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## CITIES AT THE CENTER OF GLOBAL MOBILITY

- CITIES SHAPING MIGRATION POLICY

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- ITALIAN CITIES ON THE FRONT LINE: MANAGING  
MIGRATION BETWEEN 2013 AND 2018

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Cities have long been on the frontlines of migration. When immigrants settle in cities, a broad range of urban institutions play a role in their integration. Migrants rent or buy homes, join the labour force or open new businesses, enrol in schools and visit cultural sites, engage with places of worship, pay taxes and use services, and take part in other aspects of daily urban life. Cities have often been the gateways of diversity, opportunity and tolerance. In fact, a wave of policies and programmes have been developed in recent years in cities across the United States to further facilitate and promote migrant integration.

Research and public debate on the intersection of migrants and cities are not necessarily new. What is new, however, is how city leaders are emerging as actors in shaping migration policies *beyond* their jurisdictions. No longer focused solely on local integration initiatives, cities are now trying to effect change at the national and international levels. Through advocacy, collective action, city diplomacy and international platforms, cities are demonstrating they have mechanisms to exert influence on this issue.

To be sure, there are limitations and concerns, but perhaps also untapped possibilities and opportunities. The parallel realities of urbanisation and increased migration flows of the global era will require cities to play a different role from the past. Furthermore, as city leaders step up as actors on other global issues, such as climate action, safety and security, and inclusion, it should be no surprise that they are engaging on migration as well. Whether cities become partners in shaping sensible policies or adversaries of outdated national laws will depend on how other policymakers understand and respond to the context and implications of this trend.

This chapter highlights existing research on the impact of immigration in cities to understand why they are committed to the migration agenda. It also discusses the series of recent events that have catalysed the momentum at this time and explores the many ways in which cities are in fact beginning to influence migration policies. The

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chapter attempts to recognise the areas where cities are legally limited and the concerns stakeholders may have about giving cities too much autonomy. It concludes by identifying a few areas where cities may play a bigger role in the future to ensure that migration policies respond to their realities and serve their needs.

In different cities around the world these trends are playing out in distinct ways. Each country has its own laws and governance structures that permit or limit the autonomy of cities. And what happens in one context cannot necessarily be translated into another. Yet, geographical diversity and variation in the root causes of migration notwithstanding, there are mayors from all regions of the world who want not only to be held accountable for the implementation of migration policies, but also seek to contribute their expertise to shaping them. This chapter focuses on examples drawn from the United States.

## **I. Cities recognise the realities and impact of migration**

It is first important to understand why many cities across the United States are generally supportive of immigration. A 2017 report on migration and cities by the World Economic Forum stated that over 90% of the immigrants in the United States live in urban areas (World Economic Forum, 2017: 26). While urban areas are generally defined by density rather than population size, cities large and small across the country have made investments in their communities to attract and integrate immigrants. They not only acknowledge that migration is an unavoidable 21<sup>st</sup> century reality of globalisation, they also recognise the benefits immigrants bring with them.

In many communities across the United States, immigration is the demographic lifeline for keeping their cities on the map. The Chicago Council on Global Affairs looked at US Census data on population shifts in over 40 metropolitan areas of the 12-state Midwest region, and found that the populations had risen only 7% from 2000 to 2015 compared to 14% for the nation as a whole (Paral, 2017: 1). Immigrants helped offset the declines of the native-born population, and in some metro areas, including Chicago, immigration was responsible for most of the population growth.

Cities bear witness to the entrepreneurial spirit and economic contributions of immigrant communities. The Kauffman Foundation found that immigrants in the US were twice as likely to start businesses as the native-born population and that over 25% of new entrepreneurs in 2014 were foreign-born (Kauffman Foundation, 2015: 2). New York City's "State of Our Immigrant City" report says that immigrants own 52% of the city's businesses, comprise 45% of its workforce, and contribute about 22% of the city's total gross domestic product (NYC Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, 2018: 6, 9). The main street that runs through the heart of Little Village, Chicago's Mexican community, is said to be the second-highest-grossing commercial corridor in the city after the Magnificent Mile (Sweeney, 2015). These

trends are of particular importance in smaller cities where main street storefronts close and businesses leave, taking the jobs with them. Immigrants have helped inject energy and dynamism back into numerous cities and communities across the country.

Mayors also recognise the intangible assets immigrants bring to their cities and neighbourhoods. It is difficult to quantify the impact of being surrounded by dozens of spoken languages, by people from all corners of the world, and by the cultural influences and sensibilities they bring with them. Religions, foods, traditions and customs can slowly break down deep-rooted stereotypes, promote tolerance, and help create a globally minded citizenry.

