2025 February

BROKERING SOLUTIONS :

How Local and Regional Governments

Shape Regular Migration Pathways

White Paper

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A. INTRODUCTION

This White Paper provides a first analysis of how local governments design, advocate for and implement regular migration pathways (hereafter 'regular pathways'). It starts with a definition of regular pathways and zooms in on the role of local and regional governments. The White Paper offers a tentative categorisation of how they work on pathways and provides concrete examples, with the aim to spark further discussion. It also offers a number of recommendations through which national governments and the international community can better unlock the potential of local governments in supporting the roll-out of regular pathways going forward.

This working document aims to inspire and support the 2024-2025 GFMD Colombian Chair, UN Agencies such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and its Regular Pathways Secretariat and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), donors interested in supporting local governments in their regular pathways portfolios, and, lastly, local governments that are exploring to enhance their work on pathways.

Notes:

- This paper does not elaborate on the benefits of regular pathways, and on why we need more of them: it fully acknowledges regular pathways as critical vehicles to prevent loss of life, to undermine the business model of migrant smugglers and human traffickers and to ensure prosperity of migrants and host communities alike. This paper also acknowledges that we currently have a lack of pathways that:

    1. Match motivations of people migrating with real social, cultural and economic pull factors of communities / places of destination.
    2. Prepare for future demographic, labour market and climate-specific trends across the world, which will significantly increase the demand for regular pathways.

- This paper discusses the role of local and regional governments, including municipalities, cities, states, counties, regions, provinces, etc. To keep this document accessible and easy to read, we will refer mostly to cities, which should be interpreted more broadly to include local and regional governments at large.

B. DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS

1. Defining regular migration pathways

In this paper, we use the UN Network on Migration Guidance, which defines regular pathways for admission and stay as legal, policy and administrative mechanisms that provide for regular travel, admission and/or stay in the territory of a State, regardless of whether the initial entry was regular or not, and temporary or not.

The White Paper identifies multiple situations in which regular pathways can be provided, such as:

- Obtaining a visa prior to arrival at a port of entry.
- Obtaining a visa upon arrival at a port of entry.
- A process of regularisation or grant of residence and/or work permit for migrants in an irregular situation already on the territory.
- Adjustment of status from one migration status to another for migrants already on the territory, whether because the original status will be expiring or because another status is available.

2. Types of pathways

Through desktop research[1], we have developed an overview of different pathway types, categorised by their ultimate purpose. This list is not exhaustive but gives several examples, based on the definition referenced above.

Type of Pathway	Examples
1. Family	- **Spousal Visas**: Allowing spouses to join their partners who are citizens or legal residents of the destination country. - **Dependent Visas**: For children, parents, or other dependents of residents or citizens.
2. Labour	- **Work Visas**: Issued for specific job offers, requiring employer sponsorship. - **Skilled (and Semi-Skilled) Worker Programmes**: For individuals with skills in high demand. Some of these programmes are the result of specific Skills Mobility Partnerships. - **Seasonal or Temporary Worker Visas**: For jobs that are temporary or seasonal in nature, such as agricultural work.
3. Education	- **Student Visas**: Allowing individuals to study at recognized educational institutions. - **Exchange Programs**: For students, researchers, and professionals participating in exchange programs.
4. Investment	- **Investor / Entrepreneur Visas**: For individuals investing a significant amount of money / or starting a business in a destination country.
5. Humanitarian	- **Refugee Resettlement**: The selection and transfer of refugees from a State in which they have sought protection to a third State that has agreed to admit them – as refugees – with permanent residence status. - **Private/Community Sponsorship**: Programmes that support the reception and integration of refugees, in which local communities provide financial, emotional and practical help to newly arrived refugees. - **Humanitarian Admission Programmes (HAPS)**: To grant large(r) groups of individuals in need of international protection immediate and expedited access to protection on an initially temporary basis, renewable and reviewed on a needs-basis. Such an expedited entry can be facilitated by inclusion on a prima-facie or presumably eligible basis and therefore the elimination or reduction in scope of the Refugee Status Determination phase prior to the selection process.
6. Regularisation	- **Regularisation**: Any process by which national authorities grant regular status to migrants residing in the country irregularly. This can take the form of permanent 'regularisation mechanisms', which are part of the national migration policy framework or can be ad-hoc programmes that run for a limited period and typically target specific categories of irregular migrants.

