



MIGRATIONS AND URBAN GOVERNANCE: AN AGENDA FOR COOPERATION

CITIES AND MIGRATION DATA: KNOWLEDGE FOR INCLUSIVE URBAN GOVERNANCE



Barcelona City Council. Department of Global Justice and International Cooperation

The Department of Global Justice and International Cooperation is in charge of promoting cooperation, education and policy coherence for global justice with the collaboration of other municipal departments and a large number of actors in the city (NGOs, trade unions, coordinating bodies, study centers, social movements, etc.). The department dynamises and provides technical support to the Municipal Council for International Cooperation, coordinates efforts and establishes agreements with other public or private entities to make international cooperation actions more effective and carries out and promotes initiatives to inform and raise public awareness about international cooperation, the promotion of peace and the defense of human rights.



The European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed)

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Introduction

The European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed) and Barcelona City Council jointly organised the symposium “*Cities and Migration Data: Knowledge for Inclusive Urban Governance*”, bringing together experts with the aim of supporting cities and local authorities in strengthening their capacity to design and implement effective migration policies through improved data production and use. Drawing on experiences such as the Barcelona Observatory of Migration and Refuge, the symposium examined practical challenges and opportunities related to the collection, analysis and use of migration data at the urban level. By fostering exchanges among cities, institutions, organisations and experts, it sought to promote migration policies that are evidence-based, ethical and responsive to urban realities.

Building on the conclusions of the 2024 symposium “[Migration Governance Capacities for Mediterranean Cities: A Strategic Urban Agenda for the Next Decade](#)”, organised with the EuroMedMig network of academic migration experts, which highlighted the value of city-level observatories in fostering data comparability and cooperation, this symposium focused on translating knowledge into actionable tools and strategies for cities and local institutions. Its objectives were threefold: to carry out a comparative assessment of different experiences across the region; to debate how data can help improve, innovate and generate a meaningful impact on local governance; and to reflect on the ethical challenges related to data production.

The symposium was organised within the framework of the project *Migration and Urban Governance: An Agenda for Cooperation* (MigUrb), developed by the IEMed in partnership with Barcelona City Council. The project aims to bridge research and policy-making by creating spaces for dialogue and cooperation, and by supporting the development of concrete policy proposals on the role of cities in migration governance.

This report follows the thematic structure of the symposium, gathering the main elements of the current situation, followed by ideas and proposals that arose in the debates among participants and that can be seen as main key takeaways and elements for further strategies. Furthermore, it incorporates a toolbox including a series of useful data sources and statistical tools related to urban management, planning, and local migration.

Cities and migration data: existing projects in cities and regional areas

This panel aimed to present initiatives led by cities and regional institutions with similar experiences, in order to analyse the links between existing data sources and research actors.

MAIN TAKEAWAYS:

1. Data, on its own, has limited meaning if not embedded within a broader narrative. To be fully understood and actionable, data must be contextualised and linked to coherent narratives.
2. Sustained, long-term data collection is essential to generate robust evidence capable of effectively informing policy-making.
3. The sensitive nature of migration data often limits its accessibility and use, while resource and capacity constraints contribute to the under-exploitation of existing data.
4. Administrative registers, while essential, present important limitations when used to generate analytical knowledge for monitoring and understanding migration dynamics.
5. Although local research frequently relies on qualitative methodologies, there remains a strong need to complement these approaches with quantitative data to support contextualisation and analysis.
6. Despite the limitations of individual data sources, their combined use and cross-analysis reveal a strong complementarity, as each provides a partial but necessary perspective on the overall reality.

Osservatorio di Idos sulle migrazioni a Roma e nel Lazio

Luca Di Sciullo. *President IDOS Centre for Studies and Research. Rome*

PRESENTATION OF THE OBSERVATORY

The [**IDOS Centre for Studies and Research**](#) is an independent institution established in 2004 as a cooperative and publishing house, building on the original group of researchers working at Caritas Rome on the *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione*, the first comprehensive annual socio-statistical report on immigration in Italy (first published

in 1991). Alongside this flagship publication, IDOS has progressively developed other socio-statistical yearbooks, including the *Roman Observatory on Migration*, which serves as both a city- and regional-level observatory, as well as a range of thematic publications.

The annual *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione* provides a systematic analysis of key migration-related data, including demographic characteristics, nationalities, territorial distribution, and residence permits. It is widely recognised in Italy as a reference publication, notably because it was the first annual statistical report of its kind, because of its broad dissemination across the country at national, regional and local levels, including among public authorities, and because it offers one of the most up-to-date overviews of migration trends in Italy.

