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Governing Through the Language of Vulnerability: IOM's Role in EU Border Externalization

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Abstract

This paper investigates the extent to which the discourses of vulnerability developed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) have been employed in migration management practices as part of the European Union (EU) border externalization agenda. The project brings together a close engagement with the literature on vulnerability in migration contexts, theories of humanitarian governance, and critiques of border externalization, to argue that the increasing use of the language of vulnerability in the field of forced migration has generated a hierarchy in classifications of displaced people with those most vulnerable deemed worthy of international protections or assistance and those constructed as less-than vulnerable or invulnerable excluded from any form of relief. Through a close reading of IOM's migrant vulnerability framework, the paper contends that vulnerability becomes a key term by which the organization elaborates its own humanitarian governance regime focused on identifying, tracking, classifying, and controlling people on the move. The complex institutional practices, frameworks, and assessments regarding vulnerability developed by the IOM have been coopted by what I refer to as the EU governmentality of migration. Throughout IOM's participation in EU border externalization strategies, including returns, securitized borderwork, and containment, vulnerability is employed as a key migration governance mechanism.

Keywords: *vulnerability, forced migration, border externalization, governmentality, international organizations*

Introduction

On June 14, 2023, a trawler carrying migrants from Pakistan, Palestine, Iran, Afghanistan and other regions sank on its journey from Libya to Italy. More than five hundred lives were lost. According to survivor accounts and media investigations, the trawler likely sank because of being towed by the Greek coast guard away from its waters. This was meant to deter migrants from setting foot on Greek shores (Fallon et al. 2023). The European Union (EU) border and coastguard agency Frontex and the Greek coast guard both failed to respond in a timely manner to the catastrophe, leaving hundreds to perish at sea. This marked yet another shipwreck tragedy on the Central Mediterranean migration route. It is the deadliest crossing in the world where thousands of asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants have drowned or disappeared at sea every year (Panebianco 2022). Critics attribute this significant loss of lives to the relentless EU border externalization policies, which have aimed to discontinue rescue operations and push back migrants or deter them from arriving at EU territorial borders in search of asylum (de Genova 2017; Walia 2021; Sandven and Scherz 2022).

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In recent years, the EU has mobilized a sophisticated border externalization regime that operates on multiple levels, involves a multitude of agencies, non-governmental actors and state partnerships, and aims to block the access of asylum seekers and other migrants to its territory. Border externalization refers to "the process through which destination countries promote, support, delegate, impose, or directly carry out activities related to migration and border management outside their territories […] in order to prevent unwanted arrivals at their territorial borders" (Cuttitta 2020, p. 2). Externalization strategies vary from region to region, but often include airline carrier sanctions, visa restrictions, airport immigration offices, detention and processing centers abroad, outsourcing securitized migration activities, technologies that track and push back migrants (Bloch and Doná 2018, p. 7), declaring neighboring countries safe third countries to avoid accepting asylum claims from these territories, expanded deportations (Hansen 2016, pp. 258-59), and carrying out information campaigns meant to convince mobile populations to stay put, among other techniques.

The EU combines many of these strategies in its attempt to prevent migrants travelling from the Global South from reaching its territories. It has recently sealed several migration compacts, bilateral agreements primarily with North African third countries, in which these countries agreed to host refugees, asylum seekers and other migrants heading towards Europe in exchange for development funding, financial compensation, or other advantages (Sandven and Scherz 2022; Bartels 2022). The EU has also outsourced its border controls to less-than-safe third countries in North Africa, training local border guards, funding securitization technologies and the militarization of migration routes, as well as delegating a good number of migration-related activities to international organizations (IOs) such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) (Cuttitta 2020, p. 2).

Originally known as the Intergovernmental Committee for the Movement of Migrants from Europe, IOM was founded in 1951 with funding from the United States as a Cold War-era agency meant to assist with the resettlement of refugees fleeing Europe. Throughout its various historical articulations, IOM perpetuated the colonial and racializing agenda of the Global North, excluding Africans and Asians from migration to the West, facilitating South African apartheid practices, and assisting Western states with their migration management work (Bradley 2023, p. 29). Given its controversial history and its problematic diffusion of Global North migration control, detention, and deportation practices, IOM has been regarded with varying degrees of skepticism by academics, not least for its recent role in displacing the UNHCR from its central place on the international scene of forced migration (Bradley 2017; Frowd 2018; Green and Pécoud 2022). While some studies note that IOM has the potential to ensure better cooperation in the field of migration governance (Ferris and Donato 2020) and that IOM can be reformed to become more accountable with respect to international law (Bradley, Costello and Sherwood 2023), most scholars remain critical of its current effects on forced migrants' rights and protections.

At its core, IOM is a migration management organization that operates according to the principle of "making migration work for all," assuming that orderly and safe migration benefits both migrants and host states. Its operational activities have varied from refugee resettlement, data collection on migration trends, counter-trafficking activities, workshops and information campaigns for displaced people, training border patrol officials, operating offshore processing centers, and primarily providing services for states related to migrant

detention and deportation regimes, such as housing and transporting migrants and conducting "assisted voluntary returns" for trafficked persons or rejected asylum-seekers (Bradley 2011, p. 28; Chuang 2022, p. 420). It has thus played a major role in the containment of populations migrating from the Global South. For example, IOM operated Australia's controversial offshore detention centers (Bradley 2011, p. 28), served as a tool for the implementation of externalizing European migration policies in North Africa and the Sahara (Brachet 2015; Cuttitta 2019; Pacciardi and Berndtsson 2022), and steered Turkey towards containing EU's unwanted migrants (Fine 2018), among other deterrence practices.

