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RESEARCH ARTICLE



From Supporting States to Steering their Actions: The UN Network on Migration and the Global Compact for Migration's Implementation

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ABSTRACT

The Global Compact for Migration (GCM) involves the establishment of an implementation mechanism that combines the periodic organisation of deliberation and information exchange between states with the routine drafting of texts and the design of governmental technologies. The GCM also tasked the UN Network on Migration (Network) with supporting the implementation mechanism in response to the needs of states. To achieve this task, the Network aimed to play a role in creating and maintaining the implementation mechanism and to leverage its expert knowledge to shape the states' implementation efforts. This article asks how the Network has institutionalised the implementation mechanism and with what consequences for its expert authority vis-à-vis states. Drawing on insights from discursive institutionalism, the article conducts a critical discourse analysis of texts that communicate and describe the Network's institutional work between 2019 and 2022. It demonstrates that the Network institutionalised the implementation mechanism as an experimentalist institution to bolster its expert authority and position itself as a central unit in the GCM implementation that monitors and steers the actions of states. However, the Network's position as a central unit does not fundamentally challenge the centrality of state sovereignty in global migration governance.

Introduction

Migration policy practitioners praised the adoption of the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) in 2018 as a critical milestone in global migration governance. Although legally non-binding and contested by some migrant receiving states, the GCM represented the first internationally agreed framework of action on migration. Some scholars argued that it encouraged the facilitation of regular migration and recalled the human rights obligations of states (Crépeau 2019; Guild, Basaran, and Allinson 2019). However, others

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questioned the GCM's ability to overcome the significant gap between its 23 objectives and existing migration policies, as well as the persistent contradictory interests of migrant sending, receiving and transit states (Murphy 2023; Pécoud 2021). Therefore, despite the seemingly positive objectives of the GCM, 'the ultimate proof of [its] worth will be in [its] implementation' (Ferris and Martin 2019, 6).

To ensure that its 'words [...] translate into concrete actions' (UN 2018, 4), the GCM required the establishment of an implementation mechanism that consists of two dimensions. First, a deliberative dimension that organises the periodic deliberation and information exchange between states. Every four years starting in 2022, states must convene an International Migration Review Forum (IMRF) to discuss and share progress on the GCM implementation (UN 2018, 33). Second, a bureaucratic dimension that involves the routine production of texts and the design of 'governmental technologies' (Dean 1999, 269–270) that collect, store and mobilise financial means and expert knowledge.¹ Each IMRF must address a 'progress declaration' to the High Level Political Forum (HLPF) on sustainable development and the United Nations (UN) Secretary General must report biannually to the UN General Assembly on the GCM implementation (UN 2018, 33–34). And the GCM decided to establish a start-up fund for the implementation of projects, a connection hub for developing 'solutions', and a global knowledge platform for storing 'best practices' (UN 2018, 33).

The GCM tasked the UN Network on Migration (hereafter the Network) with supporting both dimensions of the implementation mechanism 'in response to the needs of [states]' (UN 2018, 33). Established by the UN Secretary General in 2018 to replace the Global Migration Group,² the Network brings together over 30 UN agencies active in the field of migration. Its priorities are set by an Executive Committee of nine members (UNDESA, ILO, OHCHR, UNICEF, UNDP, UNHCR, UNODC, WHO) including the International Organization for Migration (IOM) which serves as the Network's coordinator and secretariat. To achieve the task assigned by the GCM, the Network aimed to 'establish and provide support' to the start-up fund, connection hub and global knowledge platform; 'support the Secretary General's biennial reporting'; and 'act as a source of ideas, tools, reliable data and information, analysis and policy guidance' (UN Network on Migration 2018, 1–2). In other words, the Network strove to play a role in creating and maintaining the GCM implementation mechanism and to leverage its expert knowledge to shape the states' implementation efforts.

Therefore, this article asks how the Network has institutionalised the GCM implementation mechanism and with what consequences for its expert authority vis-à-vis states. The institutionalisation of the implementation mechanism hinges on the Network's purposive 'institutional work' (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006, 215) and requires three conditions: (1)

establishing the mandate of the new institution to delineate its scope of activity and the social actors with which it will engage; (2) creating procedures and pooling resources (financial means, expert knowledge, human resources) to achieve the new institution's mandate; (3) gaining the support of states to avoid the contestation and replacement of the new institution (van Driel et al. 2024, 1368–1369; Huybrechts and Haugh 2018, 1087).

The article conducts a critical discourse analysis of texts that communicate and describe the Network's institutional work between 2019 and 2022, a period in which both dimensions of the implementation mechanism first took form. It demonstrates that the Network created and maintained the implementation mechanism as an experimentalist institution. Experimentalist institutions foster deliberations and information exchange among state and non-state actors to achieve open-ended goals despite conflicts of interest and values, as well as the absence of binding rules and preconceived ways to realise desired outcomes (Búrca, Keohane, and Sabel 2014, 478–479; Lavenex 2020, 676). These institutions involve 'new forms of accountability and evaluation' (Búrca, Keohane, and Sabel 2014, 478) between so-called local units (e.g. corporations, local authorities, states) and a central unit (e.g. state, international organisation). As an experimentalist institution, the GCM implementation mechanism positions states as local units that autonomously implement the GCM objectives under the condition that they 'report regularly on their performance and participate in a peer review in which their results are compared with those of others' (Sabel and Zeitlin 2012, 170). And it positions the Network as a central unit that monitors and steers the actions of states by developing performance targets and pooling and funnelling resources (Rangoni 2022, 594). As a central unit, the Network did not passively respond to the needs of states; it bolstered its expert authority by actively determining the actions that states are expected to perform, or refrain from performing, and funnelling resources to ensure their conformity.