IDOS also produces a statistical report focused on the municipality of Rome and the region of Lazio, in collaboration with the [Istituto di Studi Politici “S. Pio V”](#) and local stakeholders, such as regional trade union offices, which support the initiative. Although the Municipality of Rome hosts the annual presentation of the report, it does not provide financial support, mainly due to complex administrative procedures required to access public funding, as well as a limited prioritisation of this type of research, particularly in the field of migration. Each edition of the report addresses a set of structural issues, alongside thematic areas that vary depending on their relevance within the migration policy debate during the reference year.

The information for the different thematic chapters is compiled by IDOS researchers, in collaboration with external experts and academics. The final content is reviewed and coordinated by the IDOS editorial team, ensuring overall coherence and analytical consistency.

METHODOLOGY IN DATA COLLECTION

All reports, whether at national, regional or city level, are produced using a common methodology. The most recent and available data is collected from a range of official sources, including the Italian National Institute of Statistics, social security institutions, the National Institute for Insurance against Accidents at Work, and the Ministries of Interior, Labour and Social Affairs, and Education. For the city-level observatory, additional data are gathered from the Statistical Office of the Municipality of Rome.

As a second step, for each dataset disaggregated at the regional level, IDOS conducts a regional statistical analysis. By cross-referencing different data sources, IDOS develops rates and indicators, and at this stage provides an interpretation of what the data reveals about the living conditions of immigrants, both in absolute terms and in comparison with the native population. In a third step, the analysis is structured into thematic chapters, commissioned to different experts. This makes the dossier a collective and plural work that brings together diverse analytical approaches and perspectives, enriching the understanding of a complex phenomenon.

Each edition of the report addresses a set of structural issues, alongside thematic areas that vary depending on their relevance

The Municipality of Rome does not provide financial support due to complex funding procedures and the low prioritisation of migration-related research

WHAT DATA COLLECTED TELLS US ON THE MIGRATORY SITUATION OF THE CITY

Regarding the migratory situation in the city, Rome and its surrounding area account for around 10% of the 4.5 million immigrants living in Italy. The largest community is Romanian, followed by Bangladeshi, Filipino, Indian and Ukrainian populations.

In recent years, Italy has adopted increasingly restrictive measures affecting both economic migrants and asylum seekers. As a result, many have experienced exclusionary and dysfunctional dynamics, particularly in terms of social inclusion and labour market integration. These dynamics are especially pronounced in large metropolitan areas such as Rome, where processes of urban and social marginalisation are more intense and tend to emerge earlier than in the rest of the country.

Indeed, one distinctive feature of Rome is that trends observed at the city level often anticipate developments that later spread across Italy, making it a valuable indicator of broader national trends. In this regard, data from the Observatory have identified the early emergence and consolidation of two models that have progressively expanded nationwide.

The first relates to access to welfare and can be described as a model of social subordination, characterised by unequal access to key services such as housing, education, healthcare and social protection. Long before the rise of “nationals first” narratives, such inequalities were already evident in Rome. Discriminatory practices in the housing market, including refusals to rent to migrants, higher prices or informal arrangements, as well as stricter requirements for accessing mortgages and social housing, have significantly limited opportunities for integration. The second concerns the labour market and reflects a model of occupational segregation. Migrants often remain concentrated in low-paid and precarious jobs, even after decades of residence, pointing to a structural pattern in which foreign workers are confined to the lower segments of the occupational hierarchy, with limited opportunities for upward mobility. Over time, this has led to a highly segmented labour market, often structured along ethnic lines, where certain occupations become associated with specific nationalities.

This pattern also affects the so-called second generation, who face higher rates of school dropout and are underrepresented in higher education, thereby increasing the likelihood of reproducing their parents' occupational trajectories.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES DETECTED AS FOR THE FUNCTIONING OF THE OBSERVATORY

The main strengths lie in the continuity of data collection over time, as only long-term data series can effectively inform policy-making. Another one is the combination of theoretical and field-based expertise through collaboration between academic institutions and NGOs. However, significant weaknesses persist, particularly regarding access to data, which is often delayed or incomplete despite legal obligations to provide it. In addition, while in-depth territorial

The Observatory identified in Rome the early emergence and consolidation of two models that have progressively expanded nationwide: a model of social subordination and a model of occupational segregation

Only sustained, long-term data collection can generate the evidence needed to effectively inform policy-making

analysis is essential for understanding local dynamics, there is a declining interest among public institutions in prioritising research funding in this area.