In a notable turn in the management of forced migration worldwide, border externalization has coincided in the last decade with the rise of an international discourse acknowledging refugee and migrant vulnerability and the necessity to provide international and human rights protections to people on the move. Prompted by the so-called 2015 European refugee crisis, the emergence and adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) have also generated a complex set of discourses classifying displaced people according to their vulnerabilities. The IOM has been one of the principal actors implementing the Global Compacts and expanding the language of migrant vulnerability as part of its humanitarian governance regime.

As an organization that is primarily dependent on wealthy states' donations, IOM has gained more influence in global migration relations through its efforts to seek legitimacy to expand its human rights discourse and agenda. Although it does not have a protection mandate similar to the UNHCR, which means that it is technically not compelled by international law in its operations, IOM has expanded and redefined its mission as an organization that protects the human rights of migrants worldwide, a significant part of which has been its development of assessment and operational materials for the protection of *migrants in vulnerable situations*. Since 2016, IOM has become a UN-related agency, yet it does not hold full membership status. This does not prevent the organization from labeling itself *the* UN Migration Agency on its official website, on par with the UNHCR, a form of blue-washing that enables it to maintain its affiliation in name and independence in practice (Chuang 2022, p. 434). Given these dynamics, most critics view the human rights language as a smokescreen for a project-based and service-oriented organization primarily concerned with protecting the interests of powerful donor states and not those of migrants (Goodwin-Gill 2019; Pécoud 2018; Bradley 2017). IOM is ultimately deemed a neoliberal organization that privileges profit and border control over migrant protection (Bradley 2011; Pécoud 2018; Chuang 2022).

IOM's knowledge-making practices about migrant vulnerability have produced a significant system of classification that controls displaced populations by creating hierarchies between those deemed worthy of international protection and assistance and those excluded from any form of relief, contained, and returned to their home countries. The latter are ultimately pushed back through various externalization practices as part of the *governmentality of migration*, a complex system of state apparatuses, international institutions, bordering practices, migration policies, economic policies, and discourses about displaced people on the move. My contention is that one of the fundamental means through which this system operates is by reproducing and instrumentalizing the human rights language of vulnerability with respect to asylum seekers, migrants and refugees. As one of the primary agencies

proliferating discourses about migrant vulnerability, IOM has become a key actor in the governmentality of migration, displacing the expertise and influence of UNHCR in the field of forced migration. As the case of EU-IOM joint operations will show, IOM's power and legitimacy in the global field of migration is bolstered by perpetuating an unjust and dysfunctional migration landscape that leads, in fact, to the enhanced vulnerability of forced migrants.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Vulnerability Discourses in the Governmentality of Migration

This study investigates IOM's productive discourses about migrant vulnerability through the lenses of Michel Foucault's theories of *power/knowledge* and *governmentality*. According to Foucault (1995), "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (pp. 27-28). This is what Foucault refers to as *power/knowledge* (le savoir/pouvoir), or the role of power in producing knowledge, which is co-constitutive with the imbrication of knowledge-making practices in the diffusion and perpetuation of power.

IOs such as IOM exercise their soft power through their prolific production of knowledge, discourses that classify and produce new categories of actors, circulate new norms about migration, and create social meanings (Barnett and Finnemore 1999, p. 710). Through their evidence-based research, data collection, and their sophisticated assessment tools, IOs both establish their legitimacy on the international scene and exert their influence and power in the global arena (Green and Pécoud 2022, p. 4). However, when the operations of IOs are coopted by state migration management agendas through generous funding streams, their discursive practices are also instrumentalized to bolster the neocolonial power relations between the Global North and the Global South. This is done with the goal of governing forcefully displaced people on the move.

In his later lectures at the Collège de France, Foucault (2004) engaged extensively with the problematic of government and, particularly, the transition from a modern era of sovereign power focused on territory to a contemporary mode of government focused on biopolitical control or the classification and the management of populations. He termed this new mode of organization *governmentality* (*gouvernementalité*), a sovereignty-discipline-government triad that "has as its primary target the population and as its essential mechanism the apparatuses of security" (Foucault 1991, p. 102). Foucault clarifies that governmentality refers to at least three aspects of government: 1) an ensemble of various institutions and procedures that exercise biopolitical control through security apparatuses; 2) the proliferation of different governing apparatuses and a whole complex of knowledge-making practices; 3) the transformation of the state into an administrative apparatus of governmentality (Foucault 1991, pp. 102-103).

The governmentality framework is essential for understanding the complex relations of power that shape the EU's contemporary migration management. This framework includes not only state power, but a diffuse array of institutions: international organizations such as the border agency FRONTEX, and humanitarian partners such as UNHCR and IOM; instruments of border securitization and externalization; neoliberal economic and development policies; mechanisms that govern and manage migrants and refugees; and

diversified sets of knowledge-making practices about migration including the narratives proliferating about vulnerability. This regime operated by the EU, its agencies, and its humanitarian partners has at least two important concerns—securing well-managed and temporary migrant labor flows towards the EU, and controlling or blocking undesirable forced migration, including asylum seekers traveling across the Mediterranean (Geiger and Pécoud 2010; Oelgemöller 2017). The EU pursues a dual governmentality of migration: in Michel Foucault's terms, *an anatomo-politics of the human body*, focused on disciplining migrant bodies towards their efficient integration into economic systems, and a *biopolitics of the population*, a set of regulatory controls meant to identify, classify, and manage the movement of people across the Mediterranean (Foucault 1990, p. 139).

