CHAPTER 9

City Diplomacy and Migration

Abstract Cities of both developing and developed countries represent the main destinations of international migration flows. While international migration features a high potential for both migrants and their new city of residence, it also generates a series of challenges, whose management falls mainly in the hands of mayors. As the chapter will highlight, city diplomacy offers tools to support this task, primarily in the framework of city networks and partnerships with international organizations. Nevertheless, political differences in addressing migration between cities and central governments have sometimes led to harsh political confrontations. Like in the case of environmental politics, international coalitions of mayors have formed to advocate for a more substantial role of cities in this component of global governance. The final part of the chapter will deal with the impact of COVID-19 on migration and social inclusion, and how cities have been cooperating to address it.

Keywords City diplomacy · Migration · Diversity · Inclusion · Equality · Human rights · Empowerment · Xenophobia · Radicalization · Dialogue · COVID-19
THE IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION ON CITIES

Whether they have taken an active stance to managing it or not, many cities across the world have experienced a rise in international immigration, whose impact results in a complex, intricate, and ever-evolving network of formal and informal international connections. Across the world, cities represent the primary destination of today’s international migrants and refugees (UNHCR 2019a, 2020a; International Organization for Migration 2020).

Potentially, migrants’ arrival in a city can represent a dramatic improvement in their quality of life, namely for enhanced economic opportunities and access to services (Habitat III 2015). Moreover, cultural diversity resulting from international migration has the potential to foster a climate of innovation and growth, in accordance with Richard Florida’s theory on the geography of creativity and its effects on the local economy (Florida 2003). Unfortunately, international migrants rarely have the opportunity to access the full potential of urbanization. More frequently, moving to a foreign city coincides with a series of additional challenges, and results in a rise of urban inequalities.

As the United Nations have pointed out (Habitat III 2015), international migrants access mainly informal and precarious jobs and live in ethnicized neighborhoods (in many countries in the Global South located in peri-urban slums lacking basic services). Moreover, they are generally more exposed to climate change and tend to have more limited access to social and cultural facilities. Cities across the world are also places of discrimination and racism, thus worsening migrant isolation and lowering the chances of integration. Finally, such a situation tends to be harder for women, as they cumulate migrant and gender-related discriminations.

As the closest institution to residents and the main provider of essential services, city governments are the best-suited entity to assess these inequalities and act to address them. Besides ensuring the respect of fundamental human rights, municipalities across the world have been implementing a series of actions to improve migrants’ quality of life by targeting the challenges they face due to their status. As a result, these municipalities set the ground for a more equal and sustainable society, while reducing risks related to violent extremism connected to both xenophobia and radicalization. Besides, discrimination is very rarely directed against one ethnic, religious, or linguistic group: “intolerant attitudes tend to cluster around multiple
types of ‘difference’” (UNFPA 2014, 66), which calls mayors to integrate migrant-targeted actions in the framework of a broader municipal strategy for equity and inclusion.

Migration as a Resource for City Diplomacy

Generally, municipalities have three distinct departments addressing international migration:

- The culture department, usually in charge of promoting and protecting cultural diversity;
- Social services, in charge of integration and of providing aid and assistance to migrants in need;
- The international relations office.

The involvement of the latter, more recent compared to the first two, is mainly due to the mentioned similarities in migration’s impact on cities across the world. The spread of similar challenges and opportunities has led to the creation of international partnerships with other cities, international organizations, and NGOs, with the goal of improving the management of such a phenomenon—either through peer learning, capacity building, and introduction of pilot projects—as well as of launching (or joining) regional and global advocacy campaigns.