Observatoire des migrations dans les Alpes-Maritimes – ObsMigAM

Swanie Potot. *Sociologist, researcher fellow at CNRS, Research Center on Migration and Society (URMIS) at Université Côte d'Azur*

PRESENTATION OF THE OBSERVATORY

The Observatory ([ObsMigAM](#)) stems from a collective and interdisciplinary project led by researchers from Université Côte d'Azur, in particular [URMIS](#) (*Unité de Recherches Migrations et Société*) and [ERMES](#) (*Équipe de Recherche sur les Mutations de l'Europe et de ses Sociétés*), who share a common focus on migration issues in the border territory of the Alpes-Maritimes, albeit from different perspectives.

In recent years, the reconfiguration of the migratory landscape at the European level has turned the Alpes-Maritimes department into a key migration hub, both in terms of the volume of migrants concerned and the political and media attention they attract. This situation has generated a significant body of academic research on the Franco-Italian border, which we seek to highlight and amplify. However, the cosmopolitan character of the department existed before these recent migration dynamics. From the seasonal movements of Italian agricultural workers in the 19th century, to the arrival of repatriates from North Africa after 1962, and the large-scale recruitment of Maghrebi labour during the urban development of the Côte d'Azur, as well as more recent settlements of Chechen refugees and Romanian migrants, this territory has long been a space of encounter and both temporary and long-term settlement. In this context, the Observatory's research emphasises the role of this department as a migration crossroads, offering a perspective that contrasts with the stereotypical image often associated with leisure tourism or political opportunism.

The ObsMigAM works on migration beyond the strictly local scale and has several interconnected missions. First, it seeks to focus on the local context while also considering the wider area of the Alpes-Maritimes. Second, it aims to consolidate and unify the knowledge produced about this territory. The Observatory is therefore conceived as a trusted and reliable space where research and information can be brought together, systematised, and disseminated through a credible source.

It is also an objective to increase the visibility of migration as a public issue in the region. This includes positioning the Observatory as a regional reference centre capable of countering misinformation and preventing the spread of false or distorted narratives about migration in the

The ObsMigAM seeks to break down the boundaries of academic research and foster an ongoing dialogue with civil society, with the ambition of contributing to public debate and co-producing knowledge with those engaged in practice

Alpes-Maritimes. The initiative also seeks to offer an alternative social and political perspective on the region and to encourage the co-creation of knowledge between researchers and actors with extensive field experience.

Furthermore, the ObsMigAM promotes an innovative approach by linking research with artistic practices, recognising the role of cultural production in shaping narratives, raising awareness, and engaging broader audiences. Through this multidimensional strategy, the ObsMigAM not only generates knowledge but also contributes to informing public debate and supporting more inclusive and sensitive policy responses in its local and regional context.

METHODOLOGY

Within the Observatory of Migration in the Alpes-Maritimes, the [Data Migration dans les Alpes-Maritimes](#) (DMAM) project was launched to address the lack of quantitative data on migration at the departmental level. The project identified three main factors underlying this data gap.

First, the sensitivity of migration as a policy issue, often subject to controversy in the local public sphere, requires caution in the use and dissemination of data, given the risk of political instrumentalisation. Second, quantitative data sources remain limited and fragmented, particularly at finer geographical scales such as departments or municipalities, where only exhaustively collected data can be considered representative, although it is rarely directly accessible. Third, migration is a complex and inherently difficult phenomenon to measure. While local research often relies on qualitative methodologies, such as observation and interviews, there remains a strong need for quantitative data to support contextualisation and analysis. In this regard, data production can also play a key role in making visible realities that may otherwise remain overlooked by public authorities, thereby contributing to a more informed and inclusive policy debate.

Against this backdrop, the DMAM aims to collect and compile quantitative data on migration and migrant populations at the departmental and sub-departmental levels, covering a wide range of thematic areas, including health, administrative procedures, border crossings, violence and accommodation. Methodologically, DMAM is based on a triangulation of sources, combining data from different origins in order to develop a plurality of perspectives. Each source reflects a specific and situated viewpoint, and is therefore inherently partial; however, their combination enables a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of migration dynamics.

DATA COMPILATION

The DMAM project adopts a structured and multi-step approach to the collection and analysis of migration data at the local level. It begins with the identification of a wide range of data-producing actors, including public institutions, associations, private organisations and healthcare

While local research often relies on qualitative methodologies, such as observation and interviews, there remains a strong need for quantitative data to support contextualisation and analysis

Despite limitations across data sources, cross-analysis of multiple sources reveals their strong complementarity, as each contributes a partial but necessary perspective on the overall reality

providers, in order to cover diverse thematic areas related to migrant populations (such as border crossings, accommodation, health, administrative procedures or unaccompanied minors). This is followed by a systematic engagement with these actors to assess data availability, format and accessibility. Where possible, data is collected in raw form – either as databases or extracted from reports – with the aim of building a consolidated and usable dataset. This data is then analysed primarily through descriptive statistical methods, and the results are progressively disseminated through thematic infographics.

