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Published online: 16 May 2023.

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# Through the Looking-Glass: The IOM Recasting the Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration Narrative at the UN and in West Africa

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**ABSTRACT**

The stated aim of the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) is to facilitate 'safe, orderly and regular migration'. Yet, plain meaning alone fails to reveal who is shaping this formative narrative. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has played a crucial role in the preparatory phase of the GCM and is coordinating its implementation. In this article, we shed light on two out of the IOM's global roles – a first one of coordinating the United Nations Network on Migration and the other role of organising the first International Migration Review Forum (IMRF) of the GCM. Hence, the IOM's institutional upgrade leads us to question to what extent the IOM has designed the GCM's narrative of 'safe, orderly and regular migration'. Through a non-systematic document analysis of UN and IOM reports and briefs, we find evidence that the IOM adjusts the meaning behind the 'safe, orderly and regular migration' depending on whether a global, respectively, regional mandate is at stake. To this end, we investigate the IOM's activities in West Africa where it faces an increasingly divided mission that lies at the intersection of its global and (trans-) regional roles. A closer look at how the IOM applies the narrative at global and West African levels reveals that it deliberately rearranges the order of the adjectives 'safe, orderly and regular' to produce different meanings for different policy purposes. Viewed strategically, we find the IOM generates such word combinations to either pursue its abovementioned multilevel strategy, or to affirm its new position among UN agencies. Hence, one and the same adjective deployed at the global and regional level amounts to a different meaning, with implications for policy attribution. In result, the IOM's strategy to recast the narrative of 'safe, regular and orderly migration' depending on whether it is fulfilling a regional or global role, ultimately leads to greater tension within the IOM as a whole.

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## Introduction

Global cooperation on international migration relies on the International Organisation on Migration (IOM). The IOM is responsible for monitoring states' progress in implementing the United Nations (UN) Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), while co-facilitating the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 10.7 of the UN Agenda 2030. Pursuant to the agreement concerning the relationship between the UN and the IOM (United Nations 2016) the IOM, in its GCM role, is to keep to 'non-normative' exercise of authority (Art. 2:3). However, because it has no reporting obligations towards the UN Secretary-General nor vis-à-vis other UN agencies (Arts. 3, 5 IOM Agreement 2016) the IOM holds unparalleled agenda-setting powers (Piper and Foley 2021). As a consequence, we ascribe an influence to the IOM for shaping the 'safe, orderly and regular migration' narrative. In addition, the different roles held by the IOM prior to, during and post-negotiations of the GCM, have shifted, with a first one of 'servicing' the multistakeholder consultations making place to a coordinator function for the UN Network on Migration by virtue of its appointment as 'UN lead agency on migration'. In executing both roles, the IOM left its imprint on how the GCM is cast and the way in which it is to be implemented by states and non-state actors (Rother 2020).

While much has been written about the paradigm shift in international migration law and policy with the advent of the GCM (Guild, Grant, and Groenendijk 2017; Thouez 2019), less is known about the origins of the narrative of 'safe, regular and orderly migration', as in who shaped the wording and why (Oelgemöller and Allinson 2020, Ansems de Vries and Weatherhead 2021). Hence, a first step to uncover the determinants and the meanings of this slogan and its implications for policy choice, is to turn to the role of narratives in international cooperation and migration studies, which implies to learn about text analysis, whereby we limit the former to qualitative text interpretation.

Critical geography, law, political and sociological science each use a variation of textual analysis for understanding 'meaning' and 'sentiment shift' in international migrations (Boswell, Geddes, and Scholten 2011; Thorvaldsdottir and Patz 2021). Among the various connotating determinants shaping the plain meaning of language use, figure the interests of the actors concerned (Desmond 2020; Pécoud 2021), the scope of the mandate, the structure of the organisation's governance (de-centralised, multi-level, Triandafyllidou 2022), donor and institutional pressure (Green and Pécoud 2022), as well as external events, including crisis and relief, operational and logistical difficulties in the field (Thorvaldsdottir and Patz 2021).

In this article, we take one step further and ask how the IOM has influenced, implemented and, eventually, transformed the narrative and with what

consequences for the orientation of policy measures. To answer the second part of this question, we ask how the IOM's new tasks as a UN agency, might have impacted on its regional role in West Africa, both with regard to the intra-African projects and the IOM's mandates to manage EU – Africa migration away from and back to Africa. Our research and document analysis is furthermore informed by our hypothesis of the 'safe, regular and orderly' narrative bearing clearly, the IOM's signature, since this composition closely mirrors the SDG target 10.7 of the Agenda 2030, which, incidentally, is co-monitored by the IOM together with the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA).

The aim of the GCM is to improve migration management, so that migrants can move in a safe, orderly and regular way between countries, in accordance with the 17 SDGs under the UN Agenda 2030 (GCM Objective 23). States opted for a non-legally binding format to ensure the widest possible thematic scope ('comprehensive approach', paragraph 11 GCM) or, to quote Newland (2019), 'something for everyone to like and for everyone to dislike'.

Yet the wide range of policy areas covered in the GCM's 23 objectives makes it equally important for the GCM to develop a 'common understanding' (paras 9 and 10) about how to govern international migration (Van Riemsdijk and Panizzon 2022). According to Pécoud (2021), the 'safe, orderly and regular' terminology is one way by which the GCM drafters sought to unify the diverging interests of states regarding migration. Once states found a 'unity of purpose' (paras. 9 and 13, GCM) and had agreed on a set of 'common understandings' (para. 10 GCM), the GCM was able to deliver a global story-line about international migration (Pécoud 2021; Thouez 2019) with the IOM joining as the 'global lead agency on migration'.

The IOM has played a key role in designing the semantic architecture of the 'safe, orderly and regular migration' narrative, even though, or perhaps because, it has no legislative powers, but only 'non-normative powers' (IOM-UN Agreement, Piper and Foley 2021; Rother 2020). Since the IOM not only acts on a global level but pursues further mandates on regional and national levels, we further ask if there are any nuances to that narrative that depend upon whether the IOM wears its global UN hat or acts on a regional level as an expert and co-facilitator for West Africa, where it pursues the interests of donor-driven projects.

West Africa has been chosen as a focus of this study for several reasons: firstly, the region is characterised by high mobility. Secondly, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) already has an intra-regional mobility framework in place. Thirdly, the European Union (EU) interferes intensively through different policy instruments, including the EU Trust Fund for Africa, EU readmission agreements, EU mobility partnerships and the Common Agenda on Migration and Mobility. At times the EU is assisted by the IOM offices

in European states or depending on the migration issue at stake, the IOM office for Central and West Africa. Depending on the actors involved and the scope of their respective programmes, the geopolitics of West Africa shift to include or exclude certain countries. For example, the scope of the IOM's 'regional mission', which merges 'West and Central Africa', includes 21 countries, ranging from the East to South to West Africa, Cape Verde, Mauretania, Mali, Niger, Chad, Central African Republic, Republic of the Congo, Gabon, Sao Tome and Principe.[1] Moreover, the IOM also operates on a national level via its country offices in West African states, where its activities include migration management, crisis response and international cooperation and partnerships, including for the implementation of the GCM (IOM 2020).

## Research Methodology

This article is based on the literature on narratives in migration studies and adds to its subset on interpreting the meaning of international legal and policy texts adopted by UN bodies about cross-border migrations. Our study's objective is to track the shifting role of the IOM in UN global, and regional cooperation on migration (Lavenex and Piper 2021; Piper and Foley 2021; Rother 2020) in view to better understand the financial and policy implications for states and migrants. To that end, we draw on the notion of global migration governance (Caponio and Jones-Correa 2017; Cardwell 2016) as our analytical frame for our desk research into the IOM's evolving global, regional and local roles (Rother 2020; Triandafyllidou 2022). In so doing we contribute to the evolving body of research analysing reporting by international organisations (Campillo Carrete and Gasper 2011; Green and Pécoud 2022; Thorvaldsdottir and Patz 2021). Research on narratives lies at the intersection of different disciplines, e.g. international administrative science, law and sociology. Hence, methodologies vary and mix and include quantitative and qualitative methods. Adopting a socio-legal analysis, we screen UN and IOM documentation for the 'safe, regular and orderly' terminology. Starting in 2016 with the UN Special Adviser and the 2017 UN Special Representative reports, the two, GCM zero drafts and three revisions, the final draft and its negotiated outcome follow, with the UN Secretary-General's first bi-annual reporting on the GCM (UN 2021) and the International Migration Review Forum (IMRF) Progress Declaration of May 2022 marking an end point. Next, we analyse the IOM global strategy, regional strategy and issue briefs, in particular, the IOM regional strategy for West and Central Africa. Methodologically, we undertake a qualitative content analysis for each of the adjectives – safe, orderly and regular. We identify the composition in which the respective adjective appears: triadic, dyadic or self-standing, and in what relationship to which policy

measures. Next we systematically cross-compare UN and IOM documents in which the narrative appears, to track nuances brought to the narrative, also in following states' reports filed for the first IMRF.

