economic takeoff (Bashford 2008; Bashford 2014b: 78; Mazower 2009: 115; Reinalda 2009: 411). Mass immigration could boost the productivity and internal markets of rapidly developing but underpopulated countries, such as Australia and Canada. It could also boost their security, with Australia in particular concerned about the need to grow its population to avoid the vulnerabilities it had faced during the war (Brawley 1995: 237). With this in mind, several receiving countries relaxed migration restrictions, promoting influxes of ‘desirable immigrant stock’ through regulated and assisted movements (ILO 1959: 268). In “undeveloped” overseas countries, such as those in Latin America, where the training of locals for engaging in intensive rural modernization and industrialization was a long-range process, inflows of experienced workers from Europe could help accelerate the pace of growth and spread skills and positive attitudes towards development.<sup>2</sup>

Moves toward building a fully international migration agency under the International Labour Organization failed in 1951 for the most part as a consequence of concerns about Soviet influence and about its economic complexity (Szabla 2021: 203-204). In addition, European states and potential receiving countries showed concern that it might detract from a focus on European emigrants (Brawley 1995: 275). In December of the same year, a conference of interested Western governments in Brussels established an institutional framework for the mass migration of Europeans to overseas countries instead. Here, the USA led the creation of an intergovernmental body to act as a bridge between sending and receiving countries. The newly formed organisation began operations in February 1952 and was initially named the *Provisional Intergovernmental Committee for the Movement of Migrants from Europe* (PICMME),

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<sup>1</sup>*New York Times* 23/4/1953.

<sup>2</sup> Fernando Morales-Macedo, “Verbatim records (French)”, 3rd Session of the PICMME, Washington D.C., 13 June 1952, National Archives Records Administration (NARA, Washington D.C.).

renamed the *Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration* (ICEM) within a year. Notwithstanding continued emphasis on its provisional existence and despite the fact that the Preamble of its Constitution formally determined ICEM's '*non-permanent*' character, the Committee eventually became the most long-lived agency with a mandate to manage migration at the international level.

ICEM was the first international organization mandated to deal with refugees, displaced persons and other migrants at the same time. It thus adopted an inclusive concept of 'migrant', which encompassed all categories covered by the term, including expellees, stateless persons, and workers who migrated to other countries for economic reasons. The absence of any definition of this inclusive and vague term in ICEM's official documents and the parallel use of the term 'refugee' made the transportation of many different categories of people possible without ICEM exceeding its jurisdiction. ICEM was to deal with *de facto* or *de jure* refugees and with any European who *wanted* to migrate but did not have the means to do so (Parsanoglou 2015: 58-59).

ICEM's flexibility allowed it to pivot between addressing Europe's 'overpopulation' problem and addressing Cold War refugee crises – as well as overlapping situations. According to a December 1951 'top secret' policy guidance report of the US Psychological Strategy Board, issued just a few weeks after the establishment of ICEM, "although principally concerned with the problem of alleviating surplus populations in Europe, the Committee's charter is broad enough to provide for movement overseas of Soviet orbit escapees".<sup>3</sup> The US aspired at curtailing unemployment in European countries, such as Italy, where communist parties had a substantial political influence. Economic recovery and the raising of standards of living demanded interventionist policies. US foreign policy-makers also strived to relieve West Germany, a country vital in the stakes of the Cold War, by reducing the burden which refugees placed on its still fragile economic and political situation. By effectively and rapidly organizing the movement of Hungarian refugees during the 1956 crisis, ICEM further proved its necessity as an emergency mechanism in the US Cold War strategy.

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<sup>3</sup>Psychological Strategy Board, *Psychological Operations Plan for Soviet Orbit Escapees Phase A (Code Name: Engross)*, PSB D-18/a, 20/12/1951, [available online at: .