Not included in this list are Complementary Pathways for Refugees: these are not considered a separate category of pathways but rather refer to migration pathways (for example labour, family reunification, education, humanitarian, …) with refugee-specific flexibilities built in, that allow refugees to access work or study and find other opportunities outside their countries of origin or asylum. Such pathways form a key area of work within UNHCR's mandate.

3. Mandates

Each of these pathways takes shape within the legal, policy, and regulatory frameworks set out by States, including destination, transit and countries of origin. Each pathway therefore has its own set of eligibility criteria, application processes, legal requirements and implementing partners. Depending on the specific pathways, partners can include local and regional governments, suprarational institutions, the private sector, educational institutions, civil society and UN agencies, such as UNHCR and IOM[2]. The specific pathways available and their requirements can therefore vary significantly from one country to another.

C. CITIES AND REGULAR MIGRATION PATHWAYS

By 2050, nearly 70% of the world will live in cities[3]. 60% of refugees and 80% of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) turn to cities in search of safety[4] and migrants increasingly turn to cities in search of safety, housing, education and work, and in many cases drive the increase urbanisation[5]. Local governments - the level of government closest to the people - are responsible for meeting the most direct needs of their residents - whether that is housing, education, healthcare or employment[6].

Although national policies impose limits on migration and border control, including barriers to employment, **local administrations have developed innovative and inclusive solutions that serve all - regardless of migratory status**. These solutions help achieve the sustainable development of countries of origin, transit and destination.

Cities, drivers of sustainable development:

The idea that cities should be closely involved in the design and implementation of humanitarian action and development policy, and are critical to achieve the SDGs is widely recognised. For example, the SDG localisation agenda acknowledges cities as critical in shaping bottom-up solutions. Through the Grand Bargain, donors committed to localise humanitarian aid, and the 2024 UN Secretary General's Report on the implementation of the Global Compact for Migration, points to the need to empower and fund Local government for greater impact.   Yet, in practice, cities still lack access to the policy making table, and access to direct funding, particularly for cities in the Global South[7].

When designing regular pathways, cities are indeed **critical to success**: they indicate local capacity for hosting migrants and refugees, help identify skills and labour market needs and work with the private sector and civil society to lead migrants to work. They prepare migrants before departure, ensure access to services and inclusion once migrants arrive and work in collaboration with host communities. Local governments in sending countries also identify skills, monitor the impacts of pathways in communities of departure and ensure the reintegration of returning migrants. Throughout the full migration cycle, cities are therefore critical partners in determining to what extent a pathway will be successful, but also in shaping how it will be perceived by host communities.

Cities also advocate for better and **more pathways and access to regularisation**. Having a large undocumented population in a city can not only be detrimental to this population but also negatively impact the overall wellbeing of communities. At the same time, local leaders often acknowledge migration as a force for prosperity and development and have therefore long advocated for an increase of regular pathways as well as for the set-up of national regularisation programmes as pragmatic and smart policy tools.

This paper, while not exhaustive, proposes a categorisation of the ways in which cities support regular pathways and provides a list of examples that illustrate these areas of work. This list draws from the pledges submitted through the Call to Local Action for Migrants and Refugees – an initiative by Mayors Mechanism partners United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the Mayors Migration Council (MMC) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in partnership with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). It also draws from a mapping conducted by the Mayors Mechanism Secretariat and the MMC, and from responses to a dedicated pathways survey, circulated in October 2024.

For this section, the following considerations apply:

- National governments decide who enters and stays in their territory: they dictate the regulatory space within which a pathway may be created. Depending on this context, a pathway may be implemented or initiated by partners such as UN agencies, the private sector, academia, civil society and local governments.

- The below overview spotlights only a limited number of cases and types of pathways. This White Paper may be updated once new practices come to light.

1. **Cities as incubators**:
   Piloting innovative models for regular pathways

Cities proactively use the available tools and regulations within their national context to drive, set up and identify new partnerships that in turn result in specific pathways tailored to the needs of their population. This section looks at examples in which cities proactively design such pathways to respond to a given need and context.

