



## Mediterranean City-to-City Migration

### Dialogue, Knowledge and Action

### Peer-Learning Event – Thematic paper

#### Communication on Migration: Rebalancing the Narrative to Strengthen Local Governance

15-18 June 2020

Location: Online via Zoom (Hosted by the Municipality of Seville, Spain)

This background document has been drafted by Daniel Howden, for the purpose of the Mediterranean City-to-City Migration project (MC2CM) digital Peer-learning event on “*Communication on Migration: Rebalancing the Narrative to Strengthen Local Governance*”, which will take place online from 15 to 18 June 2020.

The objective of the document is to produce an evidence-based analysis about communication on migration at local level. It specifically aims to explore the ways local governments and authorities can rebalance the narrative on migration to strengthen local migration governance, foster social cohesion and increase the quality of life for all inhabitants. It also introduces practices from the field, models, mechanisms and tools that have proved promising.



## 1 Introduction

Take a moment to consider what migration looks like. There is a strong likelihood that the image coming to mind is of a refugee camp, a border fence or a boatload of asylum seekers. The migration narrative in the Euro-Mediterranean region has been skewed by the predominance of dramatic presentations of treacherous journeys and harsh enforcement measures. Annually, around the world, **irregular migrants represent less than 1%**<sup>1</sup> of the total of those living outside their birth country.

Publics across the region<sup>2</sup> are presented with polarizing images: either stressing the humanitarian plight of desperate migrants who risk their lives to cross the Mediterranean; or coverage that depicts migration as a threat to the security, welfare, culture and lately even the health of host communities.

This coverage places fringe experiences at the centre of public discourse and contributes to radicalizing public opinion. Migration is frequently presented as “out of control”<sup>3</sup>. Irregular migration, which makes up a tiny proportion of actual mobility and **has been in decline in the European Union for the last four years**<sup>4</sup>, still dominates the discussion, despite the downward trend in overall asylum applications in comparison to the peak of migration pressure in 2015. The notion of migration perceived as a threat to host communities has become the norm across much of the region<sup>5</sup>. The absence of real, majority, lived experience of human mobility distorts the narrative and policy responses on an issue that affects millions of people.

In this context, the COVID 19 pandemic presents both an opportunity and a threat. The overwhelming, constructive presence of migrants in what publics can now see are essential worker roles from hospital cleaners and transport workers to food delivery agents, to frontline doctors and nurses, has been widely acknowledged<sup>6</sup>. Media which previously had a marked imbalance in its presentation of migrants and migration has undergone some degree of correction.

However, the counterbalance to this increased realisation in wealthier countries of their reliance on migration is that the pandemic has also awoken deep fears and subjected millions of people to isolation and economic insecurity. Amid this intense uncertainty COVID-19 and its aftermath may make fertile ground for a rise in xenophobic, hate speech and racism<sup>7</sup>.

The challenge is to seize the opportunity and mitigate the threat posed by this extraordinary public health crisis. It is multi-faceted and calls for responses from municipal authorities in towns and cities, as well as governments at the regional, national, and supra-national level. It has been a common refrain<sup>8</sup> that not enough has been done to close the gap between public perceptions and the reality of migration. The current reality should be seen as a chance to redress this.

Mobile foreign-born and technically skilled entrepreneurs are bringing about profound transformations in the global economy and in local communities<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Refugees Deeply: [It's Time for a More Honest, Less Partisan Debate on Mixed Migration](#)

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR: [Press Coverage of the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in the EU: A Content Analysis of Five European Countries](#)

<sup>3</sup> ODI, Chatham House: [Understanding public attitudes towards refugees and migrants](#)

<sup>4</sup> MC2CM: [Social cohesion and intercultural and inter-religious dialogue](#)


<sup>5</sup> Compas: [ATTITUDES TO MIGRANTS, COMMUNICATION AND LOCAL LEADERSHIP:](#)

<sup>6</sup> University of Oxford: [COVID-19: Shifting attitudes to migration?](#)

<sup>7</sup> ICMPPD: [Expert Voice: How the COVID-19 'Infodemic' targets migrants](#)

<sup>8</sup> OHCHR: [Shaping the public narrative on migration](#)

<sup>9</sup> McKinsey: [Inclusive cities are productive cities](#)



The contribution of migrants to lower-paid but societally essential roles has received unprecedented recognition<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, it is important to move beyond the language of control, containment and crisis, to talk about mobility and migration in a realistic and balanced way as a human condition that underpins our security and essential services as well as delivering progress across the region.

