

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PROGRAMMES AND FINANCE

Twenty-sixth Session

STATEMENT BY THE DIRECTOR GENERAL

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Introduction

1. Welcome, and thank you for accommodating our modified way of working. It is good to see so many of you in person, and online. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has impacted our work in 2020 in more ways than we yet know, but it is heartening to see the dedication of the many IOM colleagues who have stayed in place to deliver and the support of so many Member States as we endeavor to continue our work. I would like to start by expressing my deepest condolences to all Member States for those you have lost during this pandemic.

2. This morning I want to offer a brief reflection of IOM's results in 2019 – as far away as it seems now – before updating you all on the changes to IOM's work that have taken place due to the global pandemic over the past several months and what we think that might mean for the future: both our future as a global agency, and the future of mobility as a whole.

IOM in 2019

3. In 2019, IOM continued to grow. The combined total revenue of the Organization – comprising assessed contributions, voluntary contributions and other income – increased by 17.4 per cent compared with 2018 and reached USD 2.13 billion.

4. 2019 saw a number of major institutional developments stemming from the elaboration of the Strategic Vision, the emerging Internal Governance Framework, and our growing role in the United Nations system. The creation of the Policy Hub, the establishment of the United Nations Network on Migration and the Start-up Fund for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and work to develop a new strategic results framework all reflect an organization reaching a new level of maturity. At regional level, efforts to strengthen the functioning of our regional offices have taken place, alongside the articulation of five-year regional strategies linked to the Strategic Vision.

5. Under the aegis of the Internal Governance Framework, we have begun to deliver on critical areas of operational effectiveness, through strengthening our internal justice system, procurement processes and risk-based financial planning, and taking steps towards the establishment of a core structure for the business transformation project, which will include a new enterprise resource planning system. Detailed assessments of this progress can be found in the report on the Internal Governance Framework, which has been distributed to you. Your support for these developments is much appreciated and much needed. Meanwhile, the total number of staff grew by 17 per cent to 14,811 by the end of the year, and over 3,500 projects were implemented in 150 countries.

6. The Organization made progress in terms of gender equality, with women representing 47 per cent of both international Professional and national staff. Women's representation at senior level (P-4 and above) stood at 40 per cent, still short of our 2023 target of 45 per cent. But while we have made progress in terms of gender, we are still striving to improve our diversity at all levels of the Organization.

7. The Black Lives Matter movement has prompted us to renew our efforts with urgency. Organizational success can only be achieved with and by a successful, diverse workforce that is able to deliver its full potential, in an environment free of racism, discrimination and xenophobia. We must do a better job of translating the Charter of the United Nations – universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion – into a work environment that promotes tolerance and inclusion, where everyone feels welcomed, regardless of their background, race, skin colour or identity.

8. Words alone are not enough. In 2019, 166 nationalities were represented in the Organization's global workforce. IOM staff from countries in the global South represented 79 per cent of the total IOM workforce, an increase of 1 per cent compared with 2018, but make up just 37 per cent of staff at senior levels. We can do better. Our Diversity and Inclusion Internship Programme awarded internships in several offices around the world to 18 young talented people from the global South, 14 of whom were women. Our Pathways Pool programme, now entering its second iteration, is prioritizing underrepresented nationalities to ensure the next generation of our leadership is truly representative of our global reach.

9. IOM has committed to supporting States in the implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. Since its adoption, over 122 offices reported that they had provided assistance in this regard, with the creation of nearly 50 country or regional migration coordination mechanisms, including local extensions of the United Nations Network on Migration. More broadly, 18 country offices reported that they had signed a new United Nations cooperation framework, ensuring migration, mobility or displacement issues are included in common country analyses and planning. In 2019, 129 IOM offices were part of United Nations country teams, while 91 were part of the operations management team and 66 were part of the humanitarian country team.

10. On the ground, our crisis-related programming reached over 28 million people in need of assistance in more than 75 countries, including Bangladesh, Nigeria, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen, which all remained Level 3 emergencies. The Organization remained deeply involved in inter-agency coordination of humanitarian assistance, leading on particular aspects of response in countries such as Colombia, South Sudan and Turkey.

The impact of COVID-19

11. As we have so often noted, IOM is deeply responsive to changing conditions on the ground. When COVID-19 spread across the world, IOM responded in a number of ways, working with governments and partners to ensure that migrants, whether in regular or irregular situations, returnees and forcibly displaced persons are included in all aspects of COVID-19 preparedness and response efforts. We are working with partners to raise awareness of the risks and inform migrant communities of the countermeasures they should take, while also working to counter the broader stigmatization of migrant groups. We are providing hygiene materials and establishing isolation facilities to offer vulnerable people the opportunity that so many of us have taken for granted: to avoid infection and access health support.

