

## Empowering and leveraging cities' capacities towards a self-reliance and inclusive city migration governance

Interview with Samer Saliba, Head of Practice at the Mayors Migration Council.

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Cities are at the heart of a mosaic of relationships between our globalized societies and an ever-evolving international migration. In this unprecedented era of increasing urbanization, cities have become the entry point for over [60%](#) of migrants living outside their countries of origin in seek of better livelihood opportunities, quality of life, better education, safety and access to jobs, and services for them and their families.

Overwhelmed and unprepared to take in growing numbers of newcomers, these urban centers often do not have the necessary technical and financial means, and the practical approaches to sustainably meet the increased demand and need of rapid influx of migrants. As a result, local governments often struggle to deliver the necessary services to facilitate decent settlements and to guarantee the full socioeconomic integration of migrants into their host communities.

With the changing dynamics of migration into a more urban world, together with weak structures to efficiently respond to it, “the greatest challenge is not migrants themselves, but city government’s capacity and preparedness to be willing and ready to address the multidimensional challenges of inbound migration”, says Samer Saliba, long-time city planner and Head of Practice at the mayor’s-led initiative that catalyzes global action on migration, the Mayors Migration Council (MMC).

Almost two years into the pandemic, the adverse socio-economic impacts of Covid-19 have brought to light and exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities correlated with migrants’ protection and access to services. Although migrants worldwide have been on the frontline during the Covid-19 pandemic, protecting and serving their communities while risking their lives as essential workers, many of them are still deprived from basic services, and continue to live in informal settlements with precarious livelihoods.

For Samer, while the crisis has affected all people in all aspects, it hasn’t done so equally. “It has presented unique challenges to urban migrants, refugees, and IDPs, due to their illegal migration status, their reliance on informal employment, in turn complicated by language and cultural barriers, xenophobia, racism, and discrimination”.

The pandemic has led to economic devastation in the form of budget shortfalls and revenue loss among city governments. « There are estimates that cities could see up to 25% losses globally in 2021 from their local budgets », he declares. Nonetheless, faced with a backdrop of mounting vulnerability and increasing needs, “local authorities are really proving that they are doing more with less”. Despite the limited resources, cities have not stopped their efforts and willingness to enact more inclusive programs of migrants and refugees. “Cities are very good at scrapping the bottom of the barrel and doing what they can to support people”, he adds.

The Global Cities Fund, an initiative led by the MMC, designed to respond to the unmet needs of cities during Covid-19, reflects the importance of actively supporting city governments to enact inclusive plans, policies, and programs, to better support migrants, refugees, and internally displaced people during the pandemic. “In Barranquilla, Colombia, the program on formal employment training and job placement for migrants, and the program on waste collection in Freetown, Sierra Leona, which uses self-employment of migrants as micro-enterprises, corroborate the importance of formulating inclusive plans at the city level, and of encouraging city-to-city learning as a means to articulate and exchange each other’s experiences.

Nevertheless, while policy responses to migration governance are widely developed at the national level, cities often lack authority to face migration flows and respond to them accordingly. For the MMC, cities and their leaders can better serve migrant, refugee, and host communities, hand-in-hand with national governments and international organizations. “Yet to do so, it is necessary to have a healthy and cooperative relationship with the national government, and to take a whole-of-city-government approach to planning for more inclusive plans, policies, and services”.

With the world experiencing this “urban revolution”, Samer asserts that cities are not only at the forefront of managing migration but can also provide a fertile ground for more innovative and sustainable solutions. Their proximity to population and a certain pragmatism makes cities an unavoidable partner to build the foundations of inclusive policies and to accelerate global commitments such as the 2030 Agenda and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM).

Although combined efforts embedded in trust and mutual support between local and national governments are fundamental, for Samer, the international community, the UN agencies, humanitarian, and development actors, also play a central role to work with, partner with, and invest in city governments, to make sure that cities’ efforts are a success, and as scalable and as equitable as they possibly can be.

To that end, as cities continue to deliver the best they can with the limited resources available to them, stronger partnerships are thus paramount to scale and expand the reach of their existing plans, policies, and services. In addition to collaborating with national governments, the private sector, and the civil society, « a one-UN-approach is also necessary to collectively address urban migration with city governments as partners, whose voices matter and whose efforts should be strengthened through investments and technical support”, he adds.

In this regard, the MMC envisions concrete ways in which the international community and the UN system can support cities: first, through targeted investments to improve existing services; a shift from policy discussion to action and implementation; improved capacities to promote economic development, self-reliance and empowerment of migrants and refugees, as well as through enhanced cooperation among cities by facilitating spaces to share knowledge and good practices.

This said, city-to-city cooperation emerges as a fundamental approach to addressing and reducing collectively the needs and vulnerabilities of migrants and their communities by respecting, protecting, and fulfilling their human rights. For Samer, “good ideas are contagious and are more easily, and readily shared between city governments who are not holding to the same rigid policy regimes as national governments. This flexibility allows for more innovation, which can be replicated between cities”.

On city-to city cooperation, the Multi-Partner Trust Fund on Migration (MPTF) Joint Program on capacity building of local governments to strengthen the socioeconomic integration of migrants and refugees in Santiago and Mexico City embodies that necessity for further international cooperation between two large urban centers to address city-level migration challenges.

As such, the MPTF in acting as the vehicle to bring the GCM to life and implement joint action, acknowledges that migration is a multidimensional reality that cannot be addressed by one government policy sector. Instead, it proves that strong partnerships, product of collaborative work by members of the United Nations Network on Migration, working with national partners such as local authorities and multi-stakeholders, are the testament to the commitment of the United Nations system to work better together.

Hence, as “the port of call” for the majority of the world’s migrant populations, cities in raising and magnifying their collective voices are demonstrating in practice how to cooperate and leverage migration in pivot from the migration and mobility perspective to a self-reliance and inclusive perspective. The world knows that the only way to recover and build back stronger from the Covid-19

crisis is to ensure that no one is left behind. To do so, combined efforts, ownership and shared responsibility between local authorities, national governments, and the international community are key to guarantee lasting solutions and to ensure safe, orderly, and regular migration for all.

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