Rebalancing perceptions of migration can pave the way for the development of evidence-based policies. As one of the greatest political challenges of our times, migration is too complex and nuanced to be addressed solely by one nation, one region, or one city alone.

As the COVID-19 crisis continues to demonstrate: all levels of governance must work together, both horizontally and vertically to meet the moment. Cities must acknowledge and embrace their own role as necessary, active agents<sup>11</sup> in migration governance. National governments have a duty to address such a complex and evolving issue and should mobilise at all levels but even where this is not happening local authorities should mobilise themselves.

It is at the city level where the benefits of migration are most readily apparent and the best examples of effective migration policy can be found. Cities are where most people settle and where the benefits of a longer-term migrant population are best seen<sup>12</sup>. Proportional to their experience, cities do not influence the conceptualization and application of migration policies, which are too often drafted on a national or supranational level. This creates an unhelpful governance gap between policy-making and policy-implementation.

What has been learned in cities and seen to work is too often invisible and unheard in the processes that deliver national migration policy. Left unaddressed, this gap can lead to disconnection between cities and national governments, fostering competing narratives about migration and generating policy which hinders social cohesion and reduces the quality of life for all inhabitants. Better synergies between cities and governments are necessary across all policy areas from employment; to education and urban planning and critically, public health.

## 2 Rebalancing the Migration Narrative to Strengthen Local Governance

Evidence tells us that diversity is a strength<sup>13</sup>. The proving ground for this is found in our cities. The most diverse and inclusive cities are also the most successful and attractive. The underpinning of this diversity is migration. **Two-thirds of the economic development of cities is determined by their population flow.**

Migration is an incredibly important part of how cities develop. Metropolises that can effectively include new arrivals grow and thrive, those that cannot shrink. But attitudes to migration are shaped by the interplay between communal values, socialisation and education. The politics and perception of migration are more complex and more resistant to evidence than the economics.

Migration can also present a challenge to social cohesion. Without effective communication of the benefits of migration, with all levels of society, pragmatic and positive attitudes to the influx of skills and human capital can sour into negative perceptions of diversity and migrants. Local governments are in a unique position, thanks to their size and proximity to citizens, to influence positive attitudes and challenge negative attitudes.


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<sup>10</sup> Oxford Review of Economic Policy: [From Low-Skilled to Key Workers: The Implications of Emergencies for Immigration Policy](#)

<sup>11</sup> Caponio, Tiziana, and Michael Jones-Correa, "Theorising Migration Policy in Multi-level States. The multilevel governance perspective." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, published online in August 2017.

<sup>12</sup> McKinsey: [Inclusive cities are productive cities](#)

<sup>13</sup> Council of Europe: [Intercultural Cities](#)



Prior to COVID-19 there have been numerous indications in the Euro-Mediterranean region and beyond that perceptions of migration have become dangerously detached from the evidence-base of its real impacts. The centrality of cities to the pandemic, due to the scale of human interactions and population density, also makes them uniquely well-placed to achieve a communications corrective in the aftermath. The contribution of migrants to meeting the moment in the pandemic has graphically demonstrated the value of diversity. **Cities can ensure this story is told.**

### 3 Disinformation

Local governments face motivated and organised opposition to an evidence-based rebalancing of the migration narrative. The COVID-19 crisis has been accompanied by an acceleration of disinformation that has come to be known as the "**infodemic**". The purpose of disinformation is to sow panic and distrust. There is fertile ground around the migration debate for stoking both panic and distrust.

Malicious anti-migrant rhetoric has long been a central theme within extremist mobilisation globally and a mainstay of disinformation campaigns. Anti-migrant and far-right networks in the Euro-Mediterranean region and beyond are exploiting the COVID-19 situation to spread disinformation targeting migrants, refugees and other vulnerable populations on and offline. The pandemic has seen migrants falsely cast as a threat to public health.

Social media, which has only grown in importance during COVID-19 lockdowns, has been the main amplifier of disinformation. Typically, the tools used are automated software programmes ('bots') which spread messages across social media platforms in ways which are hard to detect for ordinary users, who in turn pick them up and further share them.