## Roles of the Narratives in International Migration Studies

The literature on narratives in migration studies is complex and wide-ranging. Narratives are constructed on different scales and by different actors (Sahin-Mentucek 2020) and the involvement of a variety of actors in their development leads to complex, competing and complementary narratives (Wee, Vanyoro, and Jinnah 2018). Moreover, narratives are not static, but demonstrate a spectrum of nuances with respect to the dominant ideologies, while some even emerge as counter-narratives over time (Sahin-Mentucek 2020). According to Dennison (2021), narratives are described in the literature as value-based statements that serve a strategic purpose of clarification (uncertainty). In addition, a narrative can serve the purpose of positioning (among international organisations), as Piper and Foley (2021), Green and Pécoud (2022) show for the ILO, UNHCR and the IOM, as well as raise attention to a (humanitarian, climate-induced) crisis (Thorvaldsdottir and Patz 2021). More generally, narratives evoke imagery in a recipient, who ideally aligns with the interests represented and thus, 'maintains consonance' and ideally, becomes 'predisposed to the agreement' (Dennison 2021).

Scholarship on narratives in migration encompasses 'framing' (Strange and Oliveira Martins 2019) and 'meaning-making' (Amelina 2020; Boswell, Geddes, and Scholten 2011). It shares with governance theory, the aspiration of agreeing on a common understanding of how to govern migration (Boswell, Geddes, and Scholten 2011; Campillo Carrete and Gasper 2011; Pécoud 2021). Governance theory looks at the function of narrative and investigates its programmatic, explanatory attributes, beyond merely declaratory or rhetorical effects. Therefore, we draw on Scholten and Penninx (2016) (see quotation below) to test our case-study. In brief, we ask if and how the IOM's different socio-spatial engagements (global UN-level and regional level in West Africa) have led to a degree of convergence within the 'safe, orderly and regular' narrative. Increasingly, discourse analysis in migration studies follows up and complexifies the scope and object of analysis, by dissecting meaning at the *micro-meso* and *macro* levels of policy making. With the increased externalisation of migration policy following 9/11, migration management became linked to theories of governance (Cardwell 2016) and the *macro*-level discourse analysis in migration studies joined up with international relations theory about multilevel migration governance (Caponio and Jones-Correa 2017). Migration scholars investigating the meaning of power and authority exercised

by IOs active in migration, for example the Global Forum on Migration and Development (Rother 2020) and the IOM (Campillo Carrete and Gasper 2011; Guild, Grant, and Groenendijk 2017; Kraly and Hovy 2020; Lavenex and Piper 2021), draw on multilevel governance.

> [M]ultilevel governance refers to interaction and joint coordination of relations between the various levels of government without clear dominance of one level. . . . In terms of policy frames, the multilevel governance type is likely to engender some convergence between policy frames at different levels. . . (Scholten and Penninx 2016, 94)

Boswell, Geddes, and Scholten (2011) identified some narratives within 'migration as foreign policy', whereas D'Amato and Lucarelli (2019), discuss in detail how a narrative constructed by states, IOs and civil society organisations (CSOs) can be used to recount, codify, quantify, or even to monetise the cross-border phenomenon of human mobility (Wee, Vanyoro, and Jinnah 2018).

## Narratives as a Prerequisite for the Intergovernmental 'Compacting' of State Practice

According to Pécoud (2021), the intention why international cooperation 'narrates' migration management within the frameworks of the Global Compacts for Migration and on Refugees, is one of 'finding common denominators'. Without the consensus to be bound of a multilateral agreement, states must at least agree on a common storyline to be united enough in their enterprise of bringing an issue to the global negotiating table and to share responsibility at the UN. Such pre-legal common understandings, as in the Global Compact for Migration, can, in Peters' view (Peters 2011) become the first step towards a legally binding version. Conversely, the Compacts may just also express a deliberate low-key ambition to simply keep it 'soft' law, so as to offer more states and non-state actors an opportunity to identify and familiarise with the rules' normative content, before it might or not become a legally binding rule (Panizzon, Vitiello, and Molnár 2022). Van Riemsdijk, Marchand, and Heins (2021) congrue with the view of the GCM as an 'assemblage' of the different visions and aspirations held around the same 'multidimensional reality of international migrations' (GCM para. 15, Objectives 19, 23), without a clear roadmap towards a binding solution guiding the process. In result, the GCM produces a rather 'kaleidoscopic vision' of international migration law (Chetail 2020, 254), which is deliberately kept vague, so that 'anyone can agree, or disagree' (Newland 2019). The open formulations of the 23 commitments under the GCM can moreover be adjusted to a particular national policy choice (e.g. border management, return, legal pathways, vulnerability). Just a few guiding principles (paras. 14–15 GCM) hold the loose framework together. From such a viewpoint, no

priority is attributed to a single objective (Guild, Grant, and Groenendijk 2017). Moreover, the work plans, actions and benchmarks are sufficiently vague for gap-filling to remain possible (Ferris and Martin 2019), unless there is wording restating a legally binding outcome, which would require to agree on a single meaning (Vitiello 2022).

With 68% of states considering irregular migration a major concern (UN DESA 2023), the GCM's compromise is to entrust the IOM/UN with the safekeeping of state sovereignty over borders, territory and admission. This is encapsulated in the narrative of 'safe, orderly and regular' migration, as prominently stated in the full title of the GCM and repeated in the body of text, to encourage host states to diversify and expand on pathways for regular entry and admission (Koslowski 2019). In addition, the wording of the GCM of 2018 is aligned to the narrative of UN Agenda 2030, which has also used the 'orderly, safe, regular and responsible' narrative in relation to migration. The GCM underscores, albeit somewhat indirectly, attention to the root causes driving migration (Guild 2020).

Our word search for the individual adjectives composing the narrative, demonstrates how narratives become essential for non-legally binding frameworks – such as the GCM. As long as states have not (yet) been able to consent to a legally binding norm, mobilising partners around a common notion is a precondition if the 'international cooperation framework' is to have any impact. Hence, the drive to settle around a common 'vision' (GCM/Agenda 2030) is a logical first step for the GCM, which might initiate, legally binding agreements (Van Riemsdijk and Panizzon 2022).

Thus, GCM drafters have deliberately chosen the 'common language', which is aimed first and foremost to mobilise a multi-actor and multilevel governance model (Cardwell 2016) clustered around a 'comprehensive' approach to migration, which commits governments to mainstream migration into other areas of foreign and domestic policy, including convergence with refugee protection, social inclusion, health (Guild, Allinson, and Busuttil 2022; Vitiello 2022). Consequently, the GCM co-creates a 'common understanding', or 'common purpose' in connection with 'vulnerabilities' and with 'shared responsibilities', a mandate it would share with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), but no 'common' purpose is found to be associated with the entire narrative of 'safe, orderly and regular' (Oelgemöller and Allinson 2020). Instead, the word choice of a 'common' vision refers to issues of 'cooperation' and 'sustainable development' (Objectives 19, 23). These imply 'unity of purpose', 'international efforts' and 'shared responsibility' (paras. 9, 10, 11 GCM) and are thus distinct from the 'sovereignty-related' issues, like border management, return, readmission,

detention and visa pathways, which 'safe, orderly and regular' reads as a distinct nod towards (Ansems de Vries and Weatherhead 2021).

However, in another reference, Objective 23 of the GCM calls for the GCM and the Agenda to be 'concordant (in) their mutually referential framework' (Desmond 2020, 225). This reference reads as a nod towards the call in SDG 10.7 for 'orderly, regular, safe and responsible' migration management, which shall be monitored by the IOM Migration Governance Framework (MiGOF). Hence, this cascade of references reveals, how obviously shaping the GCM and IOM narratives, is the IOM (International Organization for Migration 2017).

