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The rise of repatriation: Global South refugees and forerunners of the International Organization for Migration in the long 1970s

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary international migration debates have been marked by a confrontation between the requirements of refugee and asylum law, on the one hand, and accusations they are being abused, concerns about illegal and excessive migration, and efforts to reverse migratory flows, on the other. How and when did this state of affairs arise? This article situates the 'long 1970s' as a decisive period, focusing on the policy cycle through which both donor state preferences and institutional agency remade the Intergovernmental Committee on European Migration (ICEM), later known as the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The organisation's transformation from facilitating European emigration to managing refugees in and from the Global South in this period is critical for understanding how migrant repatriation arose as a permanent feature. This article demonstrates how its unique mandate and the growth of both humanitarianism and migration restrictionism led the organisation towards greater concentrations on refugees and then asylum-seeker deportations, contributing to what has become a central tool for migration management today.

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The international legal scholar B.S. Chimni pointed to an arc from the instrumentalisation of refugees during the Cold War to their 'containment' in more recent decades. The shift occurred, he wrote, with the emergence of what observers termed 'new asylum-seekers', first noticed in 1980 but present since the 1960s. European Cold War refugees enjoyed the image of individual escapees seeking shelter from long-term political conditions, and so benefitted from international refugee law's 'exilic bias'. 'New asylum-seekers' from the Global South, however, appeared to exist on a larger scale and as fleeing temporary conflict or as 'economic migrants' abusing the system – helping justify their exclusion from the North (Chimni 1998).

Chimni and refugee historians have subsequently added detail to this account. Northern states and refugee institutions achieved 'containment' by, among other things, keeping Southern refugees confined to camps, retaining a narrow international legal definition of 'refugee', and instituting increasingly coercive forms of the return, or repatriation,¹ of

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asylum-seekers (Cosemans 2021; Gatrell 2013; Robson 2023²). Yet the rise of repatriation was, this article contends, imbricated with the evolution of a body *outside* of narrow refugee rules and institutions: today's International Organization for Migration (IOM), known before 1989 as the Intergovernmental Committee for Migration (ICM) and before 1980 as the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM).

The article shows how the decisive period of the 'long 1970s' – which stretched from the radical changes introduced by the 1960s through reactions to them into the 1980s (Hellema 2010) – first led the then-ICEM to shift from a focus on facilitating non-refugee European emigration to resettling Global South refugees. Resistance to this shift, including an increasingly restrictionist environment in the North and Southern states with other immigration priorities or facing pressure as sites of first asylum, also developed out of this period, however, leading ICEM to channel its new refugee focus into repatriation. ICEM/ICM/IOM became involved in both the initial shift and the one that followed the backlash by virtue of its relative organisational agility, as well as its capability to engage many types of 'refugees' and 'migrants', including ineligible asylum-seekers.

Despite the organisation's contemporary involvement in repatriation, refugee histories, whose focus often lies in the evolution of refugee-specific laws, initiatives or institutions, such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), have sidestepped the role that ICEM/ICM/IOM played in its rise. In those accounts, ICEM/ICM/IOM appears, when it does, largely when it is relevant for assisting or exerting competitive pressure on UNHCR (Cosemans 2021; Gatrell 2013; Loescher 2001; Robson 2023); one account even concentrates entirely on this dynamic (Elie 2010). While it has expanded its understanding of 'refugees' beyond the narrow, 'persecution'-oriented definition of the 1951 Refugee Convention (see e.g. Gatrell 2013, 7), moreover, refugee histories still nonetheless engage less with the overlapping but broader category of 'migrants', which has been a primary ICEM/ICM/IOM responsibility and one that shaped its refugee work; with some exceptions (e.g. Madokoro 2016, 7; Mayblin 2017), a disconnect between histories of refugees and migration histories persists (Kleist 2017).

At the same time, research on ICEM/ICM/IOM has focused on its earliest or most recent decades (Bradley 2023a; Bradley, Costello, and Sherwood 2023; Geiger and Pécoud 2020; Venturas 2015³), while other periods have not been evaluated by independent scholarship.⁴ Consequently, scholars have viewed the post-Cold War era as especially significant for the organisation's expansion (Dini, Fineb, and Pécoud 2025; Kreuder-Sonnen and Tantow 2023). While this article does not dispute that the years since 1989 have been important for IOM branching beyond migrant movement, it proposes that the organisation's middle decades paved the way by turning it toward refugees worldwide, and toward refugee 'containment'. In so arguing, it contributes to refugee history an indication that unwilling forms of repatriation neither followed continuously from wars of decolonisation nor were blocked by the Cold War, as current accounts suggest (Chimni 2004; Gatrell 2013; Koch 2014; Loescher 2001), but that, after brief uses following the Second World War and Algerian War, ICEM/ICM/IOM helped establish them amid the specific context of the 'long 1970s'⁵ – the currents of which were therefore pivotal for the development of practices that continue today (Koch 2014).

Joining other approaches that see the 'long 1970s' as a formative period for other contemporary structures, ICEM/ICM/IOM's history during this period thus demonstrates how global and local political, cultural and economic shifts contributed to international organisations' rising involvement with Global South asylum-seekers, and how tensions between

and within both North and South over them led this involvement towards repatriation. In so showing, the article situates the organisation's transformation and the rise of repatriation amid factors discussed, though not always brought together comprehensively, in scholarship on the period (see e.g. Gibney 2004; Hansen 2023).⁶

Key to the organisation's role in this period was not only ICEM's mandate to be 'concerned' with 'refugees', broadly defined, and to facilitate 'migration', a concept its constitution initially associated with those leaving Europe. While tied to the 'principle of free movement', it was also unbounded by specific rights (ICEM Constitution 1953, Arts. 1(1), 1(3), and 2(b)⁷). ICEM services could also take many forms. Far from a mere 'travel agent', as some viewed it, ICEM activities included language and skills training and placement in specific employment (Ducasse-Rogier 2001, 28–30). The organisation's wide remit and limited membership as, initially, a 'Western' and Latin American club opened possibilities when UNHCR's narrower definition of 'refugee', right-consciousness, or UN politics proved too restrictive.⁸