Indeed, not all individuals and communities across the country openly embrace immigration. Many argue that the short-term social costs, the language barriers, the cultural differences, and the fear of job displacements are not worth the trade-offs. Others are so concerned with maintaining the rule of law that they fail to recognise that today's laws are not meeting today's realities. They insist that immigrants wait in lines that do not exist, apply for visas that have not been created, and legalise their statuses when no path is available to do so.

This is where mayors and city leaders have been so instrumental. They have spearheaded a number of policies and initiatives at the local level to minimise the challenges associated with immigration and to maximise the benefits.

New York City has had an office for immigrant affairs since 1984, but since 2008, over 20 other cities –from Atlanta to Seattle – have opened similar ones (Pastor and Rhonda, 2015: 42). These agencies can support a variety of activities. They are champions of city engagement with the diaspora, representing the city at cultural festivals and events. They help immigrants navigate legitimate legal and financial institutions, direct them to language courses, and promote civic engagement and information about naturalisation. They can also assist in coordinating other city departments, building capacity and working with the police to understand the changing demographics in the city.

The momentum to develop local policies for attracting and integrating immigrants has swept across the nation. Welcoming America, for example, was founded in 2009 to help develop a framework for what it means to be a “welcoming community”, a city or county committed to fostering inclusion and reducing barriers for newcomers of all backgrounds. As their website states, “In a 21<sup>st</sup> century world, the strongest communities will be ones where all people can take part in economic, civic, and social life.”<sup>1</sup> With over 90 local government units signed on to the network, Welcoming America recently launched a certification programme for places that meet the rigorous requirements of their Welcoming Standard. In collaboration with the National Partnership for New Americans, a Gateways for Growth fund was also created to help cities develop internal capacity, build offices, and navigate the integration landscape. Cities across the country are helping ensure that the “American dream” remains possible.

1. <https://www.welcomingamerica.org/>

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## II. Current laws and narratives are not serving cities' needs and priorities

While many US cities are seeking to maximise the benefits of immigration through integration policies within their jurisdictions, many national laws – laws created in another era and without input from cities – hinder their abilities to be truly effective.

Cities, for example, rely heavily on migrants of all skill levels to help keep their economy and businesses thriving. Hospitals, hotels, restaurants and construction companies are some of the employers in urban areas that rely on intensive immigrant labour and yet regularly face outdated legal challenges. A low-skilled visa for year-round employment does not exist to support some of these industries. The low-skilled visa in the United States was designed for seasonal agriculture support rather than hospitality or healthcare.

High-skilled visas need to be sponsored by companies and are costly processes, made additionally complicated by quotas from an era before technology, globalisation, and the internet dramatically changed how people live and work. The entrepreneurial system of both start-ups and new small businesses – trends essential to cities and incubator hubs – is not supported by current national laws. A visa exists for investors with significant personal assets who can guarantee at least ten permanent full-time jobs for qualified US workers, but this visa does not help the ambitious restaurateur from Mexico, the tech-savvy entrepreneur from India, or the non-profit founder from France.

Cities are also at the centre of the debate around undocumented immigrants. The United States has about 10.7 million undocumented immigrants, the majority of which, according to the Pew Research Center, live in only 20 metropolitan areas of the country (Passel and Cohn, 2019). Pew estimates that metropolitan areas including New York, Los Angeles and Houston are home to 61% of the nation's undocumented population, compared to 37% of the total US population. City leaders view them as members of their communities – residents, neighbours, workers, taxpayers – and yet have no authority to help adjust their status. In addition, cities are increasingly being asked to enforce national immigration laws and identify undocumented immigrants for deportation.

What is more, cities must provide all the support systems immigrants do not receive from the national level. Schools need to expand classrooms, hire new teachers and offer classes for English language learners. Local government materials are increasingly being translated into other languages. From legal services to access to healthcare, from housing to citizenship programmes, cities are held accountable for ensuring community cohesion and financial stability, and blamed when it doesn't work.

Across a number of dimensions, cities have to deal with the implications of immigration but are not in a position to shape immigration policies. In the meantime, the country not only fails to update laws to address the 21<sup>st</sup> century realities of the global economy, but in recent years, it has enacted policies that further complicate and counter urban prior-

ities. The travel ban targeting Iran, Libya, North Korea, Somalia, Syria, Venezuela and Yemen separated families in Chicago, Minneapolis and Seattle, as well as other cities. The termination of Temporary Protected Status for over 300,000 people from El Salvador, Honduras and Haiti will require long-term residents of cities to leave their homes, families and jobs. The demand on cities to enforce national immigration laws and detain undocumented immigrants not only breaks down important levels of trust in communities but burdens municipal officers with duties beyond their actual mandates.

