

PRESS RELEASE:

Leveraging migrants' contribution to the emergency and protecting the most vulnerable during the COVID-19 crisis

#BeyondTheOutbreak

As the level of government that is closest to citizens, local and regional governments bear the greatest responsibility for “leaving no one behind”, regardless of people’s legal status.

The Live Learning Series hosted by UCLG, Metropolis, and UN-Habitat, has brought together more than 1,000 participants over the course of six sessions in which participants from local and regional governments, the UN system, and partners from civil society shared their experiences, initiatives, and actions to support their communities facing the pandemic through the provision of key basic services.

The Live Learning Session that took place on April 16, organized in collaboration with the Mediterranean City-to-City Migration (MC2CM) project, addressed the relevance of inclusive responses to the pandemic. During the session, local governments from different regions of the world also shared their aspirations for the future. Mayors and vice mayors from cities that are contributing towards changing the narrative on migration such as **Eric Piolle, Mayor of Grenoble, Mounir Elloumi, Mayor of Sfax, Mohamed Sadiki, Mayor of Rabat, Souad Abderrahim, Mayor of Tunis, Salvatore Martello, Mayor of Lampedusa, Gissela Chalá, Vice Mayor of Quito, Latif Karadag, Vice Mayor of Gaziantep**, were joined by **Spyros Oikonomou, Greek Council for Refugees**, and UCLG’s and UN-Habitat’s key partners in regards to migration such as **Michael Spindelegger, Director General of the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD)**.

Maimunah Mohd Sharif, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Director of UN-Habitat, highlighted the opportunity that local and regional governments have to change the mainstream perception on migration, sharing stories about positive contributions by migrants and countering prejudice. The Executive Director of UN-Habitat further argued that “*migrants need to be included in the recovery phase of the pandemic, and it is vital to include them in local planning processes. Solidarity is necessary to regain prosperity*”.

The Executive Director of UN-Habitat reminded participants that cities are the major destination for migrants and must remain places of opportunities for all populations, further highlighting the important contributions of migrants to cities' economic, social and cultural development. She stressed the need to put an end to segregation and foster social cohesion, stop rumours and counter the xenophobia that is spreading around the world.

Mohamed Boudra, Mayor of Al-Hoceima and President of UCLG, argued the pandemic that the world is currently experiencing will change our perceptions and strategies, and in particular regarding solidarity and migration. The mayors of the world are trying to adapt to the situation and meet the needs of their citizens at this time of a serious health crisis, he said and commended the service delivery provided by local and regional governments and the efforts of the whole of society in providing care to all citizens.

"Tomorrow we will no longer talk about migrants but about citizens of cities. Stranded tourists, migrant workers and undocumented migrants are experiencing the pandemic within host communities and they are being treated in the same way in the face of the pandemic."

Michael Spindelegger, Director General of ICMPD, affirmed that the first priority in this emergency situation should be to ensure rights of migrants and foster inclusive societies by enhancing trust and implementing evidence-based responses. The Director General of ICMPD said the input of cities was critical in ensuring inclusive measures in the quarantine phase.

The first part of the Live Learning Experience was a roundtable on how local and regional governments were responding to the need to reach out to local communities regardless of their legal status, their living or work conditions. It was moderated by **Jean Pierre Elong Mbassi**, Secretary General of UCLG-Africa, who advocated for building cities of solidarity that contribute to a new perception of migrants.

Eric Piolle, Mayor of Grenoble, emphasized the rise of inequalities that the COVID-19 crisis may bring if measures are not taken and stressed the efforts of Grenoble to enhance access to services for all citizens by issuing local ID cards.

"The City of Grenoble is a land of refuge and safety and despite the crisis, we wish to bring this open-mindedness. Grenoble is an open city with an integrating philosophy that enables migrants to benefit from the local community through citizenship actions, access to participatory budgets, citizens' councils, housing sports and cultural activities."

Souad Abderrahim, Mayor of Tunis, highlighted that networking is essential to guide and support cities in dealing with the pandemic and reminded the participants of the importance of human rights-based approaches and multi-level governance cooperation to ensure that cities duly respond to the emergency with the necessary resources.

"The pandemic has affected Tunis like most capitals around the world. Containment measures are being implemented, but unfortunately the most vulnerable groups are at high risk. Our focus has been around sanitary measures. We need to work with the central government on this particularly challenging dimension of the pandemic."

Salvatore Martello, Mayor of Lampedusa, called for transforming mainstream perceptions over migration and for enhancing collaboration with civil society. He said it is important to fight the false narrative about migrants bringing the disease.

"We were already at the frontline as a city, together with civil society, prior to this crisis. We have been providing emergency responses to the most urgent needs of migrants - before the COVID-19 outbreak and now in the context of quarantine measures. The partnership with civil society is critical in the case of small municipalities, without health facilities and which are isolated like the island of Lampedusa."