Both its mandate and membership played roles as ICEM transformed over the long 1970s from being primarily focused on European emigration to global concerns. During this period, enduring path dependencies set boundaries for institutional change driven by negotiations between member states and ICEM officials. The organisation's flexible, geographically unbounded understanding of 'refugees', in contrast to 'migrants', allowed it to become, by its rechristening as ICM in 1980, focused on providing its migration services for the resettlement of 'refugees' from beyond Europe. It nonetheless faced Latin American preferences for skilled labour and increasing hostility towards mass migration everywhere. ICM and later IOM's expanding role moving 'refugees', resistance to it, and efforts to channel reformist energies in new directions therefore helped lead it toward a new role: facilitating rejected asylum claimants' return.

The context of the period lurked behind these shifts. After growing employment undermined ICEM's main original purpose assisting emigration from Europe, antiracism and decolonisation pressured Eurocentric institutions to reform, while tilting the Cold War's playing field South. Political disillusionment also turned many towards humanitarian endeavours. Focusing on Southern asylum-seekers helped the organisation regain relevance. Yet humanitarian and foreign policy support for refugee assistance fell as domestic concerns rose, after the 1973 oil crisis and resulting downturn, about imported labour, and as asylum-seekers increasingly crowded both Northern and Southern destinations.

ICEM's, and later ICM's and IOM's, engagement with the Indochina refugee crisis – the organisation's largest focus by the end of the 1970s, and one scholars increasingly view as a forerunner of more recent migration controversies (Davies 2008; Moodley 2023; Taylor et al. 2021, 2) – provides a still-understudied window onto a policy cycle shaping competencies that IOM continues in the present.⁹ Hanoi's 1975 absorption of South Vietnam and wars and atrocities in Cambodia and Laos pushed scores to nearby polities. Western states accepted many for resettlement – seeking the help of ICEM, with its broad 'refugee' mandate. As hosting burdens mounted, however, states reduced their intake, seeing many Indochinese as 'economic migrants' and demanding that those being resettled meet the Convention definition of refugee: being 'persecuted' for specific characteristics. In Hong Kong, housing an ever-greater number of asylum-seekers then unable to move on, the organisation sought to deepen the commitment to and expertise with repatriation that it began developing in increasingly asylum-wary Europe. When constitutional revision finally permitted IOM to

classify failed non-European asylum-seekers as 'migrants' in the late 1980s, this only fuelled its existing involvement in the mechanics of return.

Anchored in path-dependencies but accounting for contingencies, decisions by members and organisational entrepreneurship, ICEM's long 1970s transformation thus also exemplifies how historical institutionalist dynamics (see Steinmo 2012) interacted with international policy cycles (see Dunn 2008). In so arguing, this article thus shares with scholarship on international organisations, including scholarship on IOM specifically, an understanding that they are driven by both endogenous and exogenous concerns (Bradley 2025, 1695; Koch 2014, 910; Kreuder-Sonnen and Tantow 2023, 193–194). It also shares with an earlier historical institutionalist approach to IOM a focus on how 'permissive and productive conditions' provided openings for 'critical junctures' that the organisation used to demonstrate new competences, expanding its remit by identifying gaps it could fill (Kreuder-Sonnen and Tantow 2023, 189, 201).

As with the origins of repatriation, however, it locates an important condition and juncture not with and after the Cold War as that account also does, but following ICEM's existential crisis that led it to focus on Global South refugees and returns in the 'long 1970s'. While the Cold War's demise also opened opportunities, this article argues that ICEM/ICM/IOM was able to demonstrate competence in new domains earlier, making the logistical capabilities that Bradley (2025) has demonstrated were important for the organisation in other periods drivers of expansion into its recent history.¹⁰ Other drivers identified as facilitating expansion after the Cold War, moreover, including IOM's closeness to Western powers and flexibility relative to UNHCR (Kreuder-Sonnen and Tantow 2023, 196–199), were present before the 1980s. Unlike some of IOM's post-Cold War moves towards broader humanitarian relief and other tasks, its expansion in earlier periods still primarily involved human mobility, but expansion within that category helped establish the task-filling 'formula' that Kreuder-Sonnen and Tantow see as a motor for its later evolution.¹¹

IOM does not have a public or professional archive, impeding access to its records (Bradley 2025, 1683; Venturas 2015, 9–10). This contribution compensates by using documents from and concerning ICEM/ICM/IOM in repositories of member states and operational locations in London, Hong Kong, Germany, Canada and Washington, DC. While they cannot reflect all the organisation's inner deliberations, these archives provide perspectives from important sites of decision-making and influence on ICEM/ICM/IOM. The US served as a major financial contributor. West Germany was an important site for the development of repatriation techniques in Europe. The Indochina crisis gave rise to acute pressures on Hong Kong and hence Britain. Canadian records balance these perspectives with those of a state less concerned with Indochina or repatriation. Given that issues such as the Indochina crisis remain sensitive for governments involved, archival silences remain in the form of restricted and even destroyed records.¹² Much, however, has now surfaced in recently declassified materials.¹³

The article proceeds in four sections. The first backgrounds ICEM's early history, when it was focused on emigration from Western European states and European refugees from communism. The second discusses its long 1970s shift towards concern with refugees in and from the Global South – illustrating how this opened rifts between members with different priorities and moved ICEM towards repatriation. The third addresses impacts of these developments as the Indochina crisis expanded and how ICM/IOM's experience with repatriation allowed it to pitch an increasingly involuntary variant in Hong Kong. The article concludes by discussing how that template and the long 1970s echo, as international refugee

and migration institutions, including IOM, continue in the vein of transformations that took place during or as a consequence of the period.