Every day cities are on the frontlines of the realities of immigration and yet have not been given a voice, a mechanism or a vote to influence national-level policies. Cities are beginning to question whether the hierarchy of the past need define the governance framework of the future.

### **III. Cities are emerging as actors shaping migration policies**

Mayors are increasingly frustrated with the lack of action at the national level and the paralysis it creates for them in cities. In the United States in particular, the current narrative has created a culture of fear and distrust that is tearing communities apart. As the World Economic Forum pointed out, "Although the key role of cities as first responders to migration is uncontested, they are in general far from adequately involved in national and international migration decisions" (World Economic Forum, 2017: 10).

In turn, cities are stepping up and emerging as new actors on migration policy. Where they used to focus on economic development and integration, they now find themselves engaging on national and international platforms to defend their interests and needs. They are using their voices and positions of influence to change the narrative. Through collective action, they are simultaneously enacting policies at the local level that are resulting in nationwide momentum. They are actively forging links across borders and engaging in city diplomacy. And they are demanding a seat at the international table in discussions about global migration and refugee policy.

The ability of mayors and cities to change the narrative around immigrants cannot be underestimated. When at the national level, immigrants are being portrayed as criminals, rapists, drug dealers and job takers, cities have been vital in countering the negative rhetoric. As Misha Glenny writes, "Plural cities will play a critical role in determining whether humanity survives this century or not" (Glenny, 2017). Mayors have been advocates not just for diversity, but for inclusion. Through networks such as Cities for Action, a coalition of over 175 US mayors and county executives, they have issued press statements of concern about family separations at the border, the termination of Temporary Protected Status, travel bans, and asylum seekers being turned away. They cite research and data that show that immigration does not in fact increase crime (Flagg, 2018). Cities are using their platforms and megaphones to change hearts and minds across the country.

Cities are also influencing policy through collective action. While limited to implementing policies within their jurisdictions, when mayors do so

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collectively and simultaneously across the country, the impact is quite significant. Most notable perhaps, is the number of cities in the United States that have adopted some version of a sanctuary city ordinance that reaffirms a city's responsibility to enforce laws within its jurisdiction and not those of the national government. The US Department of Justice sided with the City of Chicago in a 2018 lawsuit against the federal government, which had threatened to withhold grants from Chicago because of its sanctuary policies. The results of this legal dispute made clear that the separation of powers in the United States is essential to democracy and that cities cannot be commandeered by the national government to enforce national laws (Byrne, 2018).

Other actions taken by cities include closing detention centres, issuing municipal identification cards, and giving scholarships to qualifying undocumented immigrants to access community colleges. Some cities, such as Washington, DC, are providing free legal services or financial support for immigrants to offset the cost of citizenship (Delgadillo, 2019). When the nation's largest cities pursue similar policies at the same time, reaching and representing large populations, one begins to wonder to what extent the national policies matter.

Cross-border collaboration and city diplomacy is another important example of cities influencing policies beyond their jurisdictions. In 2017, shortly after President Trump was elected on an anti-immigrant platform, the mayors of Mexico City, Guadalajara and Juarez conducted a diplomatic tour of major cities in the United States with large Mexican immigrant populations. Meeting with mayors, they wanted to ensure respect and protection for their diaspora despite the national narrative. Healthcare and human rights were at the top of the agenda during these discussions (Channick, 2017). Parallel conversations are taking place regularly across borders, such as between Tijuana and San Diego, two cities working together on a blueprint for their shared metropolitan area (Selee, 2018).

Lastly, just as some mayors have been driving the global agenda on climate action, mayors are beginning to organise globally around migration. In December 2017, a dozen cities from the United States joined over 130 cities worldwide in signing a historic petition requesting a seat at the table as the United Nations met to negotiate the Global Compact for Migration (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2017). When President Donald Trump announced he was withdrawing the United States from the compact, the cities quickly mobilised. Many of the goals listed in the compact rely on cities to successfully implement the strategies, such as collecting and reporting data, and ensuring inclusion and safety. If they are to be held accountable, cities feel they should have a formal role in developing these agendas and setting expectations in the first place.

