

Policy briefs



Policy briefs on local governance of human mobility for the Town Halls of Granada and Palermo.

Direction:

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Policy Brief

July 2025

Local Governance and Collaboration with Migrant Associations

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*Executive Summary

Subnational levels of government are increasingly involved in managing migration, which is one of the key factors in developing the economic potential of a region in the context of globalised competition. Local governments, however, bear the burden of creating and maintaining positive conditions for civil coexistence and social cohesion for new arrivals in the short and medium term, taking into account their different legal statuses, which can be classified on a continuum from regular to irregular. In the service-based economies of advanced countries, cities are also among the main areas of settlement for immigrants at different stages of their migration journey (irregularity, instability, stabilisation in progress or achieved).

Migrant communities, through their organisations, act as active agents in the production of informal welfare and in everyday cultural mediation. This is a form of agency that lies on the margins of the institutional political space but often compensates for the absence of the state or municipality in guaranteeing access to essential services, such as legal support, housing, education or health guidance.

1. Introduction

Studies on the local dimension of immigration policies form a separate section from those focusing on paths to inclusion in the citizenship rights of nation states because it is at this local level that the substantive aspects of integration processes can be observed.

	Closure vs. civil society activism	Passive opposition	Implicit tolerance	Institutional activism vs. anti-immigrant mobilisation	Cooperation
Dynamics	Local authorities try to prevent non-public actors from providing aid to refugees	Local authorities do not take action and pass the buck to civil society	Local authorities do not hinder the activism of non-public actors	Groups of residents protest against institutional initiatives in favour of refugees	Local authorities and non-public actors collaborate in welcoming refugees

Source (adapted by author): Ambrosini e Campomori, 2024, 190.

The challenges described above highlight a tension between formal inclusion and substantive inclusion. From a perspective inspired by the theory of multilevel governance (Piattoni, 2010) and the concept of the “battlefield” (Ambrosini & Campomori, 2020), Palermo appears as an archipelago of practices and institutions which, although motivated by inclusive intentions, risk reproducing structural inequalities and systemic disconnections. The distance between administrative structures and migrant subjectivities manifests itself in a differential production of access to rights, mediated by language barriers, implicit norms and divergent cultural representations.

This tension can be interpreted in terms of asymmetry in communicative and symbolic power, where the ineffectiveness of institutional communication is not only a technical problem, but reflects a lack of recognition of cultural plurality. Institutional mechanisms such as the Consulta delle Culture (Council for Culture), created with inclusive aims, have often become bogged down in symbolic forms of representation, unable to translate social conflict into effective political representation. In this context, the fragmentation of policies is not only administrative, but also the result of a weakness in the relational infrastructure between institutions and migrant civil society.

To enhance the inclusiveness and effectiveness of local governance in migration policy, several strategic developments are recommended. First, it is essential to strengthen intercultural communication by creating multilingual digital portals with simplified user guides, and by establishing dedicated language task forces involving members of migrant communities. These initiatives would directly address the persistent information and accessibility gaps that hinder migrant populations from fully exercising their rights.

Second, there is a pressing need to institutionalise migrant representation. This includes introducing additional municipal councillors with the right to make policy proposals, as well as replacing outdated consultative bodies—such as the *Consulta delle Culture*—with renewed, participatory structures that are more attuned to the evolving composition and needs of migrant communities.

Third, it is crucial to differentiate and professionalise the role of cultural mediators. This means ensuring a diverse pool of mediators, trained in intercultural competence and drawn from varied backgrounds, while also introducing shared ethical standards—particularly concerning confidentiality—to ensure trust and accountability in service delivery.

Last but not least, local authorities should move decisively toward formalising cooperation with third-sector organisations (ETS) and migrant associations, particularly in the provision of essential services to undocumented migrants—one of the most structurally excluded groups. While civil society has long acted as a de facto welfare provider in areas where public services are fragmented or absent, such informal delegation often results in inconsistent standards, unclear responsibilities, and lack of coordination. Formalising these relationships through memoranda of understanding (MoUs), operational agreements, and inclusion in institutional planning processes would help move from reactive, fragmented interventions to coherent, shared governance models.

This formalisation should not be limited to bureaucratic arrangements but must involve co-design processes, where ETS and migrant organisations are recognised as strategic partners in shaping service delivery frameworks and policy tools. Likewise, their involvement in participatory budgeting can ensure that local investments reflect the actual needs and priorities of diverse communities.

* Key issues

- By transitioning from a model of tolerance or passive reliance on civil society to structured collaboration based on recognition, trust, and mutual accountability, local governance can both enhance its legitimacy and improve the inclusiveness and effectiveness of its migration-related interventions.

2. The Potential of Migrant Associations for the Inclusion of Migrants

Despite systemic obstacles, migrant associations represent a growing form of collective agency. These organisations are not only executors of “proximity” functions, but also genuine relational nodes between different social worlds, endowed with social capital and situated knowledge.