In line with the participatory approach spread across the different dimensions of city diplomacy, the international relations department should connect with migrants and migrant associations. This will allow city diplomats to identify the existing impact of migration on the city’s formal and informal international connections. As mentioned in Chapter 3, migrant communities tend naturally to act as links with foreign cities and countries in different ways, from enabling economic and trade connections to enhancing cultural exchange and twofold hybridization. Through such dialogue and engagement of migrants, the international relations department has the possibility to achieve the following set of results:

- Empowering migrants and migrants’ associations as actors of decentralized cooperation in their cities and countries of origin—see Chapter 3;
Assessing possible involvement of foreign actors piloting migrant organizations for goals not compatible with those of the municipality. This includes the identification of diaspora diplomacy (Rana 2011)—namely that implemented by nondemocratic regimes—and connection with transnational criminal and radicalized groups;

- Enhancing the culture and social services departments’ action in fostering cohesion and equity, in particular by empowering those groups and individuals possessing “transcultural agency”, i.e., “the rights and abilities to engage actively in the making of our urban spaces while finding and founding their own place in the changing society” (Hou 2013, 14).

**Sanctuary Cities vs. Fortress Countries?**

If it is mainly to cities that migration is directed, and it is up to municipal governments to provide essential services to migrants and make sure they integrate into society, the control over borders and the legal status of the migrant are all regulated by national law, and managed by national bodies. Over the last decades, radically different approaches to migration between national and city governments have led to frictions, sometimes with the involvement of foreign and international actors.

Namely, this opposition has taken the form of the sanctuary city movement, spread across the world. If the self-proclaimed statuses of “sanctuary cities” and “city of refuge” generally involve a proactive approach toward the protection of undocumented migration, its implementation varies widely from country to country as a consequence of different national legal frameworks. The practice is best known for its application in US cities, where it started spreading in the 1980s in order to benefit migrants lacking legal status. This led to sometimes harsh accusations between the federal government and mayors implementing sanctuary policies (Leffel 2018). As local authorities are not allowed to modify undocumented migrants’ legal status, the impact of sanctuary city policies is limited to improve their quality of life, such as by granting them access to social services and by refusing cooperation with federal immigration authorities. Contrary to what the terms “sanctuary” and “refuge” might suggest, local police cannot protect undocumented migrants from federal or state authorities.

The confrontation between cities and national government on the migrant status has regained its momentum in the framework of the
Trump administration’s highly restrictive migration policies.¹ A similar situation took place in Italy during the first Conte Cabinet² (June 1, 2018 to September 5, 2019). In both cases, cities enacting pro-illegal migrant practices—regardless of the use or not of the term sanctuary cities, less frequent in Italy—benefited from the political support of cities and city networks around the world.³ More recently, immigration policies implemented in the so-called Visegrad Four countries (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, and Slovakia) are among those contested by the “Pact of Free Cities” signed by the mayors of Budapest, Prague, Warsaw, and Bratislava, who, despite having diverse political backgrounds, decided to unite to defend values such as freedom, social justice, equality, and cultural diversity (Hopkins and Shotter 2019; Parmentier 2020).

A major argument raised by welcoming cities across the world is that lack of migrants’ regularization leads to a series of dangers for the whole population, including not reporting criminals to police for fear of being deported and not going to the hospital when sick. For that reason, cities, such as New York and San Francisco, have issued municipal identification cards independent of legal status for local identification purposes (Bauder 2017; International Organization for Migration 2020).

The outbreak of COVID-19 has led many municipalities across the world to adopt health and assistance strategies to all residents regardless of their status, reassuring migrant communities that everybody would have had access to medical attention, without any risk of being reported to national authorities (see below).

¹ In March 2020, the Center for Immigration Studies listed 171 cities and counties, and 11 states having put in place laws, ordinances, regulations, resolutions, policies, or other practices to prevent immigration enforcement by federal authorities (Center for Immigration Studies 2020).

² In Italy, mayors from many cities, including Palermo, Florence, or Milan, refrained from applying some dispositions included in the Salvini decree, from the name of that then minister of the interior, nativist Matteo Salvini (League party). Particularly vocal was the opposition of Palermo’s mayor Leoluca Orlando, a professor of law who deemed the dispositions preventing asylum seekers from benefitting of municipal services as unconstitutional. Orlando signed himself the municipal papers granting these benefits. In July 2020, the Italian Constitutional Court formally declared these dispositions unconstitutional (Corte Costituzionale 2020).

