

Interview with William Lacy Swing*

William Lacy Swing is the Director General of the International Organization for Migration (IOM). He has held the office of Special Representative to the UN Secretary-General for the Democratic Republic of Congo (2003–2008) and Western Sahara (2001–2003), and headed the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara. This followed a long career in the United States Department of State, during which he served as ambassador six times.



People are moving around the world for all kinds of reasons, whether economic, political or otherwise. Does IOM deal with all these different categories of migrant persons without any differentiation, or is there an emphasis on some specifically?

We help all types of migrants, but we do deal a lot with conflict-related IDPs, refugees and other forced migrants, as well as increased migratory movements induced by climate change and natural disasters. However, IOM's 2008 World Migration Report makes one concluding point, which is that more than ever in human history, most migration is related to employment in some manner or another. Labour migration is the big wave of the future, given the demographic, economic and labour market trends of today. Although climate change will continue to be a factor – with anywhere between 25 million to 1 billion people possibly affected by climate change by 2050 (the most widely cited figure being 200 million) – the overwhelming majority of migration is and will be about employment.

Has IOM broadened its scope to deal with these new trends? How has its work developed over the years?

What has remained constant is that from its creation, the IOM has been the only international organization that has had the remit to deal with all the ramifications

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of the way that people move. People initially thought of IOM as a transport agency, as after World War Two we were focused on the ravages of the war and unemployment in Europe, and moving people to places such as Australia, Canada, the US and Latin America, to countries used to receiving refugees and migrants. However, even at the time, it was also a question of helping member states to meet their migration needs, whether by helping them to come up with policies, ways of being able to recruit labour migrants, etc. After that, in the period of the Cold War, there were the regional conflicts in South-East Asia, in Africa and Central America, so our work moved more into those areas. By 1990, when the Berlin Wall had fallen and globalization began, we became a truly global organization, although we still don't have the universal coverage that either the UN or the ICRC would have.

Nevertheless, IOM has made a spectacular step forward in the size of its membership, growing from 67 countries in 1998 to 127 today. What are the reasons for that?

I give a lot of credit to my predecessor, who worked very hard at this. During his ten years here, he doubled the membership, as well as quadrupling the budget, from around US\$200 million to last year's budget of US\$1 billion. In that time, our number of worldwide offices increased from 119 to 440, and our staff grew from about 1100 to about 7000.

Apart from his good work, we were also riding the crest of a wave. Fifteen, or even twelve years ago, migration used to get a big yawn – nobody wanted to talk about it. Today, virtually every government and every agency in the world has an interest in migration. We have more and more partners now – this is good for us, because we're too small to do migration on our own. Today it's clear that we live in the era of the greatest human movement in recorded history. Not percentage-wise, but in terms of number of people. By next year, there will be an estimated 214 million international migrants in the world, counting refugees, labour migrants, their families, students and young professionals going abroad, etc. I have made the point that if these people were constituted as a nation, it would be the fifth most populous in the world. The 305 billion dollars that they sent home last year to developing countries alone is larger than the gross domestic product of Switzerland and a number of other IOM member states. So they would be a major power, in that sense alone. Of course, with migration, there are social costs, in the sense of tearing at the fabric of the family when the breadwinner is away. So that's to be taken into consideration. But with all of that in mind, the issue that this agency is focused on is how migration can take place in a humane and orderly manner.

You mentioned that labour migration is a major factor in this current wave of human movement – to what can this surge in labour migration be attributed?

That's the key question – the answer is demographic, economic and labour market trends. If you consider that in the North (Western Europe, the US, Canada, or Japan, for example), there is a dramatically declining birth rate and an ageing population. In the South, of course, given the economic disparities, you have a labour market always in surplus: too many people chasing jobs and too little

development to create jobs. So whether one likes it or not, the reality is that South/North movement will continue for the foreseeable future. However, we shouldn't forget that South/South migration is just as important. Within the West African region, for example, South/South migration is much greater than from there to Europe; in the Americas, so many Mexican workers have left for the United States that Mexico has now created some multiple entry temporary worker visas for Guatemalans to come back and forth as seasonal workers to fill the gap. There's a lot of that happening now. So we help to look for solutions to migration problems, and to facilitate an exchange of information. We are continuing to support 14 regional consultative mechanisms on migration, which work very well because they bring together the destination, origin and transit countries.