Case 1:   Cities designing local humanitarian protection programmes. **The Catalan Programme for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders (PCPDDH)** was created and is funded by the **regional government of Catalonia (Spain)**, managed by the CSO Catalan Refugee Assistance Commission and supported by the **Sant Cugat del Vallès City Council**. The programme provides protection to human rights defenders at risk and offers temporary shelter in Catalonia for six months. It also includes psychosocial support, training, actions to strengthen support networks, and assistance with returning home. The PCPDDH does not issue the visas itself but works with the national government to nominate individuals for protection and requests expedited visa issuance. The region is now further assessing whether it can play a more proactive role in establishing humanitarian corridors.

Case 2:   Cities designing regularisation programmes: **The Papyrus Programme of the Geneva Canton (Switzerland)**, implemented between 2017 and 2018, regularised the status of undocumented migrants living in the canton, providing them with federal legal residency and work permits. It focused on integrating migrants into the local community by ensuring they have access to legal employment, education, healthcare, and social services. The national legal framework in Switzerland provides the flexibility for cantons to regularise undocumented migrants based on local criteria and needs, but so far, the Geneva Canton has been the only one to make use of it.

Case 3:   Cities creating city-to-city circular migration partnerships: building on **Utrecht**'s (the Netherlands) ongoing work to include migrants and refugees into the socio-economic fabric of the city (e.g. through its **Plan Einstein**), the city recognizes that migration can be an important force of prosperity and development, both in the Netherlands and in countries of origin. Also driven by a clear demand from Dutch businesses - the city now wants to facilitate the opportunity to upskill prospective Moroccan migrants through temporary learning/work placements in Dutch businesses and in its own administration, hereby providing capacity building through city-to-city exchange as well as economic development **in the Netherlands and in Morocco**. While these pathways would make use of short-term visas, the idea would be to use this work as a prototype to scale and activate the full potential of the existing ecosystem of businesses, local governments and international actors both in the Netherlands and in Africa.

Case 4:   Cities shaping local relocation programmes[8]: **Upstate New York Relocation Programme** (USA) provides support to migrants by offering to relocate them from temporary shelters to more permanent housing opportunities in counties that have availability to host them longer-term. This is currently funded by **New York City (NYC)** and rolled out in **Erie County (Buffalo)**. Prior to this, NYC and **New York State** ran the "**Migrant Relocation Assistance Program**" (MRAP) which created relocation pathways for migrants and other eligible families to relocate from NYC shelters to permanent housing in **Albany**, **Erie**, **Monroe**, **Suffolk**, and **Westchester Counties**.

2. **Cities as implementers**:
Facilitating access to available regular pathways

Beyond taking a proactive role in shaping new pathways, cities are also critical implementing partners in national schemes and regularisation programmes and are often recognized as such by their national government. Without being exhaustive, the text below offers specific cases within different existing pathways (resettlement, labour migration, educational pathways, regularisation).

Case 1:   Cities implementing resettlement and refugee admission programmes: through the **SAI System** (**Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione**), the **Italian government** delegates significant responsibilities to local governments, including cities like **Milan**, to manage the reception and resettlement of refugees on the ground. In this system, cities act on behalf of the Italian national government in managing the day-to-day aspects of refugee resettlement and integration. This role involves implementing national policies, managing resources, and providing a range of services to ensure that refugees are effectively integrated into Italian society.

Case 2:   Cities implementing national labour pathways: through the **Canadian Provincial Nominee Program** and **Atlantic Immigration Pilot Program**, both aimed at high-wage migrant workers, provinces lead the way to identifying skill requirements and migrant profiles. Both also serve as a **complementary pathway** for refugees. For low-wage migrant workers, similar partnerships exist, for example, the **Temporary Foreign Worker Program in Canada** and the **Seasonal Workers Scheme in Spain**, whereby local governments work with employers and local service providers to ensure that foreign workers receive adequate housing, healthcare, and integration support.