In the context of this governmentality of migration, international organizations such as the UNHCR and the IOM become useful discursive, management, and humanitarian institutions through which the EU migration agenda becomes diffused (Lavenex 2016). Although IOs maintain varying degrees of autonomy related to their own agendas (Barnett and Finnemore 1999), the global migration management paradigm shapes the application of each IOs' vulnerability discourse toward the creation of classifications and hierarchies among forcefully displaced populations in transit, and the control of their movement and the narrowing of forced migrants' opportunities to seek asylum in the EU through perilous border-crossings.

Scholars of humanitarianism have noted the dual implications of humanitarianism as both an emancipatory project built around an ethics of care, which aims to ensure the wellbeing and safety of those who suffer, and a system of governance, which aims to control and wield power over the subjects of humanitarian care, in an effort to alleviate their suffering (Harrell-Bond 1986; Barnett 2011). Humanitarianism enacts the paradoxical tensions between autonomy and paternalism engendered by vulnerability, in that it aims to liberate its vulnerable subjects, while also mobilizing complex institutionalized decision-making mechanisms that dominate their daily lives. According to Didier Fassin (2012), humanitarian government is "a politics of precarious lives" (p. 4). This means that those who are constructed as vulnerable and in need of protection are viewed as such from above by humanitarian actors in a relationship of compassion that presupposes inequality, but masks it. In a close analysis of the now defunct refugee camp at Sangatte, set up by the French Red Cross in 1999 to respond primarily to Afghan, Iraqi and Kosovan refugees, Fassin (2012) shows that the right to asylum was gradually replaced by humanitarian considerations in a larger European context in which refugee concerns have been sidelined by migration control policies (p. 141). Asylum seekers in Sangatte were given IOM-drafted pamphlets titled "Dignity or Exploitation," in which they were discouraged from crossing the English Channel and seeking asylum in the UK due to the many threats to life and limb such crossings would engender. The right to seek asylum in France was also downplayed by the various humanitarian actors in the camp, leaving the only valid option as IOM-assisted voluntary returns (Fassin 2012, p. 140). In this sense, the logic of compassion enacted by humanitarian governance undermines the path towards asylum in Europe through its focus on the dangers that migrants may experience during border-crossings. The need for protection from vulnerability shifts from the right to seek international refugee protection to the need for humanitarian assistance throughout the journey and upon return, as governments enable humanitarian actors like the IOM to process, sort, manage and return asylum seekers.

The Use of Vulnerability Discourses in Humanitarian Work

Central to human rights advocacy and humanitarian intervention, vulnerability is often employed as a tool to differentiate among groups of forced migrants in displacement or disaster contexts understood as quintessential victims of human rights violations (Merry 2007). In recent years, it has become one of the primary methods used by humanitarian organizations such as the UNHCR and IOM to classify different people on the move into discrete groups based on their basic and protection needs. In this context, scholars have noted the potential of vulnerability for both establishing a universal human rights framework for engaging the state's responsibility to protect (Betts 2008; Fineman and Grear 2013) *and* triggering stigmatizing, essentialist and paternalistic policies that focus on managing individuals or groups rather than addressing the structural causes that produce vulnerability in the first place (Brown 2011; Brown et al. 2017; Atak et al. 2018). Critics also argue that the label proliferates a dualistic logic of *deservingness* versus *undeservingness*, insofar as it is used to "highlight distinctions between refugees who are deemed to deserve protection and those who do not" (Smith and Waite 2019, pp. 2289-90).

Due to these significant challenges in using vulnerability language to refer to displaced people in humanitarian contexts, critics have proposed new perspectives for the theorization and application of vulnerability. Several scholars argue for a modified theory of vulnerability in migration that places the focus on the environment, context, social and institutional conditions in which migration takes place (Reilly et al. 2022; Kofman 2019), thus mobilizing a complex understanding of vulnerability that recognizes the "the temporal, situational, relational and structural nature of vulnerability" (Virokannas et al. 2020, p. 336). However, Turner (2021) disagrees with these various attempts to refine vulnerability theory, arguing that we need instead "studies of the violence that humanitarian 'vulnerability' criteria enact" (p. 16). Turner (2021) is referring here to the fact that vulnerability becomes a central mechanism through which the power relationships of humanitarian governance are deployed, especially by means of classification, hierarchy construction, and ordering of refugee lives (pp. 11-12). This echoes other critical perspectives that warn against the uses of vulnerability to widen mechanisms of social control (Butler et al. 2016). When states expand their control over people's lives, such uses render vulnerability at odds with human rights (Brown 2011, p. 317). In this sense, vulnerability can become an essential mechanism to govern migrant mobility for both state and humanitarian actors (Heidbrink, 2021, p. 989).

Vulnerability Governance in the Era of the Global Compacts

Besides the development of humanitarian government, the vulnerability of migrants and refugees is contextualized and mainstreamed in a unique international political context shaped by a paradigm shift in migration governance. This era is introduced by the 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants and the subsequent multilateral dialogues that led to the drafting of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) under the leadership of the IOM, and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) under the leadership of the UNHCR. In this context, a discourse related to the human rights of migrants emerges, hinging upon the notion of vulnerability, which is parallel to the conceptualization of refugees in relation to international refugee protections. However, the solutions proposed for the alleviation of migrants' and refugees' vulnerability rely heavily on humanitarian measures and development policy agendas, which ultimately reinforce a neocolonial hierarchy between the

Global North and the Global South and perpetuate the status quo of the migration governance regime.

The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants envisions an international cooperation response rooted, first, in humanitarian obligations to protect populations on the move, and, second, in the discourse of development as established by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. State responses are thus conceived as twofold: facilitating and managing safe, orderly, and regular migration and investing in humanitarian and development efforts to alleviate conditions in countries of origin. In other words, the humanitarian-development solution is also a solution of containment privileging the agenda of Global North countries focused on controlling irregular migration and addressing root causes of displacement.