The article is structured into five sections. The first section discusses how the Network's institutional work is confronted by competing demands stemming from regime complexity. The second section defines the Network's institutional work as a set of discursive practices, outlines the types of texts that describe and communicate these practices, and introduces the article's critical discourse analysis methodology. The third section investigates how the Network problematised the 'damaging' actions of states during the COVID-19 pandemic to establish an expanded mandate for the GCM implementation mechanism. The fourth section analyses how the Network designed two governmental technologies that create procedures and pool financial resources and expert knowledge to measure and steer the actions of states. The fifth section examines how the Network legitimised the implementation mechanism by leveraging linkages between the GCM and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The conclusion argues that the Network's position

as a central unit in the GCM implementation does not fundamentally challenge the centrality of state sovereignty in global migration governance.

Institutional Work and Regime Complexity

Keohane (1969, 861) first conceptualised institutionalisation in International Relations as a process by which institutions become autonomous, differentiated, and shielded from their volatile institutional environment through bureaucratisation and professionalisation. This conceptualisation emphasises the importance of creating procedures and pooling resources to achieve institutionalisation. It also assumes that institutions are isolated from their environment and the states who merely act as objects or implementors of their decisions (Kay 1969, 952). Nevertheless, this assumption ignores that institutions depend on the support of states and contend with their uncoordinated and conflicting demands (Kay 1969, 953; Pache and Santos 2010, 457).

Therefore, the actors conducting the institutional work must ‘exercise some level of strategic choice’ (Pache and Santos 2010, 461) to avoid that the new institution becomes ‘buffeted about by [...] competing demands’ (Schmitter 1971, 919), paralysed and replaced. They have to position the new institution with regards to the divergent demands (Jay 2013; Scherer, Palazzo, and Seidl 2013), render any alternative to the institution ‘literally unthinkable’ (Zucker 1983, 5), and cast the institution as legitimate (Scott 2014, 71).

The GCM implementation mechanism is notably confronted to competing demands that stem from regime complexity. The GCM is built on a set of overlapping and non-hierarchical elemental regimes (travel, human rights, humanitarian, security, labour, development, environment) and refers to multiple actors with divergent interests (sending, receiving and transit states, local authorities, international organisations, NGOs, corporations, epistemic communities) (Alter and Raustiala 2018, 331; Lavenex 2020, 680). Furthermore, states do not possess a preconceived understanding of how to best implement the GCM since the latter aggregates ‘a range of competing priorities [...] with little guidance on how to reconcile them, or trade them off’ (Costello 2019, 643).

Against this backdrop, the Network’s institutional work needs to either give precedence to some elemental regimes and actors over others, balance a wide array of demands stemming from multiple elemental regimes and actors, or avoid and defy some of these demands (Pache and Santos 2010, 462–463). The Network needs to particularly attend to the contradictory demands of sending and receiving states. The former favour the creation of institutions grounded in the obligations deriving from the human rights regime, while the latter seek to avert binding institutions and defend a ‘minimalist vision of international migration law’ (Chetail 2023, 3). When left unattended, these demands lead to the paralysis and replacement of institutions and to further fragmentation in

global migration governance (Kainz and Betts 2021, 69). However, the Network can successfully navigate the states' contradictory demands by leveraging its expert authority, that is, the ability to deploy expert knowledge to achieve deference from other actors (Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 24). Amidst regime complexity and uncertainty about how to achieve desired outcomes, expert knowledge can be used to define the problem and the needed solution in a depoliticised manner to achieve consensus and drive interest convergence among states (Alter and Meunier 2009, 17; Pécoud 2015, 51).

Institutional Work as Discursive Practices

The competing demands that the Network must navigate indicate that the institutional work is not so much about carrying out actions that materially create procedures and pool resources. As discursive institutionalism contends, it is first about overcoming constraints in the institutional environment by elaborating, conveying, and legitimising interpretations about what is and what ought to be through discourse (Schmidt 2010, p. 3). Therefore, since 'institutions are constituted through discourse' (Phillips et al. 2004, p. 635), the Network's institutional work is best understood as consisting of three discursive practices (Huybrechts and Haugh 2018, 1087).

First, problematisation which diagnoses and delegitimises existing institutions as failing by subjecting them to statements of facts, hypothetical and predictive statements, and evaluating statements (Fairclough 2003, 109). These statements break 'locked-in patterns of behaviour and thought' (Meyer et al. 2017, 402) to situate the new institution within the institutional environment and establish its mandate. Second, theorisation which emphasises the superiority of the new institution in overcoming the identified failures of existing institutions. This practice, which frames the creation of procedures and the pooling of resources, requires the establishment of discursive classifications that create relations of equivalence or difference between the new institution and existing institutions to demonstrate the former's ability to provide desirable outcomes (Fairclough 2003, 88; Meyer et al. 2017, 403). Third, legitimation which persuades social actors of the appropriateness and usefulness of the new institution through various discursive strategies that reference: the utility of the action entailed by the new institution (rationalisation); value systems (moral evaluation); descriptive and predictive narratives (mythopoesis) (Fairclough 2003, 98).

The Network's discursive practices are described and communicated by three types of texts produced between the creation of the start-up fund in May 2019 and the convening of the first IMRF in May 2022: (1) the UN Secretary General's reports on the GCM implementation; (2) texts organising and describing the functioning of governmental technologies (e.g. terms of reference, annual reports, workplan, need assessment, guidance note); (3)

texts produced in the context of the 2022 IMRF (e.g. concept note, statements of the Network's coordinator, progress declaration). These texts are examined using an analysis sheet based on Rudman and Dennhardt's (2014, 143) critical discourse analysis methodology. The analysis sheet contains guiding questions to interrogate the texts that are informed by the (1) conceptualisation of institutional work and (2) tools for deconstructing texts (see Textbox 1).