#### *Some narratives include:*

- Claims that migrants specifically ignore lockdown rules and asylum seekers are violently resisting quarantine<sup>14</sup>;
- Conspiracy theories that undermine efforts to deal with the crisis and its growth, including those disputing the reality of the virus and its impacts on health and life, are particularly prevalent in closed groups such as on Telegram;
- False claims that the virus was engineered or spread deliberately by rival state actors or even airlines are stoking xenophobia in the Middle East, for instance the "Qatar is Corona" hashtag<sup>15</sup>;
- Suggestions that migration routes, in particular along the Greek-Turkish border, are acting as a vector for the virus to spread;
- Speculation that immigrant and minority communities in major cities are using the virus as an opportunity to riot<sup>16</sup>;
- Claims that migrants will use the pandemic as an opportunity to 'invade Europe'<sup>17</sup>.

So far, fears that large refugee populations across the MENA region will be scapegoated remain unrealised as sectarian and national rivalries absorb the first round of misinformation. Vulnerable refugee and migrant populations can also be the victims of false messages like, "the virus causes infertility in men", "drinking warm water every 15 minutes stops the virus," or if you are religious enough, you are "protected by God."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> ICMPD: [Expert Voice: How the COVID-19 'Infodemic' targets migrants](#)

<sup>15</sup> Coda Story: [Disinformation about Qatar surges in wake of COVID-19](#)

<sup>16</sup> Institute for Strategic Dialogue: [Covid-19 Disinformation Briefing No.1](#)

<sup>17</sup> Institute for Strategic Dialogue: [Covid-19 Disinformation Briefing No.1](#)

<sup>18</sup> Wilson Center: [Ground Truth Briefing | Misinformation, Disinformation, and COVID-19 in MENA](#)



The feedback loop between viral disinformation and local and national politics is accelerating constantly<sup>19</sup>. It is visible in a political landscape, where populist actors actively adopt talking points, conspiracy theories and even policy directly from extremist actors.

All categories of migrants are potentially vulnerable to aggressive disinformation campaigns, even frontline migrant health-workers, who have been celebrated in some cities but shunned in others as potential spreaders of the virus.

In the Mediterranean, irregular migrants are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19-related disinformation since they are already subject to overly simplistic media framing. Under lockdown, Italy and Malta closed their ports in response to the virus and Greece has carried over lockdowns in asylum seeker reception centres long after it was lifted for the general population. In Lebanon lockdowns were imposed more strictly on refugee camps than the general population. Meanwhile, irregular crossings in the Mediterranean continue as do tensions over how to handle the people rescued, and Coronavirus clusters at refugee facilities have been brought in from outside visitors.

Nonetheless, disinformation campaigns threaten to inflame this highly sensitive situation, where human rights, security concerns, border control and the essential trust needed to sustain third country cooperation are all in play.

## 4 Running Effective Campaigns

When it comes to governance and communication, local matters. Places differ and the integration challenges depend on factors such as city size, economy, education, etc.. There is no single, one size fits all approach to how a city should approach its communication.

Local and regional authorities need to think beyond ad hoc responses and implement consistent strategic messages that promote an inclusive identity and a shared future. Strategic approaches should be evidence-based and use a range of communication channels. They should deploy facts but also engage emotions and use humour, where possible.

The AMICALL3 project on “*Attitudes to Migrants, Communication and Local Leadership*” in six European countries offers a useful typology of communications activities of local authorities, which places these into three main groupings:

1. **Communications campaigns** include awareness-raising activities, media engagement and other public relations activities. They range in aims from increasing tolerance, preventing discrimination, to promoting positive attitudes towards diversity and migrants.


### BARCELONA, SPAIN

As part of their Anti-rumour Strategy, the Barcelona City Council set up an Anti-rumour Network to fight negative perceptions of migrants. Volunteers are trained to enable them to spread information and dispel myths and stereotypes about migrants among their own networks face-to-face.

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<sup>19</sup> Institute for Strategic Dialogue: [Covid-19 Disinformation Briefing No.1](#)



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2. **Intercultural communications activities** seek to celebrate different cultures, while identifying underlying commonalities, in one community and thus improving acceptance.

#### **MARBURG, GERMANY**

In Marburg, the city district of Richtsberg hosts a 'soup festival' bringing together residents from different cultural backgrounds to enjoy the various spices and flavours from around the world. The festival accomplishes the dual goal of promoting a local identity, while overcoming prejudices.

#### **NADOR, MOROCCO**

In Nador, a series of intercultural events and an awareness campaign led up to an "Expo Interculturelle AFRICA", a week of events including musical performances, culinary and cultural stands that emphasised positive exchanges between migrants and Moroccans.

3. **Face-to-face communications activities** aim to bring together different sections of the community as individuals. This can be done through public fora, informal and formal dialogue, classes or mediation.