The rise and decline of ICEM as a European migration institution

ICEM arose as the Second World War's 'displaced person' problem, which had required broad mandates for the international organisations involved, had diminished (Papadopoulos and Parsanoglu 2015, 34–39). In its wake emerged the much more narrowly constricted 1951 Refugee Convention and UNHCR, initially *de jure* or *de facto* confined to European activities (Szabla 2021, 202–203, 205). While the International Labour Organization (ILO) sought to revive interwar efforts to build a complementary migration institution, concerns about its worldwide membership and remit amid Cold War tensions impeded the effort (Szabla 2021, 203–204).

By 1952 Western and allied states had formed the alternative Provisional Intergovernmental Committee for Movement and Migration in Europe (PICMME) – quickly renamed ICEM – to tackle 'overpopulation' problems caused by still high post-war unemployment and demographic shifts such as Germans' expulsion from Eastern Europe. The notion that remedial emigration was necessary to combat susceptibility to communism was a security concern, of interest even to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)'s 'committee on non-military objectives' (Canadian High Commissioner, London 1951). Western states also sought to absorb and attract population movements from the communist East (Comte 2020, 462, 464). ICEM subsequently helped organise mass migration from 'overpopulated' and Cold War frontline states to Latin America, Australia and territories like Rhodesia seeking to enlarge their white settler populations (Bradley 2023b, 31–34). It exercised its refugee functions in a similar way, working alongside UNHCR to resettle those who, for example, fled the suppressed Hungarian uprising of 1956. Nonetheless, European states were principally committed to ICEM at this point for its broader emigration role. Some members, reading its mandate restrictively, even argued that it was unconstitutional for it to assist anyone from a country that was not 'overpopulated' or European refugees seeking to return from China, since the latter were not *in* Europe (Acting Canadian Permanent Representative, Geneva 1957, 2, 7).

By the 1960s, the need for emigration from Europe tapered off as its growing economies began absorbing more labour. A retrospective ILO report found that

[t]he main contemporary migration movements ... [were] substantially different from those which prevailed before the 1950s ... [C]ountr[ies] which, until almost 1960, had been the starting point of substantial emigration beg[an] ... about that time ... to take in foreign manpower at an increasing rate. (Lasserre-Bigorry 1975, 30)

ICEM's Eurocentric migration mandate lost relevance. But members resisted expanding it; Canadian officials neither felt that they needed workers nor believed that ICEM's emigration assistance could benefit 'overpopulated' non-European states (Canadian Department of External Affairs 1975.) British diplomats also refused to countenance relieving Asian 'overpopulation' and feared instigating more Jamaican immigration to the UK (Scott 1964). ICEM, searching for a purpose, found one in recruiting skilled European labour for Latin American development projects. The shift aligned with US efforts to stave off communist influence in

the region (ICEM Council 1962, 13); and as the main contributor to ICEM, the US held significant sway over its budget and personnel (see e.g. Vance 1979).

Other members did not lack financial influence, however. Given the dwindling of its emigration focus, some assessments have viewed ICEM's relatively increased concern with refugees from communist Europe, such as those fleeing the 1968 crackdown in Czechoslovakia, as a reason for their disengagement from the organisation during this period (Elie 2010, 351). Yet it was in coming to believe that Latin America derived disproportionate benefit from ICEM that many members questioned the costs of membership and withdrew – though continuing to use its services on an ad hoc basis (Canadian Department of External Affairs 1975). While more Latin American states joined in the 1960s and early 1970s, withdrawals included the UK, France, Sweden and a major budgetary contributor: Australia (Loescher 2001, 152; 'Explanations' to 'Chart on Membership in IOM' 1992). By the late 1960s, ICEM was in such fiscal crisis that its Director, Bastiaan Haveman, warned that it faced the end of operations (Elie 2010, 351).

The long 1970s turns to non-European refugees and returns

In contrast to ICEM's difficulties 'going global' and serving non-European migrants, however, it faced increasing pressure to assist non-European refugees. The organisation remained an effective carrier of European refugees – assisting, for example, Jews leaving the Soviet Union during the 1970s (ICEM Monthly Dispatch 1979c, 3). At the same time, the US civil rights push, identitarian movements and decolonisation exerted pressures within states and international organisations (on the latter see e.g. Maul 2012, 227, Ch. 7¹⁴) that demanded more attention be given to the emerging problems of the postcolonial Global South. The US desire to re-establish moral leadership after the Vietnam War and frustration with the limits of Cold War ideologies fed support for human rights and worldwide humanitarian action, including refugee assistance (Keys 2014; Moyn 2010; Stur 2015). Humanitarian crises also appeared to surge as causes including economic shifts produced by the 1973 oil crisis destabilised postcolonial states (Hansen 2023, 14–16). Already by 1967, this environment helped contribute to the elimination of the effective geographical restrictions in the Refugee Convention and pushed UNHCR to act increasingly further afield of Europe (Szabla 2021, 206–208).

Postcolonial conflict also fuelled geopolitical competition in the South (Loescher 2001, 9–10). US diplomats feared the loss of refugee assistance as a Western tool as voices on the UNHCR Executive Committee diversified (US Mission New York 1979). The UN Third Committee witnessed criticism that UNHCR's Western ties led it to apply refugee status to economic migrants to embarrass postcolonial governments (US Mission New York 1978, 2). Such factors made a refugee organisation that was independent of the UN more attractive to some Western states. Not all agreed; Canadian representatives had argued that most Southern refugees fled to neighbouring countries and lacked the need for the long-distance movement that ICEM usually arranged, and so were better suited to assistance from UNHCR (Canadian Mission Geneva 1962).

