



# Migration and displacement: *From humanitarian to sustainable response*

## *What role for local and regional governments?*

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*This background paper explores the role of local and regional governments on migration and displacement. It reviews the actions of local governments and other stakeholders to address emergency situations, provide long-term solutions, and contribute to global processes on migration.*

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# 1 > The impacts of migration and displacement on cities and territories

Cities are at the forefront of migration and displacement.<sup>[1]</sup> The current Ukraine displacement crisis is a case in point: more than 10 million people have fled bombings on Ukrainian cities<sup>[2]</sup> and have moved to nearby cities to find refuge and many continue their journey onwards. People forced to flee move through cities and settle in cities where they have access to more opportunities to seek protection but also work, study, and connect with their communities. Out of the 84 million people displaced worldwide in 2022,<sup>[3]</sup> the majority lives in cities: about 60 percent of refugees and 80 percent of internally displaced persons (IDPs) are displaced to urban areas.<sup>[4]</sup>

First, displacement can occur within cities. For instance, the city of **Freetown** in Sierra Leone is regularly hit by violent storms and floods that displace thousands of people in the city, especially in informal neighborhoods dominated by poorer and migrant households.<sup>[5]</sup> Second, displacement occurs along border, coastal and hub cities that are important points of departure, transit, and arrival for migrant and displaced persons. Local governments in these cities often face fluctuating and temporary flows. This is the case of several border cities in Colombia that host large numbers of Venezuelans escaping the domestic political and economic crisis, including **Cucuta** where Venezuelans represent up to 40 percent of the urban population.<sup>[6]</sup> Third, cities are also destinations for displaced persons who concentrate in urban centers, like the rest of the population. For instance, Iran is an important host country for more than 780,000 Afghan refugees, but an estimated 96 percent of them reside in **Iranian cities**.<sup>[7]</sup> The following typology breaks down these three types of urban displacement (Table 1).

Table 1: **A typology for urban displacement**

| Types of displacement            | Displacement in the city   | Displacement along the city  | Displacement to the city  |
|----------------------------------|--|--|---|
| Ways displacement affects cities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>City is affected by violent conflict and/or hazard</li> <li>Forced expropriation policies enforced in informal settlements</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>City is a place of migrant transit, temporary settlement, cross-border trade, and migrant smuggling</li> <li>City is affected by migrant disappearances and deaths</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Displaced persons settle in and around the city (including in self-settlements and camps)</li> <li>City absorbs the settlements of displaced persons</li> <li>City supports the resettlement of displaced persons</li> </ul> |
| City location (if applicable)    | N/A  | Border, coastal or hub city  | N/A   |

Source: author's compilation

## 2

## Local and regional governments' responses to migration and displacement

Local and regional governments face changing, and at times unpredictable, population movements with very few tools at their disposal to effectively manage these flows. For the most part, cities do not define, nor implement, policies that regulate international migration (i.e., border controls, status determination, document issuance) although they can play a part in influencing these policies and, in some cases, implementing them. In some contexts, high levels of informality and the lack of reliable data further complicate municipal action. Their mandate to act on immigration, asylum and entry policies is often very restricted.

However, local authorities are the primary authority responsible for providing for the daily needs of migrants and displaced people, ensuring social inclusion and providing services that are essential to residents, including newcomers and displaced persons. These include housing and accommodation, health services, education and child care, employment and skills training, public transport, arts and culture, water and sanitation systems, waste collection, security and policing, as well as the delivery of construction permits and business licenses.<sup>[8]</sup> This large set of responsibilities empowers cities to develop emergency actions and implement concrete initiatives.

For example, since the arrival of refugees from Ukraine, the city of **Rzeszow**, Poland has organized reception capacities. With volunteer support, the city created a help center at the railway station, organized collections for donations, set up a call center to answer questions from people arriving from Ukraine and created a bilingual brochure with essential information for newcomers.<sup>[9]</sup> Cities will be important actors in providing for the immediate and long-term needs of all Ukrainian arrivals, and integrating their needs and voices into existing urban plans and activities such as education and health systems will be imperative.