The analysis highlights important limitations across data sources. Census data, for instance, relies on the category of “foreigners”, which does not fully capture the diversity of migrant populations and tends to overlook the most vulnerable groups. Conversely, data produced by associations provides valuable insights into highly localised and vulnerable populations but is often fragmented and uneven in quality due to non-systematic collection practices and limited technical capacity. Despite these constraints, the cross-analysis of multiple sources reveals their strong complementarity, as each contributes a partial but necessary perspective on the overall reality.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES DETECTED

One of the main challenges is the sensitive nature of migration data, increasingly framed within contentious public debates, which contributes to its limited accessibility and use. At the same time, existing data remains largely underexploited, particularly among non-institutional actors, due to resource and capacity constraints, moreover, the diversity of data types further requires sustained efforts to ensure consistent analysis and regular updating.

In response, the DMDA project has consolidated a thematic organisation of data, combined with the progressive development of a mapping of available sources and their uses. Its collective and participatory approach strengthens its long-term sustainability, enabling the involvement of a wide range of contributors over time. Particular attention is given to documentation and archiving practices to ensure continuity, while fostering knowledge transfer between experienced and early-career researchers. This collaborative model also supports the diversification of data sources and enhances the overall robustness of the analytical framework.

Observatori de les Migracions i el Refugi de Barcelona

Albert Sales. *Head of Social Rights and Public Policies. Institut Metròpoli*

PRESENTATION OF THE OBSERVATORY

The [Barcelona Observatory on Migration and Refuge](#) was established as a tool through which Barcelona City Council can access detailed information on migration dynamics and their

The sensitive nature of migration data implies limited accessibility and use while, at the same time, resource and capacity constraints mean that the existing data remains underexploited

impact on the city. Through annual reports, the Observatory aims to enhance understanding of migration trends, the living conditions of foreign and diverse origin populations, and the broader transformations these processes entail for the city's population as a whole.

The Observatory is an initiative of the Social Rights, Economic Promotion, Employment, Feminisms and Democratic Memory Area of Barcelona City Council, and is developed by the [Institut Metròpoli](#), a public consortium composed of local and regional institutions, public universities and the Barcelona Chamber of Commerce. The Institute carries out urban research, training and knowledge transfer activities, primarily in the Barcelona metropolitan area and region.

In addition, the Observatory's scope and priorities have been discussed within the framework of the Interdepartmental Table on Migration and Refuge, ensuring an integrated and coordinated governance approach. The Observatory's first report, corresponding to 2025, provides a detailed overview of migration realities in Barcelona and highlights key findings intended to guide municipal action.

By ensuring the availability of reliable data and monitoring its evolution over time, the Observatory seeks to support the design of more effective public policies, while also contributing to countering hate-based narratives often grounded in misinformation.

Through annual reports, the Observatory aims to enhance understanding of migration trends, the living conditions of foreign and diverse origin populations, and the broader transformations these processes entail for the city's population as a whole

METHODOLOGY IN DATA COLLECTION

The report is structured into six thematic chapters that provide a comprehensive analysis of the situation of the migrant population in Barcelona from multiple perspectives. The first chapter examines the foreign population in the city, including migration flows, demographic characteristics, patterns of concentration and segregation, as well as the situation of individuals with an irregular administrative status, drawing on sources such as the Statistical Institute of Catalonia (Idescat), the Municipal Population Register, the Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE) and Eurostat.

The second chapter focuses on poverty and social exclusion among migrant populations, with particular attention to income inequality, economic poverty, housing exclusion and the impact of social transfers on poverty reduction, based on data from the Living Conditions Survey and tax records. The third chapter analyses the labour market and fiscal dynamics, addressing issues such as labour market segmentation and precariousness, job quality, unemployment and access to social rights, using sources including the Catalan Labour Observatory and the Continuous Sample of Working Lives. The fourth chapter explores educational inequalities, including educational attainment, participation in the education system and perceptions of education, drawing on data from the 2024 CEO Sociopolitical Survey, the Department of Research and Universities, and the Municipal Population Register. The fifth chapter addresses

social assistance for the foreign population, focusing on access to social services, the allocation of resources and social protection mechanisms, based on data from the municipal social services database (SIAS). Finally, the sixth chapter examines opinions and attitudes related to migration, including perceptions by origin, views on migration processes and their relationship with public services, using data from the 2022 and 2024 CEO Sociopolitical Surveys and the 2021 and 2024 Interculturality Surveys conducted by Barcelona City Council.