³ ANVITA, the French “national association of welcoming cities and territories,” displays in its website, alongside the lists of its members, the map of Italian cities who opposed the Salvini decree (ANVITA 2020).
If intergovernmental organizations, understandably, tend to refrain from commenting on political clashes between local and national governments, they have repeatedly and openly praised the welcoming approach of cities providing services and support the migrants regardless of their migration status (Price 2014; UNHCR 2019b).

Considering these frictions, it is not surprising that many national governments oppose local governments’ participation in international migration governance mechanisms. Albeit not formally a party to UN negotiations leading to the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM, 2018) and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR, 2018), mayors from across the world addressed recommendations and commitments to the co-facilitators of the texts. In the 2018 Marrakesh Declaration, adopted at the 5th Mayoral Forum on Human Mobility, Migration and Development on the eve of the GCM Conference, the participating cities recalled their contribution to the process as well as their “ambition that both Compacts bolster inclusive and coordinated multilevel governance and response for the benefits of migrants and refugees” (’Marrakech Mayors Declaration’ 2018). To support and coordinate cities’ active participation in migration policy deliberations at the regional and international levels, the Declaration launched the Mayors’ Migration Council (see Box 9.2).

Partnerships with International Organizations

At the level of multilateral city diplomacy, welcoming policies and intercultural dialogue find a series of fora, where cities can exchange best practices while branding themselves internationally as members. As topics of migration and inclusion have been for a long time at the center of international organizations’ actions, it is not surprising that municipalities are cooperating with them.

The United Nations’ New Urban Agenda connects urban management to the respect of human rights of all residents, regardless of their legal status: “We commit ourselves to ensuring full respect for the human rights of refugees, internally displaced persons and migrants, regardless of their migration status, and support their host cities in the spirit of international cooperation, taking into account national circumstances and recognizing that, although the movement of large populations into towns and cities
poses a variety of challenges, it can also bring significant social, economic and cultural contributions to urban life” (United Nations 2016a).

A key role in fostering international debate over cities’ international action on migration issues has been played by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Recognizing that “city and local government authorities have so far not had a prominent voice in the global debates on human mobility” (International Organization for Migration 2016), in October 2015 IOM convened the Conference on Migrants and Cities in the framework of its main global policy forum, the International Dialogue on Migration. The event represents a milestone in city diplomacy as the first precedent of a mayor policy dialogue with joint participation from cities and nations.

In regional terms, the Council of Europe (CoE) launched in 2009 the Intercultural Cities program (ICC), consisting of a network of cities in CoE’s member states, and Morocco, Canada, the United States, Mexico, Australia, and Japan.

This program stems from the CoE’s clear understanding that cities are in charge of the concrete application of national policies on human and cultural rights (D’Alessandro 2020).

It features three main local goals, namely effective and efficient access to rights, the spread of constructive interactions between diverse communities, and advocacy on the positive impact of cultural diversity. ICC’s member cities have access to traditional city diplomacy tools—peer learning, capacity building workshops—as well as to a diagnostic mechanism, the ICC Index, consisting of a set of indicators assessing the level of local intercultural integration, allowing for comparisons with other cities. Furthermore, IIC experts assist member municipalities in the definition and update of their own intercultural strategies.

The European Union has been supporting its cities’ migration policies through a series of funding mechanisms, including four Urbact peer-to-peer exchange networks (Roumourless Cities, Arrival Cities, Managing migration and Integration at local LEvel—MILE, and Open Cities), and seven Urban Innovative Actions in Antwerp, Athens, Bologna, Coventry, Fuenlabrada, Utrecht, and Vienna. In 2015 the European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Stability and Combating the Root Causes of Irregular Migration and the Displaced Persons in Africa (EUTF), together with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, launched the
Mediterranean City-to-City Migration (MC2CM) program, involving the cities of Amman, Beirut, Lisbon, Lyon, Madrid, Tangier, Tunis, Turin, and Vienna. With the overall goal of enhancing partnership between MENA and European cities on migrant integration, the first phase of the project (2015–2017) supported cities’ assessment of their local migrant situation, which served as a basis to the definition of local actions and common challenges among cities, on which concentrated the knowledge exchange activities between municipalities. The second phase of the program (2018–2021) is expanding the network to Algiers, Oran, Tripoli (Lybia), Sabha, Sousse, and Fès, and features the additional goal of strengthening reinforce and set up mechanisms of multilevel governance on migration through the involvement of regional and national actors (Mediterranean City-to-City Migration 2017; European Union 2020).