## The IOM and the Multiplication of Its 'Global' Roles: New Narrative?

As already mentioned, the IOM has performed a wide range of roles and mandates at the global level even prior to the advent of the Compacts (Robinson 2018) as e.g. with its 'flagship publication, the World Migration Report (WMR), which first appeared in 2000 and has appeared every two or three years since then' (Campillo Carrete and Gasper 2011). In 2016, when the two Global Compacts were under consultation, Karen Abuzayd, UN Special Adviser foresaw new global roles for the IOM and discussed the benefits of bringing the IOM closer to the UN system[2]:

> As regards migrants, it looks at bringing the International Organization of Migration (IOM) into a closer relationship with the United Nations so we have, within the UN system, a go-to place. That will help a lot in focusing [our work] and allowing the IOM to work around the world with the United Nations, as well.

In this section we describe the multiple roles the IOM has held. We argue that the most recent accumulation of roles empowered the IOM to become the co-designer of the 'safe, orderly and regular migration' narrative. Section two examines – depending on the policy measure at stake – which subcontext of a particular term is deployed. For example, 'safe' in terms of border management means something different from 'safe' as it applies to information about 'unsafe migration' (Objective 3), availability of 'safe' legal pathways (Objective 5), the 'safe access to basic services' (Objective 15), 'safe remittances transfer' (Objective 20) or 'safe and dignified returns' (Objective 21).

Following its upgrading on 25 July 2016 by UN Resolution 70/269 to a 'related UN organisation', the IOM took on a decisive role in organising the 'preparatory process' that led to negotiating and adopting the GCM on 19 December 2018. Its work included 'servicing the negotiations' (para. 15), inputting to the two zero drafts and their three revisions (para. 26) and the final draft of 13 July 2018, which preceded the intergovernmentally agreed and negotiated outcome (19 December 2018). Since then, the IOM has been acting as the 'network coordinator' for the UN Network on Migration (para. 45 GCM

and Resolution 73/195) and assists the UN Secretariat with the IMRF.[3] It is in those functions that the IOM publishes the IOM Issue Briefs to track the progress in the implementation of the GCM. The briefs, which are intended to reach the diverse stakeholders, provide guidance which makes explicit the IOM's role in developing, shaping and disseminating migration policies, including through the narrative of 'safe, orderly and regular migration' (Kraly and Hovy 2020):

> The brief draws on the extensive policy and operational experience IOM has acquired working around the world in close cooperation with States partner agencies, civil society, the private sector, academia as well as migrants themselves, and presents insights and ways forward to support the implementation of the Secretary-General's recommendations (IOM 2022g, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d).[4]

The reference to close cooperation with a variety of stakeholders can also be interpreted as a claim for legitimacy of the outcome presented, a finding which Thorvaldsdottir and Patz (2021) have made in relation to the IOM annual reports. The Issue Briefs, together with the international migration dialogues, can be understood as the result of the navigation process between multi-actor and multi-spatial narratives (Sahin-Mentucek 2020).

In addition to being the lead organisation in implementing the GCM, the IOM has another global role, which is to co-implement SDG 10.7.2 of the Agenda 2030 (Rother 2020). It shares this mandate with the UN DESA) (Lavenex 2018). For this mandate it developed the MiGOF, the Migration Governance Indicators and the Migration Crisis Operation Framework (MCOF) (IOM 2018, 76). The MiGOF and MCOF were instrumental in shaping the GCM. Once the GCM was endorsed, the IOM graduated from a specialised agency, assisting the UN Secretary-General in the multistakeholder consultations preceding the GCM state-led negotiations, to become the 'global lead agency on migration', which coordinates the UN Network on Migration and acts as the chair of the Migration Multi-Partner Trust Fund. The UN-IOM Agreement of 2016 establishing the IOM as global lead agency on migration lists the mandates for the global role of the IOM as: inter alia 'human mobility, protection of migrants, operational activities related to migrants, which include return and resettlement and mainstreaming migration into development plans'. As a monopolist in monitoring state's progress in the GCM, the IOM has uncontested discretion to monitor the GCM's progress, even though, as a 'non-normative' actor it may not propose legally binding content (Art. 2:3 Agreement on the UN-IOM Relationship). At the same time, the UN-IOM Agreement leaves the IOM full powers to continue to pursue its projectised work at the regional and local levels with states, a situation which is criticised by scholars as leading to conflicts of interests (Guild 2020; Piper and Foley 2021; Rother 2020). Criticism is also voiced by civil society actors since the GCM delivers no instruction, for how civil society

could co-align with states to implement the commitments, such that the narrative has become the key area of contention (Farahat and Bast 2022). By accumulating roles at the global level over the past decade, the IOM is in a position where it can choose to impart its own meaning to the narrative within the different UN forums it co-coordinates (UN Network on Migration, Agenda 2030) and thereby it can influence the stakeholders sitting in those UN fora. Because of its powerful role as the 'global lead agency on migration' (Art. 2:2 Agreement on the UN-IOM Relationship), it can adapt the narrative to suit its particular role or task. Its enhanced role comes with greater responsibility, as the IOM was asked to sit on two sides of the table, to help other members of the UN family get organised within the network, as well as working closely with the UN Secretary-General. Since the UN requires the IOM to act 'non-normatively' (Art. 2:3 Agreement), the closest the IOM can come to being a legislating entity on global migration is by shaping narratives (Rother 2020). In this context, it remains unclear who was the architect behind the 'safe, orderly and regular' narrative: the UN Secretary-General, the IOM or a state? To Ansems de Vries and Weatherhead (2021), the GCM reads like a strategic document, which aligns to the IOM's interests. Therefore, the IOM is neither the neutral facilitator of the GCM (Guild, Grant, and Groenendijk 2017) nor the 'non-normative' agent, which the UN-IOM Agreement of 2016 intends the IOM to be, since at the same time, the IOM may continue to serve its traditional roles as a projectised organisation (Piper and Foley 2021). Nothing prevents the IOM from continuing to pursue its regional and local mandates.[5] In this role, it is constantly seeking out new projects and donors from governments and is carefully navigating between the interests of current and potential project partners.

Thus, as we will later show with the example of the West African regional level, the IOM has become pivotal for conducting projects within EU-IOM joint initiatives. These include the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) and the (EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration 2016). The IOM is also involved in navigating between the interests of the EU, West African governments and its own interests in enhancing and defending its role on the global, regional and national levels (EU-IOM undated).

Strange and Oliveira Martins (2019) have developed a framing analysis for EU – Africa relations, to examine the 'equality and partnership' discourse in EU – Africa cooperation. Our study contributes to this research by critically examining the role of the IOM as the entity shaping and designing certain narratives in EU – Africa relations, in a collaborative process with the EU, NGOs and the UN, with respect to legal pathways, migrant return and data collection.

Taking into account the IOM's multiple roles on the global and regional level, we infer that the 'safe, orderly and regular' narrative has been orchestrated by the IOM acting in its roles of assistant to the UN Secretary-General,

coordinator of the UN Network on Migration and organiser of the International Dialogues on Migration. In this sense, it has shaped the narrative together with Member States, which it represents in each of these processes, but with little input by non-state actors given the closed-shop quality of the UN Network (Rother 2020).

In the following sections, we take a closer look at the policy areas where the narrative plays out and investigate whether the IOM deploys any counter-narratives to the safe, regular and orderly narrative. We identify which alternative combinations or even split-offs are developed at the different levels of its activities, including in its global roles as implementor of the GCM and target 10.7 of the SDGs, as well as in its regional role as an IO in West Africa.

## Analysing 'Safe, Orderly and Regular' Across IOM and UN Documents

Although the narrative of 'safe, orderly and regular migration' is prominent in the title of the GCM, there is no UN-approved definition that explains the meanings of these words, at least not in a UN resolution. For this reason, we decided to analyse IOM documents to grasp its understanding of the narrative. More specifically, we cross-check the documents to find out whether the IOM or states shifted the sequence of the three adjectives – e.g. by eliminating and/or replacing a certain adjective across time, e.g. from the GCM multistakeholder consultations to the negotiations, to the final draft and space (UN, West Africa) (see Table 1 below).