WHAT DATA TELLS US ON THE MIGRATORY SITUATION OF THE CITY

In 2023, 31.3% of Barcelona's resident population was born abroad, compared to just 5% in 2000. Among foreign residents, the largest nationality group is Argentinian (8.1%), followed by Colombian (7.4%) and Peruvian (6.8%). Nearly two-thirds of the foreign-born population is concentrated around the historic centre, the coastal areas and the northern part of the city. The foreign population is predominantly of working age. In the age groups from 25 to 39, foreign-born individuals represent a 57% of residents in Barcelona.

Foreign nationals account for 29.5% of the salaried workforce in Barcelona and are largely concentrated in low-skilled sectors characterised by high levels of precariousness. Notably, 60.5% of domestic and care workers are foreign nationals, in a highly feminised and precarious sector with limited social protection. Similarly, 47% of employees in the hospitality sector are of foreign nationality. This situation is partly explained by the fact that, despite relatively high levels of education, foreign-born individuals face barriers that prevent the full recognition and utilisation of their qualifications.

Three key factors contribute to segregation and the persistence of inequalities, namely education, housing and social protection. Students of foreign origin are well represented in compulsory education but their presence declines significantly in more prestigious post-compulsory pathways. Housing remains a major mechanism for reproducing inequalities between foreign and native populations. Finally, social protection systems tend to be less effective for people of foreign origin.

In terms of perceptions, migration is viewed both as a source of economic and cultural enrichment and as a potential social challenge. While its legitimate drivers and labour contributions are widely recognised, perceptions of excessive presence can give rise to feelings of saturation and rejection.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES DETECTED

The analysis of the data production and use system highlights a number of key strengths. First, the strong commitment of the municipal administration to develop tools for analysing and

Three key factors contribute to segregation and the persistence of inequalities, namely education, housing and social protection

Despite the strong commitment of the municipal administration to develop tools for analysing and monitoring migration, administrative registers have important limitations in generating analytical knowledge

monitoring migration dynamics stands out. This is complemented by the combined use of administrative registers and survey data, which together provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. In addition, the availability of representative surveys at the municipal level constitutes a significant asset for knowledge generation.

However, several weaknesses persist. On the one hand, administrative registers have important limitations in generating analytical knowledge beyond their operational function. On the other hand, shortcomings in data governance mechanisms hinder a more systematic and coordinated use of available information.

In this context, a number of methodological challenges emerge. A key issue concerns the definition of appropriate variables to capture migration experiences, such as place of birth or nationality. There is also a need to rethink how diversity is recorded in a context where the number of individuals born in Spain, holding Spanish nationality but with a migrant background, is increasing. Finally, while it is relatively easier to capture the effects of administrative exclusion, it remains more complex to measure dimensions such as migration experience, racism, or the structural disadvantages affecting families of migrant origin.

The importance of data: local production and management

This panel addressed initiatives related to the production and management of migration data at the global level and examined the need to establish strategies and implement local analytical instruments.

MAIN TAKEAWAYS:

1. A key structural challenge in migration data at the local level lies in the mismatch between national data systems and local governance needs.
2. Building robust evidence systems requires long-term commitment and the active involvement of local authorities, positioning them not only as data users but also as key actors in knowledge production.
3. Strengthening coordination and the use of evidence enhances the potential to develop more strategic and inclusive migration governance.
4. The OECD's subnational statistics expands the definition of cities to include economically connected surrounding areas, providing a more accurate representation of urban systems.
5. A harmonised methodology has been developed to define cities, urban and rural areas, seeking to balance national relevance with international comparability.

The intervention by the moderator of the session,¹ highlighted a key foundational principle: data plays a central role in the production of meaningful and reliable knowledge on migration. In a context where multiple actors are involved in knowledge generation, the quality, consistency and analytical value of such knowledge largely depend on the availability and use of robust data.

At the same time, the discussion introduced a critical dimension: shifting the focus from data production to data use. In particular, the question of who benefits from data, emerges as a central concern. This perspective highlights that, beyond methodological considerations, it is essential to examine how data is used, by whom, and to what end. In this sense, data is not a

From data production to data use: beyond methodological considerations, it is essential to examine how data is used, by whom, and to what end

¹ Ricard Zapata-Barrero. Director of the GRITIM-UPF and Coordinator EuroMedMig.network

neutral instrument but can actively shape governance processes and influence public debate, raising important questions about accountability, inclusiveness and the distribution of benefits derived from knowledge production.

Filling the gaps: towards city-relevant data production

Denis Kierans. *Consultant, United Nations Statistics Division. Research Affiliate, Centre on Migration Policy and Society (COMPAS), University of Oxford. Visiting Academic, Institute of Economics, Geography and Demography, Spanish National Research Council (CSIC)*

The presentation highlighted a structural challenge in the field of migration data at the local level, namely the mismatch between national data systems and local governance needs. While migration policies are primarily designed and implemented at the national level, their social, economic and institutional impacts are experienced locally, where cities are responsible for delivering services and supporting integration processes. However, existing data systems have been largely developed to serve national purposes, resulting in a significant gap between the information available and the needs of local authorities to effectively plan and respond to migration-related dynamics.