ICEM was conceived from the beginning as a fully ‘operational organization’ independent of the UN. According to its Constitution, adopted in 1953, and the will of its founder states, ICEM was to have four guiding characteristics: small, flexible, efficient and economical.<sup>4</sup> Consensus amongst receiving and sending countries with diverging interests was achieved by the focus on a technical field of cooperation, i.e. the transportation of refugees and migrants. As the transportation of these categories of people required a series of operations preceding and following their movement, such as identifying, informing, recruiting, pre-selecting, screening, documenting, training, embarking, receiving, housing and placing them, ICEM was meant to also undertake some or all of these operations. To persuade receiving states with antagonistic interests in migration issues to participate in an international agency, the US had to assuage sovereignty and security concerns, ensure effective selection processes and guarantee countries that were not preferred by prospective migrants that its operation would enhance their ability to attract categories of aliens in high demand in the international labor market (Venturas 2015: 318). Not surprisingly, the “close relationship between economic development and immigration” was underlined in ICEM’s founding Resolution.<sup>5</sup>

Despite potential divisions, however, ICEM was an organization of the Western world, excluding from its membership both Soviet-bloc and developing countries, with the exception of Latin American states situated closely to the USA. The ostensible criterion for the selection of potential partners in this endeavor, besides an interest in migration, was that of political regime: membership of the new agency was open exclusively to countries of the ‘free world’. The exclusion of communist countries contributed to the ideological homogeneity of its member states. But what was equally of prime importance for ICEM’s homogeneity and cohesion was the implicit exclusion of all non-European or non-settler countries. ICEM was an organization designed to serve the mobility of Europeans. Despite its flexibility, its Constitutional mandate with respect to

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<sup>4</sup>“A Plan to facilitate the movement of surplus populations from countries of Western Europe and Greece to countries affording resettlement opportunities overseas (Submitted by the United States Delegation)”, Brussels Migration Conference, 24 November 1951, MCB/3, National Archives Records Administration (NARA, Washington D.C.).

<sup>5</sup> “Resolution to establish a Provisional Intergovernmental Committee for the Movement of Migrants from Europe (Adopted at the 13<sup>th</sup> Meeting, 5 December 1951”, MCB/9, 6/12/1951, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA, Washington D.C.).

migrants was explicitly limited to those from Europe – and in its early days, it was only concerned with refugees from Europe as well. It also transported them only to areas where ‘Western civilization’ was hegemonic and the ‘white race’ controlled the state apparatus.

Most prospective emigrants from Europe preferred to settle in the USA, Canada or Australia, while Commonwealth countries had long preferred immigrants from Britain and Northern Europe, believing that they were racially superior and could be assimilated easier. Until the mid-60s neither the USA nor its Commonwealth allies were prepared to abandon immigration restrictions that excluded racial, ethnic and other categories of people deemed undesirable; hence, the establishment of this organization with a mandate strictly circumscribed to migrant outflows from Europe permitted receiving countries to continue to limit inflows to those considered desirable while avoiding accusations of racism and discrimination. In an era of universalist rhetoric and criticism against race-based immigration restrictions, ICEM initially offered receiving countries the cover they needed to go on selecting immigrants exclusively from what they saw as a racially white continent. It would discriminate itself between the workers desiring to enter their territory on the basis of ethnic origin, class, occupation, and gender so that member states could receive only the politically desirable among the young and healthy (Limnios 2015).

*ICEM ‘Goes Global’: Mobilizing the Organization Beyond Europeans in the Long 1970s*

By the 1960s and 70s, however, the conditions that had shaped ICEM were changing in the wake of economic growth, increasing consciousness of racial discrimination, decolonization, and a growing concern with humanitarian catastrophes. These set the stage for the organisation needing to consider how to accommodate people and places beyond Europe and those seeking European migrants.

Economic conditions in ICEM’s traditional sending and receiving countries were among the changes. Spectacular growth and demand for labor in industrially developed Northwestern Europe changed the direction of migration flows. These economically developing areas of the European continent absorbed their own unemployed and underemployed populations during the first half of the 1950s, reducing their motivation

to emigrate. Receiving countries in the Commonwealth had to reconsider their aversion to Southern Europeans as a consequence.

Yet Northwest European countries soon started recruiting immigrant workers as well, becoming more enticing than overseas destinations for the majority of those willing to leave poorer Southern Europe (Thomas 1962: 81). Promising working and living conditions in countries closer to their homelands, as well as regulation through bilateral migration agreements and the expansion of the welfare state, led to an enormous increase in intra-European movements – a tendency that had a severe impact on the numbers of those willing to move overseas. Northwest European growth would also begin to attract migrants from outside Europe as well (Gatrell 2019: 10), with consequences that will be explored below.

That said, European overseas migration in general and more specifically overseas movements under the auspices of ICEM did not cease in the 1960s and 1970s. During these decades ICEM continued assisting the migration and family reunification of Europeans, particularly those involved in refugee crises in the Soviet bloc. After the 1968 Prague Spring, ICEM resettled about 20,000 Czechoslovaks. It also assisted in resettling 6400 Jews from Poland in 1968-69. From 1971 onwards ICEM helped resettle more than 64,500 Soviet Jews, mainly in Israel (Carlin 1989: 83, 86; Ducasse-Rogier 2001: 55-56).

