



UNITING  
MAYORS:  
LOCAL  
SOLUTIONS  
TO GLOBAL  
CLIMATE  
CHALLENGES



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INDIAN INSTITUTE FOR  
HUMAN SETTLEMENTS



# CITIES AT THE INTERSECTION

## Climate, Culture, and Migration

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## Preface

City leadership is essential to limiting global climate change and building resilience to its myriad impacts. Without systemic transformations in cities and urban areas, global warming will continue to have catastrophic impacts on built infrastructure, ecosystem functioning, and human wellbeing. While cities and urban areas are moving forward to implement such transformations and dramatically reduce emissions, they are already experiencing severe impacts of climate change.

The Uniting Mayors Project (Project) seeks to advance the ability of cities to take local action and address climate change. The Project is funded by the British Council in collaboration with the Global Parliament of Mayors (GPM). Over the last two years, the Project has convened dozens of mayors and city leaders alongside policy experts on climate change, culture, and migration. It has offered mayors the opportunity to amplify their collective voice while identifying and distributing actionable policy steps.

This report draws on the latest findings from the 6th Assessment Report (AR6) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), recent publications from leading international organizations and city networks, including the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), as well as previous Project publications on cities and migration. Built around four case studies of cities and towns in the global South and North, the report offers insight into ongoing city-level actions to enable migration that is, in the words of the global Compact on Migration, “safe and orderly.”<sup>1</sup> While drawing from leading scientific and scholarly findings, the report seeks to be accessible to a wide array of urban stakeholders and policymakers.

In support of, and with support from, the Project, this report has been co-authored by scholars at Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the Indian Institute for Human Settlements.

# 01 Introduction: The Uniting Mayors Project

The Uniting Mayors for Local Solutions to Global Climate Challenges Project has brought together mayors and urban leaders to foster dialogue on the role of cities in responding to climate change and climate-related migration.<sup>2</sup> It has provided local leadership with a global platform to connect, share, and learn from the successes and challenges of one another. As part of the Project and with support of the British Council, the GPM has hosted workshops, events, and mayoral debates, with the intention of developing and building knowledge and policy around the intersection of climate change, culture, migration.

The 2021 GPM report, *Local Responses to Climate-Forced Displacement and Migration: Uniting Mayors and City Leaders as Global Champions*, examined how cities are responding to climate-related displacement and migration, particularly in the absence of robust policy consensus at national and international levels.<sup>3</sup> Recognizing the role of local leadership, authors Kamal Amakrane and Sheila Foster hosted focus group discussions with 30 mayors and local leaders to understand their level of awareness on the intersection between climate impacts and migration, and to assess the support mechanisms cities will need to continue their efforts. The report identified three key areas of action recommended by local leaders: advocacy, capacity building, and innovative financing. The report also provided a comprehensive overview of the current trends of global migration and identified gaps in international legal and policy frameworks on climate-related displacement. These findings led to the establishment of the "Mayors for Migrants: Our Multi-Level Call to Action" by the GPM mayors.

Recognizing the role of mayoral leadership in advancing local-level climate action and the response to climate-related migration, the Call to Action was adopted in July 2021 by a majority of votes of the GPM mayors.<sup>4</sup> Since then, over 45 mayors and city networks that represent hundreds more have signed the Call to Action, underscoring the gravity of the issue and the urgency of action. At the heart of the Call to Action is raising awareness on climate migration and building global partnerships to support local actions. The mayors recognize the critical role of city networks, community-led coalitions, and the private sector in accessing financial and technical support to address climate impacts and migration in cities. Importantly, the Call to Action acknowledges the need to value and protect culture and heritage, including Indigenous and local knowledge and practices, for climate change adaptation and urban resilience.

This report examines the role of local leadership, policy exchange, and city networks in responding to climate-mediated migration, as well as explores the critical need for a strong understanding of the cultural values of people and places as a prerequisite to meaningful policy solutions. In addition to drawing from scientific, social, and cultural analysis on urban migration, this report is based on virtual interviews with officials from four cities: Afanloum, Cameroon; Iganga, Uganda; Braga, Portugal; and Montpellier, France. The cities were selected in consultation with the GPM.

We recognize the limited geographic scope of the cities interviewed and do not intend to present the findings and recommendations as universal. The report nonetheless makes clear the role of local leadership in the context of the "Mayors for Migrants" Call to Action. This report also builds on, and adds to, the GPM report *Local Responses to Climate-Forced Displacement and Migration*.<sup>5</sup> In particular, it adds a cultural dimension to the analysis of climate-related migration and the attendant urban policy solutions.