### Safe

In *Migration and the Agenda 2030* (IOM 2018), the IOM refrains from defining 'safe' migration. It does, however, raise awareness of the fact that 'safe migration' is not a 'static' concept and should encompass all stages of the migration process. Migrants can find themselves in an unsafe situation during or after having migrated through regular channels; 'conversely, a migrant can be in a situation both safe and irregular' (IOM2018:28).

In the pre-negotiations phase, the UN Special Adviser to the Secretary-General, Ms Karen Abuzayd, who drafted the 2016 UN report *In safety and dignity: addressing large movements of refugees and migrants* for the UN Leaders' Summit (Thouez 2019), used the term 'safety' exclusively from the migrants' perspective. Consequently, she drew attention to unsafe and dangerous passages and journeys, where threats to life, health and welfare emanate from criminal networks, violence and exploitation by smugglers and traffickers, but can encompass unsafe migrant labour due to exploitation (Cholewinski 2020). To

Koslowski (2019) the narrative of 'safe' encapsulates the very compromise upon which the GCM is built, one of providing states' wiggle room to secure their borders against irregular/risky migration, while in exchange offering 'safe' legal pathways for regular labour mobility to sending countries. The word choice is criticised for translating an Eurocentric understanding of international migration, which is dominated by security concerns (Zardo 2022; see also Campillo Carrete et Gasper 2011 for word choices in the IOM WMR and Green and Pécoud 2021 for the IOM and the UNHCR).

Post-negotiations, the UN SRSG Report of 2021 and the IMRF Progress Declaration of 2022, show that 'safe' includes a panoply of issues: smuggling and trafficking, migrants in vulnerable situations and, post-COVID-19 pandemic, 'safe access to basic services' (including safe access to justice and transfer of remittances as well as to vaccination, testing and screening). However, the most frequent reference to 'safe' in this progress report is made in relation to 'safe and dignified' returns.

Hence, safety, even in the absence of a 'common definition', comes in the shape of a binary concept: firstly, it concerns a host country's 'public safety' and sovereignty over its territory and borders. Thus, the first subcontext calls for keeping migrants 'well-informed' about the risks of migrating, to help ensure that their journeys are 'planned' and 'consensual' and 'predictable'. More generally, these three adjectives, which form the subcontext of 'safe' call to keep *receiving countries* 'safe' from the risk of irregular entries into their territories (para. 11 GCM, Guild 2020, 244; 2017:1779). Whereas the second subcontext is about keeping *migrants* safe from trafficking/smuggling, bodily and psychological harm along the route and in the host country. It is and being 'concerned about the migrants' wellbeing' and as such relates to the protection of migrants and refugees in vulnerable situations (Objective 7 GCM). This calls for humanitarian action and showcases the IOM's expanding ambition to share the field with UNHCR (Thorvaldsdottir and Patz (2021).

### *Regular*

When it comes to 'regular' migration, the IOM definition reads: 'migration that occurs through recognised authorised channels' (IOM 2018, 28), including not only the border crossing, but also the stay in the destination country. However, such a definition is neither found in the GCM nor in the Agenda 2030, meaning that there is no explicit consent by states to a 'default' meaning for 'regular'. However, in the GCM, reference to 'regular' migration is found with respect to information (Objective 3), migrant status (Objective 7), regular pathways (Objective 5), regular cross-border movement (Objective 11), regular exchange by authorities on detention (Objective 13), basic access to services more comprehensive for regular migrants (Objective 16), remittances

transfer (Objective 20) and global partnerships (Objective 23). Furthermore, 'regular' is found in the context of 'expanding and diversifying "regular" pathways', as well as with respect to improvements to enable non-discriminatory access to essential services for 'non-regular' migrants, regardless of legal status (Guild 2020; Majcher 2022). In the third and fourth progress reports, as well as in the second report on the GCM, we see that 'regular' as well as 'irregular' is associated on the one hand with the way migration/mobility takes place, and on the other hand with migrants' status or situation in transit or destination countries. For instance, the progress report calls for 'facilitating (...) [migrant's] access to regular status, the formal economy, labour market and basic services in line with national legislation' (IOM 2022d, para. 21). However, the report also states that the availability and flexibility of pathways for regular migration remains limited in many cases (para. 24). Furthermore, '*ir*regular' is associated with vulnerability (para. 33), and measures should be taken to avoid migrants falling into 'irregular status', by halting forced returns and by establishing cross-border coordination mechanisms to facilitate safe and dignified voluntary returns. In the part of the text concerning regularising migrants in irregular situations (para. 59), the report also stresses the importance of enhancing pathways for 'safe, orderly and regular migration' to reduce the incidence of smuggling of migrants (para. 33).

### *Orderly*

Looking at 'orderly' migration, the IOM strategy paper of 2017 was already proposing that it should take the lead as the global organisation for the management of migration. Its mission statement asserted that: the 'primary goal is to facilitate the *orderly and humane* management of international migration' (italics added), which means 'to enhance the humane and orderly management of migration and the effective respect for the human rights of migrants *in accordance with international law*' (italics added). The IOM's (2007) strategy clarifies that 'orderly' means establishing migration policies and laws 'in accordance' with human rights and international law. Thus, the IOM implements the '*orderly and humane* management of migration' (our italics), by 'offer(ing) expert advice, research, technical cooperation and operational assistance to states, intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations and other stakeholders' (IOM Council Resolution no. 1150, 2007). Campillo Carrete and Gasper (2011, 5) drawing on the IOM's WMR of 2008, however, criticise the IOM that the human rights aspects remain subordinated and 'economic priorities based on market power dominate'. Whereas the GCM remains silent as to what 'orderly' might mean, the preceding UN Special Adviser's Report (UN 2016) links the term to orderly departures, while the 2017 UN Special Representative's (SRSG) Report 'making migration

work for all' (UN 2017) associates 'orderly' to the contrary with '*(r)eturn, readmission and reintegration* (instead of departure). In that report, 'orderly returns' are deemed 'essential elements of a *well-ordered* migration system' (para. 38) (italics added). Read together with the report's heading 'making migration work for all', the subcontext behind 'orderly' reveals a demand to give a certain consideration to host state concerns over overstays and irregular migration. At the same time, however, the report's indiscriminate use of 'orderly migration' (UN 2017) for almost any type of policy measure, whether it is opening of legal pathways, returns, inclusion and integration, explains that the adjective 'orderly' accumulates the meanings of 'safe, regular, sustainable' or others and becomes a buzzword used to advertise how states work together to expand legal pathways, to ensure safe returns and to promote inclusion and integration:

> *Orderly migration* depends on *providing expanded pathways* for legal entry, both for migrants fleeing crisis situations and for those seeking work abroad... After arrival, States can promote an *orderly process of migration* by fostering the *inclusion and integration* of migrants within host societies ... For migrants who choose not to stay in the host country or who lack the authorization to do so, an orderly process of migration also requires effective mechanisms for their *safe and timely return and reintegration.*

When looking at the literature, we found Majcher and Grange (2020:288) to confirm that 'orderly' is used predominantly with respect to return in the GCM, while Cholewinski (2020, 306) relates 'orderly' to lawful migration related to employment and thus to the 'mainstay of migration and mobility'.

In the final text of the GCM, the word 'orderly' lost its significance, either because it was deleted or because it was replaced by the terms 'regular' and 'safe', which would eventually swallow up those measures and policies, which had been denoted by 'orderly'. It seems that 'safe' replaces 'orderly' with respect to return and reintegration ('safe and dignified return', Objective 21) and the 'orderly process of migration' is replaced by integration and inclusion needing to be 'safe' (Objective 16). In sum, 'regular' was becoming a catch-all term, replacing 'orderly' in relation to lawful entry, stay and return. For example, Objective 5 calls for 'regular pathways' to be expanded and established and Objective 11 refers to 'regular cross-border movements'. The drafters' penchant to merge into a single adjective different meanings seems to be a practice which continues unabridged from the 2017 report (UN 2017) to the GCM final draft. The risk that a single adjective accumulates the meaning of another adjective appears in orderly departure, which is not the same as orderly return or orderly movement through legal pathways. This trend for one adjective to dissolve into another such that two or three concepts fuse into a hotchpotch of diverging subcontexts is perhaps what Van

Riemsdijk, Marchand, and Heins (2021) relate to as 'assemblage', meaning an uncharted mélange, where no actor or interest superimposes itself over another in the GCM.