Yet ICEM made itself useful. As it assisted more non-European refugees, it served both its traditional Cold War role in its involvement with South Asians expelled from Idi Amin's Uganda and with the Mariel boatlift from Cuba, while also engaging in less obviously geopolitically aligned assistance for exiles from Pinochet's Chile (Carlin 1989, 87–89, 119). Its constitution's loose definition of 'refugee' was an asset where UNHCR could not be easily

involved (Elie 2010, 355). Director John Thomas pushed this definition to its greatest possible extent by 1971, arguing that 'there was no strict dividing line' between refugees and migrants for ICEM's founders (Bradley 2023b, 55). UNHCR, meanwhile, could not engage as 'refugees' those who had not crossed an international border, such as the Chileans seeking protection in embassies instead (Cosemans 2021, 128). By 1979, ICEM was far more involved in refugee than migrant assistance and most of its operations were extra-European (Ducasse-Rogier 2001, 54).

A major reason was ICEM's Indochina operation, which commenced the same month as the fall of Saigon (ICEM Press Release 1979a). With the 'Third Worldist' UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadruddin Aga Khan, initially refusing to be involved in what he viewed as an American responsibility, the US turned, at first, to ICEM (Cosemans 2021, 266–268). Subsequent years saw increased flight from Vietnam after economic disruption, imposed re-education programmes, and war with China, along with the reign and fall of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and Laotian persecution of the Hmong (Taylor et al. 2021, 8). The scale of the resulting exodus was vast, encompassing hundreds of thousands and persisting into the 1990s. ICEM Director James Carlin argued that Indochina's 'threaten[ed] to become one of the largest forced migrations in the history of mankind' (ICEM Monthly Dispatch 1980b, 6). To coordinate its efforts, ICEM's offices expanded across Southeast Asia (ICEM Monthly Dispatch 1979a, 3).

A UN conference that same year had agreed to treat all boat arrivals as *prima facie* refugees and doubled down on resettlement (FCO 1989, 1–2), which later that year exceeded targets of 20,000 a month (ICEM Monthly Dispatch 1979c, 1). With UNHCR now involved and focused on reception, ICEM provided preparation and travel services. Its earlier work in Hong Kong had eventually served European, but not Chinese refugees – given UNHCR's then-restrictive mandate, an understanding that ICEM (not yet making use of its flexible refugee definition) could only serve Europeans and a lack of destinations beyond a reluctant Taiwan (Menzies 1957; Pope 1958, 2; Robson 2023, 201). In the first half of 1980, however, 70.4% of ICEM's assisted movements were Indochinese, as not only had it embraced non-European refugees but also Western states including the US, UK, Canada, France, and Germany proved willing recipients (ICEM Monthly Dispatch 1980b, 6).

The relevance of ICEM's new focus for humanitarian politics helped bring back Australia as a member and both the UK (Trevan 1987) and Canada as observers (while Canadian foreign policy officials appreciated the global refugee push (Hadwen 1975), immigration officials thought ICEM was still not sufficiently useful to them to justify the cost of full membership (Edmonds 1974)).¹⁵ Yet the change in ICEM's direction also exposed tensions between members and with other organisations. Latin American states expressed concern that it would diminish ICEM's skilled migration work; 'rumors' circulated that Carlin was made director in the late 1970s 'to advance US human rights policy' instead and Brazil announced its withdrawal (USMG 1978a; Gillies 1979, 1, 5). UNHCR also grew disturbed as ICEM functions increasingly resembled its own (USMG 1978a; Gillies 1979, 1, 3). The issue of ICEM's redundancy loomed large enough that UK civil servants later believed that it was what had previously led their country and France to withdraw (Godfrey 1982a).

Questions concerning the nature of the organisation's expansion became the focus of debates within ICEM over constitutional revision, which began in 1975 amid a new push to remove its Eurocentric restrictions on assistance for 'migrants' (Permanent Mission of Canada, Geneva 1975, 3–5). ICEM's then-Director Thomas appointed Italian jurist Roberto

Ago to form an expert committee, eventually including international legal heavyweights Georges Ali-Saab, Robert Jennings, Hermann Mosler, Paul de Visscher and Prosper Weil, to draft a reform proposal (ICEM 1975a, 5–6). Ongoing resistance to expanding the ‘migration’ mandate, however, meant that only the shakier fix of a resolution removed ICEM’s ‘E’ by 1980 (ICEM 1980). But while the committee showed concern for ‘surplus populations’ in the Global South (ICEM 1975a, 11), most discussion did not centre on *whom* it served as much as on *what* ICEM could do on a limited budget.

As constitutional debates stretched into the 1980s, Latin American states pushed for the then-ICM to take on a wider range of activities (Fenge 1986, 1). At the same time, the organisation’s conferences had expanded into even the ILO’s sphere, discussing the rights of undocumented workers (ICM 1983, 7). West Germany, worried about ICM becoming an organisation ‘of development aid’ (German Government 1986) and overlapping with other agencies’ mandates, supported Australia in redirecting expansionist momentum towards a more limited and self-interested goal: proposing repatriation as an explicit ICEM function (German Government 1986, 2).

Fuelling disagreement over the extent and nature of the organisation’s activity – and eventually channelling it towards repatriation – was the period’s economic downturn. Rising inflation ate into ICEM’s budget (US Embassy Bonn 1978; US Government Statement 1976). At the same time, an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report noted ‘the decision taken by immigration countries, [around] the appearance of the so-called [1973] energy crisis, to completely stop immigration’ (OECD 1975, 6). Culturally motivated backlash to immigration had led to restrictions in Britain not long before, but now the Netherlands and Switzerland also began restricting arrivals; France banned recruitment abroad in 1974 (Hansen 2023, 6–7). West Germany placed a ‘hiring stop’ on non-European Economic Community nationals in 1973, with its diplomats sharing materials boasting of ‘action against illegal immigrants’ there, as ‘150,000 foreign nationals’ were ‘without work’ amid the ‘worldwide recession’ (Newsletter from Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany 1976, 12–13).