Has the increase in labour migration resulted in states trying to limit their reception of refugees – to classify them as migrants rather than asylum seekers?

I think until recently the current trend had been more of the number of refugees declining, and that of IDPs increasing. But I don't see any lessening of support for refugees. The quotas in the US, for example, have tended to go up more than decline – it's just over 77,000 people per year now. I would think that these quotas are likely to continue to increase over a period of time, because I think that's the inclination of the administration. But they will of course be constrained somewhat by the financial circumstances.

In Europe, such a phenomenon might partly be due to the pressures of labour migration. A lot of the countries would like to select who comes, in terms of the skill levels. I think they're looking at it much more as a migration challenge, because they've opened their borders with the East now, and the borders get very soft as you go eastward. There is also their flank on the South, in the Mediterranean, and the problems that Italy, Malta, Greece and Spain are facing now with irregular migration. This reflects the kinds of pressures that impact on many European countries' attitude towards refugee flows.

In many destination countries, there is also a lot of resistance to migration because the population feels their identity is threatened. Do you also engage in that kind of issue?

Very much so – especially now with the financial crisis, we're obviously concerned about the loss of jobs and the decline in remittances. We're also concerned that official development assistance and foreign direct investment levels don't decline in this period. But our overriding concern is that governments do not resort to discriminatory policies that verge on xenophobia. Now, my belief is that we have to counter a tendency on the part of some governments to think in a counter-cyclical way, that the answer to our problem is to send the migrants home. If they're going to recover, they're going to need these people, considering what I just told you about the demographic and labour market trends. You can send them home, but you're going to have to call them right back. There's also something related to

national identity, but that's already changing, even just with the creation of the European Union.

Another fundamental point is that far too much attention is being paid in the media and by governments to the question of what they call illegal migration – we call it irregular migration, in the sense that these migrants are not properly documented. At the same time, far too little attention is paid to the contribution migrants make to our countries. We do a lot of work disseminating information to educate the public – for example, we recently did a campaign through the Italian media about the contribution of migrants to society. In South Africa and in Ukraine, we also have initiatives that directly tackle issues of xenophobia because of the levels of violence towards migrants. This is a very important part of what we do, to educate and work with communities to promote greater understanding of migrants.

How can destination countries manage migration in the face of this pressure from their populations?

You have to strike a balance between migration control and migration facilitation. If you don't have a control policy, your migration facilitation won't be credible with your populations. I think two elements are fundamental. First, governments need to have a comprehensive, whole-of-government approach to migration. For example, a country may turn over the migration portfolio to the interior ministry; therefore, their focus will be on border control, police, and sending irregular migrants home, because that's what they do. However, the foreign ministry may have an interest in the relations with the countries of origin and would not want to cause tensions. Other ministries, such as social welfare, would have an interest in human rights and humanitarian concerns. So if you don't bring it all together, you tend to get an imbalanced policy that will not serve the national interest. Now, the second aspect is that you have to then put that into a regional consultation framework to avoid the kinds of bilateral conflicts that come up because the two parties are not talking to one another.

The issue of detaining asylum seekers or migrants – as well as the question of sending them back to their countries of origin (refoulement) – can become quite critical in many situations. How do you see your role there? Do you engage in protection activities?

We don't have a formal protection mandate, but we do protect. Our role is not a specific treaty-based protection mandate, like UNHCR's for example, which we respect and support. But we do a lot of *de facto* protection because we are involved in a lot of grey areas where nobody else is present, or where no-one else can do it, wants to do it or has a mandate to do it. We are obviously going to protect when people are in need.

The question of detained migrants is one such grey area. Tens of thousands of migrants all around the world – in developed and developing countries alike – have been put into prisons, not because they're criminals but just because they are in the country irregularly. Countries will often call these detention places

something else, like migrant centres, but they end up being detention centres nonetheless. In many parts of the world, the conditions in the prisons are absolutely appalling. So if you do not enter that grey area, and actually go and help them – whether by trying to improve their conditions, providing assistance or just being there as a support – they would just be left there to rot in jail. It's a very difficult one to justify on the face of it, but on a purely humanitarian level, detained migrants actually need that help, and that is something that we can do.