The discourse on vulnerability proliferates throughout the New York Declaration, particularly in its recognition of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of people in vulnerable situations, including migrants and refugees. The document identifies populations at risk through a common listing of vulnerable groups—"women at risk, children, especially those who are unaccompanied or separated from their families, members of ethnic and religious minorities, victims of violence, older persons, persons with disabilities, persons who are discriminated against on any basis, indigenous peoples, victims of human trafficking, and victims of exploitation and abuse in the context of the smuggling of migrants" (New York Declaration, para. 2). The emphasis, as in many other contexts, falls upon the vulnerabilities of women and children, who are conceived as inherently vulnerable due to their specific immutable traits. Additionally, the Declaration introduces a concept first outlined by the Global Migration Group, *migrants in vulnerable situations*, to encourage the development of guidelines to protect unaccompanied children, older persons, women and girls and victims of trafficking.

Scholars note the various shortcomings of the Declaration including the fact that it does not distinguish between vulnerability and precariousness, the latter concept capturing the complex socio-political and economic infrastructures that engender vulnerability, including state policies that deny migrants access to human rights and social protections (Atak et al 2018, pp. 5-6). In fact, the situations that render migrants vulnerable in the conception of the New York Declaration have to do with inherent traits, root causes, or the risks of the migratory journey including smuggling or trafficking. Not surprisingly, the document studiously avoids discussing border externalization practices or acknowledging receiving states' obligations to uphold the human rights of people on the move by facilitating their access to asylum and other social protections.

The Global Compacts developed in the aftermath of the New York Declaration perpetuate these conceptual problems and politicized omissions. Like the Declaration, the GCM and the GCR maintain the problematic clear-cut distinction between migrants and refugees (Crawley and Skleparis 2018), and emphasize the need for their respective human rights protections, while framing the question of mobility through the lens of sustainable development. Some scholars note that the Compacts put forward a set of values that establish a basic platform for international cooperation to alleviate the vulnerability of displaced people (Hillpold 2020, p. 227). However, most critics argue that the Compacts remain deeply ineffectual due to their logic of voluntary cooperation, which does not place any binding obligations upon states but merely outlines a set of guidelines that may or may not be followed

in the future (Hathaway 2018; Chimni, 2018; Boucher and Gördemann 2021). Indeed, scholars note that this is a direct result of the lobbying efforts of EU's diplomatic agency, the European External Action Service, in the revision of the Compacts (particularly the GCM) to exclude legally-binding obligations and to reinforce the distinction between regular and irregular migration (Boucher and Gördemann 2021, p. 231).

The language of vulnerability is less prominent in the GCR than in the GCM, which indicates that the vulnerability of refugees is taken for granted, with a passing note in the GCR to vulnerable groups and their specific needs. On the other hand, the GCM makes it one of its main objectives to "address and reduce vulnerabilities in migration" (para. 16). The emphasis of the GCM falls on the situational vulnerabilities experienced by migrants in "countries of origin, transit and destination," but the discourse of vulnerable groups that identifies specific categories of people including women, children, older persons, indigenous people, victims of trafficking and others remains foundational. Interestingly, the GCM acknowledges labor-related vulnerabilities such as the abuses experienced by migrant workers due to their precarious status and advocates for work protections and integration (para. 23). Yet, the document also emphasizes enhanced screening procedures at the border, the management of mixed movements, and the obligations of countries in the Global South to readmit irregular migrants returned thus, elaborating its containment agenda. By invoking vulnerability yet avoiding the enforcement of legally-binding human rights obligations, the GCM becomes a depoliticized document that endorses the status quo and renders migrants' rights soft law (Desmond 2020; Pécoud 2021).

Zetter (2019) places the New York Declaration and the Global Compacts in the context of the broader neoliberal economic order in which the humanitarian-development nexus (HDN) mirrors the core-periphery/metropole model of colonialism. He argues that the HDN, supported by organizations such as the UNHCR and IOM and invoked in the aforementioned treaties, represents an instrument for the Global North to contain refugees in their countries of origin. The securitization of migration purports to alleviate the burdens experienced by hosting countries by obstructing the mobility of displaced people and ensures that the Global North can establish pathways to secure productive surplus labor from "safe, regular, and orderly" migration while reinforcing the dependence of peripheral countries in the Global South (Zetter 2019, p. 1778). Development, which traces its roots to colonial ideologies reinforcing distinctions between developed and underdeveloped countries, is envisioned as a solution for improving the conditions in countries of origin to prevent outward migration, thus becoming an instrument of externalization and of curtailing access to asylum (Mathew 2021, p. 10). The Global Compacts and their mainstreaming of vulnerability discourses ultimately perpetuate this neocolonial logic of containment through their emphasis on voluntary humanitarianism and development, which prioritizes these over human rights (Boucher and Gördemann 2021, p. 229).

3. DISCUSSION

IOM's Development of Vulnerability Discourses

Because of its breadth of migration management experience, it is not surprising that IOM was selected as the main agency to lead the debates around the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM), a document that ultimately brings migration management, humanitarianism and development considerations together in an effort to both mainstream a

human rights discourse protecting migrants and curb irregular migration. During the 2017 International Dialogue on Migration in Geneva, IOM organized a multi-panel workshop, titled *Understanding migrant vulnerabilities,* that invited various stakeholders to weigh in on the emergent concept of *migrants in vulnerable situations*. The IOM thematic conference paper laid out in brief what was to become IOM's stance on vulnerable migrants, which was further elaborated as part of its work after the adoption of the GCM in 2016.