A 1975 ILO meeting focused on the practicalities of returning migrants (ILO 1975, 2–5); an ILO report that year found returns ‘considerable’ in the US, Canada and Australia, ranging from a quarter to a third of arrivals (Lasserre-Bigorry 1975, 31). The OECD noted talk of ‘re-emigration’, which it defined as forced return (OECD 1975, 6–7). Britain’s 1971 Immigration Act already permitted forced repatriation (Cosemans 2021, 108). France and West Germany began motivating returns through payments or early pension access, but the latter moved towards deportation by the early 1980s. Not long after, Chancellor Helmut Kohl celebrated ‘remigration’ as a growing majority supported repatriating immigrants (Gatrell 2019, 198, 206).

As public sentiment embraced moving migrants out of Europe, ICEM found another new role. It had studied returns since at least 1975 (ICEM 1975b). Over the course of the 1970s it also evolved, from its skilled labour programmes, ‘Return of Talent’ schemes incentivising ‘qualified’ Latin Americans and Africans in Europe to ‘reverse brain drain’ back to their countries of origin to assist development (ICEM Monthly Dispatch 1979b, 3; Godfrey 1982b). European states also solicited ICEM to assist workers seeking to return after the oil crisis, including those who, Carlin noted, ‘continue to attempt to enter ... labour markets ... where they cannot possibly be absorbed’ (ICM 1986, 8). These moves could be reconciled with its mandate given that it was again moving migrants out of Europe.

ICEM/ICM subsequently also acted to lift what was coming to be perceived as an increasing asylum burden in Europe (Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly 1986, 3–4). The humanitarian and Cold War shifts of the late 1960s and early 1970s that it and UNHCR had helped facilitate now gave way to hostility toward their consequences. West Germany, for example, experienced a ‘rapid increase’ of asylum-seekers from the mid-1970s (Gatrell 2019, 205), numbering over 100,000 by 1980 (Hansen 2023, 35). Such growth bred suspicion that UNHCR allowed many who were not ‘genuine’ refugees to reach the continent (Loescher 2001, 12; USMG 1978b). ICEM/ICM, however, was able to respond quickly to its more limited membership by pivoting to removal. Its work included returning Chileans denied residency in Switzerland, during which it explicitly drew on the experience of the Return of Talent programme, and new Reintegration or Emigration of Asylum-Seekers in Belgium (REAB) and Germany (REAG) schemes (McCulloch 1987 and attachments).

REAG, an ICM fact sheet explained, began in 1979 as asylum claims in West Germany were increasingly ‘denied as being manifestly unfounded or abusive’ and the government sought to motivate their departure (McCulloch 1987, attachment on REAG, 1). Given its commitment to ‘free’ movement, ICM disclaimed involvement in ‘counselling’ asylum-seekers to accept an understanding that appeals were fruitless. This task was handled by local agencies, but the procedures were an integrated part of REAG. ICM would approve counselled acceptance as ‘voluntary’ before officials escorted returnees to airports (McCulloch 1987, attachment 2–3, annex 1 at 3). By the later 1980s, Carlin could argue that ‘[o]ne of the more positive measures available to governments confronted with this dilemma [of asylum-seekers] already exists in the form of ICM programmes for the[ir] voluntary return’ (ICM 1987, 2). While individual German states had once enthusiastically organised receptions of Indochina refugees (Taylor et al. 2021, 34), state leaders were, by 1982, pressuring the federal government to increase funding for ICEM to expand REAG (Späth 1982; Strauß 1982).

Moves to halt immigration to the Global North during the 1970s were ultimately stymied by family reunification laws (Hansen 2023, 9). A growing desire for economic migrants willing to work for suppressed wages in the wake of the economic crisis also discouraged restriction (Hansen 2023, 9, 11). In the context of a competitive economic environment that also fueled cultural anxieties, however, the political appeal of removing at least seemingly illegitimate asylum-seekers remained (Gatrell 2019, 198–200; OECD 1974, 4¹⁶).

The long 1970s and beyond: the Indochina crisis and the turn to returns

By the early 1980s, tensions between the previous decade’s humanitarian, geopolitical and restrictionist tendencies were coming to a head, helping to bring systematic repatriation to other parts of the world. Despite willingness to ‘internationalise’ Indochina’s crisis (Cosemans 2021) and perceptions of Indochina refugees benefitting from both anticommunist sentiment and ‘barely disguised racism’ relative to others (Gatrell 2019, 205, 211), resistance also grew to their resettlement. Arrivals in Asian host territories were double departures in 1978 (ICEM 1979, 1); in 1979, President Carter’s refugee coordinator estimated a maximum of 11,000 resettlement places available for the 500,000 Vietnamese in camps (ICEM Press Release 1979b, 1–2). Even as it accepted ‘responsibility’ for the regional discord that prompted their flight (Taylor et al. 2021, 17), ‘[r]acial problems as Indochina refugees congregated’ fostered concerns in France (US Embassy Paris 1979, 3); West Germany worried about ‘integration’ (German Government 1979).