Textbox 1. Analysis sheet

(1) Questions informed by conceptualisation of institutional work:

- Problematisation: What are the failures of existing institutions? Which social actors are responsible for these failures?
- Theorisation: How is the new institution superior to existing institutions? What desired outcomes are to be achieved by the new institution? What procedures and resources are required to realise them?
- Legitimation: How is the new institution legitimised? What legitimating account is developed? Which audience is targeted by the account? What are the advantages the audience needs to consider?
- Regime complexity: What elemental regimes and actors are referenced? Which ones take precedence, are combined, ignored or defied?

(2) Questions informed by tools for deconstruction:

- How do evaluating statements, statements of facts, and hypothetical/predictive statements problematise existing institutions?
 - How do discursive classifications create difference and equivalence between the new institution and existing institutions?
 - What discursive strategies legitimise the new institution?
-

Establishing an Expanded Mandate for the GCM Implementation Mechanism

The first year of the GCM implementation was marked by the creation of the start-up fund and the UN General Assembly's decision to convene the IMRF in 2022 under its auspices, despite the opposition of five states that refused to adopt the GCM (e.g. United States, Hungary, Israel). However, lacking existing norms to build upon and a centralised process led by a single international organisation, the GCM implementation progressed more slowly than the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) (Kainz, Banulescu-Bogdan, and Newland 2020, 2). The COVID-19 pandemic further delayed progress and 'provided cover for states to [...] more fiercely guard national sovereignty' (Papademetriou, Banulescu-Bogdan, and Hooper 2022, 9).

Against this backdrop, the UN Secretary General published the first report on the GCM implementation in October 2020. Following instructions from the Network's Executive Committee, the secretariat – that is, IOM – drafted the report on behalf of the UN Secretary General and based on inputs from the Network's other members (UN Network on Migration 2019b, 10). The report represented a crucial component of the Network's institutional work: it problematised existing institutions to establish an expanded mandate for the GCM implementation mechanism that went beyond responding to the specific needs of states.

The Implementation Mechanism as a Solution to Correct the ‘Damaging’ Actions of States

The first report on the GCM implementation focused on the most immediate and visible impact of the COVID-19 pandemic: state-imposed border closures. It argued that the latter ‘have particularly affected [migrants]’ in ‘many’ countries by leaving them ‘stranded’ and unable to access support and assistance (UN 2020c, 5). Moreover, these ‘State measures have exacerbated existing inequalities and eroded migrants’ rights and dignity, sometimes even at the cost of their lives’ (UN 2020c, 2). To corroborate the ‘protection crisis’ created by border closures, the report referenced two other UN reports produced in the context of the human rights regime and that castigated the ‘severe’ impact of state policies on the migrants’ rights: a policy brief on the impact of COVID-19 on people on the move (UN 2020a) and a report of the UN Human Rights Council on migrants’ human rights during the pandemic (UN 2020b).

By focusing on the negative effects of border closures, the report problematised the ‘damaging’ (UN 2020c, 4) actions of states in global migration governance. Although ‘the need for greater cooperation across borders [...] has become urgent’, states resorted to unilateral and uncoordinated actions since ‘bilateral and regional arrangements [were either] absent or suspended’ during the pandemic (UN 2020c, 5). Therefore, the report rebuked states for not achieving the ‘promise of the [GCM] to move beyond a transactional approach to migration, towards multifaceted and human rights-based collaboration’ (UN 2020c, 4). The sharp criticism levelled against the states argued for the need of multilateral action by giving precedence to the human rights regime and by leveraging the UN Secretary General’s moral authority as the ‘protector’ of migrants’ human rights (Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 23). It also reflected an opportunistic use of the emergency constituted by the COVID-19 pandemic to expand the mandate of the GCM implementation mechanism (Kreuder-Sonnen 2019, 190–191). Rather than merely supporting the states’ efforts as the GCM stipulated (UN 2018, 32), the implementation mechanism aimed to correct their unilateral and uncoordinated actions.

Accordingly, the report theorised the implementation mechanism’s ability to correct the actions of states through deliberation and information exchange. It highlighted that the GCM ‘has had a ripple effect in terms of formal and informal [state] cooperation’ (UN 2020c, 7). First, it ‘solidified the UN General Assembly’s commitment to cooperation’ (UN 2020c, 7) by establishing the IMRF as the primary forum for ‘robust discussions’ between states (UN 2020c, 18). Second, the GCM led states to ‘work with the [Network] in promoting best practices, peer exchange and the further implementation of the objectives of the [GCM]’ (UN 2020c, 7). In this regard, the report framed the Network’s role in the GCM implementation as that of a central unit which not only

provides ‘tools, guidance and support for national implementation plans’ (UN 2020c, 16), but also ‘highlight[s] best practice and bring[s] attention to urgent situations calling for immediate action’ (UN 2020c, 18).

To persuade states to rely on the implementation mechanism and the Network, the report developed a common place narrative in multilateral settings that described the complexity of migration (Ahouga 2024, 21–22) – ‘Over the past several decades, migration has become increasingly complex’ (UN 2020c, 1); ‘Migration is a complex dynamic based on many factors’ (UN 2020c, 3). Against such complexity, ‘no single State can effectively govern migration without principled and effective international cooperation’ (UN 2020c, 1). Consequently, states have to collectively resort to the GCM to govern migration, particularly since ‘[it] creates a comprehensive 360-degree approach, and a common language, for discussing migration and provides tools for implementing well-governed migration policies’ (UN 2020c, 2).