A structural challenge in the field of migration data at local level is the mismatch between national data systems and local governance needs

In this framework, three main issues were identified. First, the fragmentation of data sources limits the ability to obtain a comprehensive and coherent picture of migrant populations at the local level. Data is dispersed across multiple administrative and statistical sources, each covering only specific segments of the population and relying on different definitions, timeframes and geographical units. This results in partial and sometimes inconsistent evidence, a challenge that extends beyond the UK context and reflects broader limitations in national statistical systems. Second, the instability of both migration patterns and measurement tools further complicates analysis. Migrant populations are highly dynamic, with individuals moving between different legal and socioeconomic statuses, while data collection systems are subject to methodological changes, declining reliability and discontinuities. This creates uncertainty for local policy-makers, who must make decisions based on evolving and sometimes inconsistent data. Finally, there is a persistent gap between international and national policy ambitions and local realities, emphasising the need to better align data systems with the governance role increasingly played by cities.

Migrant populations are highly dynamic, while data collection systems are subject to methodological changes, declining reliability and discontinuities

Kierans situated the challenges of migration data within a broader global framework, notably referring to the 2025 [United Nations recommendations on international migration statistics](#). These guidelines recognise the importance of timely and disaggregated data at the sub-national level to support local service provision in areas such as housing, healthcare, education and social services. However, despite this recognition, the framework remains

primarily oriented towards national statistical systems. Sub-national data is treated as a secondary objective rather than a core requirement, and limited attention is given to how these standards should be operationalised at the local level. As a result, a gap persists between global and national ambitions and their practical implementation in cities, where the need for data is most acute.

The UK case illustrates the gap between ambitious policy frameworks and the availability of data to operationalise them. The 2019 [Indicators of Integration framework](#) set out a comprehensive approach to measuring integration across multiple domains, but many of the proposed indicators lacked publicly available data, even at the national level. This disconnect has been acknowledged by local authorities themselves, notably in the 2024 [Local Government Association White Paper](#), which calls for a substantial improvement in data collection and sharing practices. At the same time, ongoing decentralisation efforts risk weakening evidence-based policy-making if not accompanied by investment in local data and analytical capacities.

In response to these challenges, a range of bottom-up and practice-oriented initiatives have emerged to bridge this gap. These include the development of practical guidance and training tools for local practitioners, often operating with limited resources. One example is the [The Migration Observatory Local Data Guide](#), an interactive platform that consolidates data from multiple sources to provide a more accessible and comprehensive overview of migrant populations at the local level. Such tools aim to support local authorities and practitioners by offering a coherent entry point for data-informed decision-making. More broadly, the experience highlights persistent structural challenges, including fragmented data systems, limited evidence bases, and difficulties in defining and measuring migrant populations, compounded by political sensitivities. At the same time, it underscores the need to balance immediate policy responses with the gradual development of more robust data infrastructures. Importantly, the case also points to the critical role of political commitment: where there is a clear willingness to improve coordination and strengthen the use of evidence, there is greater potential to advance more strategic and inclusive migration governance. Finally, Kierans identified three key conditions for making migration data at the local level more relevant and actionable for governance:

First, improving access to existing data is essential. A significant amount of relevant information is already available within national systems but remains difficult to access due to institutional fragmentation and legal constraints. Enhancing data-sharing frameworks, promoting interdepartmental coordination and fostering a culture of openness would significantly improve the usability of existing datasets without requiring additional data collection.

Where there is a clear willingness to improve coordination and strengthen the use of evidence, there is greater potential to advance more strategic and inclusive migration governance

Building robust evidence systems requires long-term commitment and the active involvement of local authorities, positioning them not only as data users but also as key actors in knowledge production

Second, there is a need for timely and appropriately disaggregated data. Beyond aggregate figures, local authorities require detailed information on the composition of migrant populations, including origin and time of arrival, at a scale that reflects local realities. While traditional sources such as the census provide valuable insights, their periodicity limits their usefulness for policy design. In this regard, combining multiple administrative data sources offers a more dynamic and comprehensive picture, although such efforts often face technical and capacity constraints.

Third, strengthening data infrastructure is critical, both from an ethical and from an operational perspective. On the one hand, data systems must ensure the protection of vulnerable populations, including irregular migrants, asylum seekers and minors. On the other, there is a need for sustained investment in local data capacities. Rather than relying on short-term projects, building robust evidence systems requires long-term commitment and the active involvement of local authorities, positioning them not only as data users but also as key actors in knowledge production.