However, their ability to influence public policy is often limited by a structural asymmetry in the field of governance: institutions do not always recognise migrant associations as legitimate political interlocutors, relegating them to executive or subordinate roles.

Supporting the agency of migrant associations implies redefining institutional relations in terms of co-decision-making and co-planning, overcoming the logic of delegation in favour of collaborative practices based on trust, transparency and mutual recognition.

Migrant associations are a strategic lever for social, economic and civic inclusion:

1. Production of social capital and intercultural cohesion

Migrant associations act as relational bridges between the communities involved and the local population (Donati, 1991). They offer cultural and social activities that involve not only immigrants but the entire community, helping to transform the public perception of immigration from a problem to a resource. This effect promotes inclusion and enriches the urban fabric in terms of interculturalism and solidarity. In particular, in urban contexts such as Rome, migrant associations promote widespread social capital and reduce inter-community prejudice.

2. Informal support and local welfare

While public policies often arrive late or remain fragmented, migrant associations mitigate inequalities through informal services: language courses, legal guidance, housing or health support. This “bottom-up” approach allows migrants to access their rights more directly, especially where institutions struggle to ensure the uniform provision of services, compensating for structural deficiencies by offering support in essential areas (housing, health, work) (Barberis & Angelucci, 2022).

3. Socio-economic inclusion and the labour market

Italian CSOs and migrant associations play a key role in economic integration, offering professional courses, internships, career guidance and CV writing support. Associations cover a wide range of services aimed at social and labour integration, going well beyond mere emergency relief to promote training, guidance and migrant entrepreneurship, strengthening autonomy and empowerment (OECD, 2022).

4. Empowerment and agency in political protagonism

Migrant associations act as collective entities with strategic capabilities. Through collaborative networks and co-design processes with public bodies, migrant organisations establish themselves as legitimate political interlocutors. The empowerment model developed at the diaspora level – as documented by the OECD – shows that migrant associations can contribute to sustainable development, skills transfer and institutional dialogue, both locally and transnationally. They are incubators of active citizenship and spaces for political construction, even in the absence of legal citizenship (Bicchieri, 2016)

*** Key issues**

- Migrant participation should not be seen as a symbolic meaning, but as a transformative device capable of changing the very structure of local governance.

5. Social innovation and entrepreneurship

Associations and migrant entrepreneurship represent a laboratory for social innovation: micro-enterprises, co-development projects and microcredit initiatives with local roots create mutual recognition and a sense of belonging. These experiences can act as drivers of economic inclusion and community cohesion, for example through the valorisation of remittances and the banking of migrants. They activate transnational and local projects, contributing to inclusive and sustainable development models (Yeates, 2022).

Dimension	Description of value
Social	Building bonds, breaking down prejudices
Welfare	Covering needs not met by the public sector
Economic	Facilitating entry into the labour market
Political	Organised and authoritative presence in local policy
Innovation	Production of entrepreneurial projects and co-development

Source: Frazzica G., Gerbino G., Gucciardo G., *La governance locale delle politiche migratorie a Palermo* (forthcoming)

3. Public policy recommendations

Truly inclusive governance must recognise and support the active contribution of migrant associations, not only as service providers, but also as key players in the definition and implementation of migration and social policies. Local governance systems must shift from symbolic inclusion and passive reliance on civil society to structured, trust-based partnerships with migrant associations. By institutionalising their dual role—as both service providers and policy actors—local authorities can create more inclusive, effective, and legitimate migration governance frameworks.

1. Recognise and promote the role of migrant associations in providing of programmes and services to migrants.

- Formalise Collaboration Frameworks
 - o Establish Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) and operational agreements with migrant associations and third-sector organisations.
 - o Integrate them into institutional planning processes to ensure coherent, coordinated service delivery.

1. Recognise and promote the role of migrant associations in providing of programmes and services to migrants (Cont.).

- Support Informal Welfare Contributions
 - Acknowledge and fund the essential services provided by migrant associations—especially in areas where public provision is lacking (e.g. legal assistance, health access, housing).
 - Provide technical and infrastructural support to ensure quality and sustainability.

2. Recognise and promote the role of migrant associations in defining and implementing migration and social policies.

- Institutionalise Migrant Representation
 - Introduce migrant councillors at the municipal level with formal powers to propose and influence policy.
 - Reform outdated consultative bodies (e.g. Consulta delle Culture) into participatory, accountable, and inclusive structures.
- Embed Migrant Associations in Policy Co-Design
 - Include migrant organisations in co-design processes for service frameworks and policy tools.
 - Ensure their participation in participatory budgeting to align public investments with diverse community needs.
- Promote Political Empowerment and Active Citizenship
 - Recognise migrant associations as legitimate political interlocutors—not merely service implementers.
 - Support diaspora-led initiatives and transnational collaborations that strengthen democratic engagement and skills transfer.
- Strengthen Intercultural Communication
 - Create multilingual digital platforms with accessible user guides.
 - Involve migrant community members in communication task forces to address information gaps and improve institutional outreach.