IOM argues that vulnerable migrants have been excluded from discussions related to legal definitions and specific protections reserved for refugees or trafficked persons, or from discussions of vulnerable groups (IOM 2017, p. 5). In fact, IOM takes issue with existing definitions of vulnerability, particularly UNHCR discourses, that place people into "vulnerable groups" depending on their membership in a particular group, a paradigm the organization considers both reductive and discriminatory. Instead, IOM argues that humanitarian actors should properly assess both the "many factors that may protect an individual from, or expose him or her to violence, exploitation, abuse, and rights violations that may bear no relation to their membership in a group" (IOM 2017, p. 4). In this sense, IOM proposes a nuanced model of vulnerability assessment and theorization that considers individual factors, household or family factors, community factors, structural factors and situational factors, thus acknowledging the complex interplay of individual and family traits, community characteristics, and systemic forms of discrimination and abuse.

This approach will be further developed as part of IOM's Assistance to Vulnerable Migrants (AVM) Unit, a recent paradigm shift which redefines the organization's approach to migration management by couching its practices in the language of human rights and protection. Through a close analysis of IOM publications and central AVM Unit documents, including the *IOM Handbook on Protection and Assistance for Migrants Vulnerable to Violence, Exploitation and Abuse* (2019), I will turn to IOM's theorization of vulnerability in an effort to elucidate the relationship between the organization's knowledge-making practices and its migration governance regime. As IOM's operationalization of vulnerability demonstrates, there remains a marked disparity between IOM's theoretical recognition of structural vulnerability factors (precariousness) and its practical agenda, which jeopardizes, instead of bolstering, forced migrants' human rights.

IOM's Definition of Vulnerability

In its *Glossary on Migration*, IOM defines vulnerability within a migration context as "the limited capacity to avoid, resist, cope with, or recover from harm. This limited capacity is the result of the unique interaction of individual, household, community, and structural characteristics and conditions" (IOM 2019a, p. 229). Although the term "limited capacity" is not attributed to an individual and remains abstract, the implications are that vulnerability relates to a limited human capacity. Thus, vulnerability is not imagined as a universal condition, but as a situational or circumstantial phenomenon that arises from a sense of individual deficiency. Humanitarian responses are envisioned as forms of remediation of the symptoms of vulnerability through targeted individual interventions.

Additionally, the *Glossary* defines *migrants in vulnerable situations* as "migrants who are unable to effectively enjoy their human rights, are at increased risk of violations and abuse and who, accordingly, are entitled to call on a duty bearer's heightened duty of care" (IOM 2019a, p. 134). Here, IOM links migrant vulnerability directly to the deprivation of human

rights, thus complicating the language of vulnerability by suggesting that various societal factors at play generate situations of vulnerability. In this context, vulnerability is no longer defined as a limited capacity, but as a set of situational factors that put an individual at risk of violence or abuse. This means that what is at stake is a societal deficit or injustice. The crucial role of humanitarian actors is emphasized again in this second definition, since situations of vulnerability are said to require a paternalistic response of care.

IOM has been more systematic and careful about elucidating its operative concepts than UNHCR. Nevertheless, the language of vulnerability that IOM employs still elicits contradictions and ambiguities, such as the unresolved tension between inherent vulnerability and structural vulnerability (Mackenzie and Dodd 2014). It also captures a particular hierarchical relationship of power between migrants deemed vulnerable and, thus, helpless and dependent, and humanitarian actors deemed to have the duty to provide care and, thus, legitimized to take control of migrants' lives as part of the logic of humanitarian governance.

IOM's AVM Unit Documents

In early 2020, IOM launched a series of publications meant to provide practical tools for the identification of migrant vulnerabilities and to set guidelines for providing protection and assistance to migrants, including its central document, the *IOM Handbook on Protection and Assistance for Migrants Vulnerable to Violence, Exploitation and Abuse* (*IOM Handbook*), and two guidance handbooks on referral mechanisms and response planning. These documents were produced with the financial assistance of the European Union, and within the framework of the Global Action against Trafficking in Persons and Smuggling of Migrants (GLO.ACT), a partnership between the European Union, UNODC, IOM, and UNICEF. In other words, IOM's research on migrant vulnerabilities has been from the beginning aligned with EU priorities on migration, including criminalizing trafficking and smuggling activities as a way to curb irregular migration. This is not a departure from the general agenda of the IOM, in which the risks of trafficking and of migrating in general have been used in previous informational campaigns as deterrence strategies for irregular mobility (Nieuwenhuys and Pécoud 2007).

The *IOM Handbook* indeed emerges directly from IOM's previous work on combating trafficking and smuggling and providing protections for migrant victims, and relies significantly on previous documents such as the 2004 *IOM Handbook on Direct Assistance for Victims of Trafficking* (IOM 2019b, pp. 3-4). It was conceived as a set of guidelines that would assist case managers, service providers, development, and state entities to offer protection for migrants in vulnerable situations, whether they be in humanitarian or emergency contexts. It proposes a complex plan to operationalize and apply the Determinants of Migrant Vulnerability Model (DoMV) detailed in almost 300 dense pages of definitions, assessments, questionnaires and guidelines. Most significantly, the DoMV expands on the multifaceted factors that produce situations of vulnerability for migrants: individual factors, household and family factors, community factors and structural factors.