Case 3:   Cities working with academia to regularise youth residents: the **City of Amsterdam** (the Netherlands), facilitates access to higher education for the city's undocumented young residents. To do so, the city joined forces with five local educational institutions with the aim of creating tailor-made solutions. The pilot project (lasting until the end of 2024) aimed to make sure young people without proper documents receive assistance from educational institutions in applying for and obtaining a study residence permit and investigate if they are eligible for other types of education and if registration costs for this group can be reduced.

Case 4:   Cities facilitating access to information about available pathways: **São Paulo** **(Brazil)** provides services for migrants through their Centres for Reference and Assistance to Immigrants (CRAI). Within these CRAIs, migrant and refugee professionals hired by the council help with legal counselling and information about regularisation opportunities, offer cultural and linguistic mediation, and provide social and psychological assistance. The city administration fully acknowledges the importance of local informal networks of migrant organisations and other trusted local leaders in ensuring information reaches relevant communities.

Case 5:   Cities providing support to communities that remain, and to returning migrants: **Quezon City** **(the Philippines)**, administers a Migrants Resource Center (MRC) to cater to the needs of vulnerable migrants, with a particular focus on overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) and their families. The MRC is a one-stop-shop that provides comprehensive support under one roof at the local level of government nearest to OFWs and their families. It offers a range of gender-responsive programs and services, including awareness campaigns, seminars, migration-related events, capability building, skills training, community organising, and direct assistance like repatriation support, psycho-social counselling, and referrals to essential agencies.

3. **Cities as advocates**:
Calling for the expansion of regular pathways

This section zooms in on the role of cities in advocating for better and enhanced pathways and regularisation programmes.

Case 1: Cities advocating for more resettlement and refugee admissions: In 2020, **Safe Harbour cities in Germany** addressed a letter to Chancellor Merkel, calling to urgently address the human catastrophe taking place in Refugee Camp Moria (Greece), at the same time pledging to welcome more refugees in their cities. In 2023, in light of the development of the European Pact on Migration, cities and city networks advocated for a more humane and welcoming asylum system. Safe Harbour cities from across Europe came together to jointly strategize and advocate for a more human asylum system in Europe, including a system that is based on solidarity and human rights. In a convening hosted by the **city of Villeurbanne**, **8 European cities** jointly called for a system of resettlement that is more just and that takes into account the cities' capacity for welcoming newcomers.

Case 2: Cities advocating for more labour migration pathways and access to regularisation: The **US Conference of Mayors** adopted a **bipartisan resolution** in 2024 that calls on federal policymakers to adopt a **Heartland Visa** proposal to revitalise local economies through high-skilled immigration. The Heartland Visa proposes leveraging the talent of skilled workers to rejuvenate areas affected by de-industrialization by redistributing skilled workers across the country. This visa would offer a new immigration pathway for highly skilled workers, entrepreneurs, and innovators and simplify the migrants' path to permanent residency in return for their commitment to live in participating communities experiencing economic decline.

Case 3: Cities changing the dominant migration narrative towards one of human rights and inclusion. The **2022 Lampedusa Charter** is a municipal initiative led by UCLG that advocates for a renewed vision of human mobility, emphasizing dignity, human rights, and territorial solidarity. Named after the **Italian island of Lampedusa**—a significant entry point for migrants into Europe—the charter reflects the commitment of local and regional governments to address migration and asylum with compassion and inclusivity. The charter includes a strong call for efficient, coherent and coordinated administrative and policy processes across all government levels to enhance safe and regular pathways and promote flexibility to adapt to ground realities. The charter was developed through a participatory process involving **over 300 municipalities and regions** worldwide, along with civil society and international organizations.

D. RECOMMENDATIONS

The list above shows there is a significant breadth and diversity in how cities incubate, implement and advocate for regular pathways. Much of this depends on the specificities of the policy framework, the level of decentralisation of the country in question, size and geographic location. Our research also shows that cities still face **several challenges** in taking up this role, such as a lack of formal competency, lack of legal mandates and access to resources and information. This is not only true for pathways work but applies to migration governance at large – see box on p.5.

Matching migrants and refugees with decent jobs and educational opportunities, helping them find housing, and reuniting them with families is complex and requires extensive collaboration with local communities, associations, the private sector, academia and others. Cities play a **critical broker role**: they are creative and set up innovative partnerships to optimally seize opportunities. Simultaneously, cities also recognise the importance of **investing in communities of origin**, so that the development potential of regular pathways is maximised.