The Implementation Mechanism and State Sovereignty

However, the 360-degree approach that underlines the GCM implementation mechanism is flexible and ‘will mean different things to different States’ (UN 2020c, 3). The flexibility offered to the states is not only meant to adapt the GCM implementation to the complexity of migration. It mitigates the perception that the implementation mechanism could result in a top-down and uniform implementation that encroaches on state sovereignty. This flexibility is typical of experimentalist institutions which leave the implementation of broadly framed goals to local units who have ‘better’ knowledge of local conditions (Búrca, Keohane, and Sabel 2014, 478). Thus, the report recognised the relevance of the national ‘context, experience and resources’ (UN 2020c, 3) and showcased the different ways in which states have implemented the GCM so far – e.g. by improving migration statistics, carrying out information campaigns on migration and human rights, providing information on disease control to migrants, participating in the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) (UN 2020c, 7–15).

Yet the flexibility in the GCM implementation is not limitless since the report reminded that the ‘[GCM] does not start from zero: [...] [it is] rooted in established obligations and principles and underpinned by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and international law’ (UN 2020c, 7–15). The reminder of the states’ obligations, particularly those deriving from the human rights regime, is compounded by the absence of any mention of the principle of sovereignty. Contrary to the GCM, the report did not ‘reaffirm the sovereign right of States to determine their national

migration policy' (UN 2018, 4). This absence did not so much challenge the GCM's non-binding character. Rather, it opened the door to expanding the mandate of the GCM implementation mechanism towards correcting the unilateral and uncoordinated actions of states.

Creating Procedures and Pooling Resources to Steer the GCM Implementation

The Network designed two governmental technologies to fulfil the expanded mandate of the GCM implementation mechanism. First, the Multi-Partner Trust Fund (hereafter the Fund), which pooled financial resources and developed performance targets and procedures to measure and steer the actions of donor and recipient states involved in the GCM implementation. Second, the Migration Network Hub (hereafter the Hub), which pooled expert knowledge and mobilised a transnational network of knowledge-based experts to shape how national policy practitioners accessed information and solicited expert advice. These governmental technologies positioned the Network as a central unit that funnels financial resources and expert knowledge to steer the states' practical implementation of the GCM.

Measuring and Steering the Actions of Donor and Recipient States

The Network's Executive Committee established the Fund in May 2019 after drafting its terms of reference (ToR) (UN Network on Migration 2019c). The ToR organised the Fund's structure and functioning under the premise that states cannot 'address migration alone' and that it is 'best governed through enhanced international cooperation' (UN Network on Migration 2019a, 3). This cooperation hinged on the Fund which represented a 'key component' of the GCM (UN Network on Migration 2019a, 3). As 'the only funding mechanism fully dedicated to supporting collective action on migration' (UN Network on Migration 2019a, 3–4), the Fund's superiority stemmed from the ability to foster mutual 'trust, determination, and solidarity among States and with other stakeholders' (UN Network on Migration 2019a, 4).

Indeed, the Fund adhered to the principle of 'partnership' (UN Network on Migration 2019a, 5), which eschews politicisation by reframing global migration governance as a non-zero sum game that benefits all sending and receiving states and all 'stakeholders' regardless of their power asymmetries (Ahouga 2023a, 39–40). The Fund Steering Committee particularly embodied this principle. As a 'multi-partner decision-making body' tasked with approving funding requests, the Steering Committee 'allow[ed] all partners to collectively agree on strategies and priorities' (UN Network on Migration 2019a, 5). These partners, which are expected to 'make compromises necessary to adopt decisions agreeable by all' (UN Network on Migration 2020b, 10), specifically

consist of three countries of origin, transit, and destination; three donor states; three non-governmental stakeholders; three members of the Network; and the Network's coordinator, that is, the Director General (DG) of IOM who acts as chair (UN Network on Migration 2019a, 9). The chair plays an important role: they appoint the Steering Committee's other members for a two-year period with a staggered rotation (half the members rotate each year)³; they can take decisions in the case of a deadlock with the support of 'a majority of at least two third of the [m]embers' (UN Network on Migration 2020b, 10). The Steering Committee's composition, its consensus-based decision making, and the chair's powers aim to balance the divergent demands and interests generated by the GCM implementation. They also seek to prevent donor states from monopolising decision making within the Fund to favour the GCM objectives that most align with their interests.

To 'provide balanced support for the Global Compact's comprehensive approach' (UN Network on Migration 2019a, 6), the Fund was additionally equipped with a 'programmatic framework' that 'cluster[s] the Global Compact's 23 objectives [...] under five thematic areas' (UN Network on Migration 2019a, 6): (1) promoting fact-based and data-driven migration discourse, policy and planning; (2) protecting the human rights of migrants, including through addressing drivers and mitigating situations of vulnerability in migration; (3) addressing irregular migration, including through managing borders and combatting transnational crime; (4) facilitating regular migration, decent work and enhancing the positive development effects of human mobility; (5) improving social inclusion and integration of migrants. Adopted by the Network's Executive Committee, this thematic clustering aimed to identify 'broad policy and operational areas for which funding can be sought and to ensure that the Fund provides balanced support' (UN Network on Migration 2019a, 6; UN Network on Migration; 2021c, 4). The latter objective indicated that the thematic clustering sought to preclude donor states from focusing the Fund on a specific GCM objective. Indeed, although donor states 'can provide loose thematic earmarking' by funding one thematic area, the Network expressed its 'preference [...] for unearmarked contributions [...] to provide support across all of the [GCM] objectives' (UN Network on Migration 2019a, 6).