Individual factors include "age, sex, racial and/or ethnic identity, sexual orientation, gender identity, personal history, mental and emotional health, and access to resources such as money, goods or support" (IOM 2019b, p. 6). Although this enumeration of physical and identitarian traits might evoke the classic listing of vulnerable groups, IOM clarifies that these factors are context-specific, which means that they are variable depending on migrants' status in society, histories and experiences, beliefs and attitudes, physical and mental health and other

individual characteristics that render the rigid boundaries of group belonging more flexible. These additional circumstances are said to influence how migrants experience their own vulnerability and resilience (IOM 2019b, p. 28). The assessment toolkit provided by the *IOM Handbook* details a series of questions that touch on migrants' country of origin/citizenship, migration status, history of migration, human trafficking, physical and psychosocial situation, education, financial situation, health, shelter, race, ethnicity and religion, biological sex, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, and others (IOM 2019b, pp. 101-103).

Household and family factors include "the family circumstances of individuals and their family members, the role and position of individuals within the family, and family histories and experiences" (IOM 2019b, p. 7). IOM holds that households and families can present both risk factors such as interpersonal violence, single-parent headed households, and protective factors such as a supportive environment, gender parity, and basic needs met within the family (IOM 2019, p. 118). Among the forms of assistance for households and families, issues such as shelter, WASH, food security, personal safety, health, employment and access to education are prioritized and solutions such as cash-based programming are suggested, similar to the UNHCR model of vulnerability assistance. There is also an emphasis on child protection issues related to unaccompanied children, family reunification, or child labor.

Community-level factors take into consideration how individuals and their families are situated within larger communities. Community contexts present both risk and protective factors as exemplified by social networks that provide support and protection to some groups and enact exclusion, marginalization or discrimination against others (IOM 2019b, p. 154). IOM assessment toolkits take into consideration several variables including individual status, community beliefs and practices, livelihood opportunities, environmental factors, and the prevalence of violence, among others (IOM 2019b, pp. 181-182).

Finally, and most interestingly, structural factors are said to be twofold: institutional or organizational (governmental or non-governmental organizations, and regional or global institutions) and abstract (systemic issues related to globalization, climate change, state inequalities, social systems, and the impact of historical events). This is where IOM clearly identifies a series of risk factors related to "systemic marginalization and discrimination, conflict and instability, poor governance, the absence of accountability mechanisms, and weak rule of law," balanced out by protective factors such as "peace and security, good governance, respect for human rights, and equitable development" (IOM 2019b, p. 198). The recognition that vulnerability can be an effect of structural systems of inequality or precarity, and not simply inscribed upon the body as an essential trait, represents a significant departure from the vulnerable groups paradigm. However, the subsequent structural factors assessment toolkit included in the *IOM Handbook* remains focused on measuring individual experiences of structural factors, with some guidelines for case managers for navigating challenging political systems, respect for human rights, and migration management practices. The IOM does not engage in a broader critique of specific systems of oppression or marginalization and the theorization of structural vulnerability remains at the level of abstraction.

The complementary documents produced by the IOM AVM Unit include the *IOM Guidance on Referral Mechanisms*, which provides guidelines for government officials on developing referral mechanisms for the protection of migrants vulnerable to violence, exploitation and abuse. The *IOM Guidelines on Response Planning* offers support for government officials carrying out planning processes on migrant protection and assistance globally. Both

adjacent documents employ the determinants of migrant vulnerability framework (DoMV) and make recommendations meant to enable state agencies and organizations in countries of origin, transit or destination to work collaboratively with other non-governmental agencies and strengthen their operational capacities. Like many other IOM projects, these guidelines are focused on a technocratic humanitarian model of protection, based on hyper-efficiency, data collection, identification and classification of migrants, project planning, targets, finance, operational outputs, and less so on migrants' rights. This bureaucratization of vulnerability informs IOM's central work of humanitarian governance focused ultimately on the biopolitical control of migrant lives.

Overall, the IOM AVM Unit key documents present a nuanced philosophy of migrant vulnerability that departs from the humanitarian norm, which attributes vulnerability to individuals based on group membership. There is an implicit critique of previous underdeveloped models of vulnerability, most evidently UNHCR models, and a concerted effort to engage with the structural dimensions of vulnerability, or what scholars have termed *precariousness*. This is a welcome gesture on the part of IOM, particularly since it brings into focus systems of inequality and injustice that shape migrant journeys. However, in practice, IOM is not a human rights advocacy agency that challenges and pushes against structural factors, particularly when these are the result of donor states operating their externalization and non-entrée policies. On the contrary, the IOM has been actively diffusing and bolstering Global North externalization practices in its operationalization of vulnerability, as the following case study will show.

IOM's Operationalization of Vulnerability Governance

A 2020 IOM article titled "Migrants in Vulnerable Situations: Words to Describe Wounds" exemplifies the manner in which IOM operationalizes the Determinants of Migrant Vulnerability (DoMV) model on the ground as part of the EU's externalization agenda in Africa. The article introduces the new DoMV framework arguing that it fills an important gap "in identifying, protecting and assisting migrants who are not entitled to international protection as refugees, stateless persons or victims of human trafficking, but who nonetheless require protection and assistance" (IOM 2020). It then presents IOM return operations in West and Central Africa, funded by the European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), focused on identifying African migrants stranded in the desert in desperate situations, providing temporary humanitarian protections for them, and ultimately persuading them to return to their home countries with or without some form of financial assistance to support their reintegration. In the article, Marina Buckenham, an IOM official, adds that "there are different forms of vulnerability and different needs. IOM's support is tailored to the different vulnerabilities of our beneficiaries to ensure their protection and sustainable reintegration" (IOM 2020). Thus, vulnerability assessments directly inform migration management practices.