## 02 The Intersection: Climate, Culture, and Migration

Climate change and migration are intersecting realities for millions of people millions of people who live in cities across the world. Cities, city networks, and policy experts are increasingly applying diverse solutions to the broad range of challenges posed by these phenomena. However, rapid rates of urbanization and widening inequalities continue to strain the physical and social infrastructure of cities, increasing the vulnerability and exposure of local communities to climate risks (Figure 1). Cities are thus both “sites of increased exposure to risks”<sup>6</sup> and actors of urban governance that advance local solutions to global challenges.

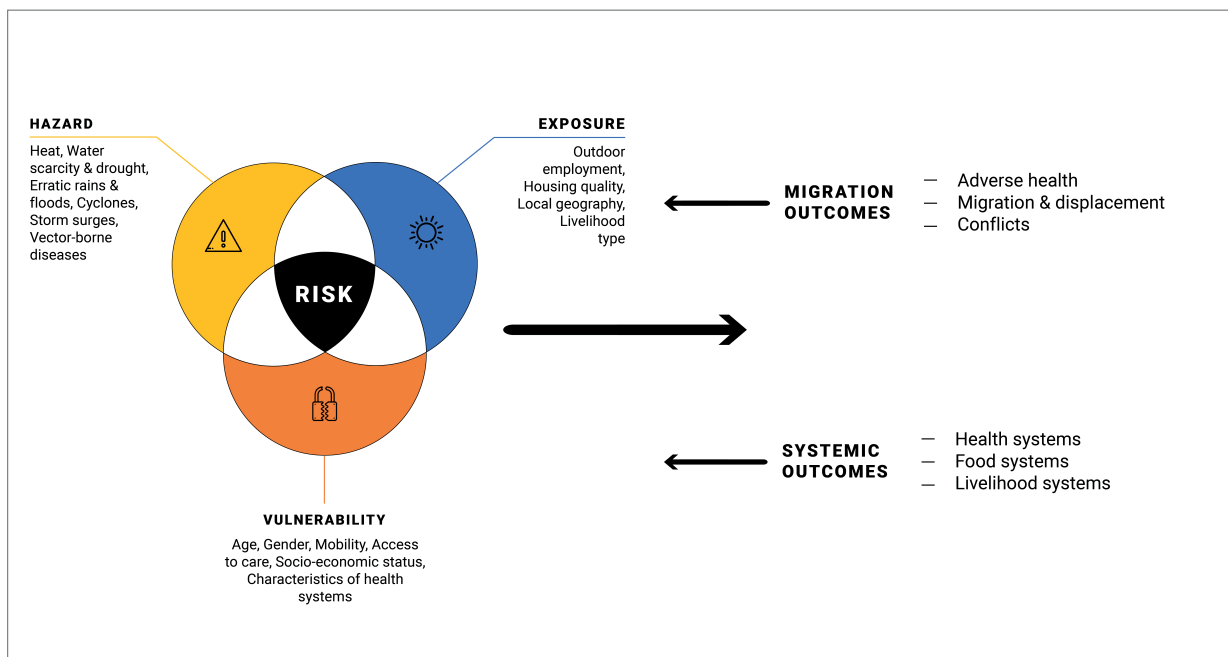


Refugees in Budapest. Picture Credits: Michael Gubi

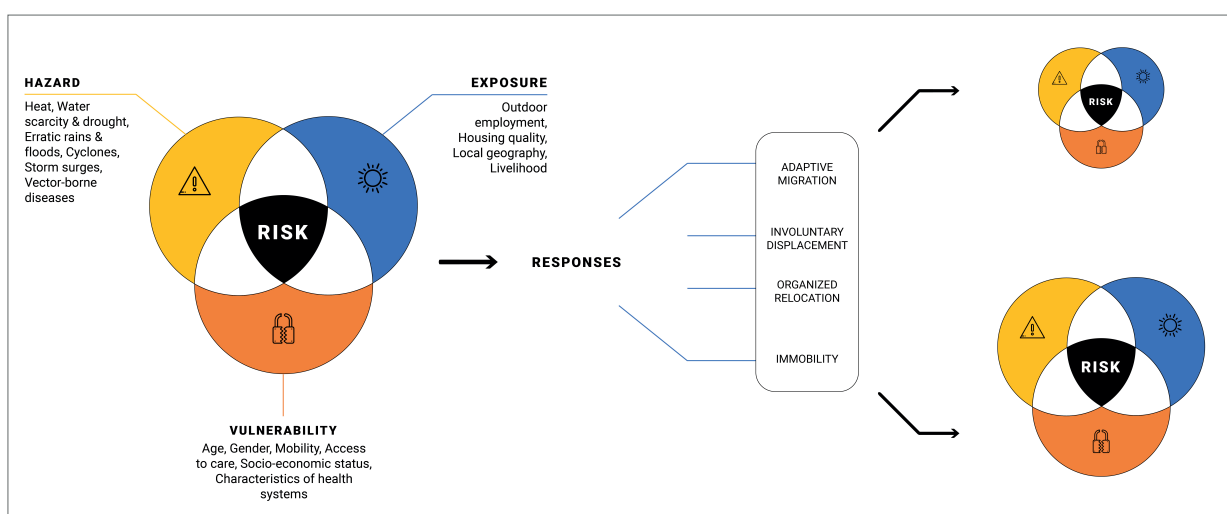
### *Migration as an adaptation measure for climate risks*