Yet, this indiscriminate packaging of practices and policies into a single semantic unit, as in the adjective 'orderly' (or later on, 'safe') (Düvell 2012:424), leads to a blurring of the meanings and the subcontexts, which tempts the IOM commissioned by powerful states, into creating new conditionalities between orderly/safe (forced) returns and expanding and diversifying on legal pathways (Info migrants 2022).

So as to explain why the GCM final text got lost of the term 'orderly', we first compare to the frequency and weight that IOM documents, including the mission statement (IOM 2017) attribute to 'orderly'. We also highlight how SDG 10.7 positions 'orderly' to prime 'safe' and 'regular'. Hence, we infer that during the state-led negotiations leading to the GCM final draft, the IOM might have been outvoted over the use of 'orderly'. Oelgemöller and Allinson (2020) were able to show that throughout the Revised and Zero drafts of the GCM, 'safe' migration as a concept is mentioned with increasing frequency. Their finding corroborates our suggestion that 'orderly', faded because it failed to address the responsibility to protect and respect migrants' lives and health, two human rights, which in the aftermath of disastrous at-sea-crossings and the Syrian war, states had elevated to the UN level. In this sense, the safety of migrants surpassed the desire to better manage 'orderly' movements abroad and for return.

## Attributing Subcontext to 'Safe, Regular and Orderly Migration': Actors and Policy Levels

The narrative offers more than a compilation of words and plain meanings; underlying its terminology are subcontexts and counter-narratives shaped by different actors and shifting across time. We congrue with Thorvaldsdottir and Patz (2021) that the IOM might have been at the forefront of re-casting time and again the narrative, starting out with the 2017–2018 pre-negotiations phase of consulting with stakeholders and overseeing the states' submissions to the International Migration Review Forum in 2022. At the same time, the narrative condenses the context in which policy measures are initiated to implement the GCM at global, regional and local levels and their cross-scalar interplay. Hence, the way international migrations are narrated finds its way into policy measures endorsed by states in view to fulfil their commitments under the GCM and be reviewed successfully by the UN. With its 'management' approach to migration, the IOM reconciles various stakeholders' positions on migration. This is reflected in the IOM Issue Brief *Promoting Safe and Regular Migration* (IOM 2022h). Here, the IOM refers to 'good migration governance', of which 'right-based regular migration

pathways' are considered to 'form a crucial part' (IOM 2022h). In other words, 'good governance' is closely linked to 'right-based' and 'regular pathways' as well as to 'safety':

> *Regular* pathways contribute to making *migration safe* by reducing the need of migrants to resort to unsafe *and irregular migration* pathways that pose great *risk* to their lives, particularly in times of crisis (IOM 2022h) (our italics).

The two contrasting narratives of 'regular-safe-migration' and 'irregular-risk-migration' can be found in numerous IOM documents, in policy papers and in academic scholarship (Guild 2020; Guild, Grant, and Groenendijk 2017), as well as in the policy programmes of IOs and NGOs (see below). Their relevance for the GCM is demonstrated by the fact that two out of four Issue Briefs (IOM Issue Brief 2022h, 2022f) reflect these dominant narratives. Of these two, one highlights the positive perception of migration in utilitarian terms as an economic activity to be 'kept safe' from trafficking/smuggling and other risks (Amelina 2020, 5). It also addresses the promotion of safe and regular migration (IOM Issue Brief 2022h) by linking it to the fight against unlawful migration (Guild 2020; Martín Díaz and Aris Escarcena 2019). The other Issue Brief highlights the negative aspects of migration and focuses on preventing the loss of life, violence and threat thereof, bodily harm and further violations of the right to life, and physical and psychological integrity during the migration process (IOM Issue Brief 2022f).

The recommendations formulated in the Issue Briefs are rather general, aiming at the global level without addressing specific stakeholders or requiring them to take specific actions. Those recommendations which are linked to the narrative of 'safe and regular migration' propose to expand on the existing regular pathways by adding extra categories, including schemes for family reunification, civil registration, and identity management as well as by respecting non-refoulement obligations at the borders. In this context, the IOM refers not only to securitisation of 'safe *e*migration', but also to 'safe and dignified returns' (IOM 2022h, 2). Proof of identity is an indispensable prerequisite for safe and dignified return, family reunification and access to basic services (IOM 2022d). Looking at the latest IOM publication concerning the GCM and its implementation in practice (IOM 2022c, 100), skills partnerships are conceived as a means to promote 'safe, orderly and regular migration'. Linked to this are skills transfer and recognition, as well as skills training and development, such that 'safe' immigration shapes the design of tailor-made *regular* labour migration schemes.

Conversely, measures relating to the negative narrative, 'irregular-risk-migration', are closely linked to a moral concept of humanitarianism, within which the IOM represents itself as acting on behalf of vulnerable migrants (Amelina 2020, 5). The IOM's more frequent deployment of 'humanitarian' narrative fulfils another, strategic aim, which Thorvaldsdottir and Patz

(2021:801, 807) describe as one of consolidating its position within the UN family's 'competitive resource environment' with a 'need to impress donors'. Hence, the IOM since the Syrian crisis has been proactively developing tools with a global focus on protection, such as the Migration Crisis Operational Framework, the Migrants in Countries in Crisis Initiative and the Missing Migrants Project (MMP). Yet, its assertive, 'new global orientation' of stepping into other agencies' humanitarian crisis relief agendas (UNHCR) leads to clashes with the IOM's global migration governance mandate which it shares with a non-humanitarian actor, the UN DESA under SDG 10.7 UN Agenda 2030. For that reason, the MMP project for example, is presented as 'the only concrete measure of "safe" migration in the Agenda 2030' (IOM 2022f, 2).[6] Furthermore, different IOM recommendations link the IOM's 'humanitarian' focus to effective search and rescue operations (SAR), securing equal access to vaccination, testing and screening (IOM 2022d), in addition to delivering protection and assistance of migrants as well as of families of missing migrants in need. A longitudinal comparison of sentiment shifts in three UN agencies by Thorvaldsdottir and Patz (2021) corroborate our finding which argues that the IOM's increased substitutive use of the term 'safe' migration with 'protection' correlates with the IOM's trajectory from a projectised organisation engaged in regional and local mandates to a global role as UN migration agency. Furthermore, the IOM calls for strengthened border management to reduce risk. Interestingly, however, the IOM does not separate as clearly as the EU or CSO/NGO actors in West Africa (Bisong 2022), the securitisation aspect (border management, anti-trafficking/smuggling, data collection and screening of migrants along the routes, media and communication campaigns) from the humanitarian issue of protection of migrants in vulnerable situations.

## A Moving Target: The Narrative's Impact on Migration Policy Choice

So far, we have shown that the bundling of the three adjectives 'safe, regular and orderly' shifts with time, differs according to the sociospatial context (see the case of West Africa below) and alters with the policy area and which role the IOM is asked to play therein. In some areas, 'safe, orderly and regular' narrates the global consensus at the UN level to safeguard sovereignty (Oelgemöller and Allinson 2020) justifying measures for biometric data collection, integrated border management, surveillance and migrant screening (Guild 2020).

We also see that the 'safe, orderly and regular' narrative is inspired by the wording of SDG target 10.7 of the Agenda 2030, namely to 'facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies'. However, the 'positive sentiment' about migration in the GCM header trumps the 'negative sentiment' about migration which SDG 10.7 connotes: firstly, the

header of the GCM reverses the order of the wording of the Agenda 2030 by prioritising 'safe' over 'orderly'. Through this switch, the IOM exemplifies its new, wide-ranging scope of policies and terminologies packed into the term 'safe'. Not only does the IOM affirm it's new global reach as UN migration agency, but by placing 'safe' before 'orderly', it demonstrates that its global mandate is broader than just return and readmissions, the latter which are connoted with 'orderly'. Instead, it shows its preparedness to compete with other UN agencies (UNHCR, WHO, ILO) and institutions (International Committee of the Red Cross) for resources and mandates, such as humanitarian missions, including protection of vulnerable migrants and identifying missing migrants and their families, to border security and management, to preventive actions such as border surveillance, access to health.