Do you counsel refugees on the possible risks of returning to their countries? What is your policy in situations where they are not ready to go back?

We definitely have a policy – we will only do voluntary returns. We do not do forceful repatriation of any kind. I've had several European countries ask whether we could suggest to the migrants that they go home, or stimulate them to do so. I said no – we don't do suggestions, we don't do stimulation. If they come to us and want to go home, we'll take them home. Beforehand, we will also provide them with all the information they need, including what the situation is like back at home.

We have to make judgements on the ground, though. If a government decides to send people back forcefully, then we have to face the dilemma of whether to offer reintegration services on the other side to migrants who often have little to nothing and need some humanitarian assistance. It has to be done in such a way that we do not promise the government sending them back that we'll do that. However, once they're back, they're back, and then you have to deal with the issue. If the government in the country of origin doesn't have any kind of reintegration services in place, then we would give serious consideration to undertaking those activities. But it has to be done in a manner that would not then encourage the government of the destination state to send people back against their will.

What assistance do you offer to refugees who are resettled in third countries?

In the resettlement programme for refugees and IDPs, we often work closely with UNHCR, which refers refugees for resettlement to third countries. IOM organizes their travel documents and transport, we carry out medical screenings for serious illnesses or contagious diseases such as TB, and treat those who are sick until they are cleared fit to travel.

We also do a lot of cultural orientation for people who are being resettled, and have very well-trained people to facilitate that. If we are resettling Iraqis out of Jordan and Syria to Canada, they need to know a little bit about the place – for example, that it's cold! So we try to brace them. The Japanese, remarkably, have just asked IOM to start cultural orientation and Japanese language training on very, very tiny numbers in the Northern Thailand refugee camps, where the Myanmar refugees are. Japan is actually going to integrate these refugees into their society, which is a first. They've never done this before.

There's actually a lot more involved, including medical escorts and transit assistance, but essentially, UNHCR refers refugees for resettlement to third countries and once a resettlement country approaches us, we get involved. It's very

complicated. One example of such collaboration with UNHCR is in Malaysia, which is not an IOM member and where we don't have an office, but from where we resettle about 7000 Myanmar refugees per year.

IOM is not a part of the UN, but you work closely with UNHCR, for example. How do you find your place in the system of the various UN agencies who also deal directly or indirectly with issues that have a bearing on migration? What is the strategy?

Our membership decided once again in 2006 that they didn't want us to be part of the UN; they wanted to keep us independent. At the same time, however, member states want us to continue to strengthen our ties with the UN. The result is that we're now part of all UN country teams worldwide. We're the lead in the camp management cluster for natural disasters, and also part of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee.

Finding our role is a difficult kind of balancing act, but I think we've managed to do it – we have our place at the table. Our weakness is that generally speaking, in an emergency or disaster, we're the first at the table who has no money even though often we have an operational presence in these places where others don't. If something happens, we have to go out and look for money quickly. We draw on UN funds too, like the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) and the Peace Building Fund. We have an excellent relationship with OCHA as well. However, we only have one contingency fund of our own right now, which we use for stranded migrants. We need to build up those funds so that we can get off the mark very quickly, as we have been valued over the years for being quick, low-cost and also relatively low-profile.

Nevertheless, we are much closer to the private sector than the UN in the way we operate. In terms of our operational pattern, we're probably closer to the World Food Programme than anybody else, because we're operational. However, we're more than operational, as we do a lot of policy too, especially as we've become more of a global organization. That is why we look for a chief of mission who is both very skilled operationally, but also very nuanced on the policies – the complete diplomat who can bring together the diplomatic skills to have credibility within the UN system and the diplomatic corps, but who can also deliver.

What do IOM's policy activities entail? Does IOM seek to develop international law on migration?

We counsel a lot on national migration legislation – making comparable foreign laws available, examining best practices, and advising on which elements make a good law and which may be problematic. We similarly support governments in coming up with counter-trafficking legislation. We also advise States and other actors on the contents of existing norms of international law.