Migration is a key strategy for people to manage risks, meet aspirations, diversify livelihoods, and escape conflicts and other perilous situations.<sup>7</sup> Migration stems from a complex interplay of environmental, cultural, socioeconomic, political, and demographic factors, and is increasingly mediated by climate variability and change, as depicted in Figure 1. Ranging from temporary movement to permanent relocation, the choice of individuals and households to move are often mediated by their agency, available assets, and the broader sociopolitical contexts that they are embedded in.<sup>8</sup> The IPCC’s AR6 identifies four types of migration<sup>9</sup> (Figure 2):

- *adaptive migration*, where migration is an outcome of individual or household choice;
- *involuntary displacement*, where people have few or no options other than to move;
- *organized relocation* of populations from sites that are highly exposed to climatic hazards; and
- *immobility*, an inability or unwillingness to move from areas of high exposure for cultural, economic, or social reasons.



**Figure 1:** Interaction between hazard, exposure, and vulnerability that influences the level of risk individuals and communities are exposed to, and the system outcomes that are generated by associated climate risks. Adapted from Guéladio Cissé et al., 2022.<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 2:** Climatic and non-climatic factors together determine risk and shape migration responses. Risk management choices have differing migration outcomes and implications for future risk. Adapted from Guéladio Cissé et al., 2022.<sup>11</sup>



Climatic hazards are a growing driver of involuntary migration and can lead to violent conflicts, particularly in conjunction with other socioeconomic, political, and local conditions. Climate impacts that are experienced through frequent and intense events—such as heat waves, droughts, erratic rainfall, floods, and cyclones—are unevenly distributed across and within communities, and tend to exacerbate existing levels of differential vulnerability. Extreme events can be direct drivers of internal displacement as when tropical cyclones destroy homes and necessitate relocation. They can also be indirect drivers of involuntary migration as when the rural incomes decline during prolonged droughts. Moreover, international movements occur primarily between countries with contiguous borders, particularly those with labor-migration agreements or longstanding cultural ties.<sup>12</sup>

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Cities and settlements are crucial both as sites of potential action on climate change, and sites of increased exposure to risk (*medium evidence, high agreement*).

**Chapter 6 of the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report**

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The 2021 *Global Report on Internal Displacement* estimates that over 30 million people are internally displaced by weather-related extreme events in 2020, with storms and floods standing out as the most common drivers.<sup>13</sup> Regionally, the most severe disaster-related displacements were experienced in East Asia and the Pacific, and South Asia, where about 21 million people were displaced. Small island states in the Caribbean and South Pacific are disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change, particularly due to rising sea levels.



Floods in the Ganga-Brahmaputra basin. Picture Credits: Moniruzzaman Sazal

Elsewhere, urban centers in Mexico and Central America could see an increase of over 10 million climate migrants by 2050.<sup>14</sup> Because most of the largest urban centers in the Central American region are on highlands and away from the coastlines, they are hotspots for in-migration. Accordingly, a 2022 brief on *Climate Migration in Mexican and Central American Cities* published by the Mayors Migration Council recognizes the critical need for cities to prepare for the arrival of migrants, and recommends direct funding as a support measure to avoid consequences of unplanned urban growth,<sup>15</sup> which in turn would increase the risk and exposure of populations to the impacts of climate change (Figures 1 and 2).