OECD subnational data to support innovation in migration governance policies

Ana Isabel Moreno Monroy. *Head of the Territorial Statistics and Analysis Unit at the Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities at the OECD*

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The presentation focused on OECD sub-national data and its role in supporting innovation in migration governance. It highlighted the growing importance of migration for regional economies, particularly in the context of demographic change across many OECD regions. Ageing populations and declining labour supply are generating significant structural pressures, to which migration can provide a partial response.

In this regard, migrant arrivals and effective integration policies were identified as key factors in alleviating labour shortages and sustaining economic dynamism. Beyond labour market contributions, migration was also presented as a driver of regional innovation. These dynamics point to the broader potential of migration to contribute to long-term economic resilience and competitiveness at the sub-national level.

OECD FRAMEWORKS FOR SUBNATIONAL STATISTICS

The OECD has developed a comprehensive and standardised territorial framework for sub-national statistics aimed at ensuring comparability across countries at different geographical scales. This framework distinguishes between administrative and functional spatial units, enabling a more nuanced analysis of regional dynamics.

Functional Urban Areas (FUAs) approach expands the definition of cities to include economically connected surrounding areas, offering a more accurate representation of urban systems

At the administrative level, regions are classified into two main levels: Territorial Level 2 (TL2), which includes large regions such as states or provinces (363 regions across OECD countries), and Territorial Level 3 (TL3), which provides a more granular perspective with 1,802 smaller regions. Complementing this structure, [Functional Urban Areas](#) (FUAs) are defined based on labour market linkages, particularly commuting patterns, rather than administrative boundaries. This approach expands the definition of cities to include economically connected surrounding areas, offering a more accurate representation of urban systems.

Data based on this framework shows that the majority of migrants are concentrated in urban areas: approximately 68% reside in cities, 13% in commuting zones, and 19% outside FUAs. These figures highlight the centrality of cities in migration dynamics, while also pointing to the complexity of spatial patterns. In particular, the fact that migrants may live and work in different locations within the same functional area complicates the relationship between place of residence, labour market integration and local governance, underscoring the need for data systems that better reflect these functional realities.

THE DEGREE OF URBANISATION CLASSIFICATION

Moreno Monroy argued that defining urban and rural areas remains a challenge in a context of diverse national statistical systems. While countries rely on their own definitions for domestic policy-making, the lack of harmonisation has historically limited the comparability of data at the international level. Differences in criteria have made it difficult to interpret indicators on urbanisation and territorial development, thereby weakening cross-country analyses.

In response, international statistical efforts² have developed a [harmonised methodology to define cities, urban and rural areas](#). This approach seeks to balance national relevance with international comparability, enabling more consistent measurement of urbanisation patterns and supporting evidence-based policy-making, particularly in the context of monitoring progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Importantly, this methodology is designed to complement, rather than replace, national definitions.

The framework offers several methodological advantages, as it captures the urban-rural continuum through multiple levels of classification, applies consistent population size and density thresholds across countries, and relies on population grids to minimise spatial bias. It also measures population clusters directly rather than through proxy indicators, and defines areas independently from service provision, allowing for more accurate monitoring. Finally, it provides a relatively cost-effective approach that can be applied to existing data sources.

The harmonised methodology to define cities, urban and rural areas, seeks to balance national relevance with international comparability, enabling more consistent measurement of urbanisation patterns and supporting evidence-based policy-making

² Produced in close collaboration by six organisations: the European Commission, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UNHabitat), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank

Together, these features contribute to a more robust and comparable understanding of territorial dynamics.

GRANULARITY AND FUNCTIONAL PERSPECTIVES IN TERRITORIAL ANALYSIS

This harmonised methodology includes further refinements that enhance analytical precision. A second level of classification provides a more detailed breakdown of towns, semi-dense and rural areas, while the above-mentioned concept of Functional Urban Areas extends the definition of cities to include surrounding commuting zones. This functional perspective captures the economic and spatial interdependencies within metropolitan areas and allows for a more nuanced understanding of territorial dynamics, including distinctions between rural areas located within and outside urban systems.

Ethical challenges related to data production

This panel focused on the main ethical challenges arising from the use of new technologies in the production and management of migration data. It addressed key issues to ensure the protection of human rights in data use, including anonymisation, consent, potential impacts on migrants, decisions on data publication in politically sensitive contexts, and the safeguarding of ethics and human rights in data governance, among other aspects.