Most recently, as seen during the first IMRF in May 2022, states have split up the bundle, by using a single adjective out of the three, for example, 'safe', or replacing one adjective, for example, 'orderly' with 'safe', or even adding an adjective to the triad. When an additional word is used, it is one which expresses more concern for migrants' well-being, including 'humane', 'dignified' or 'sustainable' (see Table 1).

This switch in the word order is possible because the GCM refrains from giving any definition of the narrative. It might even be argued that the narrative's deliberate openness, preserves the leeway for states to attribute different meanings. In that way, the everyday orderliness connoted by the choice of plain, simple adjectives, encourages new interpretative practice, which in turn enables policy measures to be adjusted to the fluctuations and changing legal circumstances of global migration flows. Whereas Thorvaldsdottir and Patz (2021) observe how the UN agencies they surveyed used 'protection', 'relief' and other 'negative sentiment' more often during the Syrian 'crisis', in the case of the GCM, the triad 'safe, orderly and regular', more specifically how the adjectives have been ranked within the heading, marks a clear choice for conveying a 'positive' message about migration. Similarly, Pécoud (2021) affirms that its unifying narrative is an attempt to 'gloss over' differences and conflict, while Farahat and Bast (2022) consider the vagueness of the GCM as a means of 'communicative power'.

To sum up, the 'safe, orderly and regular migration' terminology has the benefit of providing broad and sufficiently positive terms that each UN Member State can identify with (Newland 2020). The drafters cleverly omitted any indication as to the direction of the migration trajectory. This is in line with Campillo Carrete and Gasper's (2011, 26) observations, that 'discourses of policy management, especially in international organisations, often proceed in terms that leave objectives and criteria conveniently vague'. Hence, any state can identify with the different spatial dimensions human mobility can take, including outmigration, return migration or circular migration, which are not specified. In the following section we examine to what extent the triad is

mirrored in the IOM's work at the regional level in West Africa. We ask whether replacement of 'orderly' with 'safe' has also occurred at the regional level. We also look at which other changes to the sequence of the wording and which splits appear regionally in the IOM's project-based mandates for West Africa. Finally, we examine how the different policy measures the IOM adopts, in its daily work in West Africa, to implement its mandates mirror and reflect elements of the global-level narrative.

## The IOM Shaping a Regional 'Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration' Narrative in West Africa

The West African population is highly mobile, and migration is culturally anchored. National borders established during the colonial era remain rather porous, and intra-regional temporary and seasonal migration patterns are widespread. Furthermore, intra-regional mobility is facilitated by the ECOWAS free movement regime, which was established in the 1970s. In 2021, nearly 90% of the 7.4 million migrants living in West Africa were from other countries in the region (ICMPD West African Outlook 2022). However, the migration destinations of West Africans have diversified in recent years and intercontinental migration has increased. From the 1990s to mid-2020s the proportions of Western African migrants residing in North America and in Europe rose from 3% to 10% and from 12% to almost 19%, respectively (Migrationdataportal 2021). Irregular departures of migrants from Senegal to the Canary Islands were seven times higher in 2020 than in International Organization for Migration, 2019, with nearly 18,000 West African migrants arriving in the Canary Islands (ICMPD 2022).[7] Other migrants chose a mixed itinerary travelling by land and by sea via Niger and Libya and the Central Mediterranean route to Italy, which is known as the deadliest migration route in the world. In 2021, 2048 deaths and disappearances were recorded in the Mediterranean by the IOM MMP. The migration route via the Sahara Desert is also notoriously risky and the majority of the 1555 dead and missing persons recorded in Africa in 2021 were on this route.[8] One reason why people choose to travel along such risky and dangerous routes is the lack of access to visas, so that illegal pathways to Europe remain the only option. Generally, citizens of the West African nation states can travel to between 30–70 countries globally without applying for a visa. By contrast, citizens of European countries (generally EU Member States) can travel visa-free to 141–172 countries. Mobility in West Africa is not only limited by visa restrictions, but it is further complicated by visa fees and time-consuming visa procedures (Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung 2020, 19).

What does this mean for the IOM and its activities in West Africa? The IOM not only plays a role as a global facilitator of the GCM and the Agenda 2030 but is also active at the regional level in West Africa. What measures and

actions does the IOM take in West Africa to enhance the GCM's objectives and work towards opening and diversifying regular and safe pathways, preventing irregular and risky migration and incentivising orderly and sustainable returns? Does the IOM adopt the same position with respect to its West Africa strategy as is presented in the issue briefs addressing the global level, or are there different positions that reflect the IOM's engagement in the region?

### Claims for 'Safe and Regular' Migration Within and Beyond Central and West Africa

The IOM together with the African Union and the United Economic Commission for Africa produced the Continental Report that fed into the global report, reflecting the common African Position (CAP) on the GCM. The IOM's role was providing its expertise and technical backstopping, but it has further activities in (West) Africa, such as the Migration Dialogue for West Africa, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development's Regional Consultative Process on Migration and the African Platform on Migration (Maiyegun 2019). Considering its role as facilitator of the GCM on the African continent, here again it can be shown that the triad of 'safe, orderly and regular migration' was chosen very cleverly. Its – at first glance – positive connotation was not contested by the African stakeholders. This was in contrast to the narrative of 'poverty as a root cause of migration', which the African stakeholders wanted to have exchanged for 'wealth creation' (Maiyegun 2019, 262).

In the introduction to its 2020–2024 strategy (IOM Regional Office West and Central Africa, 2020, 2), the IOM sketches a positive image of migration and stresses that *humane and orderly* (our italics) migration benefits migrants and society. This is in line with the above-mentioned IOM strategy (2007) but stands in contrast to the global-level GCM narrative, where the 'regular-safe-migration' narrative dominates and is disseminated by the IOM. However, this slightly different narrative reflects not only the IOM's strategic position as an organisation but, in the regional West African context, it fits with the existing protocols of free movement in the (ECOWAS) region. Here, the element of regularity is of lesser importance and cross-border mobility is already a fact (Arhin-Sam et al. 2022). Although the free movement of persons in the region is established by the existing protocols, the IOM seems to be aware of the importance of mobility, as it is one of the three central pillars in its 2020–2024 strategy paper, along with humanitarian response and resilience, as well as governance. In our context, the vision of 'mobility' is particularly important and interestingly the IOM refers within the formulation of this pillar to the triad of 'safe, orderly and regular migration':

Mobility: Contribute to African economic and social integration through the promotion of policies and protocols for the free and voluntary movement of people, supporting national authorities, regional entities, the private sector and other relevant stakeholders with the requisite expertise, tools, technology and partnerships to achieve *safe, orderly and regular migration*. (IOM West and Central Africa 2020:3, italics added)

Hence, the existing free movement protocols seem to be an important means to contribute to safe, orderly and – of course – regular migration within the region. Still, irregular migration remains prevalent, and smuggling and trafficking are a 'safety' concern for the IOM Regional Office in West and Central Africa (Arhin-Sam et al. 2022). Porous borders and the lack of identity documents among some ECOWAS citizens (IOM West and Central Africa 2020, 11) lead to irregular and *dis*orderly migration and the dissemination of the 'irregular-risk' narrative. According to the IOM regional strategy, governments in the region need to find a balance between facilitating the regular movements of travellers and traders and establishing measures to prevent irregular migration such as trafficking and smuggling (IOM West and Central Africa 2020, 11). Whereas the 'regular/safe' and 'irregular/risk' narratives are in play when the IOM implements the above-mentioned West and Central African strategy, once it co-facilitates the CAP, the IOM was confronted with the request of African states to remove the distinction between regular and irregular migrants (Maiyegun 2019, 266).

Whereas, on a global level, the IOM claims to promote 'safe and regular migration', which necessarily implies provision of regular pathways (IOM 2022h), these claims do not seem to have the same urgency *beyond* the regional border crossings in West Africa. In that case, the IOM confines itself to referring to the partnership agreements between the EU and West African states without making more demands for regular pathways, as it states:

'IOM will focus on (. . .) human mobility governance, especially at the local level' . . . This should build on the results of and lessons learned through the European Union–IOM Joint Initiative and aim to enhance partnership addressing priorities of mutual interest' (IOM West and Central Africa 2020, 12).