The hesitancy prompted strains in Asia. Hong Kong's Governor described 'over-crowded boats' from Vietnam entering the 'over-populated' territory, 'as though you had 10 or 20 ... coming up the East River every day dropping anchor in front of [UN] headquarters', and pled that the colony's hard-won living standards would be 'eroded by this influx' (Maclehose 1979a). Thailand, also facing Cambodian overland arrivals, cried that it was 'drowning under a humanitarian ocean' (ICEM Press Release 1979b); ICEM reported resulting 'security, socio-economic, and political problems' (ICEM 1979, 4). '[O]verflowing' Malaysian transit centres caused 'grave anxiety' about 'the tremendous burden placed on the developing economy' (ICEM 1979, 3). On one Malaysian island, Ted Kennedy told the US Senate, 26,000 people crowded into '85 inhabited acres', facing 'subhuman conditions: shortages of food, water, medicines, and medical care, rampant sickness and disease, [and] unimaginable sanitation' (Congressional Record 1979, S467). Southeast Asian states pushed back asylum-seeker vessels (HKG 1983a, 5), causing 'countless numbers' to 'perish' (ICEM 1979, 2); some rejected those who were rescued from disasters at sea as well (Hartling 1981). Despite all experiencing difficulties, Asian hosts had to compete to be given priority for resettlement (USMG 1979, 2). Malaysia, seeking to highlight the seriousness of its position, suggested it would shoot inbound asylum-seekers (Maclehose 1979b, 9–10). Association of Southeast Asian Nations members protested that they had 'reached the limits of their endurance and decided they would not accept any new arrivals' (Taylor et al. 2021, 11).

The 1979 agreement brought renewed Western commitment and temporary relief in Asia but began breaking down quickly as reluctance re-emerged in countries like West Germany (Bundesministerium für Jugend, Familie und Gesundheit 1981). In particular, concerns began mounting that Vietnamese asylum-seekers, too, were motivated less by political persecution than escaping economic conditions (FCO 1983a). In his era, Director Haveman could hit back at such sentiment with Cold War rhetoric that the idea was an attempt to weaken Western resolve (ICEM Press Release 1962). Now, however, such concerns coincided with large numbers in resource-strained Southern hosts and concerns over migration in the North. It even undermined the political rationale for accepting Indochinese in the US (Adams 1983a), which adopted rules that would decrease its intake by 75–80% (HKG 1982a).

Hong Kong, praised by UNHCR's head for 'the exemplary humanitarian way in which [it] had kept its doors open to refugees' (HKG 1980, 1) had still not, by the early 1980s, 'refouled' one (HKG 1983b). Yet '[t]oo many [Vietnamese] northerners' in the colony, one UNHCR official put it, implied less chance that many had faced ethnic or political persecution than if they had been from the former South (Leeks 1983a). Hong Kong was, British diplomats assessed, 'required to treat arriving boat people as refugees' under the 1979 agreement, while 'unable to resettle them because others consider them to be economic migrants' (FCO 1983b). The pressure made it ripe, the Governor believed, for 'unrest' (HKG 1982b, 3). Still, Britain hesitated to accept Vietnamese itself (Hongaid 1983). With resettlement routes blocked, one insider claimed that UNHCR wanted Hong Kong to absorb more Vietnamese (Leeks 1983b). Another detected a 'widespread European view that Hong Kong was full of orientals and could take Vietnamese as much as Chinese' (Leeks 1983a) – indicating that views of where 'overpopulation' needed to be addressed had not entirely changed. In this context, emerging calls for 'regional solutions' (HKG 1983c) could be read as racialised forms of containment.

One international alternative attempted to provide a 'safe pathway' for Vietnamese emigration. The Orderly Departure Program (ODP) aimed for resettlement directly out of the country, bypassing overwhelmed Asian hosts (on ICEM/ICM's role see FCO 1987). In

participating, ICM exercised its flexible definition of 'refugees', whom it was allowed to assist anywhere and which could stretch to encompass economically motivated flight. Echoing Thomas, Carlin noted as the programme began that

[w]hile in the past ICEM has been very much involved in providing resettlement assistance to persons regarded as refugees in the traditional sense, today a considerable number of persons emigrating under ICEM auspices could, in practical terms, be regarded as legal migrants. (ICEM Monthly Dispatch 1980a, 1)

The ODP was limited, however, and did not stave off irregular arrivals in nearby territories (HKG 1982c, 2). While it permitted only authorised departures – a breach of the human right to leave (Cosemans 2021, 6) – there was reluctance to persuade Vietnam to enforce exit limitations in practice because of ongoing fidelity to that right (Long 1982). Another option, shifting asylum-seekers to offshore holding centres like one at Bataan, in the Philippines, confronted hosts' wariness about accepting those who could not be resettled (Adams 1983b).

Hong Kong's colonial government began to take matters into its own hands. In 1982, it debuted a 'closed camp' programme for Vietnamese, restricting 'contact with the general public' (HKG 1982d, 1–2) and separating family members (HKG 1983c, 2). Meant to deter Vietnamese arrivals, the policy came under fire in the West, where human rights advocacy persisted more than commitment to resettlement; UNHCR officials decried the appearance of 'too much barbed wire' (Leeks 1983c) and contrasted the carceral approach unfavourably with China's (South China Morning Post 1983). While UNHCR internally assessed that the camps were run 'humanely' (Lasan 1982), complaints included accusations that some internees were prohibited from crying (Williamson 1982).

A new alternative emerged at an international conference held in 1983 which mooted 'durable solutions' other than resettlement, including repatriation, as UK officials began coming around to voluntary returns of Vietnamese (Hongaid 1983, 2–3; South China Morning Post 1983). UNHCR endorsed voluntary repatriation worldwide in 1985 (Robson 2023, 228) as resettlement encountered resistance and camps grew expensive (Loescher 2001, 251). Hong Kong's government had, by that point, already raised the possibility of 'involuntary repatriation' (Jeafferson 1982, emphasis added). While Vietnam remained unwilling to receive returnees, whom it considered 'traitors', the UN High Commissioner noted that its position was changing well before the wind-down of Cold War tensions as it considered the potential to stave off brain drain and improve its image (UKMG 1983).