The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) signed in December 2008 a Memorandum of Understanding with UCLG to promote intercultural dialogue in cities (UCLG 2008). More recently, it has signed an MoU with the City of La Courneuve (Greater Paris), featuring a population of 42,000—80% of which of foreign descent. Through this partnership, UNAOC supports La Courneuve’s intercultural strategy by means of a capacity building program for local youth, with the general goal of addressing stereotypes, fake news, and hate speech (UNAOC 2019). In March 2020 UNAOC collaborated with the City of Los Angeles and the LAMEDINA International Dialogue Institute in the organization of the first edition of the LA Dialogue on Creating Cities of Belonging, a knowledge-sharing meeting between Mayors and city representatives committing, through the LA Declaration, to going “beyond fostering tolerance among diverse communities” in order to “create a sense of belonging and sharing for our residents, whereby all individuals feel values, heard, and included and their rights are respected” (LA Dialogue on Creating Cities of Belonging 2020).

4 The program is implemented by a consortium led by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) in partnership with the UCLG and UN-Habitat, and with UNHCR as an associated partner.

5 MC2MC’s participant cities have identified the following list of common challenges: safeguarding social cohesion; ensuring access to basic services as well as to housing, education and employment for newcomers; addressing needs of specific target groups such as asylum seekers and refugees; and ensuring human rights of migrants are guaranteed (European Union 2020).
The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has launched the Cities #WithRefugees initiative (part of the global #WithRefugees campaign) consisting of a statement of solidarity by which signatory cities and local authorities, restate their commitment in creating inclusive communities and promoting hope. In July 2020, 255 cities worldwide and of different sizes have signed the statement (UNHCR 2020b). UNHCR is also supporting the Refugee Food Festival, launched in 2016 by French NGO Food Sweet Food and taking place in June in 15 cities across Europe, the United States, and South Africa, in partnership with the local municipalities (Food Sweet Food 2020).

Last but not least, UNESCO fosters inclusion and cooperation through its International Coalition of Inclusive and Sustainable Cities (ICCAR), launched in 2004 and composed of seven regional and national coalitions, each featuring a Ten-Point Plan of Action, whose signatory cities undertake to integrate into their municipal strategy.

Cities themselves have been creating fora to discuss migration and enhance their capabilities to respond to the related challenges. Numerous discussions, peer learning activities, and pilot projects have been implemented in the framework of several global city networks, including UCLG, C40, and AIMF. Moreover, regional city networks have risen as key actors in coordinating a response to exceptional migrant inflows and through a common narrative among member cities. It is notably the case of Eurocities’ working group on migration and integration, producing a large amount of information and analysis material to support cities’ action while advocating the European Union and its states on the respect of migrants’ human rights and solidarity.

Similarly, as several Latin American cities had to face a massive inflow of asylum seekers from Venezuela and Honduras, Mercociudades launched in December 2018 a program called “La diversidad que hay en ti” (“the diversity there is in you”). This media campaign invited member cities to facilitate social cohesion and fight xenophobia and racism by celebrating the positive impact of migration (Mercociudades 2018).

In order to expand opportunities for cities to discuss and learn from each other on the topic of urban cohesion and inclusion, in 2015 the City of Montreal—a member of AIMF and Intercultural Cities, among other networks—launched the International Observatory of Mayors on Living Together. Through interactions between its 54 members from across the world and cooperation with universities, the initiative acts as
a peer learning and research platform focusing on intercultural policies at urban level (Coderre 2016). The Observatory is currently focusing on the impact of COVID-19 on minorities and social cohesion (July 2020).

Box 9.1: Intercultural Place Branding Through Gastronomy: The Case of Malmö

Across the world, many cities have been featuring an increasingly diverse food scene as restaurants, food kiosks, and markets offer food from migrant communities’ culinary traditions. A small group of cities has decided to brand themselves through such diversity, thus pursuing the goal of expanding their reputation as cosmopolitan and welcoming food destinations. Among them, the city of Malmö, Sweden, home to an uncommonly diverse population (186 nationalities), has been addressing food as a connector between communities, as a source of revenue for migrants, and as a tool for international attractivity.