ICEM tried to find its role within new migration challenges facing the Western world and to adapt its services in order to survive. One opportunity came in the form of Latin American countries starting to demand more skilled immigrants who could contribute to their development in new ways. The organisation hence made efforts to improve its vocational training programmes and placement services focused on immigration to Latin America. In 1964, it launched the *Selective Migration Schemes* for the region that aimed at identifying their labour shortages and matching them with the available and appropriately qualified workforce in European countries. It also inaugurated *Migration for Development Programmes* to contribute to Latin America's development processes.

But with the emergence of new states in the aftermath of decolonization, the Cold War also intensified in the "Third World". The USA and the USSR in the 1960s and 1970s tried to enlarge their sphere of influence in this contested ground. They launched an ideological battle to gain the hearts and minds of people in those states buffeted by

poverty and population growth (Westad 2010: 4; Maier 2010: 33, 52; Painter 2010: 486). Capitalism had to show that it had “better tools for improving the lives of the world’s poor” (Mazower 2012: 274).

ICEM’s work on Latin America during the 1960s also continued its concern with Cold War security logics. It could be examined in line with the wider efforts of the Kennedy Administration, which launched a ten-year plan, *Alliance for Progress*, in the context of US foreign policy concerns. In the face of the resurgence of communism in the so-called Third World, specifically in Latin America and especially after the final success of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, the *Alliance for Progress* encouraged economic reforms in Latin American countries aiming at increasing the legitimacy of governments of the region (Venturas-Damilakou 2015). The ultimate goal was to prevent the expansion of communism from Cuba to the nearby countries. It is thus not by chance that ICEM assisted more than 70,000 Cuban refugees between 1961 and 1979 and more than 51,000 in 1981 by resettling them mainly in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

However, economic shifts and the Cold War were not the only contexts for changing approaches to the mobility of non-Europeans. A new consciousness of racial discrimination, including the African-American civil rights movement, led to changes in US priorities. The need to do so broke old racial barriers in the USA’s own refugee policies (Bon Tempo 2008: 145). Its 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act largely removed geographic limits on migration to the US. Newly decolonized states were becoming increasingly assertive in advocating for themselves. As they increasingly became UN members, they reshaped that organization’s legal and institutional refugee regime (Szabla 2021: 206-208). The 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, for example, removed geographical and other restrictions that had led refugee law and institutions to focus on Europeans. Dissatisfaction with Cold War ideologies was also, by 1968 and into the 1970s, fostering an increasing concern with humanitarianism and human rights as alternatives (Moyn 2010).

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<sup>6</sup> IOM-SW/Library, ICEM Executive Committee, “Emergency Migration Programme from Cuba”, 57<sup>th</sup> (Special) Session, MC/EX/INF/42, 27.05.1980; IOM-SW/Library, ICEM Council, “Addendum to Report of the Director on the Work of ICM for the Year 1980. Report on Transport”, 47<sup>th</sup> Session, MC/1334/Add.1, 01.04.1981.

In the course of these shifts, pressure built on ICEM to become more relevant to humanitarian crises beyond Europe. ICEM therefore began assisting non-European refugees. Doing so required drawing a line where it had previously blurred the distinction between refugees and migrants, as its ability to assist the former was not constitutionally limited to Europeans (Szabla 2021: 201). Yet although the organisation had operated outside Europe since its establishment, initially it only transported Europeans who remained outside Europe, mainly in China and the Near East, after the war.<sup>7</sup> But in 1967 ICEM's Hong Kong office was formally authorized to provide transport to non-European refugees. Already by the end of the 1970s, Asia had become ICEM's main theatre of operations (Ducasse-Rogier 2001: 54).