To discourage donor states from focusing on a specific thematic area, the Network accompanied the programmatic framework with a 'results framework' which consists of 'outcome areas' that 'correspond to the five thematic areas' (UN Network on Migration 2019a, 8). The results framework included performance targets designed to steer the donor states' financing of the Fund: (1) donor states should not earmark more than 25% of their financial contribution to a single thematic area and (2) should limit the maximum proportion of earmarked funding to 60%. To elicit conformity with these targets,⁴ the results framework measured and benchmarked the performance of donor

states to showcase the ‘best in class’ that should be emulated (Fougner 2008, 317–318). The Fund Annual Reports for 2020 and 2021 drafted by the Fund Management Unit – which is staffed and housed by IOM and responsible for the Fund’s operational functioning – praised three ‘major donors’ (United Kingdom, Germany, Norway) for taking a ‘constructive approach’ either by earmarking funds to multiple thematic areas or leaving 50% of their funding unearmarked (UN Network on Migration 2021d, 48; 2022c, 74).

The Network also designed the Fund to steer the actions of recipient states. Despite recognising the ‘key principle of national sovereignty’ and that recipient states should ‘determine their own tailored policies and plans’ (UN Network on Migration 2019a, 4), the Network standardised the Fund’s project selection procedure to restrict their autonomy as local units (UN Network on Migration 2019a, 15). The procedure starts when at least two UN agencies submit a standardised concept note briefly outlining the project to the Fund Management Unit. If the concept note is accepted, the UN agencies prepare a fully developed project proposal according to a standardised format. The project proposal is then submitted to the Fund Management Unit on behalf of the recipient state by the UN Resident Coordinator, which is the highest-ranking representative at the country level of the UN Development System, that is, the network of UN agencies supporting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Finally, the Fund Management Unit conducts a technical assessment of the project proposal and issues recommendations that the Steering Committee must consider before deciding whether to fund the project proposal.⁵ Thus, the project selection procedure positioned the Network as a central unit that funnels financial resources in a top-down manner to determine the recipient states’ implementation of the GCM.

Determining the Access of National Policy Practitioners to Expert Knowledge

To further shape how states implemented the GCM, the Network launched the Hub on March 2021. The Hub combined the knowledge platform and connection hub expected by the GCM: it represented a ‘tool’ both for sharing ‘migration knowledge, expertise, good practices and initiatives’ and for developing a ‘community of practice’ consisting of national policy practitioners and experts (IOM 2021). As instructed by the Network’s Executive Committee (UN Network on Migration 2019b, 6), IOM led – and partially funded – the creation of the Hub through its Global Migration Data Analysis Centre, which has expertise in the production of policy-relevant data (Ahouga 2024, 129).

The design of the Hub drew upon a ‘needs assessment’ conducted by the think tank Migration Policy Institute (MPI) on behalf of the Network. This assessment, published in February 2020, interviewed 31 policy practitioners and surveyed 123 others to understand how they accessed and used information on migration (MPI 2020, 2). The assessment problematised the existing

institutions producing migration data by drawing attention to the absence of a ‘trusted arbiter’ of information (MPI 2020, 2). There was no ‘consensus as to who should be coordinating’ the efforts to produce evidence and ‘educate’ practitioners and the ‘broader public’ (MPI 2020, 2). This opened the door for a ‘panoply of actors’ to provide ‘competing and sometimes contradictory data, often with self-serving aims’ (MPI 2020, 2). The absence of coordination negatively affected global migration governance by hindering efforts to address the politicisation of migration, which ‘complicate the possibility of neutral policy discussions’ (MPI 2020, 2), and preventing policy practitioners from processing the overwhelming proliferation of data (MPI 2020, 11).

Against this backdrop, the Network strove to become the ‘trusted’ central unit that fosters deliberation and information exchange. It designed the Hub to determine how national policy practitioners accessed expert knowledge and solicited expert advice to shape their interests and the GCM’s practical implementation (Haas 1992, 4). The Hub consisted of three features that pool expert knowledge and organise the interactions between national policy practitioners and a transnational network of experts.

First, the Hub acted as a knowledge repository which allowed policy practitioners to upload examples of their practices of GCM implementation, policy documents, and links to events and research projects. By enabling users to upload information on the Hub, the Network ensured ‘that there is enough buy-in’ from policy practitioners (MPI 2020, 21). This differentiated the Hub from its main competitor, the GFMD platform for partnerships, which the MPI’s needs assessment criticised for its irregularly updated content (MPI 2020, 20). Nevertheless, each upload had first to undergo a peer-review procedure conducted by one reviewer from the Network and two experts with a track record of publications (UN Network on Migration 2021a). Thus, the repository showcased only what the Network considered as the ‘best’ practices of GCM implementation that policy practitioners should emulate.

Second, the Hub contained a database which provided policy practitioners searching for ‘technical support’ with direct access to over 1150 migration experts of the IMISCOE Migration Research Hub (UN Network on Migration 2021b). These experts from a variety of geographical areas, professional backgrounds (e.g. academics, analysts, consultants, project managers, national and international civil servants) and academic disciplines have recognised expertise and policy-relevant knowledge. Therefore, they can influence how policy practitioners determine their interests regarding the GCM implementation by ‘elucidating the multiple linkages between possible policy actions and desired outcomes’ (Haas 1992, 3). Policy practitioners are all the more reliant on experts and expert knowledge since the GCM offered a range of competing priorities and subsumed multiple elemental regimes with little guidance on how to reconcile them. To ensure that policy practitioners solicited expert

advice on the broadest range of issues and elemental regimes possible, the Hub classified the IMISCOE experts according to a large array of topics ‘related’ to the GCM – e.g. big data analysis, border control, labour migration, climate change, civil and political rights (UN Network on Migration 2021b).

Third, the Hub hosted online spaces where policy practitioners can participate in discussion forums and webinars on topics that ‘must fall among the Network thematic priorities’ – e.g. climate change, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), IMRF (UN Network on Migration 2021g, 1). The online spaces aimed to drive interest convergence among policy practitioners by organising their interactions with experts. Monitored by moderators with ‘subject-matter expertise’, these spaces encouraged policy practitioners to solicit expert feedback on policy documents and practices of GCM implementation, and to initiate collaborations on issues before or after a policy event (UN Network on Migration 2021g, 1).

