

To the Les Aspin Committee:

Two summers ago, as an intern at the State Department's Office of International Labor Affairs, I first became attuned to the extraordinary lack of legal and policy oversight governing international labor migration. At the headquarters of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), funded through the generosity of the Les Aspin Fellowship, I had the opportunity to help close such global governance gaps. Working directly under IOM's senior labor migration specialist, I researched best practices in ethical labour recruitment to draft policy guidance on how businesses and recruitment agencies can promote respect for the freedoms of movement, association, and collective bargaining, and ensure workers' access to remedy. Helping IOM spearhead the development of the International Recruitment Integrity System (IRIS), a multi-stakeholder voluntary certification system for recruitment intermediaries committed to ethical labor practices, gave me a new appreciation for the ability of international organizations to convene diverse coalitions—from Canadian trade unions and South Asian governments to leading international brands—around issues of common concern. At the State Department, the United States' own labor rights record had limited my colleagues' external advocacy: the U.S. has yet to ratify six of the eight ILO core conventions, and temporary farm workers often face exploitative conditions and barriers to justice comparable to those cited by Nepalese migrants in the Gulf. At IOM, I regularly liaised with ILO colleagues working across the street.

On a day-to-day level, my internship proved to be both educational and empowering. While the bulk of my work centered on ethical migration policy research, I also had the opportunity to help organize a stakeholder meeting about how to operationalize IRIS' guiding principles. Serving at the point of contact for the event, I helped my colleagues to determine the guest-list, design the agenda, and prepare draft materials for stakeholders' consideration. In this process, I was also able to leverage my experience working on student publications to redesign IOM's IRIS communications materials, most notably the IRIS brochure shared with all governments, companies, and other non-governmental organizations interested in learning more about the initiative and potentially supporting its future development. After staffing the two-day IRIS expert stakeholder meeting, I had the chance to write a lengthy summary report framing the takeaways from the meeting and next steps, which went out to all participants and other interested parties. My responsibilities also included conducting topical research on an ad hoc basis for the head of LHD on issues ranging from global remittances to how the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development understands the linkages between migration and development.

With a staff of more than 7,800 spread across 470 field offices and a lean headquarters operation, IOM prides itself on its decentralized structure. Sandwiched between the imposing structures of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the World Health Organization, the small building promoted an atmosphere of collegiality and teamwork. The Deputy Director-General was a regular presence at staff going away (e.g. to IOM field missions) and retirement parties, and the Director-General could often be seen at lunches in the employee cafeteria.

Despite being the only undergraduate intern in the Labor and Human Development Division (LHD), I felt entirely incorporated into the work of the division. I collaborated side-by-side on projects with experienced consultants; shared an office with two migration and development specialists, and reported on my work during biweekly division-wide meetings. The American culture of one-off public service summer internships has not gained ground in Europe: as many IOM staff members enter the organization through internships, mentors are inclined to invest

time in their interns and assign them real responsibilities on team projects. My short experience at the organization instilled in me a sense of confidence in my own capabilities as a public servant that I hope take with me as I tackle projects at Yale and going forward.

Yet working for an intergovernmental organization also forced me to recognize the delicacy of multilateral action. Ensuring that IRIS will ultimately be a sustainable and independent institution meant learning the value of leading from behind, for only by allowing like-minded partners to feel ownership over the creative process could IOM ensure their continued support for the initiative. Our thorough preparations for stakeholder meetings and ongoing bilateral consultations would enable member states, employer associations, and labor rights advocacy groups alike to arrive at similar reasoning about the importance of prohibiting the charging of exploitative recruitment fees and the withholding of identity documents. But securing such buy-in is inevitably a slow process, and, ultimately, I found that the most meaningful project I worked on at IOM was the development of a rights-based pre-departure orientation curriculum for migrant workers in Southeast Asia, tailored to empower participants to speak out against suspicious workplace practices.

Many of colleagues began their careers “in the field,” whether by working on migration policy and refugee law in their home countries, staffing IOM missions, or providing direct aid to migrants and refugees in Africa and southeast Asia. Frequently, they emphasized that such experiences had provided the necessary empathy and motivation to drive their work in Geneva, a wealthy city far removed from the migrant communities organizations like IOM serve. As I’ve explored potential post-graduate ideas, I’ve taken their words and sought out opportunities for cultural immersion and volunteer public service. And in the short-term, I’ve been inspired to become more directly involved in the work of New Haven’s own refugee resettlement agency, Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services (IRIS), as a volunteer through the Dwight Hall Urban Fellows program.

My experience at IOM simultaneously reinforced my interest in learning more about migration from an academic perspective. Both of the two specialists with whom I shared an office hold doctorates in Anthropology, and one continues to teach once a week at the University of Lausanne. My constant exposure to their work managing IOM’s migration and development projects and agency-wide policy positions led me to learn more in free time about the linkages between well-managed migration and international development, and how remittances flows and diaspora communities can spark economic growth. With Europe’s prolonged migrant crisis (which would gain widespread news coverage over the course of time in Geneva) showing no sign of abating, I’ve sought to focus my balance my coursework on the history of forced labor and the passage of the Helsinki Final Act with a seminar on U.S refugee law and policy in the hope of better understanding the interplay between the global governance of economic migration and forced migration. Seeing how many IOM-ers balanced their extensive academic experience with policy work has inspired me to give more thought to future opportunities for field research and post-graduate study.

I’ve returned to Yale this semester feeling energized and inspired. I’m excited to see how my time at IOM will inform my academic work and shape my outlook. Thank you once again for your role in making that experience possible.

Sincerely,
Zoe Rubin