#### **LYON, FRANCE**

In Lyon, the Agence Lyon Tranquillité Médiation (ALTM) initiative is designed to maintain a secure and peaceful environment Gabriel Péri square, deploys uniformed mediators to promote long-term social cohesion in a specific and 'problematic' area of the city.

## **5 Press and Media**

Relations between local and regional government and the press and media are not without hurdles. A functioning media will be aware of its watchdog role and rightly resist any official direction or seal of approval to their work.

Cities and regions have a story to tell and should constructively engage with media practitioners in an effort to tell it. Cities find themselves at the crossroads of horizontal communication, across municipal departments and other cities, and vertical communication, encompassing multilevel coordination with local, regional, national and international actors.

#### **NADOR, MOROCCO**

In Nador, 20 journalists were selected, as part of MC2CM, and taught awareness of hate speech and trained in approaches to migration journalism by communication and migration experts. The aim was to combat negative stereotypes about migration in accordance with journalistic ethics.

These multiple channels provide cities with an ideal platform for coordination that can be used to showcase successful policies, reach out for support, learn, exchange and grow. Local media should be made aware of examples where positive engagement with migration issues improved audience ratings.

#### **BARCELONA, SPAIN**

In Barcelona, COMRàdio is a regional network that dedicates two radio stations to immigrant integration, in both Spanish and Catalan. To recognize the increasing diversity of local audiences, COMRàdio creates 'village squares' across the airwaves for more than 140 local stations.

## TORONTO, CANADA

In Toronto, CBC Radio's Business Case for Diversity combines their audience growth strategy with effective diverse hiring and recruitment practices to become the top rated morning show in the city.

Many cities are well placed to train staff, practitioners and the media on issues of migration. However, this should be seen as a long-lasting investment from which, even in the case of unsuccessful implementation, lessons learnt and experiences can be drawn.

The table below presents a non-exhaustive list of the types of communications activities that can be implemented:

Types of communication	Best practices
<b>Press releases or media conference</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● <b>Barcelona, Spain:</b> Call for extraordinary regularization of unauthorized immigrants; more <a href="#">here</a></li><li>● <b>Valladolid, Spain:</b> Semana Intercultural: A Week of Sharing Ideas and Cultures; more <a href="#">here</a></li></ul>
<b>Stand-alone information campaigns</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Information about migrants</li><li>• Information for migrants</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● <b>Erlangen, Germany:</b> Immigration City Erlangen; more <a href="#">here</a></li><li>● <b>Dublin, Ireland:</b> Migrant Voters Project; more <a href="#">here</a> (p.18)</li></ul>
<b>Web presence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● <b>Cologne, Germany:</b> Cologne helps; more <a href="#">here</a></li><li>● <b>Erlangen, Germany:</b> The Welcome App; more <a href="#">here</a></li><li>● <b>Collaboration of cities in Europe:</b> MICADO; more <a href="#">here</a></li></ul>
<b>Multimedia communications strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● <b>Geneva, Switzerland:</b> Genève, sa gueule; more <a href="#">here</a></li><li>● <b>São Paulo, Brasil:</b> There is a place for everyone in São Paulo. Except for intolerance; more <a href="#">here</a> (p.59)</li></ul>
<b>Media engagement</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sensitising journalists</li><li>• Promoting positive coverage</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● <b>Spain:</b> Inmigracionalism Project on the media's treatment of immigration and asylum in Spain; more <a href="#">here</a></li></ul>
<b>Diversity training for officials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● <b>Lisbon, Portugal:</b> SOMOS Lisbon Programme for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education; more <a href="#">here</a></li><li>● <b>Leicester, United Kingdom:</b> Everyday Policing for Equality; more <a href="#">here</a> (p. 54)</li><li>● <b>Collaboration of cities in Europe:</b> Proximity Policing Racism, Xenophobia and Other Forms of Intolerance; more <a href="#">here</a></li></ul>
<b>Intercultural festivals/celebrations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● <b>Erlangen, Germany:</b> Anti-Rumour Picnic Banquet; more <a href="#">here</a></li><li>● <b>Frankfurt, Germany:</b> Newcomers Festival; more <a href="#">here</a></li><li>● <b>Ravenna, Italy:</b> Festival of Cultures; more <a href="#">here</a></li><li>● <b>Marseille, France:</b> Marseille Esperance; more <a href="#">here</a></li></ul>