12. We have also responded to governments' direct calls for support, not least in returning the many migrants who have been stranded by the global travel lockdown, but also in developing means to manage borders safely. At points of entry across the world, we are training health workers to screen arrivals and front-line officers on surveillance and prevention, developing entry/exit procedures and performing needs assessments and screening activities, including at major trade corridors across Africa to minimize transmission along trucking routes.

13. I would like to take this opportunity to express my own sincere thanks to the donors who have supported our global COVID-19 Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan. To date, we have received USD 185 million of the USD 499 million requested, and particular thanks go to Germany, Japan and the United States of America for their generous contributions to the response.

14. The funding we have received is addressing the most pressing needs identified by our field operations, with emphasis upon maintaining continuity of service and assistance for those most impacted by COVID-19, particularly in terms of protection, camp coordination and camp management – which is our most pressing concern – livelihood support and other life-saving assistance to vulnerable

populations, especially women and children. More flexible contributions have been allocated to underfunded responses and to support organizational priorities, such as assistance to stranded migrants and addressing broader socioeconomic impacts. As you might imagine, despite the generosity of our donors, many gaps remain.

15. The impact that COVID-19 has had on our ability to do our work – and indeed the ability of all humanitarian actors to respond – cannot be underestimated. Our own internal survey has revealed that 84 per cent of offices have been impacted in terms of staffing, and 61 per cent have been impacted in terms of supply chains. At the same time, a majority (63%) of offices expect an increase in the number of people they will need to assist in the future. Security remains a challenge in some locations, as does maintaining access to affected populations.

16. The combination of uncertainty and changing needs has led to significant shifts in IOM's spending and employment. In terms of our existing programming, the global suspension of international travel has had a deep impact on our health assessment and visa assistance programmes. By June, our year-on-year spend was down by 19 per cent, as colleagues were unable to undertake planned programming or reach beneficiaries. However, nearly half (45%) of offices are currently adapting programme funds to respond to the changing situation.

17. Nonetheless, there are glimmers of hope: as we announced in mid-June, we hope to restart resettlement and movement operations – travel permitting – and colleagues are working hard to establish new and virtual methods of delivering services, such as pre-departure information and training. IOM may be today a little less mobile but we are definitely no less innovative.

18. We have also been asked by the United Nations system to play a significant role in the medical evacuation cell that has been activated for COVID-19 for the use of United Nations staff, and IOM clinics and laboratories are being used for COVID-19 testing. All of this is further evidence of our growing integration in the United Nations system. Meanwhile, a number of our health staff have been deployed to support COVID-19-related programmes, both internally and in support of government efforts, and several dozen of our health assessment sites are supporting local COVID-19 response initiatives. In developing countries, there is an urgent need to build the capacity of national health systems to prepare for future waves of the virus, and I am afraid there will indeed be future waves of the virus.

19. We are still calculating the full costs and impacts of COVID-19, as are all of you, though we know they will be deep. They have brought home to us, once more, the advantages and disadvantages of being a project-based organization. We have been flexible, but it has made some of our fragilities more visible. We have identified an immediate impact on financial coverage for staff and office costs in some 40 field offices. I have mandated a taskforce to develop a financial impact forecasting model – coordinated with our regional offices – to pre-empt and mitigate potential financial risks as they emerge.

20. Again, this fragility reinforces the importance of our ongoing discussions in the Working Group on Budget Reform, discussions which have particular relevance for our Chiefs of Mission and other field staff who are working tirelessly every day to deliver services while maintaining sustainable funding. Against this background, the Revision of the Programme and Budget for 2020 seeks authorization to use drawdowns from the Operational Support Income reserve to address immediate and unforeseen shortfalls, where a rapid response is crucial to mitigate risks as they occur. I will give you some examples.

21. First, the provision of personal protective equipment, testing kits and access to United Nations clinics to IOM staff. IOM does not have a central budget to cover the costs of ensuring IOM staff are

adequately protected and safeguarded against COVID-19. Since April, in some specific circumstances, through coordination with United Nations country teams, United Nations funds and programmes have provided personal protective equipment and access to medical facilities on our behalf. Albeit generous, these initiatives come with associated costs. This drawdown will allow us to fulfil our commitment to reimburse the United Nations and ensure our staff remain safe in the field.