Gaining the Support of States by Leveraging the 2030 Agenda

Following the design of the Fund and the Hub, the Network’s institutional work focused on legitimising the GCM implementation mechanism in the context of the 2022 IMRF. The second report on the GCM implementation published in December 2021 constituted the linchpin of these efforts. Drafted by the Network’s secretariat under the supervision of the Executive Committee and on behalf of the UN Secretary General, it provided ‘guidance for the deliberations during the [upcoming 2022 IMRF]’ (UN 2021, 1) to secure the support of states. To this end, the report problematised the existing arrangements implementing the GCM to blur the boundary between global migration governance and the development regime.

The Implementation Mechanism in Support of the 2030 Agenda

Despite showcasing various best practices of GCM implementation selected from the voluntary reports submitted by more than 90 states during the regional reviews, the report deplored the ‘many deficits that remain’ – e.g. non-vaccination of migrants, xenophobia, discrimination, misinformation, deaths of migrants (UN 2021, 2). These deficits left ‘too many migrants in desperate situations of vulnerability’, denied them ‘agency’, and devalued ‘the solemn commitment to leaving no one behind that Member States made in the 2030 Agenda’ (UN 2021, 2).

The relevance of the latter text for migrants’ vulnerability reflected the ‘interconnectedness between the well-being of migrants and the prosperity of societies’ (UN 2021, 5). Based on this interconnectedness that echoed the long-standing policy narrative on the migration-development nexus first championed by the GFMD, the report expanded its scope to assessing the

implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. It argued that the pandemic ‘reversed’ the progress in their implementation as illustrated by various factual statements taken from multiple reports of the UN Economic and Social Council: ‘the number of poor people has increased by up to 124 million; [b]etween 83 and 132 million people may have been pushed into chronic hunger in 2020’; ‘an additional 101 million children and young people fell below the minimum reading proficiency level’; ‘the equivalent of 255 million full-time jobs were lost’ (UN 2021, 5).

Nevertheless, the report emphasised ‘the [GCM’s] potential to promote the achievement of the [SDGs]’ (UN 2021, 2–3) as testified by the fact ‘that 20 of the 42 voluntary national review reports submitted by States at the [HLPF] held in 2021 referred to the Compact’⁶ (UN 2021, 6). Moreover, the report welcomed the Network’s efforts which spurred the GCM’s 27 ‘champion countries’ to issue a joint statement during the 2021 hLPF that highlighted the ‘synergies’ between the review processes of the GCM and the 2030 Agenda (Government of Morocco 2021, 2; UN 2021, 4). In sum, states had to strengthen the GCM implementation mechanism to ‘get the [SDGs] back on track’ (UN 2021, 5).

By arguing for the relevance of the GCM for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the Network gave precedence to the development regime over other elemental regimes, notably the human rights regime. This preference legitimised the GCM implementation mechanism in two ways. First, it buttressed the implementation mechanism with the 2030 Agenda’s moral commitment to ‘leaving no one behind’. As states endorsed the 2030 Agenda more widely than the GCM, referencing the former’s value system would persuade them of the appropriateness of the implementation mechanism. Second, it emphasised the latter’s utility for realising tangible development outcomes that would seemingly benefit all sending and receiving states. Since states consider development as an issue of greater priority and less contention than migration, this utility would shield the implementation mechanism from contestation and contradictory demands.

In fact, the Network focused on the 2030 Agenda to mitigate the persistent politicisation of the GCM in the European Union (EU), which inhibited the ability of the European Commission and the EU member states to support the Fund (Papademetriou, Banulescu-Bogdan, and Hooper 2022, 8). It also strove to guarantee the continued support of the United States, which ambiguously announced in December 2021 its endorsement of only some GCM objectives (Chetail 2023, 2–3). The need to keep the EU member states and the United States on board explained why the Network did not give precedence to the human rights regime. Although the obligations deriving from the latter would have offered a firmer foundation for the implementation mechanism, the Network recognised that the non-binding 2030 Agenda was more likely to gain the support of many receiving states.

Therefore, the report emphasised the implementation mechanism's utility by theorising the Fund's ability to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It notably established relations of equivalence between the Fund and the 2030 Agenda by stating that the former's 'programmatic scope' was 'aligned with the 2030 Agenda' (UN 2021, 18). The Fund implemented the 2030 Agenda since its results framework argued that 'it is imperative that all [...] funded joint programmes and initiatives are firmly aligned to the SDGs' (UN Network on Migration 2020b, 35). To track this alignment, the Fund results framework delineated the 'key linkages' between each of the GCM's objectives and the 17 SDGs (UN Network on Migration 2020b, 36–39). Moreover, the operations of the Fund closely involved the UN Development system. The Fund project selection procedure placed the onus of submitting funding requests solely on the UN Resident Coordinators so that the GCM implementation could be 'well integrated in the national development priorities' (UN Network on Migration 2019a, 5). And the Fund was administered by the UNDP's Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, which also managed the Joint SDG Fund that supported the implementation of the 2030 Agenda (UN Network on Migration 2019a, 12). In this regard, the Network established relations of equivalence between the Fund and the Joint SDG Fund by suggesting that their 'strategies and goals [...] could align' (UN Network on Migration 2019a, 5).