<b>Physical spaces for intercultural dialogue (long-term)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Cologne, Germany:</b> Language area – learn together and get involved; more <a href="#">here</a></li> <li>● <b>Donostia-San Sebastian, Spain:</b> House of Peace and Human Rights; more <a href="#">here</a></li> <li>● <b>Botkyrka, Sweden:</b> Anti-Rumour Cafes; more <a href="#">here</a></li> </ul>
<b>Dialogue processes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Copenhagen, Denmark:</b> The Copenhagen Host Programme; more <a href="#">here</a></li> <li>● <b>Lisbon, Portugal:</b> Familia Do Lado 2019; more <a href="#">here</a></li> <li>● <b>Valongo, Portugal:</b> Living Library Program/Don't Judge a Book by its Cover; more <a href="#">here</a></li> <li>● <b>Zarqa City, Jordan:</b> Zarqa Youth City Council, more <a href="#">here</a> (p. 19)</li> </ul>
<b>Conflict resolution/mediation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Florence, Italy:</b> Amir project; more <a href="#">here</a></li> <li>● <b>Berlin, Germany:</b> Dialogue creates neighbourhood; more <a href="#">here</a></li> <li>● <b>Al Sarhan, Jordan:</b> Strengthening Social Cohesion in Al Sarhan Municipality; more <a href="#">here</a> (p.27)</li> </ul>
<b>Network development</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Between local/regional authorities and migrant organisations</li> <li>● Between communities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Barcelona, Spain:</b> BCN Anti Rumour Campaign; more <a href="#">here</a></li> <li>● <b>Ghent, Belgium:</b> Refugee Solidarity, more <a href="#">here</a></li> </ul>
<b>Neighbourhood regeneration strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Berlin, Germany:</b> District mothers; more <a href="#">here</a></li> <li>● <b>Forlì, Italy:</b> Widespread hospitality; more <a href="#">here</a></li> <li>● <b>Amadora, Portugal:</b> Zambujal Gets Better!; more <a href="#">here</a></li> </ul>
<b>City branding strategies</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Integration focus and general public</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <b>Amsterdam, The Netherlands:</b> 180 Amsterdammers; more <a href="#">here</a></li> <li>● <b>Oslo, Norway:</b> OXLO – The Oslo Extra Large; more <a href="#">here</a></li> <li>● <b>Neuchâtel, Switzerland:</b> NEUCHÂTOI; more <a href="#">here</a></li> </ul>

### **TURIN, MOROSTYLE**

A fashion enterprise initiated by five refugee tailors producing African inspired clothing. Emerging as a unique brand and style in the region, MoroStyle regularly exhibit their clothing designs during summer cultural and tourism events. Since March 2017, MoroStyle has secured a regular sales pitch at Turin's Gran Balun open-air market.

### **AMMAN, JORDAN**

Training courses for young football players: Provides football training courses for local children aged 8–12 years. Participants in this programme come from local families, with both host and refugee communities represented.





## 6 CONCLUSIONS

This thematic background paper provides a thorough explanation of some of the main caveats underpinning the key principles of communicating migration in the Mediterranean today. In particular, the document focuses on four elements that are fundamental to enable cities, local governments and authorities to strengthen local migration governance, foster social cohesion and increase the quality of life for all inhabitants via effective communication. Specifically, these elements are:

- **Rebalancing the migration narrative in the Mediterranean** – How a distorted narrative affects policy-making and how to bring the debate back to the middle;
- **Fighting disinformation** – Fake news, manipulative information or lack thereof jeopardize communication. Cities can implement anti-disinformation action to tame this negative phenomenon;
- **Running effective campaigns** – Advocacy needs attention, attention needs excellent information, values, and content. These must be managed via coordinated communication campaigns promoting the benefits of migration;
- **Nurturing relations with press and media** – Especially in times of high risk of disinformation and short attention spans, good journalism and relations with the media are fundamental to make the voice of cities heard when it comes to establishing a position in migration governance.

These macro-concepts need to be further developed specifically in relation to the needs, the available resources, the goals and the long-term ambitions of cities and territories to make the most out of the opportunities that migration provides to them. In this situation, the collection of practical case studies based on initiatives implemented by local administrations across the Mediterranean is very useful to expand the available expertise and knowledge base.

The need to empower local authorities to have a stronger voice in migration governance is today clearer than ever. It is through strong, coordinated, professional and well-targeted communication that cities can achieve this goal and obtain a more prominent position in drafting migration policy vis-à-vis national and international frameworks. This process begins with investing in stronger skills for public servants communicating about migration.