22. Second, we need to be in a position to rebound swiftly to deliver on our mandate once we emerge from the pandemic. Thus, we are undertaking a number of necessary measures to ensure that the Organization operates within available budget resources, while maintaining core structures. We are developing a structural adjustment plan to enable offices to continue with their activities while also preparing for the future. Human resources policies and guidelines have been developed to ensure there is a coherent and fair approach to dealing with changes in staffing. We have attempted, as far as possible, to reassign and retain staff, but contract terminations have been inevitable. This could worsen if our current situation is further prolonged.

23. We have also included in the drawdown proposal non-recurrent expenditures which are essential to meet other long-term institutional needs, such as ensuring adequate IT infrastructure is in place to facilitate the Organization's work – including vital back-up, increased security, and data protection – and establishing appropriate controls to protect the Organization's assets. We are deeply aware of the potential impact of existing and emerging information and communications technology-related threats to our work and remain committed to establishing an open and secure environment.

24. Similarly, in line with the institutional commitment to better manage risks and establish adequate internal control measures, it is critical to consolidate the local staff payroll process, which is currently managed separately by each country office. This builds on the initial restructuring of our human resources master data.

25. For such a flexible organization, IOM has had to address this pandemic with limited budgetary flexibility. Unprecedented circumstances such as these require unprecedented measures. Even while we are in the midst of a crisis, we can establish a solid and predictable budget to enhance IOM's capacity in the field, enabling timely action while ensuring full accountability. The coming months will not be easy, but I have every confidence that we can make the hard decisions needed and push through these difficult times to ensure that all of our beneficiaries remain safe. Our fragility is fortified by the strong foundations of our staff, to whom I would like to pay tribute before all of you.

The future of mobility

26. I want to conclude this morning with some thoughts on the future of mobility. We will see a differently mobile world over the next several years. One that is neither shut, nor fully open, as we expect multiple waves of COVID-19 cases affecting countries at different intervals, many of which have limited capacity to respond. Governments will have to take swift decisions on how and when to open or close borders and how best to manage the mobility that this crisis has revealed to be both essential and desirable. We will have to manage not just inflows, but also outflows, while maintaining a baseline of predictability at a deeply uncertain moment.

27. When one combines this challenge with the broader economic impact and the loss of jobs in the public and private sectors – including the devastating effect on the airline industry – it is clear that the prospects for regular migration pathways will be disproportionately affected, beyond a specific impact on international travel and mobility. In the short term, human mobility dynamics may become more regional, a trend that may be intensified by the creation of mobility corridors and “travel bubbles”. But we must resist the instinct to focus inward at such a time of crisis and find ways to ensure that essential channels of entry remain, while ensuring the health of all those who move, as well as their communities.

28. In order to do so, we must put in place public health tools that can minimize the spread of the virus before, during and after travel; in essence, “health-proofing” border management. Some of the go-to mechanisms for the Ebola outbreaks – such as temperature checks at the border – are less effective for a virus that it may be possible to transmit asymptotically. Other policies, such as contact tracing, are likely to be more effective, but will depend on how many people use the apps and capacity to scale up testing. While it has potential, it will be harder to implement across borders while respecting individual data privacy.

29. To manage safe travel, States will need to find common concepts for integrating health into border management without unduly excluding either States or migrants and travellers who may not be able to meet additional travel requirements. This is a huge challenge for low-resource countries which do not have the capacity to create new and complex infrastructure – particularly along porous land borders where daily crossing is a part of life – and who may find themselves left out of the international travel system as a result.

30. But there is also a need to develop flexible and workable criteria, not only for the initial reopening of borders, but to manage future fluctuations in infections across the world. Thus, we believe that there needs to be a common global space to exchange information, establish common understanding and concepts, and identify gaps in capacity. Without this, borders may continue to open and close on an ad hoc basis, reducing predictability for travellers, migrants and businesses dependent on mobility, and further deepening an economic slowdown.

31. This is particularly important for developing States. Significant political and technical investment has been made in recent years to support the African continent in terms of development and regional integration. It would be tragic if this progress were now reversed. Mobility and trade are inextricably linked. To recover economically, governments will have to re-establish safe means of mobility and cooperate not only across borders, but across regions.

32. It is entirely possible for us to speak in doomsday terms here today. But we are still in the eye of this particular storm. Rather than speak in terms of more or less migration, we need to envisage and adapt to different dynamics. In the short term we will, of course, see regular movements drop. As we are already witnessing, the pandemic has not deterred the activities of smugglers and traffickers in many places. But in the long term, we may see new means of mobility emerging and a new age of migration.

33. Thus, it is important that we are vigilant in mitigating the clearly negative effects of the pandemic on migrants and their communities in countries of origin and destination – from limited access to health care to lost income and the dramatic and severe drop in remittances – while also identifying new opportunities to recover better and to make sure migrants remain indispensable to that better and stronger recovery.