Focusing on the development regime also legitimised the Network itself by highlighting its utility for achieving development outcomes. The second report on the GCM implementation showcased that the institutionalisation of the Network led to the creation of 'more than 50 country networks'⁷ to 'mainstream the Compact in national planning and implementation, including within the framework of the 2030 Agenda' (UN 2021, 18). These country networks, that 'guide States with the on-the-ground GCM implementation, including [by] connecting [them] to the [Fund]' (UN Network on Migration 2022a, 70), were also 'integrated into one third of the [UN] country teams across the globe' (UN 2021, 18). As the UN country teams play an important part in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, this integration further indicated that the Network's actions 'align with the [UN] development system' (UN 2021, 18). This alignment signalled to the states that the Network collaborated with other parts of the UN system to improve the efficiency of the 2030 Agenda implementation (Betts 2013, 77–78).

Legitimising the Implementation Mechanism During the 2022 IMRF

During the four-day IMRF held in May 2022, the Network reiterated the second report's emphasis on the equivalence between the GCM and 2030 Agenda at least in three instances. First, it argued that both the 2030 Agenda and GCM recognised that 'coherent and comprehensive

responses' and international cooperation are necessary 'to optimise the overall benefits of migration' (UN Network on Migration 2022b, 2). Second, the Network sought to frame deliberations during the IMRF by creating a standardised template that encouraged states to present their implementation of the GCM in ways that 'describe [their] efforts to leverage synergies across the various reporting mechanisms of other international agreements, such as the 2030 Agenda' (UN Network on Migration 2021f, 4). Third, during the plenary session held on the third day of the IMRF, the Network's coordinator informed the states that the Network created 74 country networks which worked 'in close cooperation with resident coordinators and the [UN] country teams' (UN Web TV 2022b, min 23:28).

Besides echoing the second report on GCM implementation, the Network sought to legitimise the Fund during the policy debate held on the IMRF's second day. Organised by the Network's coordinator, the policy debate focused on 'challenges in the implementation of the [GCM]' (UN 2019, 5). To frame the discussions, the Network drafted a concept note which reprised the problematisation of the first report on the GCM implementation. It stated that the 'COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the inconsistent and fragmented nature of migration governance' (UN Network on Migration 2022b, 2). To achieve a more coherent governance, states had to address the 'differing capacities among countries' by making 'pledges towards the [Fund]' (UN Network on Migration 2022b, 2). The notion of pledge referenced the Network's so-called pledging initiative launched in December 2021. It encouraged states to '[d]emonstrate the value of international cooperation' (UN Network on Migration 2021h, 1) by pledging to contribute up to 70 million dollars to the Fund before the end of the 2022 IMRF (UN Network on Migration 2022d, 2).

To convince states to reach this target, the concept note developed a predictive narrative on the future of migration typically favoured by IOM (Ahouga 2023b, 521). It emphasised the Fund's long-term utility by arguing that the 'drivers of international migration in countries of destination and origin are likely [to] become more complex during the next several decades as economic and environmental pressures, population growth and population ageing, labour market realities, food insecurity and lack of livelihoods and decent work are projected to persist or intensify' (UN Network on Migration 2022b, 1). During the policy debate, the Network's coordinator reiterated and further developed this predictive narrative by inviting experts, notably from academia, to speak about the future of the economic, political, environmental, demographic and social drivers of migration (UN Web TV 2022a). Having bolstered the narrative during the policy debate, the Network's coordinator took the stage during the following IMRF plenary session to highlight that the Fund supported projects which addressed many drivers and issues ranging

from ‘the impacts of climate change [...] to the social economic integration of migrants’ (UN Web TV 2022b, min 23:59).

However, the predictive narrative did not only legitimise the Fund. It also ‘depoliticised migration’ (Pécoud 2015) to protect the IMRF’s deliberations from the repetition of the antagonisms between receiving and sending states that marked the GCM negotiations (Ahouga 2024, 173). These antagonisms could lead some receiving states to contest the GCM implementation mechanism and prevent the IMRF from adopting a progress declaration. That is why the Network framed the increasingly complex drivers of migration as ‘[g]lobal issues’ (UN Network on Migration 2022b, 2) that no single state can solve alone. Instead of taking unilateral actions to protect their short-term interests, states should acknowledge that these drivers ‘require [a] migration governance based on cooperation and partnership [...] across countries’ (UN Network on Migration 2022b, 2). Moreover, addressing migration drivers demands the maintenance of the implementation mechanism beyond 2022. The Network’s coordinator particularly conveyed this point during the policy debate by suggesting that the drivers should be considered to ‘set the priorities towards the next IMRF in 2026’ (UN Web TV 2022a, min 41:37).

Despite fears about potential interstate antagonisms, the IMRF adopted a progress declaration by consensus and with the support of the United States. The declaration notably recognised ‘the work of the [Network] in support of the implementation of the [GCM], including the establishment of the [...] [Fund] and the [Hub]’ (UN 2022, 3–4). It also encouraged states to ‘submit good practices [...] to the [Hub], and to consider making financial contributions to the [Fund]’ (UN 2022, 12). The latter point compensated the Network’s failure to reach the Fund’s funding target.⁸ Furthermore, the declaration reprised the Network’s emphasis on the equivalence between the GCM and 2030 Agenda by calling on states to align their implementation processes and strengthen their linkages (UN 2022, 12). This alignment had positive implications for the Network and the institutionalisation of the GCM implementation mechanism.

First, it formally expanded the scope of the Network’s institutional work to the development regime. The progress declaration authorised the Network’s coordinator to participate in the HLPF to ‘report on linkages between the implementation of the [GCM] and the 2030 Agenda’ (UN 2022, 13). Previously, the Network could only informally shape the HLPF’s deliberations by issuing public statements (UN Network on Migration 2021e), mobilising the GCM champion countries, and ‘supporting’ states during the negotiations of the ministerial declaration concluding each HLPF (UN 2021, 19). By having a voice at the table, the Network would fully take part in the less contentious politics of the development regime to gain the support of states for the GCM implementation mechanism (Betts 2013, 76–77).