This remains far from the first time cities have rallied to support migrants and displaced people. In Germany, 300 cities – including Berlin, Dortmund, and Munich – have declared themselves “safe havens” for people on the move following an initiative launched by the civil society movement Seebrücke (Seabridge) in 2018.<sup>[10]</sup> Participant cities commit to welcoming people seeking protection regardless of their status and to contribute to the resettlement of refugees from other world regions. Among others, the city-state of Berlin followed up on its pledges and organized the relocation of 300 people from Greek islands in 2020.<sup>[11]</sup>

Cities located on land and sea borders often grapple with the deadly effects of unsafe and unmanaged human flows. For 10 years now, local authorities on **Lampedusa**, Italy commemorate the shipwreck of 3 October 2011 when more than

360 people lost their lives and advocates for safer migration routes – principles that are echoed in the Lampedusa Charter (Textbox 1).<sup>[12]</sup> Since then, it is estimated that more than 23,000 people have died crossing the Mediterranean, making it the deadliest crossing for migrants worldwide.<sup>[13]</sup>

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**Textbox 1: *The Lampedusa Charter***

Following the call of Salvatore Martello, Mayor of Lampedusa and Linosa, for restoring the dignity of people on the move and reaffirming the role of cities, UCLG launched a consultative process toward the Lampedusa Charter which articulates 7 key principles:

- Dignity:** *Ensuring humanitarian assistance and human rights protection for all regardless of their status and their reasons for migrating*
  - Equity:** *Promoting universal access to basic services and public space mindful of the forms of discriminations encountered by migrants*
  - Recognition:** *Recognizing diversity as an asset and enabling its transformative potential through inclusive forms of urban citizenship*
  - Participation:** *Opening spaces and channels for migrants, displaced persons, and refugees to participate in urban planning*
  - Community:** *Enabling whole of government and whole of society approaches that promote coexistence, equality, and access to the Right to the City for all*
  - Solidarity:** *Striving towards dignified and safe human mobility through collective action via international cooperation and coordination among all levels of government and all of society*
  - Resilience:** *Driving action in cities and territories to attain preparedness and resilience to eventual disasters, consequences of climate change and others, with an emphasis on leaving no one behind*
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### 3

## From emergency to long-term responses to urban displacement

It can take many years until people fleeing hazards and conflicts can return home safely. It is estimated that close to 80 percent of all refugees were in a situation of protracted displacement in 2018 – meaning that they had been displaced for more than 5 years.<sup>[14]</sup> Considering that the majority of refugees and other displaced persons live in cities, local authorities have an essential role to play in long-term responses to displacement. Concurrently, migrants and displaced persons also bring a diversity advantage and skills to cities that contribute not only to local communities and global economic development; leaving them out of policies and initiatives will compromise these long term development goals and stand to worsen community prosperity overall.

Over the past decade, place-based approaches to urban displacement have started to emerge. The objective of place-based approaches is to upgrade living conditions for all in a specific area, district, or neighborhood regardless of residents' status. These approaches often target vulnerable areas with weak infrastructure where migrant populations tend to be overrepresented. Their implementation requires work across sectors (e.g., sanitation, education, protection, livelihoods, etc.) and in collaboration with humanitarian organizations, national government, local authorities, civil society organizations, and residents. This poses a number of coordination challenges among the different actors but can improve the coherence of national and local responses, increase cities' visibility in policy planning, and include the voices of host and migrant residents.

For instance, in 2016 the city-state of **Hamburg**, Germany decided to build in several city districts new refugee housing centers to host Syrian refugees and asylum seekers. Residents advocated to limit the number of residents per unit to 300 to limit the scope of the new constructions, mitigate the impact of new residents on local infrastructures, and increase the integration prospects for refugees. These housing units are dedicated to hosting refugees and asylum seekers for 15 years, after which they will be turned into social housing available to all residents.

The region of **Maradi**, Niger hosts more than 57,000 Nigerian refugees fleeing repeated attacks by non-state armed groups. To support both refugee and host communities, the UNHCR has identified so-called "opportunity villages". In select villages, UNHCR worked with local and national authorities to upgrade public infrastructure (schools, hospitals, marketplaces) that are available to refugee and host populations. This has allowed refugees to find livelihoods opportunities in the village, to integrate into local societies, and to relocate away from the border in a safer region.

Investing in local communities is not only essential to cope with urban displacement, but also to improving local resilience capacity to cope with future crises. This is particularly important considering the effect of climate change on cities. Temperature rises and sudden shocks, such as floods, landslides and earthquakes tend to affect primarily the urban poor, people living in informal, poorly equipped, and overcrowded areas where many migrants feature. Upgrading urban infrastructure and increasing the political participation of residents – migrants included – is necessary to full proof cities for future challenges.