Today, Malmö is known to international gastronomic tourists for its Falafel World Championship, launched in 2018 to celebrate this Middle-Eastern delicacy—and the diaspora who brought the recipe with them. This event is also part of the branding campaign presenting Malmö as “Sweden’s capital for vegetarians.”

This intercultural branding has been endorsed by the private sector as well, as shown by Matkaravan (Food Caravan), a tourism company offering food tours in English and Swedish to discover Malmo’s culinary diversity.

Moreover, Malmö’s intercultural strategy includes the support to two local initiatives implementing a food-based capacity building and integration approach: Yalla Trappan (Yalla Stairs), supporting female migrants’ employ through training in the food sector, and Botildenborg, a “Sustainable Innovation Center” using urban agriculture and food as a tool to create jobs in the green economy, with a focus on young people and newly arrived migrants.

Malmö’s strategy has been shared with foreign cities mainly through the Délice Network, whose 32 cities from across the world cooperate to enhance economic development, city branding, and the wellbeing of their citizens through food and gastronomy.

Sources City of Malmö (2010, 2018), Berg and Sevón (2014), Benoist (2020), and Tingstedt (2020)
COVID-19 generated a series of additional challenges to city policies addressing migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers needs and issues. Nonetheless, as in other municipal action sectors, the pandemic has led to a series of emergency best practices widely shared among cities, which might turn into long-term measures.

First of all, the need to share basic information on how to fight the spread of the disease lead many cities across the world (e.g., Leeds, Oslo, or San Francisco) to develop multilingual communication tools targeting the diverse foreign communities. This included establishing new partnerships with foreign-language local media makers such as the Pakistan Cultural Society’s radio in Botkyrka, Sweden. Moreover, cities put in place communication campaigns to counter xenophobia-motivated fake news, namely those targeting communities perceived as either the source or their primary vehicle of contagion (Intercultural Cities 2020).

Cooperation with civil society organizations providing support to migrant communities has been strengthened in many cities. A number of them have created centralized information and knowledge exchange system connecting all charities and NGOs working on supporting the most fragile population, thus fostering synergies and efficacy (OECD 2020).

Like it happened with the other dimensions of city diplomacy, existing networks and platforms dealing with migration quickly deployed mechanisms to support peer learning and mentoring. An extensive series of tools, including knowledge exchange webinars, video chats with experts, policy papers and lists of best practices, were therefore put in place by actors such as the Intercultural Cities, ICCAR, AIMF, and ASToN. It is worth mentioning that most of this knowledge sharing and production was made public, in order to allow nonmember cities to benefit from them.

**Box 9.2: The Mayors Migration Council**

Launched in Marrakech in December 2018, on the eve of the Conference on the Global Compact for Migration, the Mayors Migration Council (MMC) is a coordination mechanism on migration issues open to cities across the world. Its main aim consists in coordinating the demand of
mayors across the world to “have a seat” at the international policy table on migration. Its strategic guidance is provided by a Leadership Board composed of 10 mayors from across the world, and its secretariat is managed pro-bono by Rockefeller Philanthropy.

The MMC is financially supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the Open Society Foundation and cooperates with C40 in addressing urban challenges related to both migration and climate change.

In July 2020, the MMC Leadership Board members launched a global advocacy campaign to celebrate migrants’ contribution in the fight to the COVID-19 pandemic and denounce that undocumented migrants have been excluded in many places across the world from relief and assistance due to their status. The campaign directly addresses national governments and international organizations, urging their action to ensure universal access to basic healthcare and economic relief regardless of migration status, to regularize immigrant essential workers, and to fight misinformation and xenophobia. These actions are presented by MMC as instrumental in paving the ground for a full recovery from the outbreak. The campaign shares a series of best practices by MMC member cities, showing their vision and leadership for an inclusive and sustainable recovery.

Sources ‘Marrakech Mayors Declaration’ (2018) and Mayors Migration Council (2019, 2020)

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