Although we are not part of any of the UN policy-making bodies, not even as observers, we also try to make sure that we have a voice in every significant conversation related to migration, and a seat at every important table. IOM is involved in the Global Migration Group (which promotes the wider application of

international and regional migration instruments and norms, as well as coherent migration policies), and the World Economic Forum, where we are part of the Global Alliance for Migration. We also want to be part of the Summit of the Americas follow-up, it's important for IOM and I've insisted on keeping our place at the Joint Summit Working Group.

However, we've had to be very careful. While we do provide policy advice, the majority of member states are very concerned that IOM does not become a normative body.

The Red Cross Movement – particularly National Societies – have some activities which overlap with migration issues, for example the restoration of family links. What is IOM's interaction with the Red Cross Movement?

We don't work with the national Red Cross or Red Crescent society everywhere, but where we can, we do – for example, in places like Iraq, Syria and even in Kenya, with the post-election violence. We worked very closely with the Kenyan Red Cross, actually, in devising the humanitarian response: the camps and the food and non-food relief distribution. I'll give you another example – in Italy. The migrant reception centre on Lampedusa, where we work with the Italian Red Cross, UNHCR and others, was meant to be a role model to be replicated elsewhere, in places like the Greek islands. There has now been a change in policy by the new government regarding the centre. However, every time I go to Rome, one of the main calls I make is on the Italian Red Cross. They are a very important player and we value the relationship.

One thing I've learned about ICRC over the years is that you cannot work with the ICRC if you cannot develop a degree of confidence that it will guard any information it gets. I've always respected ICRC's total institutional integrity. I respect that because I know that at the end of the day, when everybody else has gone, ICRC will be the only one left who can really do something.

The programmes that you have in conflict areas – Afghanistan or Sudan, for example – are wide-ranging, and include activities such as assistance operations and community stabilization. What is the link between those programmes and the migration issue?

There's a debate among the member states as to the true role of IOM. There are those who are strictly constructionist, and insist on only the core mandate, which they would like to see defined in a very strict way. Then there are others who want us to be much more flexible. I tend a little more toward the flexible approach, because I can see a very clear connection between migration and various other activities. For example, the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programmes, which we have done or are doing in nearly 30 countries, including demobilizing and reintegrating ex-Tamil fighters in Sri Lanka right now. Until you have political and community stability, you are going to have a very heavy migration push factor, people are just going to leave. So it's very much migration-related.

You'd probably be surprised at some of our other activities – for instance, we did the whole German compensation programme for victims of the Nazi war crimes. Again, we do that – land and property compensation claims – because it's part of stabilizing countries. We are involved in many such programmes on an *ad hoc* basis – we're doing them now in Iraq and Sierra Leone.

In Indonesia, we're training the police in Aceh. There are a lot of members who don't like that – they ask, 'what does this have to do with migration?' Well, we have a 12-point strategy that they came up with in June 2007. In our annual budget, we relate every project we do to one of the 12 points. The programme in Aceh, for example, was related to three points. I say to them, you can still disagree with me, or my interpretation that fits with that particular point in the strategy, but they have to tell us if they want it that way – up to now, the majority have wanted us to remain relatively flexible, because we are operational.

Running this 'nation' of 200 million migrants, so to speak, is a heavy task. How do you prioritize?

A heavy task, yes. We're very limited in terms of our budget and very dependent on donor funding. But migration is not a clear-cut issue. The whole complex process of moving from one country to another or within a country has led to so many issues surfacing. Every aspect adds to the picture: for example, through our work, it's clear that tackling human trafficking isn't just about helping a victim of trafficking recover from their ordeal, physically, emotionally and economically, but also in overcoming stigma and discrimination towards them so that they can once again be full members of a society. If you don't do something to address the demand side, the problem will continue forever. If governments don't enact strong counter-trafficking legislation, traffickers will always escape prosecution because of legal loopholes, and if law enforcers don't understand the issue or have proper legislation to work with, they will neither be able to protect the victim nor ensure that traffickers are put behind bars.

You can't isolate and just deal with one component, because then you would really not be able to truly help the person. That is the difficulty of working in migration.