For instance, the Greater Municipality of **Amman**, Jordan, and UN-Habitat have launched a project to improve urban resilience and disaster risk management to address flash floods that have repeatedly hit the city center of Amman killing scores among vulnerable Jordanian and Syrian residents. The project invites the participation of representatives of Syrian refugee communities, women groups, and persons with disabilities.<sup>[15]</sup> Civil society organizations can also help include the voice of displaced communities, which is the case in **Nairobi** where local stakeholders include displaced people to participatory planning process in informal settlements to make sure all residents are represented in the process, but also to show to city authorities that displaced persons are residents like others.<sup>[16]</sup>

Last, long-term integration policies that open social, economic, and political opportunities to newcomers are also essential for cities to unlock the “diversity dividend” of migration and benefit from the opportunities migrants and displaced persons bring along. Cities recognize the expansion of the local economy, increased cultural diversity, and increased workforce as positive elements of hosting migrants and displaced persons.<sup>[17]</sup>

## 4

## Local contribution to global migration processes

Local authorities' actions on urban displacement reach beyond city boundaries to feed into global conversations on migration. Among them, the 2018 UN-led Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM)<sup>[18]</sup> and Global Compact on Refugees (GCR)<sup>[19]</sup> are intergovernmental processes that have the objective to advance safe migration and refugee policies globally. The implementation of the objectives of the Global Compact on Migration (GCM) is rooted in Sustainable Development Goal 10.7 to “facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies”<sup>[20]</sup> and the GCM provides a robust framework to support governments and other actors achieve the migration dimensions of the SDGs.

In connection to displacement, the GCM seeks to connect all aspects of migration governance, from humanitarian to development and rights-based approaches. More specifically, objective 8 of the GCM relates to saving lives and coordinating actions for missing migrants (Textbox 2). Additionally, the GCR aims to establish a stronger system for international cooperation and responsibility-sharing for refugees, including expanding support for refugee-hosting countries and opportunity for resettlement.

Textbox 2. **Global Compact for Migration – Objective 8: Save lives and establish coordinated international efforts on missing migrants**<sup>[21]</sup>

- a **Develop procedures and agreements on search and rescue of migrants with the primary objective to protect migrants' right to life**
- b **Review the impacts of migration-related policies and laws to ensure that these do not raise the risk of migrants going missing**
- c **Enable migrants to communicate with their families without delay to inform them that they are alive by facilitating access to means of communication along routes and at their destination**
- d **Establish transnational coordination channels, including through consular cooperation, and designate contact points for families looking for missing migrants**
- e **Collect, centralize, and systematize data regarding corpses and ensure traceability after burial**
- f **Make all efforts, including through international cooperation, to recover, identify and repatriate the remains of deceased migrants to their countries of origin**

While the GCM and GCR are inter-governmental State-led processes, the GCM's whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches as well as its 360 degree vision make it clear that local governments and authorities are critical actors in achieving its objectives. In December 2018, over 150 cities committed to implementing relevant aspects of the global compacts at their level by signing the Marrakech Declaration.<sup>[22]</sup> They also commit to participating in monitoring processes to evaluate progress on implementation during the International Migration Review Forum (IMRF) 2022.<sup>[23]</sup> On the occasion of the upcoming IMRF, the Mayors Mechanism of the Global Forum on Migration and Development has launched a Call to Local Action for Migrants and Refugees that aims to increase the visibility of cities' actions on migration on the global stage.<sup>[24]</sup>



## 5

## Guiding questions for the peer-learning event

### *Humanitarian response and long-term integration*

- What are the lessons local and regional authorities have learned from the displacement crises in the past years? What has improved and what challenges remain?
- How can local policies and actions move from emergency responses to sustainable approaches to migration? How can international and humanitarian actors contribute positively to this process in partnership with local and regional governments in their territories and communities?
- What tools do local and regional governments need to increase their humanitarian response and their resilience to large arrivals (in terms of resources, competences, expertise, processes, etc.)?
- In the longer run, how can local and regional governments turn the migration and displacement crises into opportunities and leverage the advantages that migrants and displaced persons bring to their territories?

### *Policy and advocacy*

- How can local governments and their networks connect the initiatives of cities along the displacement continuum (from hazards and conflicts, to borders, to destinations) to strengthen the role of cities at all stages of displacement?
- What other concrete applications could city-to-city exchange on displacement have, in view of preserving migrants' dignity and saving lives? What is the potential for city-to-city resettlement schemes?
- How can local governments further participate and contribute to initiatives for safe passage and missing migrants, also through influencing the concerned national policies and fostering an enhanced national - local policy coherence and cooperation?