Here, we can clearly see that the IOM's geographical scope in facilitating safe and regular migration is limited to supporting mobility *within* the regional level – where free movement is already more or less implemented. When it comes to migration pathways *beyond* the region, specifically from West Africa to Europe, the IOM Regional Office for West and Central Africa does not appear to be an advocate for broadening pathways but curtails its demands and asks rather vaguely for cooperation in 'broadened migration governance' (IOM West and Central Africa 2020, 12).

### Contested Perception of Voluntary Return: The 'Safe and Dignified' Return Narrative

It has already been shown that what the IOM means by a 'mutual interest in migration' refers to *return migration*. This narrow focus originated in the situation with Libya, when European states were concerned about the numbers of Africans trying to cross the Mediterranean, while the African governments were alarmed by the fate of their citizens in Libya (Trauner et al. 2019). These concerns led to the launch of the EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migration Protection and Reintegration in 2016 with resources from the EUTF. Accordingly the EU-IOM Joint Initiative for Migrant Protection and Reintegration (2016):

> enables migrants who decide to *return* to their countries of origin to do so in a *safe* and *dignified* way, in full respect of international human rights standards and in particular the principle of non-refoulement.[9] (our italics)

The IOM's protection and humanitarian activities in the field of return and along the West African migration routes focus on safe and dignified *return* and, only to a limited extent, prevent irregular migration by offering support to migrants and their communities. Unlike the IOM's position on 'safe and dignified' return at a global and regional level, the African Group in the CAP added the adjective 'voluntary' to the narrative. The group – with the IOM as a co-facilitator – emphasised that return should be a measure of last resort and that 'return should always be coupled with comprehensive, robust and sustainable reintegration support' (Maiyegun 2019, 263). Reintegration support is also an important measure for the IOM as it states that 'reintegration [assisted voluntary return and reintegration] (AVRR) support shall afford migrants *safe* pathways towards a sustainable and dignified future in their countries of origin' (IOM West and Central Africa 2018: 17, italics added). In the context of return we can thus infer that 'safe' embeds both the regular/irregular dyad and it is associated with the dyad of voluntary/forced return and is also expanded from return mobility to future reintegration. When used as the overarching term in the context of return, the term 'safe' accommodates and mitigates some of the conflicts between policy measures (see Table 1 below).

Furthermore, 'safe and regular' migration is associated with labour migration:

> IOM will engage with governments to promote *safe and regular migration* by facilitating *regular labour migration*, strengthening free movement *in the region*, informing the design and implementation of relevant protocols, redoubling efforts to link national and regional development initiatives with migration policies and programmes, and promoting ethical recruitment practices. (IOM West and Central Africa 2020, 18) (our italics)

Here again, we see that at the West and Central African regional level, safe and regular migration is related to labour migration, as expressed in the West African priorities (2020–2024). The IOM's efforts in the field of migration policies aim to link national and regional policies and programmes but, again, its claims for safe and regular pathways do not go beyond the region in contrast to its position on the global level. This raises the question of the IOM's position when it engages with West African governments on migration policies that call for opening up pathways beyond the region, for example, towards Europe.

## Local IOM Activities in West Africa: Splitting the Narrative to Focus on Safe (Forced) Returns?

Beyond its involvement as co-facilitator of the CAP, the IOM acts at the local level in various West African states. In this context, assisted voluntary return and humanitarian return are considered the most important means of protection in West Africa. In 2021 the IOM assisted 49,795 migrants, of whom 45% originated from West and Central Africa, to return in a 'safe and dignified' way (IOM 2022i:iii) to their countries of origin, either through assisted voluntary or assisted humanitarian return (IOM 2022i, 6). In various states of the region the IOM is coordinating and implementing return and reintegration measures, to enhance *safe and dignified* return (without the above-mentioned voluntariness added by the CAP). With its international network encompassing emigration, transit and destination countries, the IOM is predestined to carry out these activities. However, with return policy high on the international agenda, other IOs and NGOs are showing an interest in the field of return migration and are becoming 'competitors' of the IOM in acquiring projects and finance (Trauner et al. 2019). In Senegal, for instance, the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ) has become increasingly active in the field of migration and reintegration. It is operationalising programmes and policies on migration and development, including return migration and reintegration, on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) (GIZ 2021). In its role as facilitator of *safe and dignified* return in the West and Central African region, the IOM is collecting precise data on return. In that sense, both the GIZ and the IOM are 'invited' or 'instrumentalized' actors (Bisong 2022), whereby non-state actors, are implementing '*safe and orderly*' return migration on behalf of the (German) government in West Africa. For example, the IOM's report *Return and Reintegration Key Highlights 2021* specifically established how many migrants from and to West and Central Africa were assisted (13,227 migrants (27% of all cases) and 22,143 migrants

(45% of all cases), respectively). Interestingly, no such precise data are available to provide an overview of how many West and Central African migrants were supported through migration schemes or assistance that enabled safe and regular migration. However, there are a few new programmes led by the IOM that support (regular) labour migration from West African states to Europe by opening up existing pathways. One of these is MATCH, funded by the EU's Asylum Migration and Integration Fund, which ran from January 2020 to December 2022 (IOM 2022b).[10]

The MATCH programme is neither led by the IOM country offices in Senegal nor in Nigeria, but by the IOM country offices in the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and Italy. We can therefore assume that the European IOM offices are primarily facilitating recruitment processes for European companies, while the Senegalese and Nigerian IOM country offices are not involved in opening up 'safe and regular' pathways. The analysis of the MATCH leaflet supports this argument: the aim of the programme is not to offer regular and safe pathways from West Africa to Europe, but to recruit skilled professionals on a temporary basis to fill bottleneck vacancies in Europe. It is argued that MATCH creates a win-win situation for both European enterprises and West African professionals. However, conditions for the temporary stay are set by the European enterprises/governments with the support of the international recruitment company Aldelia and the afore-mentioned European IOM offices. Of course, West African migrants can benefit from this opportunity to migrate in a safe and regular way and can gain new experiences abroad if they agree to the conditions. Comparing the number of return migrants to the region and the 105 participants of the MATCH programme in 2022 (International Organization for Migration 2022a), the imbalance we see again raises the question of the role of the IOM and whose interests it represents? As a projectised organisation, it can be assumed that the European enterprises and governments sought the support of their own IOM country offices, where contacts are already established and more easily accessible. West African IOM country offices were left out of this labour programme for safe and regular migration and their activities are confined to enabling 'safe and dignified' return.

To sum up, the IOM in West and Central Africa is not involved in opening up legal pathways beyond the region, to enhance 'safe, orderly and regular' migration. To the contrary, at the regional and local levels, as Table 1 shows, the IOM faces split tasks in implementing the 'safe, orderly and regular migration' narrative. This is because the European IOM offices are charged with facilitating 'regular' pathways, predominantly for the skilled and talented, while the West African IOM offices are mandated with implementing the 'safe and orderly' and dignified return migration programmes.

**Table 1.** The IOM uses of 'safe, orderly and regular' migration.

| Level | Narrative | Measures |
|---|---|---|
| **Global** | *Humane and orderly migration*\*<br>IOM strategy (2007)\*<br>*Safe and regular migration* | • Respect for human rights and international law<br>• Expert advice, research, technical cooperation and operational assistance<br>• Expansion and diversification of existing pathways<br>• Improving family reunification, civil registration, identity management<br>• Skills mobility partnerships<br>• Develop, upgrade skills/training, transfer, recognition<br>• Opportunities for regularisation of status<br>• Decrease remittance transfer costs |
| | *Irregular, risky migration* | • Missing migrants project<br>• Protection, border management<br>• Expand and diversify existing, adapt to regular pathways<br>• Raise awareness about regular pathways and family reunification<br>• Halting deportation<br>• Equal access to vaccination/testing/screening<br>• Effective consular and diplomatic system and services, including digital solutions and bilateral agreements, extending visas<br>• Prevention (anti-trafficking/smuggling/exploitation) |
| | *Safe and dignified return* | • Proof of identity documents, family reunification, accessibility of essential services, including evacuation assistance<br>• Non-refoulement, humanitarian actions |
| **RegionalWest Africa** | *Humane, orderly migration*\*<br>\*IOM Strategy West and Central Africa<br>*Safe, regular and dignified migration* | • Expansion of labour migration<br>• Free and voluntary movement<br>• Offering expertise, tools, technology, partnership<br>• Mobility governance at local level<br>• Facilitating legal movements |
| | *Irregular risky migration*<br>*Safe and dignified return* | • Prevention of trafficking/smuggling<br>• Projects embedded in the humanitarian-development-peace-nexus<br>• 'Soft landing' (MATCH)<br>• Save vulnerable migrants |