Second, the alignment of the GCM with the 2030 Agenda led to the addition of a new component to the bureaucratic dimension of the implementation mechanism. The declaration instructed the Secretary General to propose ‘a limited set of indicators, drawing on the global indicator framework for the [SDGs] and targets of the 2030 Agenda [...] and other relevant frameworks, to assist Member States, upon their request, in conducting inclusive reviews of progress related to the implementation of the [GCM]’ (UN 2022, 12).

These indicators could represent a notable development. During the GCM negotiations, IOM unsuccessfully advocated for the adoption of a ‘benchmarking and monitoring tool for the GCM’ (IOM 2017, 5) like its Migration Governance Indicators (MGI). Since 2016, this governmental technology whose 90 indicators measure various aspects of migration policies (e.g. ratification of international conventions, migrants’ access to basic social services, institutional and legal frameworks, diaspora engagement, border control, cooperation with other states and non-state actors) has evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of more than 20 states. However, IOM deployed the MGI only after obtaining the states’ agreement, which reflected both the inability to circumvent their sovereignty and the concern with ensuring their active participation. Indeed, IOM engaged state officials to discuss the results of the MGI’s evaluation and to convince them to publicise the results to demonstrate their willingness to address the identified weaknesses (Ahouga 2024, 133–134).

Thus, the development of GCM indicators could further position the Network as a central unit capable of monitoring and steering the states’ GCM implementation. But for this to be true, the states’ preference for limited indicators inspired by the global indicator framework for the SDGs would have to be overcome. Contrary to the more expansive MGI, this framework contains only 2 migration-related indicators out of 231 that measure the ‘proportion of countries with migration policies that facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration’ and the ‘number of people who died or disappeared in the process of migration’ (UN 2024, 12).

Conclusion

During his statement at the IMRF’s plenary session, the Network’s coordinator interpreted the GCM as a response to the ‘need to minimise ungoverned spaces’ (UN Web TV 2022b, min 18:37). From 2019 to 2022, the Network sought to fill this need by institutionalising the GCM implementation mechanism as an experimentalist institution. Based on the problematisation of the states’ unilateral actions during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Network bolstered its expert authority by positioning itself as a central unit that monitors and steers the actions of donor states, funnels financial resources on behalf of recipient states, and determines the access of national policy

practitioners to expert knowledge. Moreover, the Network legitimised the implementation mechanism by leveraging the linkages between the GCM and the 2030 Agenda. These linkages further strengthened the institutionalisation of the implementation mechanism by leading states to agree to indicators measuring their actions and to authorise the Network to formally expand its institutional work to the development regime. While carrying out this institutional work, the Network pursued its own institutionalisation, as illustrated by the creation of over 70 country networks and efforts to legitimise them during the IMRF. Future research could delve into the institutionalisation of the Network to understand its internal procedures and their implications on the power dynamics between its members.

That being said, the Network's position as a central unit in the GCM implementation confirms previous research which indicated that international organisations use non-binding texts such as the 2030 Agenda, GCM, and GCR to increase their authority vis-à-vis states and create new institutions in previously poorly institutionalised issue areas (Ahouga 2023b; Micinski and Bourbeau 2024; van Driel et al. 2024). However, the Network's position as a central unit does not fundamentally challenge the centrality of state sovereignty in global migration governance (Murphy 2023). A case in point is the fact that the Network gave precedence to the non-binding 2030 Agenda over the obligations deriving from the human rights regime to ensure the support of the EU member states and the United States. This choice reinforced state sovereignty and reflected the Network's recognition that the GCM remained controversial in many receiving states. This politicisation of the GCM constitutes an ever-present risk to the long-term institutionalisation of the implementation mechanism and the Network's ability to effectively act as a central unit in the GCM implementation.

Notes

1. The implementation mechanism's bureaucratic dimension distinguishes the GCM from previous multilateral initiatives in global migration governance. During the 2000s, the Berne Initiative, the Global Commission on International Migration, the UN High-level Dialogue on International Migration and Development, and the Global Forum on Migration and Development attempted to encourage interstate cooperation through informal deliberations alone.
2. The UN Secretary General established the Global Migration Group in 2006 to improve coordination between the UN agencies active in migration.
3. The first Steering Committee was composed of Ecuador, Morocco, Philippines (countries of origin, transit and destination); Germany, United Kingdom, Thailand (donor states); Mayors Migration Council, UN Special Rapporteur for the human rights of migrants, African Movement of Working Children and Youth (non-governmental stakeholders); ILO, UN Women, WHO (members of the Network) (UN Network on Migration 2019c).

4. The first target was met in 2020 and 2022 (UN Network on Migration 2021d, 47–48; UN Network on Migration 2023, 94–95). But in 2021, thematic area 4 received 26.5% of the funds (UN Network on Migration 2022c, 74). The second target was missed twice: in 2020, 11 donors earmarked 70% of 17.3 million USD; in 2021, 9 donors earmarked 72.6% of 10.79 million USD (UN Network on Migration 2021d, 48, 2022c, 74). However, 19 donors earmarked only 6% of 9.2 million USD in 2022 (UN Network on Migration 2023, 94). Combined since the Fund's inception, donors earmarked 55% of 37 million USD (UN Network on Migration 2023, 94).
5. From 2020 to 2022, the Fund received 120 concept notes, among which 48 were approved (UN Network on Migration 2023, 34).
6. Since 2021, one of the Network's 'core priorities' consists of encouraging states to include 'the GCM into their voluntary national review reports to the [HLPF]' (UN Network on Migration 2021c, 7).
7. Country networks coordinate the Network's members at the country level by convening regular meetings and sharing information (UN Network on Migration 2020a).
8. The states' pledges reached 37.3 million by the end of 2022 (UN Network on Migration 2023, 92).

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