The global momentum continued throughout 2018. Mayors voted on migration policies at the Global Parliament of Mayors summit in Bristol where the Bristol Declaration was passed (Global Parliament of Mayors, 2018). They launched a new Mayors Migration Council in Marrakesh in December (Biron, 2018), and participated in the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' 11<sup>th</sup> Dialogue on Protection Challenges around the theme of "Cities of Light" (Gaynor, 2018). These initiatives pave the way for what will happen in the years to come.



#### **IV. Certain limitations and concerns must be recognised**

The emergence of cities as actors shaping migration policies beyond their traditional jurisdictions certainly raises many questions and concerns. Immigration is determined at the national level: cities cannot change visa laws, grant citizenship to undocumented immigrants, decide to whom they want to grant asylum, or prevent Immigration and Customs Enforcement from operating in their cities. And with good reason. Once within the country's borders, people can move freely from city to city. It is therefore logical that ensuring overall national security, conducting background checks against intelligence databases, and overseeing the nationwide labour force cannot all be devolved to hundreds of municipalities.

It is also important to note that the authority cities possess not only differs from country to country, but even within the United States, from state to state. Some cities have more autonomy, or in some cases, their priorities are aligned with leaders at state level. The nature of immigration also differs. Long-term migrants, undocumented immigrants, asylum seekers and resettled refugees all come with a different set of demands. Understanding what works, when it works, and why it works is crucial when offering new policy recommendations.

Many cities have expressed concern that immigrants and refugees may be misled about how safe and protected they are within the city's limits. Vocal welcoming proclamations and informal competitions to be "the most immigrant friendly city in the country" could leave immigrants who are unfamiliar with the intricacies of US immigration policy with a false sense of optimism about their future.

There are many other concerns too. Some wonder about the extent to which a city's experience with migrant integration legitimises their ability to influence policies at the national or international levels. Others have asked whether the situation in the United States is politically motivated, with Democratic mayors trying to counterbalance a Republican president. Questions arise about a reverse scenario: what if mayors tried to reduce immigration while a country was opening its doors? Would the support for cities to shape migration policies receive the same response? These concerns and more will need to be addressed as cities continue to emerge as migration policy actors.

#### **V. Systems could evolve to include cities in decision-making**

Governments and systems have evolved over time to meet the realities of the day. When it comes to migration policy, it is not impossible to conceive of a new era in which cities are helping shape the policies that affect them. The following are a few examples of areas where cities could potentially garner more influence:

- *Employment visas*: Cities are among the most vocal supporters of immigrant entrepreneurs and small business owners, which are vital

to local economic vitality. Could cities help accelerate a new form of entrepreneurial visa that is sponsored by the local government to help improve economic development?

- *Legal status protections:* For those who have been long-term members of the community, who call the city their home, who have raised families and worked tirelessly, can the city help make the case for their status to be legalised? This could also apply to immigrants whose Temporary Protection Status will expire. If a local government can vouch for them, can the national government create a pathway that recognises a city's interests?
- *Sponsoring refugees:* In cases where the country is decreasing the number of refugees it will accept, but where cities want to open their doors, could a new system be created where cities can help influence outcomes? A new programme in Ireland, similar to one in Canada, is encouraging a community-led programme of refugee sponsorship that continues to pass national-level guidelines and requirements (Pollak, 2019). Could this serve as a model?
- *Shared-border visas:* For cities with such deep ties to another city that they ultimately form a large metropolitan region across national borders, could a new visa help streamline border life?
- *Voting power:* Many immigrants have been living in their cities for over twenty years. Mayors care that they pay local taxes, use local services, and are a part of the local community. If a newly relocated US citizen resident can vote on the future of the city, why can a long-term immigrant resident not use their vote too?
- *A seat at international tables:* Cities are implicated through these processes and negotiations. They are responsible for reporting on data, integrating immigrants, and creating ecosystems of inclusion. Can international organisations evolve their procedures to ensure that cities are at the table when decisions that affect them are made?

## Conclusion

Cities have a stake in the future of migration policies. Immigration manifests itself most acutely at the local level and cities are on the frontlines every day of adapting to a changing, global and diverse world. Across the United States, city leaders are grappling with their responsibilities to the residents within their localities against the often-outdated laws enforced at national level. But, globally, a range of push and pull factors will continue to drive migration trends, with cities as the first responders in times of crisis or as gateways for opportunity. World leaders are beginning to construct a framework and guidelines for migration governance with significant implications for cities. Rather than simply being held accountable for implementation and integration locally, cities want and should be able to contribute their needs and concerns to policy decisions more broadly. When it comes to migration policy, it will not be enough to simply let cities have a voice. Their voice will need to be heard as well.

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