Here are a few avenues in which national governments, regional bodies, donors and UN agencies can further build on this potential:

1. **Work with cities to embed regular pathways in local contexts**
    National and regional entities should build upon local governments' expertise and local networks in countries of origin, transit and destination, by involving them in the design phase, by unlocking sufficient resources to strengthen local capacity and by ensuring availability of disaggregated migration data at local level.

2. **Empower cities to set up and scale regular pathways**
    National governments, regional institutions and international partners should seek to maximise the potential of local government initiatives, by simplifying existing visa frameworks, providing easy and transparent communication, and helping cities navigate the existing regulatory space.

3. **Involve cities to drive local development efforts**
    It is critical that regular pathways include longer-term development needs in their set-up. For example, skills mobility partnerships can factor in training and capacity building in given job sectors for members of the sending community at large. However, comprehensive frameworks that leverage genuine win-win solutions for both origin and destination communities—while staying true to the localisation agenda by working directly with local administrations—are scarce and need to be supported and scaled up.

4. **Invest in research on the role of cities in supporting regular pathways**
    There is little data available on the role of cities in advancing regular pathways. Their role is mostly documented in community sponsorship initiatives, and even then, little is known about existing hurdles and opportunities. Also, most of the examples are from cities in the Global North and look at pathways that facilitate South-North migration. Future research could look at the potential of involving cities in the set-up of regular pathways, including by zooming in on the Global South. This would help identify critical factors of replication, such as enabling national policies and preconditions needed for local governments to continue to play this role.

Endnotes

1   From sources such as: Migration Governance Insights on Regular Pathways (IOM, 2024), Pathways to Protection (ECRE, 2024),   Regular Pathways for Admission and Stay for Migrants in Situations of Vulnerability (UN Network on Migration, 2021), European Legal Migration and Integration (European Commission, 2024), International Migration Outlook (OECD, 2024)

2   UNHCR: is mandated to support national governments with the set-up of pathways to provide durable solutions and safe, legal options for refugees to rebuild their lives. Building on the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees, UNHCR has developed a Strategy on Resettlement and Third Country Solutions and 2030 Roadmap to guide this work. IOM: In its 2024 - 2028 Strategic Plan, IOM commits to assist States to establish, expand and enhance regular migration pathways and it has set up a Pathways Secretariat to lead this work. In 2023, IOM and UNHCR adopted the 'Route-Based Approach', which entails not looking at countries of destination in isolation but at the entire migratory route that people take. It proposes a set of comprehensive interventions, including the set-up of corridor-specific regular pathways.

3   Localizing the SDGs: Overview (Local 2030, 2025)

4   The Power of Cities (UNHCR, 2016)

5   World Migration Report (IOM, 2015)

6   Better Inclusion of Migrants Starts in Cities (Eurocities, 2024)

7   The lack of funding, access to mandates and coordination mechanisms, is consistently echoed across policy documents and advocacy messages of Mayors Mechanism partners. 'Cities Empowered: How Cities Shape the Agenda and Governance of Global Migration' (Sophie van Haasen, Mixed Migration Review 2020, page 262), or 'Curtain Up: City Diplomacy in Global Migration Governance' (2023, Janina Stürner - Siovitz), provide more elaborate reading on this.

8   Even though voluntary relocation between local jurisdictions within the same country does not fit within the UN definition of a pathway, from the practical perspective of cities, it is important to include as it showcases their proactive work for longer-term socio-economic inclusion – responding to inaction from federal level government.

Further reading:

- Building on Regular Pathways to Address Migration Pressures in the Americas (IOM and Migration Policy Institute - MPI, 2024)
- Demographic Changes in OECD Regions and Cities (OECD, 2024)
- Engaging Employers in Growing Refugee Labor Pathways (MPI, 2024)
- Facilitating regular pathways to a better future: harnessing the power of migration - Outcome Report (IOM, 2024)
- Migration governance insights on regular pathways: delivering on the promise of migration (IOM, 2024)
- Webinar: Community sponsorship of refugees - How can cities be involved? (EUROCITIES and Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative, 2020)

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