Outcomes of moving are mixed and unequal. Migration is often envisaged as an adaptation mechanism, whereas mobility is seen as “an array of (often interwoven) reactive and proactive strategies and behaviors that reduces vulnerability, recognises the economic agency of migrants, and builds resilience through investing remittances.”<sup>16</sup> There is substantial evidence that migration helps individuals and families diversify livelihoods and manage risks by moving out of climate-sensitive sectors such as agriculture and supplementing incomes through remittances.<sup>17</sup> The option to migrate is often available only to those who can incur the significant economic and psychosocial costs that moving demands, while immobility reflects vulnerability and lack of agency. Migration dynamics are complicated. In some instances, the decision to stay can also be a deliberate choice of people to maintain livelihoods and social and cultural attachments to a particular place.

While migration can be an adaptive measure to reduce climate risks, it can also lead to maladaptation with unexpected or undesirable impacts.<sup>18</sup> Migrants often find unsafe and precarious livelihoods in urban areas, tend to live in risk-prone locations, and are disempowered because of shifts in the influence of their social networks and loss of existing networks of kinship and care.<sup>19</sup> These undesired challenges often pose social and cultural impacts on communities, which impel the critical need for policies on migration to center on cultural diversity, inclusion, and social cohesion.

### ***Culture and heritage as integral to the climate change discourse***

A strong understanding of the cultural values of people and places is a prerequisite for meaningful policy solutions. A recent review of IPCC Assessment Reports found the evolving definitions of “cultural heritage,” from earlier reports that overwhelmingly refer to “specific sites and reserves” to the most recent reports that associate the term with a “greater range of cultural phenomena.”<sup>20</sup> There has also been a “clear increase in references to Indigenous knowledge” across Assessment Reports.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, local mitigation and sustainability practices are now frequently referenced in international development discourse, particularly as they relate to agroecology and climate change adaptation projects.

This change in ideology is also reflected in the contemporary practice of disaster risk reduction and resilience. Community relocation has often been unplanned and top-down, although there is increasing prevalence of participatory approaches to understand and include the cultural values of the communities in the process. For example, the Geneva UN Charter on Sustainable Housing identifies cultural adequacy as one of seven key elements of the right to adequate housing.<sup>22</sup> Despite available best practices on cultural inclusion in disaster recovery, there is more work to be done, particularly on community participation in designing and planning temporary housing programs.<sup>23</sup> More importantly, it is critical that such interventions do not repeat the historical displacement of local culture, knowledge, and practices.

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Climate change itself needs to be understood as an historically situated phenomenon that has involved and Implicated populations and territories differently, especially across the Global North/Global South divide.

**International Co-Sponsored Meeting on Culture, Heritage and Climate-Change: “Solutions” White Paper, Draft 8.**

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An understanding of cultural diversity is a key component of many successful migration and integration policies and is necessary for social cohesion among communities. As reflected in the next section on City Perspectives, sports and arts, among other cultural activities, enable communities to explore shared values and foster dialogue on unity and solidarity. Policymakers should ensure that migration and integration policy provide opportunities for migrants and host communities to participate in culture, a right which is guaranteed by Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>24</sup> This is particularly important when integration policies involve sports activities, which are sometimes culturally exclusionary.<sup>25</sup> In a time when conflicts exacerbate climate impacts, centering local action on culture and heritage will help communities preserve their ways of life while adapting to the new realities of climate and migration.

### *The urban policy context: challenges and opportunities*

The role of cities has drastically changed over the last decade. They are no longer mere sites in which global challenges manifest, but also sources of solutions and leadership. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, cities led the way in equitable approaches to pandemic response and recovery.<sup>26</sup> With regards to climate change, in 2020, five years after the Paris Agreement was ratified, more than 50 major world cities were on track to meet climate goals through local climate action plans.<sup>27</sup> Cities have also been at

the forefront of migration policy. In 2018, the intergovernmental policy response to migration took a major step forward with the Global Compact for Migration<sup>28</sup> and the Global Compact on Refugees.<sup>29</sup> Alongside these international frameworks on migration, 150 city leaders adopted the Marrakech Mayors Declaration to recognize the two global compacts and strengthen the efforts of cities “working together for migrants and refugees.”<sup>30</sup> City initiatives have been especially crucial when there is a vacuum in national leadership. For example, the US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement spurred cities to develop their own local climate action plans. Cities have shown that they can be as influential as nation-states, and are often more innovative in pioneering and implementing policy solutions to address global challenges.<sup>31</sup>

Recent global frameworks have further identified the role of cities and local actors for climate adaptation. Rapid urbanization has exacerbated systemic risks of climate-related disasters and vulnerabilities amongst migrant populations, particularly those in low-income cities.<sup>32</sup> International policy agreements such as the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Climate Agreement, and the New Urban Agenda recognize the role of local governments in achieving the goals and targets of global frameworks. They further highlight the necessary cooperation between the national and local levels for their successful implementation.<sup>33</sup> The AR6 by the IPCC identified gaps in extant research on the efficacy of global initiatives when applied in medium and small cities, and in research on the related role of “non-traditional agents, particularly in the global South.”<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, the IPCC advocates for a broader conception of city policy making by using the terminology “cities and settlements” to describe “concentrated human habitation [that] centers along a dynamic continuum from rural to urban.”<sup>35</sup> Our study therefore includes a variety of cities and settlements on the rural-urban spectrum, located both in the global South and North.