## Conclusion

In this article we shed light on the meaning behind the narrative of 'safe, orderly and regular migration', which is heading off and guiding the GCM. Through a non-systematic, qualitative analysis of IOM and UN reports and briefs, we uncovered how several possible subcontexts shape the plain meaning of the adjectives and ultimately, feed into the policy choice of measures taken by the IOM at the global and regional levels, including in the case of West Africa. Given the wide range of stakeholders with diverging interests who developed the GCM, that it has come about at all is a success story. Supportive in this context was certainly the cleverly chosen narrative of 'safe, orderly and regular migration', a formula that can be connected back to states – be they emigration, destination and/or transit countries – and to IOs and NGOs. None of these stakeholders would stand for migration not being made 'safe'. Moreover, it is a truism that migration cannot be governed by a single stakeholder, but that rights and responsibilities must be shared and respected by all if migration is to take place in a regulated and orderly manner (para. 11 GCM). Yet, what aspects of the narrative are left out, what sequencing is opted for, when is a substitute

('orderly' swapped for 'safe') replacing an original term or when is an alternative meaning ('dignified', 'sustainable') inserted, illustrates which migration policies are attributed priority and by which stakeholders.

We have shown that at the outset the narrative – with its three positively connotated adjectives – offers a welcoming image of migration, one which most stakeholders can identify with. At the same time, the vagueness and the lack of definition allows for stakeholders' diverging interests to be united under an overarching 'story' of migration, where, as literature has shown, everyone has a take-home message. However, despite its positive aspects, such vagueness presents a challenge. This is because the space it leaves for interpretation also leaves space for counter-narratives to evolve, as well as serial narratives. This, in turn, leads to the IOM formulating differing and (contested) policy measures for managing international migrations.

Once we started out with a legal documentary analysis we understood that the plain meaning of the wording connects to the multiple roles, which the IOM has accumulated since the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants. In our analysis of preparatory materials to the GCM endorsement, UN reports and resolutions and IOM policy and strategy papers, we find sufficient material which implicates the IOM in its different global roles, with co-orchestrating this narrative. Considering the IOM's different roles at the global and regional levels, we found that to reconcile its two UN mandates (GCM and SDG 10.7 Agenda 2030, also with its regional and local activities in West and Central Africa, it concurringly created counternarratives.

Borrowing from Lewis Carroll's 'looking-glass' imagery, we have discussed that viewing certain fragments of the 'safe, orderly and regular' narrative through the lens of the IOM means to magnify certain adjectives and content, while others take on less importance.[11] Hence, a closer look at how the narrative of 'safe, orderly and regular migration' has evolved over time, prompted us to identify variants and nuances.

Firstly, looking at how these three adjectives have been translated into policies, pledges and action plans, we noted that each adjective does not carry the same weight. For example 'orderly', was mostly removed from the GCM's final text, and at times replaced by 'safe'. Secondly, the triad is often split and shortened to a combination of two adjectives, for example, 'safe and regular' migration. In other cases, a single adjective is complemented, newly added, synonym adjective or variation; for example, 'safe and dignified' return. Finally, an antonym adjective is used in a combination which conveys a negative meaning, for instance 'risky and irregular' migration. This semantic analysis is more than a combinatorial exercise because we have shown that these split narratives can tell a quite different 'story' of migration, welcoming one or a threatening one. In combination, these split narratives – which adjectives are left out or added to – becomes an act of policy choice, including by the IOM asserting its new global role within the UN family, which requires

'demonstrating strong performance' (Thorvaldsdottir and Patz 221.807). Shifting or removing adjectives itself, becomes legally and politically relevant, as a choice which ultimately sheds light on the subcontext and underlying policies and actions they refer to.

The overview presented (Table 1) shows the different taxonomies of the narrative of 'safe, orderly and regular migration' which the IOM deploys on a global and a continental/regional level and what measures it intends to link up to them. A first implication of our systematic document analysis could be that the level playing field conjured up by the 'safe, orderly and regular' narrative, might not be so level after all, since viewed through the looking-glass of document analysis, certain policy priorities become even clearer, while others are side-lined and marginalised.

In result, in the case of the European Trust Fund for Africa deployed to return migrants reaching Europe through the Central African route via Libya, we found that the IOM deployed a 'safe and dignified return' discourse. By using a narrative of 'safe', which operationalises 'safe' migrations to protect individual, at times, vulnerable *migrants'* wellbeing and keeping migrants' returns 'safe', the IOM legitimised its traditional mandate over return, while positioning itself as a humanitarian actor within its portfolio as UN migration agency.

We further found that a multilevel governance approach is helpful to frame the GCM narrative within a socio-legally enlightened perspective: at the global level, the IOM calls (in several policy briefs) for opening up more 'safe and regular' pathways, while this is not the case when it comes to (West) African migration policies. Here, the IOM limits its interests to regular pathways within the region, where they already exist. The few programmes with limited numbers of participants that enable 'safe and regular migration' beyond the region – to Europe – address primarily European economic interests and are led by the European IOM country offices. This situation might arise because the IOM functions as a projectised organisation, which is highly dependent on donors. Also, this perspective explains the rather limited regular pathways into Europe, since the IOM would not wish to upset any potential (European) donors.

In sum, we have characterised 'safe, orderly and regular migration' as a bundled narrative, which encapsulates a possibility of shifting meanings with each adjective open enough to express different sub-meanings, whether across time or over space. For that reason, a plain text analysis alone proved insufficient to uncover the subcontext, which different actors, in this case the IOM, attribute to the narrative. For that reason, we proposed a socio-legal contextual analysis of the UN and IOM documents, to help us uncover the counternarratives behind the plain meaning. We have thus come up in Table 1 with a taxonomy for the 'safe, orderly and regular migration' narrative, which is broad enough to capture how the narrative has been evolving globally, between the GCM's endorsement in 2018 and the first IMRF in 2022, and at the multiple levels of the IOMs

regional and local activities in our case of West and Central Africa. While the subcontexts of the narrative continue to stand and fall with the IOM's multiple roles, the IMRF (2022) provides evidence of states and timidly, civil society proposing some new word choices and combinations. Yet, in sum, we found that the IOM navigates its multilevel spaces of engagement, by tailoring its narrative of 'safe, orderly and regular' to fit the partner's mandate. This process of adjustment requires the IOM to continuously reconcile the diverging mandates – global, regional and local with one another, in view to remain credible and effective towards its donors and within the state community.

## Notes

1. IOM Regional Office (Dakar) for West and Central Africa https://rodakar.iom.int/; for ECOWAS, the scope of West Africa includes 15 countries. Yet another definition is used by the EU, which often relates to the notion of G5 Sahel, a security and development conglomerate financed by the EU, covering five countries: Mali, Mauretania, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso.
2. Interview with Karen Abuzayd, UN Special Adviser, 6 May 2016, available at: https://news.un.org/en/story/2016/05/528672-interview-karen-abuzayd-special-adviser-summit-addressing-large-movements, accessed 26 January 2023.
3. Pledges of the IOM to the IMRF 2022, available at: https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl486/files/documents/iom-pledges-v3.pdf.
4. The four IOM issue briefs address 'Promoting Inclusive Societies and Including Migrants in COVID-19 Response and Recovery' (2022g), 'Promoting Safe and Regular Migration' (2022h), 'Preventing Loss of Life and Other Tragedies During Migration' (2022f), and 'Building Capacity' (2022e).
5. Article 2 paragraph 6. 'The United Nations and the International Organization for Migration will cooperate and conduct their activities without prejudice to the rights and responsibilities of one another under their respective constituent instruments'.
6. Missing Migrants Project https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean.
7. Between 2006 and 2008, nearly 50,000 people boarded on Senegalese pirogues and headed for the Canary Islands – the Cayucos crisis preceded the Mediterranean crossings.
8. Missing Migrants Project https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean.
9. www.migrationjointinitiative.org/about-eu-iom-joint-initiative.
10. IOM MATCH, available at: eea.iom.int/match-hiring-African-talents.
11. Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There, Macmillan, London 1982 is the sequel to Alice in the Wonderland.

## Acknowledgements

## Disclosure statement

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