In 1972, when President Idi Amin of Uganda ordered the expulsion of all Asians from the country, ICEM, in cooperation with the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), resettled about 4,600 stateless Asians from Uganda to European and overseas countries.<sup>8</sup> After the Pinochet coup in Chile in 1973, ICEM, in cooperation with other international organisations, moved more than 20,000 foreign and Chilean refugees.<sup>9</sup> But ICEM initiated its longest-lasting resettlement programme with the pullout of American forces from Vietnam in 1975. This programme for refugees and displaced persons who fled from Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos lasted for more than two decades. ICEM, in cooperation with UNCHR and the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), founded operation centres in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, Korea and Hong Kong and assisted the refugees with medical and resettlement services. Between 1975 and 1979, it had resettled about 280,000 Indochinese (Murdock 1983: 56; Carlin 1989: 92, 115-116). Between 1975 and 1996 it helped over 1,5 million resettle (Ducasse-Rogier 2001: 60-61).

Between February 1952 and December 1980, ICEM transported 1,000,538 migrants and 1,899,996 refugees, totalling 2,900,534 souls (Limnios 2023: 82). By the 1970s, especially with the diminution of mass European migration and the Cold War's change of focus towards the "Third World", the involvement of ICEM in non-European refugee

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<sup>7</sup> "Refugees of European Origin Resident outside Europe. Report of the Director", September 17 1952, PIC/69, PICMME, 1952, October 13-21, 4th Session, Geneva, NARA, Washington D.C.

<sup>8</sup> ICEM, *Review of Achievements 1972*: 9-12; ICEM, *Review of Achievements 1973*: 8-9; IOM-SW/Library, ICEM Council, "Report of the Director on the Work of the Committee for the Year 1973, 38<sup>th</sup> Session, MC/1087, 16.04.1974.

<sup>9</sup> ICEM, *Review of Achievements 1973*: 9-10; Carlin 1989: 88-90.



resettlement became a larger part of its activities. This change in the organisation's emphasis or the perception that it had fulfilled its role resulted in the withdrawal of several important member-states in the 1960s and 1970s. At the same time, however, ICEM remained an exclusive club, rejecting new applications from states beyond Europe and Latin America, such as Japan. The fear was that the admission of such states would create what was rejected in 1951: a truly international migration organization that would diminish its focus on moving Europeans. (Szabla 2021: 209-210).

In the context of increasing postcolonial migration into Europe, a particular concern was that new members might support efforts to push more non-European migrants into Europe. A British diplomatic note from 1964, – concerned with “the question of taking the ‘E’ out” of ICEM, espoused fear at the prospect of an expanded organisation promoting more Jamaican immigration to the UK. ‘Overpopulation’ problems beyond Europe, he argued without further explanation, could not be solved in the same way as those in Europe.<sup>10</sup> After the 1973 oil crisis and ensuing recession, moreover, several immigration countries, such as West Germany, stopped recruiting foreign workers, fearing growing unemployment and welfare expenditures. Proposals to extend ICEM's formal remit to non-European migrants were made and rejected as late as 1975 (Georgi 2010: 51).

Nevertheless, pivoting toward non-European refugees meant that ICEM managed to update its relevance in a changing geopolitical environment. It also worked beyond its legal limitations in other ways; in the 1970s, ICEM initiated a *Forum for International Migration Issues* to support the exchange of knowledge and practices amongst governments and other organisations on migration issues. ICEM, therefore, progressively turned into a global agency and in 1980 was renamed the *Intergovernmental Committee for Migration* (ICM). Finally, in 1989, it assumed its present incarnation as the *International Organization for Migration* (IOM). Only then did it revise its Constitution to remove the restriction that it focus on European migrants (Perruchoud 1989: 512).

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<sup>10</sup> 23 November 1964 letter on behalf of C.P. Scott, United Kingdom Mission Geneva, to K.R.C. Pridham, Foreign Office, in “Future of ICEM,” FO 371/178510, British National Archives, Kew.

In his book published in that year, James L. Carlin, successively Counselor of the United States Mission in Geneva, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in Charge of Refugee and Migration Affairs and ICEM/ICM's Director from 1979 to 1988, wrote that "the United States Government had been instrumental in [ICEM's] creation and was the major supporter of the organization, so that it fell upon US delegations at ICEM meetings to play a leadership role, especially in encouraging ICEM to be adaptable and responsive with regard to the resettlement of refugees and displaced persons" (Carlin 1989: 107). If ICEM turned global during the 1970s, this was, once again, in accordance with US foreign policy.

Carlin could also define the organisation's purpose as still anchored in "the need [...] to perform discreetly in crisis situations and extrication operations" (Carlin 1989: 114-115). Although both migration and refugee patterns and policies changed during the 1970s, and despite its renaming in 1980, ICEM continued to exist because of its capacity to adapt to new circumstances in serving the USA and the Western world.

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