Despite recent progress, cities require further technical, financial, and legal support when implementing local policies. To this end, mayors have called “on national and regional governments, central banks and international financial institutions, and international organisations” for support.<sup>36</sup> For technical transfer and capacity building, the IPCC recognizes the importance of regional and global city networks.<sup>37</sup> The AR6 presents case studies in which cities, particularly small cities and those located in the global South, have benefitted from the interventions of transnational city networks for connectivity, resources, and knowledge sharing.

Additionally, the shifting definitions of climate migrants and refugees, who are often excluded from legal frameworks for migration, pose challenges for cities to support those displaced or seek asylum due to climate change.<sup>38</sup> Along these lines, ActionAid International observes that “in the scenario of worsening climate impacts, maintaining the strict differentiation between ‘refugees’, ‘economic migrants’ and ‘climate migrants’ may become increasingly impossible.”<sup>39</sup> With climate-related migration projected to increase in the coming decades, policies on climate migration will prove more important, and perhaps more contentious, than ever. This observation is supported in the findings from interviews with city officials, as will be discussed in the next section of this report. Ultimately, an integrated and comprehensive policy response is necessary to address the interconnected issues of climate change and migration.



Young Somali girls line up for porridge at a feeding center in Mogadishu.  
Picture Credits: Amison Alamy

## 03 City Perspectives

### Afanloum, Cameroon

*In conversation with Salomon Rim, Advisor to Mayor Marie Angele Meyanga*

Cities of all sizes are at the forefront in taking action to address environmental migration.<sup>40</sup> Afanloum provides a case study of a small town taking local action that is culturally and ecologically tailored to its communities. A small town in the Méfou-et-Afamba department of Cameroon's Centre Region, Afanloum is home to a population of about 1,800 people. Over a third of the commune lives in rural settings. Afanloum, like large parts of Cameroon, features a tropical climate. Many residents are farmers of Christian faith. For decades, Afanloum has welcomed seasonal environmental migrants, mostly nomadic herders from the northern region of the country that is experiencing prolonged dry seasons. The herders migrate to Afanloum between January and June, and stay in the commune until the monsoon season begins. Some, however, stay permanently, which has contributed to an increase in the commune's population. In addition to ongoing seasonal migration, Afanloum has also seen an increase of Cameroonians fleeing the Anglophone Crisis since 2016.

Afanloum does not have a formal policy on migrants, but their integration practices consist of two key methods: advocacy on welcoming migrants through the leadership of traditional and religious leaders; and sensitizing the local community on peaceful coexistence in the commune. Afanloum's Catholic priest and the Protestant pastor play an important role in welcoming new migrants, mostly herders from the northern regions, the majority of whom are of Islamic faith. While the city council facilitates formal meetings between community leaders of the two faiths, most connections take place through informal and interpersonal dialogue between the two communities.

Beyond these neighborly interactions, football is a cultural symbol of unity and inclusion in Afanloum and across Cameroon, explained Salomon Rim. "Almost all Cameroonians are good football players. In Afanloum, when it's about football, we don't know who's coming from the northern region, who's from the center region, who's an Anglophone. Everybody's on the field and playing together." An example of sports bringing together cultures is the 2021 Africa Cup of Nations, where Afanloum "organized a village to celebrate and watch the competition." The city provided the migrants an opportunity to showcase their architectural techniques for building "tents" that are heat-tolerant, in which they sold goods produced through cattle herding.

The differences in language, faith, and the way of life between the two groups have at times led to conflicts. Farmer-grazer conflicts often arise when the cattle stock of migrant herders grazes in the farmlands of the local population or bathes in streams,

thus polluting the drinking water. Through dialogue, the two groups have come to respect their different ways of life and learn the trades of one another. For Afanloum, migrants are not only a cultural asset, but also a source of economic growth, described Salomon Rim.

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In Afanloum, when it's about football, we don't know who's coming from the northern region, who's from the center region, who's an Anglophone. Everybody's on the field and playing together.