Stranded African migrants are described as having reached "the end of a lifelong dream of better living conditions in Europe" when they "voluntarily" requested to be returned with the assistance of the IOM. There is no mention of the choices that migrants were provided with, whether they were seeking asylum in Europe, whether they requested access to an RSD procedure after the vulnerability screening, and whether their return decision was truly "voluntary" or a last resort. Scholarship describes the voluntariness of IOM return

operations as questionable, since these sometimes target people eligible for refugee protection and often act as nothing more than reimagined deportation mechanisms (Pécoud 2018; Fine and Walters 2022; Maâ 2023). In many circumstances, migrants do not have an actual choice between staying or returning, but between returning "as a free person receiving certain financial benefits in the form of return or reintegration assistance, or in shackles without any financial assistance" (Koch 2014, p. 911).

In 2025, IOM announced that it reached a new milestone by returning approximately 100,000 migrants home from Libya, as part of its Voluntary Humanitarian Return (VHR) program (IOM 2025). Through outreach in detention centers and urban areas in Libya, IOM distributes information about its free of charge return assistance, then provides counselling, vulnerability screenings and assistance to travel for migrants, including consular services and return flights. This country-specific program complements the organization's broader Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration initiative (AVRR), through which approximately 1.5 million migrants have been returned since 1979. According to the latest official statistics on return provided by the IOM for the year 2023, approximately 22% of migrants were returned through VHR and 78% through AVRR, with a total number of 71,951 migrants assisted (Figure 1).

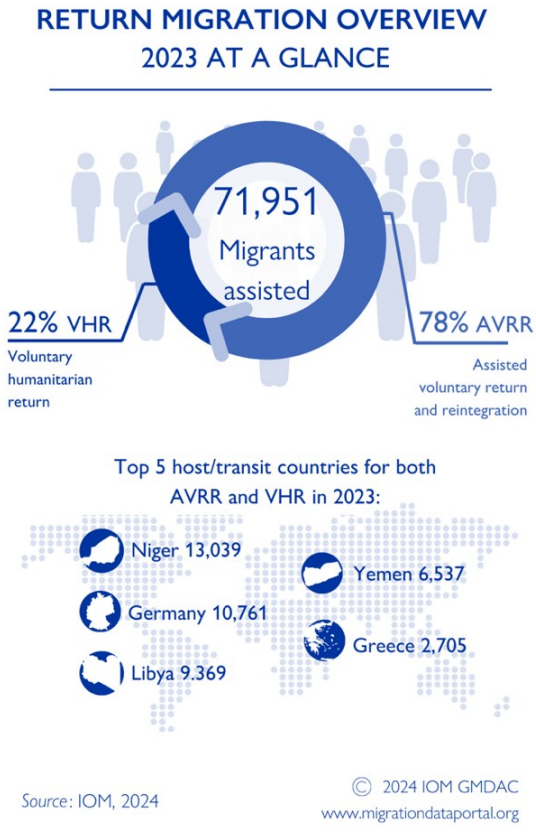

Figure 1 2023 IOM Return Statistics.

In this context, vulnerability screenings become the fundamental bureaucratic tools through which migrants are identified and processed for return, in lieu of procedures that can establish forced migrants' access to asylum or RSD. As Goodwin-Gill (2019) points out, IOM's discourse on migrants in vulnerable situations conceals underlying protection needs, while ignoring systemic reasons and focusing responses on symptoms. Even more, it creates a knowledge base that enables a concerted containment strategy in Africa, as the EU-IOM joint operations across the continent demonstrate. This is, in the end, a form of co-optation of the more complex and politicized potentials of vulnerability theory in the guise of a seemingly neutral and apolitical technocratic discourse that aims to deepen IOM's power and influence in the global migration management regime and mask its less savory practices.

IOM's Role in the EU Governmentality of Migration

According to Lavenex (2016), IOs may in fact play multiple roles in relation to EU migration policies. First, they may act as counterweights by resisting and correcting EU policies that are divergent from their policies. Secondly, they may play the role of subcontractors for EU agendas by implementing key EU projects. UNHCR is perceived as a greater counterweight to the EU, as opposed to the IOM, which has reduced autonomy and, thus, fulfills a state subcontractor role (Lavenex 2016, pp. 557-58; Rossi 2019, p. 378). However, both organizations have acted as subcontractors for EU external migration policies in a variety of projects across Africa and elsewhere. Finally, IOs may be transmitters of EU policies by diffusing EU norms and rules, which is once again a role that both IOM and UNHCR have taken on in recent years (Lavenex 2016, p. 556). The EU migration governmentality project has become more expansive and complex due to the cooptation of the operations of these organizations. As a result, it is difficult to clearly track accountability for specific decisions and activities that may impact migrants' human rights or jeopardize their pathways towards asylum.

IOM plays a central role in the EU's governmentality of migration, as it is responsible for several migration management operations in the region, including providing services in refugee and detention camps, collecting data and tracking forced migrants, facilitating assisted "voluntary" returns, and contributing to various information campaigns and activities related to migration. The organization operationalizes its discourses of vulnerability on at least three different levels of the EU externalization regime: facilitating returns, enhancing the securitization of migration, and contributing to the overall EU containment strategy in Africa.

A key tool for EU externalization policies has been the Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), launched in 2015 at the European-African migration summit. It is a funding mechanism designed to address the root causes of irregular migration and displacement in Africa and to enable better migration management. As part of this project, UNHCR has received approximately 28,500,000 euros to ensure emergency protection, evacuation, and access to durable solutions to displaced persons, while the IOM has received 95,000,000 euros to facilitate the assisted voluntary returns of migrants and their reintegration in their countries of origin (Bartels 2022, p. 140). IOM's activities have grown considerably as a result of this funding stream, with the organization expanding its psychosocial services and vulnerability evaluations, as well as improving regional conditions where migrants in transit are hosted. On the other hand, the funding distribution clearly indicates which activities are prioritized by the

EU agenda, with the redefinition of international protection for displaced people in the form of IOM-operated voluntary returns, and not in the form of resettlement and asylum procedures conducted by the UNHCR. This indicates that UNHCR activities in the region are slowly supplanted by IOM-driven migration management operations.

