

IHRP Final Report

Paloma van Groll – International Organization for Migration, Geneva, Switzerland

This summer, I interned at the International Organization for Migration (IOM)'s headquarters in Geneva. The IOM is the 'world's migration agency,' and has field offices all around the world. I was an intern in the International Migration Law (IML) Unit. Two of IML's main functions are to conduct training and aids in capacity building for governments and other groups, and to research migration law at the international, regional and national levels.

At the IML, I was given two larger projects, and completed shorter-term tasks as they came up. The first project involved surveying IOM projects that could fall under the umbrella of 'alternatives to detention,' with the overall goal of understanding what kind of 'alternatives' IOM already carries out, and to use those as best practices and promote this kind of work in IOM projects worldwide. Many countries detain irregular migrants that turn up at their borders. The conditions can be horrifying, and sometimes migrants are even thrown into jails with other criminals. There is thus an emerging paradigm on 'alternatives to detention,' looking at, and hoping to promote, alternative forms of border management other than detaining irregular migrants in these centers (or prisons) when they reach the border.

In my first week of work, the IML team met with members of an NGO called the International Detention Coalition (IDC), which does work specifically on promoting alternatives to detention. It was interesting to sit in on that meeting and see how this NGO, who is trying to achieve their specific mandate, interact with IOM, an intergovernmental organization. It was also very helpful to get their perspective on the issue, and I kept in contact with one of the researchers who had just finished an extensive project researching detention practices in many countries around the world. I developed a 10-page questionnaire to send to IOM regional offices and certain project managers to get information about alternatives to detention in IOM projects in the field, and this researcher kindly gave me feedback on the questionnaire and made some very helpful suggestions on our project's design.

My second larger project was to create a 'best practice' guide for country legislation on detention. Part of IML's role is to review legislation that countries send them, and this guide would be used by IML to advise countries on border management practices, with the specific focus on detention legislation. I looked at international standards for detention and reviewed literature on detention practices to determine what I should be looking for, and then tried to find good examples in country legislation as I carried out the comparative analysis. Unsurprisingly, most countries only had certain aspects that were good, so I ended up drawing from across many regions to create the 40-page 'best practice' guide.

I would also complete shorter research projects as they came up. For example, I drafted a background paper on the different forums for bringing human rights claims in Africa, including African Human Rights Courts and African sub-regional economic courts, which included a summary of any relevant migrant rights cases.

Overall, I enjoyed my time at the IML and in Geneva in general. My colleagues were incredibly smart and hardworking, and very supportive. I learned a great deal about immigration detention specifically, but also much more about migration law generally, and then at the more macro level, how intergovernmental organizations function.