**Salomon Rim, Advisor to the Mayor, Afanloum**

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Despite the lack of resources and fiscal support, Afanloum is proactively exploring ways to welcome new migrants and reduce potential conflicts between residents. The city council has recently approved a concept note for a pilot rural development project to grow climate-resilient fodder and build enclosures to restrict cattle grazing in farmlands, which it hopes will be a best practice adoptable in other cities experiencing farmer-grazer conflicts. Another noteworthy policy initiative is Afanloum's upcoming release of a climate action plan, designed after Cameroon's National Climate Change Adaptation Plan.<sup>41</sup> While the Afanloum local plan does not specify climate or environmental migration, it addresses other local challenges such as resource scarcity in the commune. The city council is exploring opportunities for technical and financial assistance to implement the plan.

National and international organizations, both local and international, have supported Afanloum's efforts to welcome new migrants and strengthen local communities. At the national level, the city council has closely worked with the Ministry of Environment, Nature Protection and Sustainable Development and the National Observatory on Climate Change. UN Women and Elections Cameroon (ELECAM)<sup>42</sup> have supported women development programs. Moreover, Afanloum's women-owned local microfinance group exemplifies ground-up coalition building for local action. Overall, despite the town's limited geographic scale, Afanloum provides a powerful case study on the role of local leadership in responding to the challenges of internal environmental migration.

## Iganga, Uganda

*In conversation with David Balaba, Former Mayor, Iganga*

Housing more than 53,000 people, Iganga is a municipality in the Busoga region in eastern Uganda. Landlocked and located ninety miles north of Lake Victoria, the city has a tropical climate and receives rainfall even in its driest months. Iganga experiences both seasonal and permanent migration.<sup>43</sup> The municipality welcomes migrants from conflict-ridden regions of Kenya, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Many migrants and their families have been forced to move to Uganda due to unstable economies and precarious living conditions in their countries of origin. Within Uganda, people from rural parts of drought-stricken northern regions move to Iganga in pursuit of food, water, jobs, and pastures for their cattle.



Floods in South Sudan. Picture Credits: Reuters, Andreea Campeanu

Looking for safer places to live, many migrants “enter the city stealthily.” Fearing “rejection from the local population, they enter in groups, reside in makeshift homes, and scavenge for food at night,” explained Former Mayor David Balaba. Conflicts between residents and migrants have arisen at “drinking joints” and on common pasture lands. Aware of these challenges and in hope of integrating migrant populations into the Iganga community, the municipality has established a community development office that documents the personal details of migrants. The city also offers immediate support with food and housing, and works with local cultural leaders to integrate and welcome migrants to Iganga.



The municipality encourages migrants to take on leadership roles, invest, own properties, and operate businesses. “Migrants bring skills and help build a diverse community. We have been able to grow different businesses. We have a growing community because of the immigrants,” shared the Former Mayor. To help migrants feel included, Iganga welcomes intercultural marriages while “ensuring strict police enforcement to avoid segregation and discourage harassment.” Furthermore, the municipality relies on international networks and nonprofit organizations such as UNICEF and Dwelling Places<sup>44</sup> to address food insecurity and malnutrition of children. To better support the communities, the municipal council is looking for international support, financial assistance and opportunities, and medical and psychological support for migrants.

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Migrants bring skills and help build a diverse community. We have been able to grow different businesses. We have a growing community because of the immigrants.

**David Balaba, Former Mayor, Iganga**

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Additionally, many residents of Iganga have left the city for employment in the Middle East, and for higher education in Europe and North America. Remittances from migrants are a prominent source of income for many families in Iganga. The municipal council underscores the need for a database to track emigrants in order to ensure their safety in host countries, particularly during emergencies.

Former Mayor David Balaba concluded the conversation by highlighting the cultural value of the natural environment. Close to Iganga is Lake Victoria, which serves as a site for cultural exchange in which festivals and celebrations are conducted to connect and enrich local communities. Unfortunately, due to rising fuel prices, local communities are forced to use timber as fuel. The growing demands on the natural resources have led to the depletion of forest cover at valued cultural sites, including Lake Victoria. These spaces are also used to increase local and global awareness of the detrimental effects of climate variability on the Lake. Altogether, Iganga presents an insightful case study where the city tackles migration through an integration of culture, traditions, and local leadership.

## Braga, Portugal

*In conversation with Nuno Gouveia, Advisor to Mayor Ricardo Rio and Hélder Costa, Advisor for Sustainability to Mayor Ricardo Rio*

Situated in the northwestern province of Minho, Braga is the seventh largest municipality in Portugal with a population of approximately 182,000 people. Its history of 2,000 years makes Braga one of Europe's oldest cities. The city enjoys a warm Mediterranean climate. The urban agglomerations of the city extend from the Cavado River to the Este River.