In this context, Hong Kong and UNHCR began discussing 'screening out' asylum-seekers determined not to be 'genuine' refugees (HKG 1983a, 4–5). But while UNHCR had begun assisting mostly self-motivated departures elsewhere (Loescher 2001, 252–255) and even motivated some by reducing aid, it remained committed to repatriation being 'voluntary' (Robson 2023, 228). States, however, increasingly advocated for involuntary repatriation; eventually, British officials, too, recognised that 'voluntary return of those boat people who ... have been identified as economic migrants rather than genuine refugees, will not alone be sufficient to match the sheer scale of the problem' (FCO 1989, 1–3). Malaysia threatened not just 'forcible return' but 'force' against Vietnam if it did not accept returnees (UK Embassy Kuala Lumpur 1988). By 1988, Vietnam had agreed to do so (FCO 1989, 1). A UN-sponsored Comprehensive Plan of Action endorsed voluntary repatriation, with ICM involvement – and potential alternatives (Purcell 1989, 'Repatriation' attachment, 1).

Vietnam's willingness to accept returnees may have ultimately been influenced in part by the breakdown of Cold War tensions (Loescher 2001, 260). Yet ICM/IOM's ability to step in was conditioned fully on neither the Cold War's denouement nor its simultaneous constitutional changes finally removing its Eurocentric restriction on assistance for 'migrants' (as suggested in Kreuder-Sonnen and Tantow 2023, 196). Pitching the organisation's involvement, Director James Purcell cited its experience, developed since the 1970s, with returns (Purcell 1989, 'Repatriation' attachment, 3). By the fall of communism, when it began repatriating Vietnamese workers from the Eastern bloc, its activity in the area was hardly new (FCO 1992a, 3).

Obstacles also persisted after 1989. For the US, returns to Vietnam remained politically sensitive ('but not, apparently [returns] to Mexico or Haiti', one British diplomat quipped, pointing to the wider trend) (FCO 1992b). Reliance on US funding therefore slowed, but did not stop, ICM/IOM involvement (UKMG 1989a). Amid persistent activism, judicial reviews of screening in Hong Kong also cast doubt on the procedure (HKG 1992). Another wrinkle was ICM/IOM's own *ostensible* commitment to voluntary returns. Yet Purcell (1990, 4–5) proposed techniques similar to those used by REAG, now involving ICM/IOM directly educating failed asylum-seekers about the impossibility of their position. An Australian ex-UNHCR official, proposing similar methods for Southeast Asia, saw them as 'enhanced counselling', a less than voluntary 'grey area ... tantamount to mandatory repatriation' (FCO 1990).

Purcell (1990, 3) went further, however, arguing that 'refugee concepts' of voluntary or involuntary repatriation should not apply to the 'screened out' at all; screening 'should constitute a sort of dividing line Those for whom the answer is "no" should immediately leave the "refugee" regime and enter into the "migration" regime'. Doing so would break the 'refugee mentality' among them (UKMG 1991, 3) and 'redirect the movement of people in this region toward the more normal and orderly immigration systems which prevail in most other parts of the world' and as part of which deportation would be less controversial (Purcell 1990, 6).

Now freed from constitutional restrictions on assisting non-European 'migrants', Purcell could also argue that 'ICM's broad mandate enables [it] to deal with persons ... determined *not* to be refugees The "screened out" could therefore be seen to fall within ICM's purview' (FCO 1989, 4). But given, as Thomas and Carlin had argued, that the organisation was able to assist any 'refugee', or treat any non-European 'migrant' as one, and given its lack of commitment to specific refugee rights, Purcell's new ability to use 'migration' terminology represented a mostly *rhetorical* emphasis. What it provided was an edge in competition with UNHCR; since the 'screened out' were 'not refugees' at all, Purcell argued, IOM should handle them instead (FCO 1991).

A more important consideration for that competition, however, may have been the sense that UNHCR was not up for the job. Orderly Return Program agreements between UNHCR and host states now involved 'mandatory' repatriation, but UNHCR's stricter 'voluntary' commitment meant they excluded the use of force. Hong Kong authorities, however, moved to compel some returns using sedatives (Robinson 2004, 330). UNHCR, British officials alleged, 'failed to achieve results in the repatriation programme'; its staff being 'temperamentally unsuited to the job of repatriating unwilling non-refugees' (Haswell 1991). They not only unfavourably contrasted UNHCR concern with 'protection' to Purcell's 'creativity ... moving in a helpful direction' (Bruce 1990; Wilson 1991, 2) but also noted IOM's experience elsewhere 'counselling' rejected 'Third World' asylum-seekers to return (UKMG 1989b). Purcell's

proposals for Hong Kong still met with mixed reactions as inertia favoured UNHCR (compare Haswell (1991) and Leeks (1991)), but, as the conclusion will suggest, ultimately found a broader reception.

Conclusion

Over the course of the long 1970s, ICEM and later ICM moved from a focus on European emigrants to refugees across the Global South as the former waned and support for a more global humanitarian politics grew. While this shift led to renewed commitment to the organisation, tensions mounted over members' divergent interests and questions about how to reconcile ICEM/ICM's foci on migration, its widening refugee work and growing restrictionism. The organisation eventually channelled this impasse into using both its 'refugee' and 'migration' competencies for the purpose of repatriating rejected asylum-seekers.

This shift is an important bridge to contemporary criticisms of the IOM and today's landscape of international refugee and migration institutions. When Britain discussed rejoining IOM in the 1990s, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) pointed to its 'carving out a role as the international organisation responsible for migrants determined not to be refugees', citing its work in Europe and proposals for Hong Kong, and speculating that it could assist with not just asylum-seekers, but 'irregular migrants to the UK' (Evans 1991, 3–4). This emphasis appealed in domestic quarters in ways that refugee work afield had not. 'As the problem of unjustified asylum seeking and illegal migration has become more widespread', a Home Office official subsequently wrote,

there has become a growing need for ... international mechanisms for dealing with the question of repatriation. This is not something with which UNHCR wishes to become involved and the IOM has emerged as the only organisation ready and able to address the problem. (Hellmuth 1992)

The savings involved in not needing to care for asylum-seekers was also, as an FCO evaluation put it, a 'selfish' but necessary case for membership (Dew 1991, 2).