Both UNHCR and IOM have developed a complex relationship with state-induced returns, legitimizing this practice as one of the main mechanisms of border externalization. While assisted voluntary returns are the prerogative of IOM, both organizations have emphasized their complementary role in the area of migrant return and approved "each other's engagement, as well as the overarching return objectives of governments, and are, therefore, involved in norm-building regarding the social and political acceptability of state-induced returns" (Koch 2014, p. 906). As Chimni (2004) notes, UNHCR has become increasingly involved in the task of returnee integration, moving away from its traditional role as an advocate for third country resettlement or host country integration, and embracing more frequently the option of voluntary repatriation (p. 69). In part, this has been a result of the pressures UNHCR is facing in protecting its mandate and activities from the expansion of IOM operations and in responding to donor governments' expectations (Koch 2014, p. 913). More importantly, UNHCR has been actively supporting IOM return activities in order to protect the institution of asylum, since more restrictive border migration controls are deemed a prerequisite for refugee protection (Scheel and Ratfisch 2014, p. 930). In other words, through its active collaboration and encouragement of return activities, the UNHCR has morally legitimized IOM's involvement in returns of questionable voluntariness and has bolstered the increasing sovereignty of states in the governance of migration (Koch 2014, p. 919).

Furthermore, IOM has been involved in securitization activities, reinforcing border regimes by training border guards to process populations on the move, sharing technological tools for the registration of forced migrants and for data collection, and even, in some cases, assisting with the operation of detention centers. The vulnerability assessment tools elaborated by IOM have become some of the main mechanisms through which people on the move are assessed at the border and identified for additional protections or assistance. IOM's routine assessments of migrants in transit in European hotspots and across the African continent are conditional upon individuals being able to gain access to "rights, services and mobility opportunities" (Bartels 2022, p. 148). For example, in Libya, IOM collaborates with the Libyan coast guard and other local authorities to improve conditions in migrant detention centers, to provide the technological equipment necessary for more efficient processing of migrants, and to train staff on rights-based migration management (Bartels 2022, pp. 141-42). In other words, IOM is engaged in projects that attempt to improve hosting conditions in North Africa, which reinforces EU goals to render neighboring countries "safe" third countries and use these to either stem migration or push back asylum seekers (Cuttitta 2020, p. 4).

In this sense, IOM contributes to the EU strategy of containment in Africa. In Landau's conceptualization (2019), containment development refers to a set of strategies utilized by the EU across the African continent to address the root causes of migration and confine mobile populations to specific areas; direct aid to African countries comes with requirements to control migration, while successful development is redefined in terms of settling local populations, and assistance is specifically targeted to controlling the sources of

mobility (Landau 2019, p. 172). A significant portion of IOM's EU funding stream is invested in reintegration efforts, wherein individuals and families returned to their countries of origin after migration receive financial assistance to restore their lives (Chuang 2022). IOM information campaigns across the African continent also serve as a form of propaganda that emphasizes the myriad risks of migration, trafficking, smuggling and other types of criminality, and aims to deter individuals from leaving their homes (Landau 2019; Brachet 2015; Pécoud 2018).

IOM is deeply embedded in the EU migration governmentality regime that focuses on migration control, border externalization, and the containment of mobile populations. Through its vulnerability classifications, return policies, securitization borderwork, and development activities, the organization has considerably expanded its influence in the field of migration management in Europe, across the African continent, and elsewhere.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper began with the observation that there is a set of contradictions at play in the manner in which border externalization regimes have expanded worldwide in the past decade alongside a growing human rights discourse in international, governmental, and policy forums acknowledging migrant vulnerability. By focusing in particular on IOM's cooptation by the EU migration governmentality complex, I attempted to tease out the relationship between IOM's knowledge-making practices about migrant vulnerability and its power within humanitarian governance regimes. These regimes have been sorting, classifying and labeling displaced people as part of various migration management practices across the African continent and beyond.

Through a close analysis of the discourses on vulnerability developed by the IOM, this paper traced the different assumptions and frames of recognition that establish the organization's representations of forced migrants, as well as the extent of its humanitarian governance regime. IOM's language of vulnerability attempts to develop vulnerability assessment frameworks to attend to the complex interrelationship between individual, family, community and structural factors. IOM's theorization of vulnerability comes closer to scholars' critical evaluations according to which an engagement with systemic or structural forms of vulnerability (*precariousness*) is less likely to stereotype forced migrants and more likely to invite effective political action on their behalf. However, the scholarship on structural vulnerability misses an important point—no matter how complex an organization's vulnerability discourses may be, they can be instrumentalized in migration management and border externalization practices that ultimately enhance migrants' vulnerability, instead of alleviating it. This is exemplified by IOM's migration management operations in Africa, in which vulnerability assessments are utilized to identify, classify, and register mobile populations and return them to their home countries, thus carrying out EU's containment agenda.

By analyzing the manner in which IOM contributes to EU border externalization strategies, including returns, securitization borderwork, and containment, I conclude that vulnerability discourses may in fact function as migration governance mechanisms that enhance the biopolitical control of people on the move. IOM's participation in EU migration management provides this organization with the legitimacy and funding needed to expand its own distinct humanitarian governance regime focused on distinguishing between deserving

refugees and undeserving forced migrants. In this landscape, the EU attempts to contain people displaced by the compounding effects of colonial histories, neocolonial globalization patterns, conflict and instability and climate change, and to curtail forced migrants' access to the institution of asylum.

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