Renowned as an intercultural city, Braga has long welcomed migrants, including from Brazil, Mozambique, and Uganda in recent years. Owing to the economic crises in their countries of origin, migrants have moved to Braga in search of safety and better livelihood opportunities. An estimated 10,000 Brazilians have moved to Braga in the last six years, although the exact number is unknown.

While Braga welcomes migrants, such a large influx has not been easy for the city to manage. The city does not have sufficient infrastructure, including public transportation, to accommodate the migrants. "We have more people than infrastructure," noted Nuno Gouveia. The arrival of migrants has created a stir in the local economy and the real estate sector. In recent years, housing prices have increased in Braga, in part due to the market demand from well-off Brazilian migrants. The housing crisis has created resentment among the local population. Meanwhile, finding suitable housing remains a constant difficulty for migrants from West Africa. Despite the influx in migration, Braga suffers from depopulation and brain drain, mostly due to high emigration rates amongst the youth population, who seek better job opportunities and higher incomes.

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We have more people than infrastructure.

**Nuno Gouveia, Advisor to the Mayor, Braga**

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Moreover, frequent droughts and heat waves in Portugal have challenged the availability of sufficient food and water. As a solution, Braga has devised a local climate action plan that includes mitigation initiatives such as reducing half of its carbon footprint by 2030, creating more green spaces, and enhancing public awareness of the impacts of climate change.

To address these pressing challenges and welcome migrants with an open heart, Braga heavily relies on its international and regional networks. To promote the integration of migrants into the economy, the city has implemented a project with support from the European Union, which seeks to encourage a mutual recognition of different cultures, uniting local and migrant populations.<sup>45</sup> The national legislation for the acquisition of work permits and residence cards have liberalized over the last thirteen years, making it more accessible. At the local level, the municipality has a Parish council with representatives from Brazil, Ukraine, and other countries. These representatives play a key role in providing migrant communities with housing, food, and support with immigration paperwork. Migrant children are encouraged to pursue education in local schools. Promoting inclusion of cultures, schools offer language classes and recruit teachers who speak the native language of migrants. Gouveia remarked that language promotes a “strong connection” amongst migrants, especially the “Brazilian Brothers” who also speak Portuguese. Lastly, underscoring the need for city-to-city learning, Hélder Costa emphasized the “need for politicians to talk to each other, for city professionals to connect with and learn from each other, and share best practices.” Overall, Braga employs multiple methods in a holistic effort to integrate migrants into their "intercultural" city.<sup>46</sup>



Displaced by Children displaced by sea level rise at a care center in Auckland. Picture Credits: Robin Hammond

### Montpellier, France

*In conversation with Clare Hart, Deputy Mayor, Montpellier*

Situated near the Mediterranean coast, the city is a fast-growing urban center and home to over 300,00 people. Migrants from Afghanistan, Syria, Ukraine, and African countries have arrived in Montpellier in recent years.

The city is part of the National Reception Scheme (Dispositif national d'accueil) of France<sup>47</sup> and receives funding from the national government to implement integration programs at the local level. Montpellier is the prefecture of Hérault, a department of the Occitania region in France. Applications of asylum seekers are processed through prefectures, the decentralized administrative body of the national government. Montpellier's department of international affairs has been recently tasked with the integration of refugees and migrants. The city partners with non-state actors—including non-governmental, charity, and civil society organizations—to provide services tailored to the needs of individual refugees and their families.

The City of Montpellier has several mechanisms in place to facilitate the migrant integration process, including the operation of three refugee centers for African and Syrian asylum seekers. The first phase of integration includes healthcare, accommodation, and social integration through cultural activities in the community. The city has partnered with the University of Montpellier to evaluate and provide psychological and physical healthcare for refugees. Community organizations arrange housing to ensure that families remain together. Unaccompanied minors are placed with host families to provide support structure for youth. The second phase of integration enables refugees to find professional training and employment opportunities, for which the city collaborates with the private sector. The business community sees migrants as bringing with them skills and experiences that are valuable to the commerce of the city.

Montpellier sees itself as “a deeply Mediterranean city” and has a tradition of being “open-armed and welcoming to people coming from elsewhere,” recounted Deputy Mayor Clare Hart. The University of Montpellier, central to the city's history, is rooted in the intercultural collaboration between Muslim, Christian, and Jewish physicians. This legacy of multiculturalism is evident in Montpellier's present-day policy approaches to welcoming migrants.