Purcell pitched such ideas beyond the UK, invoking population expansion in the 'developing world' to note that '[t]he mass migration problem could only grow' and that '[i]t was important therefore that the European states solved the question of what to do with asylum seekers who had been screened out IOM's message', he continued, was 'that [asylum-seekers] should think long and hard before leaving' (FCO 1992c, 2). The widespread use of repatriation would, in other words, contain them through deterrence. By 1997, UNHCR assessed that 'a large proportion of the world's recent returnees have repatriated under some form of duress' – a process in which IOM played a key role (Dubnov and Robson 2025, 584) and which it even motivated as an 'illiberal' influence on states (Koch 2014, 910).

Today, techniques that the organisation first pursued in the 1970s are understood as part of 'Assisted Voluntary Return' programmes, which have attracted scepticism about their 'voluntariness' (Gauci 2023, 401). Returns have become 'central to the agency's identity' and critical for its budget (Koch 2014, 911–912), as well as a focus of criticisms (Georgi 2010). At the same time, competition from IOM has pulled UNHCR away from a focus on protection (Betts 2009). Yet the former's more overt involvement in returns may also help absolve the latter of closer association with coercion (Koch 2014, 917). Association with involuntary

return may also undercut IOM's own appeals to other bases of legitimacy, including 'humanitarian' forms of border control, anti-trafficking actions (Dini, Fineb, and Pécoud 2025, 1539–1540; Pécoud 2020, 12) and rights, as it has sought a broader role in migration governance and come to be associated with the UN as a partner organisation (Bradley 2025, 1690, 1694). Its success in serving or appealing to member states' appetites or interests, in other words, may now limit its ambitions to expand its remit beyond that role.

In illuminating the roots of repatriation and this potential impasse, this history underscores how the long 1970s were both not unlike and helped make our own time, and points to the significance of ICEM/ICM/IOM for and within its shifts. It demonstrates the growth in prominence of refugee and asylum designations *within* an institution built for 'migrants' and how refugee and asylum issues became entangled with broader migration controversies. In pointing to structures and circumstances that led to the present state of affairs, it might also help determine the conditions under which the rules and institutions impacting on refugees and migration could be upended again.

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Notes

1. Some scholars (e.g. Dubnov and Robson 2025) distinguish between 'return' and 'repatriation', especially due to the former's resonance in Israel/Palestine. This article, however, follows other scholars' and actors' use of both interchangeably.
2. Gatrell (2013) discusses the use of nearby host territories (225); Cosemans (2021) discusses maintaining refugees *in situ* and repatriation (13) and discusses the end of resettlement programmes and limitation of departures (generally); Robson (2023) discusses camps (195), the refugee definition (209) and containment generally (Ch. 9).
3. Venturas (2015) and Bradley (2023a) focus on early decades; Geiger and Pécoud (2020) and Bradley, Costello, and Sherwood (2023) are more centred on recent decades; while they discuss the organisation's history, they also concentrate on earlier decades in doing so and not the middle decades covered by this article.
4. IOM's institutional history (Ducasse-Rogier 2001) includes a discussion of the period covered by this article, but largely valorises the organisation.
5. Gatrell (2013) notes the use of involuntary repatriation after the Second World War (at 7) and in Algeria (244), suggesting continuity after the latter, but that the Cold War prevented use in Indochina (221). Chimni (2004, 53, 55–56) and Loescher (2001, 12–13) focus on thawing relations towards the very end of the Cold War and diminished political will for resettlement; Koch (2014, 914), points to UNHCR repatriation 'debates' beginning in 1990.
6. Gibney (2004) discusses themes as they relate to specific states (e.g. the energy crisis for Germany and the Cold War for the US); Hansen (2023) focuses more on the energy crisis than on geopolitics or humanitarianism.

7. Arts. 1(1) and 1(3) concern ICEM's understanding of and work for 'migrants' and 'refugees'; 2(b) concerns its relationship with free movement.
8. This was the case despite UNHCR sometimes also overstepping its own mandate (Cosemans 2021, 6).
9. Literature on the crisis has not sufficiently accounted for the organisation's role. Refugee histories have touched on but not centred it or covered the entire breadth of its operations. Cosemans' (2021) account, for example, does not continue past 1979, and Komar (2013) focuses on one specific resettlement programme.
10. While Bradley (2025) suggests this argument, that publication does not focus on the long 1970s or the specific logistical competencies developed then.
11. While Kreuder-Sonnen and Tantow argue (at 196) that the Gulf War was a 'critical juncture', this article situates IOM's 'evacuation' work then as part of a longer history. Some 'new' IOM functions during this period, such as providing support to migrants (204), were also not necessarily unprecedented.
12. For example, some UK records were classified; some German ones are inaccessible or were destroyed. The author attempted research in Malaysia but was refused access to potentially relevant materials.
13. Despite moves towards a 20-year declassification horizon, many British Foreign and Commonwealth Office files, for example, only became available more recently. See <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/preparation-for-transfer-to-the-national-archives-of-fco-annual-departmental-files>.
14. Per Maul (2012), new members used the ILO to press for their priorities and attack Global North states on political grounds.
15. The UK left ICEM in 1969 but became an observer in 1983.
16. The OECD report was sceptical that increased restriction was due to economic problems, as opposed to political ends including concerns about 'overpopulation' or 'foreign "control"'.

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