The second part of the session included a discussion on how local and regional governments support migrant communities, leverage their socio-economic contribution to the emergency and safeguard the most vulnerable. This segment was facilitated by **Lefteris Papagiannakis**, Former Vice Mayor of Athens, who highlighted that in many cases, the current context is leading to restrictions of rights and that it is often migrants who are paying the price of distorted narratives. He called for reversing this narrative, stressing how protecting everyone, including the most vulnerable, is key for everyone's health.

Mohamed Sadiki, Mayor of Rabat highlighted the often precarious situation of migrants and how Rabat had endeavoured to provide shelter to migrants that were homeless. The city also tried to carry out educational follow-up with migrant minors.

« We have tried to identify migrants living on the streets and open the university dormitories to them after students returned home. There have been very difficult situations, especially with children living on the street, and we try to maintain an educational follow-up to the best of our capacity ».

Mounir Elloumi, Mayor of Sfax, mentioned the importance of facing this crisis through solidarity and with the ambition of making societies more cohesive.

"COVID-19 compels us to look together for solutions for a real integration of migrants in our cities and territories. I hope that this pandemic will be the opportunity to definitively change the reality of migrants in Tunisia."

Gissela Chalá, Vice Mayor of Quito also highlighted the need to develop a rights-based approach to supporting migrant citizens during the outbreak and beyond. She recalled the particularly vulnerable situation of women migrants and

said that many cities in Latin America deal with in-country migration and the fragile situation of those new comers with unstable or informal jobs and poor housing conditions. She called for assurances that the emergency situation would not be to the detriment of democracy and human rights.

"It is necessary to go beyond assistentialism. Supporting migrants is not only a question of solidarity, it must be a public policy. Including migrants is also key to the economic recovery policies that will follow after the quarantine."

Latif Karadag, Vice Mayor of Gaziantep addressed the challenges of providing adequate services to refugees in the midst of the outbreak and highlighted that the only way a relatively small city can deal with over half million refugees is by integration and overcoming the language and employment barriers to ensure this happens. He further mentioned that using the talents and skills of the refugees themselves is critical. Volunteer Syrian doctors are playing a key role in containing the pandemic in Turkey.

Spyros Oikonomou, Greek Council for Refugees, also highlighted how refugee communities were using their collective skills to help during the pandemic. He commended the critical role played by local and regional governments and called the constituency to lead policy transformation for refugees. He stated that the inclusion of refugees and migrants in consultation mechanisms is critical to address the pandemic.

Mehmet Duman, Secretary General of UCLG-MEWA, argued that contribution of international organizations is key to supporting local authorities and leveraging their action at global level. He further highlighted the major efforts made in cities around the MEWA regions in challenging circumstances and mentioned that in Turkish cities the percentage of COVID-19 cases among the migration community is comparable to the host communities.

Emilia Saiz, Secretary General of UCLG, wrapped up the session stating that the discussions needed to have an impact on how local authorities address both the crisis and the aftermath. It is essential, she argued, to connect this momentum on the defence of public services to our advocacy efforts towards national governments and the international system. *"Cutting down on service provision to overcome the crisis is the worst possible idea and will deeply affect migrants' living conditions. We need to find a way to ensure that many of the*

emergency measures undertaken in terms of emergency housing, temporary status and health coverage are transformed into permanent measures.”

“The “Cities for Global Health” Platform powered by Metropolis and ALLAS is an essential part of this process of discussion and collective learning, which aims

ultimately at transforming the way we approach crises through public service, particularly because this pandemic will not be the last one and we need to be ready for that.”

Cities were called to upload their experiences in the platform www.citiesforglobalhealth.org where over 300 cases can be found.

The Live Learning Exercises will continue throughout the month, taking place on Wednesdays and Thursdays during the crisis. Culture, Local Finance, Local Economic Development, and Informalities will be among the topics covered as cities around the world are looking at how to overcome challenges with a new generation of solutions.

About United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG):

UCLG is the global organization of local and regional governments and their associations that represents and defends their interests on the world stage. Representing 70 per cent of the world's population, UCLG members are present in all world regions: Africa, Asia Pacific, Europe, Eurasia, Middle East-West Asia, Latin America and North America - organised in seven continental sections, a metropolitan section and a regional forum. This network covers more than 240,000 cities, regions and metropolises and more than 175 local and regional government associations present in 140 countries. UCLG includes among its main areas of political interest local democracy, climate change and environmental protection, the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals, local finance, urban development and city diplomacy for peacebuilding. Visit www.uclg.org and follow [@uclg_org](https://twitter.com/uclg_org) for more.

About UN-Habitat

UN-Habitat is the UN agency focused on our cities, towns and communities. UN-Habitat works in over 90 countries supporting people in cities and human settlements for a better urban future. Working with governments and local partners, its high impact projects combine world-class expertise and local knowledge to deliver timely and targeted solutions. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes a dedicated Goal on cities, SDG 11 – to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Visit www.unhabitat.org and follow [@unhabitat](https://twitter.com/unhabitat) for further information.

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