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A deeply Mediterranean city Montpellier has a tradition of being open-armed and welcoming to people coming from elsewhere.

**Clare Hart, Deputy Mayor, Montpellier**

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Cultural programs are vital to the social integration of migrants in Montpellier. All migrants and refugees are provided with French language tutoring, and children are matriculated into local schools. The city and community organizations match migrants with cultural activities, such as sports and arts, according to their individual interests. This enables integration at the local community level and engages the public in the

process. Montpellier also facilitates trauma and recovery programs in migrants' local languages, often in collaboration with diaspora communities. The city believes that these social programs ensure that "their interculturality will feed into what already is the lifeblood of Montpellier, and will make the city a stronger and better place."

Despite a largely successful migrant integration process implemented in Montpellier, the city has received criticism from some residents who do not welcome refugees.<sup>48</sup> Such attitudes indicate the need for further public outreach and education. Sharing success stories has been effective in highlighting the benefits of integration policies and reinforcing Montpellier's cultural values of welcoming migrants. Another practice of public education has been the facilitation of dialogue between asylum seekers and the host community to raise awareness about war, political instability, climate change, and other causes of migration to the city.

Montpellier's integration policy continues to seek further development. The city's coordinated integration policies have been able to address the rapid influx of refugees of the war in Ukraine and other crises. Montpellier is a member of Cités Unies France<sup>49</sup> and plays a key role in the networks' working group on migration, through which city leadership transfers best practices and policies to cities that are less prepared for migrant influxes. However, Montpellier could benefit from the strengthening of national and local policy frameworks. Further knowledge transfer could fulfill the need to enhance the city's capacities for the emergency construction of prefabricated housing. Additionally, France currently has no specific asylum status for climate refugees, a legal shortcoming that could hinder Montpellier's integration processes in the future. Nonetheless, Montpellier's intercultural heritage and integration policy has equipped city leadership for future global challenges.



University of Montpellier. Picture Credits: Reuters, Philippe Laurenson

## 04 Findings

The interviews with city officials reinforced the critical role of local leadership in responding to climate threats and addressing the challenges associated with migration, as well as the key role that culture plays in social integration policies. This study also drew from recent publications on the social, scientific, and cultural perspectives of urban migration. The key findings from the interviews and secondary research are listed below, particularly as they are situated in the policy context of context of the "Mayors for Migrants" Call to Action established by the GPM mayors.

### **Cities of all sizes and geographies play an important role in leading local action for climate change and migration**

Our findings suggest that cities often enact climate and migration initiatives at the local level. These are sometimes implemented to address gaps in national policy, but at other times are modeled after national policies themselves. In the latter case, cities adapt national policies to address specific social, economic, and environmental contexts at the local level. However, top-down policies often displace local and Indigenous knowledge and approaches, particularly during policy transfer from the global North to the global South, and from larger to smaller cities. Therefore, policy dialogues should center the experiences and practices of smaller cities and those in the global South, and further recognize the role of culture and heritage in policymaking.

### **Cities require support tailored to different types and rates of migration**

Migration takes on various forms, such as short- and long-term relocation, movement within and across national boundaries, and voluntary and involuntary migration. Cities require funding, technical assistance, and policy solutions that are tailored to these variations. Direct financing mechanisms are especially suited to giving agency to cities and enabling context-specific policy implementation. Additionally, our research identified a particular need to prepare cities, especially smaller cities with less capacity, to respond to rapid influxes of migration resulting from ecological and humanitarian crises.

### **Fostering cultural diversity is critical for successful migration policy**

In addition to the legal and economic integration that is often the focus of migration policy, programs should provide opportunities for social and cultural integration. Influxes of migration can engender discontent among host communities, and can even lead to social conflict. These challenges can be addressed with initiatives that value culture and heritage and those that involve intercultural encounters through arts, sports, and interfaith exchanges.

### **City networks are important platforms and partners for discussion, knowledge sharing, and policy transfer**

City networks are instrumental in discussing emerging issues and sharing policy approaches. They are particularly beneficial when there is a lack of strong national policy support for cities and in amplifying the collective voices of mayors and local leadership from around the world. City networks also serve as a platform to raise the voices of small- and mid-sized cities, and to connect cities worldwide for mutual knowledge exchange and support.

### **National governments and international organizations should enhance financial, technical, and legal support for cities**

Cities are already at the forefront of policy innovation, taking local action to address climate threats and the challenges of migration. Our research found that city networks play a key role in engaging communities. However, cities need additional financial, technical, and legal support, particularly to address the projected increase of the impacts of climate change on migrants and refugees in the coming years.

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