## 6

## Resources

International Rescue Committee, “Urban Refuge How Cities Are Building Inclusive Communities”, 2018: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ircurbanrefugereport102918final.pdf>

Forced Migration Review, “Cities and Towns”, Issue 63, February 2020: <https://www.fmreview.org/sites/fmr/files/FMRdownloads/en/cities/cities.pdf>

UCLG, IMPACT, and CUF, “Consultations on Humanitarian Responses in Urban Areas Perspectives from Cities in Crisis”, World Humanitarian Summit, May 2016: [https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/cities\\_in\\_crisis.pdf](https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/cities_in_crisis.pdf)

Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, “Unsettled: Urban displacement in the 21st century, Research agenda and call for partner”, February 2018: <https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/20180209-idmc-intro-urban-displacement-thematic-series.pdf>

Mixed Migration Center, “Mixed Migration Review 2020. Highlights. Interviews. Essays. Data.”, November 2020: <https://mixedmigration.org/resource/mixed-migration-review-2020/>

## 7

## Research projects

“Refugees in Towns, Supporting integration of refugees and hosts”, Tufts University: <https://www.refugeesintowns.org/>

“Cities of Refuges”, University of Utrecht: <https://citiesofrefuge.eu/about-us>

“Protracted Displacement in an Urban World”, research consortium: [https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/cities\\_in\\_crisis.pdf](https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/cities_in_crisis.pdf)

Internal Displacement Monitoring Center, “Unsettled: Urban displacement in the 21st century, Research agenda and call for partner”, February 2018: <https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/20180209-idmc-intro-urban-displacement-thematic-series.pdf>

Mixed Migration Center, “Mixed Migration Review 2020. Highlights. Interviews. Essays. Data.”, November 2020: <https://mixedmigration.org/resource/mixed-migration-review-2020/>

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- [1] Displacement is “the movement of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters” (IOM Glossary on Migration, 2019, p.55).
- [2] <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2022/3/623da5894/month-since-start-war-quarter-ukraines-population-displaced.html>
- [3] <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>
- [4] <https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/the-power-of-cities/>
- [5] <https://www.thesierraleonetelegraph.com/freetown-city-council-to-build-5000-homes-amid-debate-about-devolution-of-power/>
- [6] <https://blogs.worldbank.org/latinamerica/how-venezuelan-migration-changing-urban-expansion-cucuta-colombia>
- [7] <https://www.unhcr.org/ir/refugees-in-iran/>
- [8] <https://urbangovernance.net/en/>
- [9] <https://eurocities.eu/latest/rzeszow-and-other-polish-cities-welcome-millions-of-ukrainian-refugees/>
- [10] <https://seebruecke.org/sichere-haefen/haefen>
- [11] <https://www.infomigrants.net/fr/post/25418/berlin-passes-decree-to-take-in-300-refugees-from-greece>
- [12] <https://www.uclg.org/en/media/news/uclg-joins-lampedusa-call-memory-and-dignity-and-commemorate-lost-migrant-lives-october-3>
- [13] <https://missingmigrants.iom.int/data>
- [14] <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2018/>
- [15] <https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/strengthening-urban-resilience-amman-jordan-mitigate-flashfloods-and-protect>
- [16] <https://www.protracteddisplacement.org/sites/pd/files/resources/2021-12/HLOM-VirtualSpace-LucyEarle-IIED.pdf>
- [17] <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ircurbanrefugereport102918final.pdf>
- [18] <https://www.iom.int/global-compact-migration>
- [19] <https://www.unhcr.org/the-global-compact-on-refugees.html>
- [20] <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/sdgs?node=10#target107>
- [21] [https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/sites/default/files/180711\\_final\\_draft\\_0.pdf](https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/sites/default/files/180711_final_draft_0.pdf)
- [22] [https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/marrakech\\_mayors\\_declaration.pdf](https://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/marrakech_mayors_declaration.pdf)
- [23] <https://migrationnetwork.un.org/international-migration-review-forum-2022>
- [24] [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1F\\_7bVw8ZswAyOuXwDw2onRv15kjsEw9d/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1F_7bVw8ZswAyOuXwDw2onRv15kjsEw9d/view)