MAIN TAKEAWAYS:

6. Over the past decade, there has been a significant increase in studies using big data sources to analyse migration-related phenomena, including the estimation of migration patterns.
7. Access to individual-level data often involves complex procedures and restrictions, while data is typically generated for purposes other than statistical analysis, which affects its reliability.
8. Big data and social media create new opportunities to analyse migration, but also pose ethical risks of data breaches, de-anonymisation, stigmatisation, hate crime, detention and deportation.
9. Funding bodies, including local migration observatories, should ensure that the thematic focus and objectives of research calls are fully aligned with the ethical principles they promote.
10. Responsible and context-sensitive data use protect vulnerable population, especially in contexts where migrants may be exposed to exploitation by criminal or trafficking networks

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Ethical challenges associated with big social data research projects on migration

Elena Ambrosetti. *Professor of Demography at the Faculty of Economics, Sapienza University of Rome*

THE ROLE AND LIMITATIONS OF BIG DATA IN MIGRATION ANALYSIS

Data can be used for all types of demographic research: information on population's dynamics, human behaviours, social connections, voting preferences, adherence to social norms, feelings, narratives, cultural trends, perception of migration phenomena in different geographical areas

such as destination, origin, border areas, regions with different migration rates and economic conditions. Now, the increasing availability of big data and digital traces is opening new avenues for analysing migration dynamics. This data is generated through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), including social networks, digital communications, e-commerce platforms, delivery services and interactions with public administrations, and, basically, it is produced by users when accessing digital services or generating content online.

Big data is characterised by a high degree of heterogeneity in both formats and content and is primarily collected by private ICT service providers. Its main added value lies in their scale and timeliness: it offers large sample sizes, enables near real-time monitoring of mobility patterns, and provides geo-localised information that can be combined with personalised content analysis, for instance through microblogging platforms. These features make big data particularly relevant for capturing rapidly evolving phenomena such as human mobility.

However, the use of big data for research and policy-making also presents significant limitations. Access to individual-level data often involves complex procedures and restrictions, while data is typically generated for purposes other than statistical analysis, which affects its reliability. Moreover, big data is derived from non-random and often non-representative samples, reflecting existing digital divides related to internet access, socioeconomic status, age, and geographic location. Certain groups, such as older populations, individuals in rural or remote areas, or those with limited digital access, are systematically underrepresented. Legal constraints, such as age restrictions for data collection, further limit coverage.

Additional challenges relate to the lack of transparency in data collection, aggregation and classification processes, as well as the absence of standardised protocols for data sharing between private companies and the research community. These limitations highlight the need to develop clearer frameworks for collaboration, alongside robust ethical guidelines and updated regulatory standards to ensure data protection, privacy, informed consent, and responsible use.

LESSONS LEARNED: THE H2020 PERCEPTIONS PROJECT

Ambrosetti presented the main lessons learned from the [PERCEPTIONS H2020 project](#) where she participated. The project examined the role of mass media and social media in shaping migration aspirations and perceptions of Europe. The project involved the construction and analysis of large-scale datasets derived from both traditional media and social media sources, applying a variety of methodological approaches and techniques within a multinational research consortium. This experience contributed to advancing knowledge on how to work with complex and heterogeneous data in a comparative context.

The increasing availability of big data and digital traces is opening new avenues for analysing migration dynamics, with data that is produced by users when accessing digital services or generating content online

Access to individual-level data often involves complex procedures and restrictions, while data is typically generated for purposes other than statistical analysis, which affects its reliability

The findings highlight that social media has become a central actor in migration processes, playing a key role both in supporting mobility and facilitating integration. It enables the development and maintenance of transnational networks, provides access to information, allows for the comparison of migration experiences, and offers platforms for personal testimony. In this sense, digital environments are increasingly embedded in the lived experiences of migrants. At the same time, social media data offers a readily available and relatively low-cost source for accessing large volumes of relevant information. Over the past decade, there has been a significant increase in studies using big data sources to analyse migration-related phenomena, including the estimation of migration patterns and the examination of online public discourse. These developments point to the growing importance of digital data in complementing more traditional sources of migration analysis.

ETHICS IN MIGRATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA RESEARCH

The use of big data and social media data offers significant opportunities for advancing the analysis of migration dynamics, enabling the investigation of diverse aspects ranging from mobility patterns to public discourse. These data sources can complement traditional datasets by providing timely and large-scale insights into complex migration phenomena. However, their use also raises important ethical concerns. Issues such as data breaches, de-anonymisation and profiling can expose individuals to substantial risks, including stigmatisation, hate crime, detention, deportation or even unsafe migration routes. These risks are particularly acute given that migrants are often considered a vulnerable population, while at the same time frequently lacking the possibility to provide informed consent. This situation can further exacerbate existing power imbalances between data producers and the individuals concerned.

Addressing these challenges requires carefully balancing individual rights with the potential collective benefits of data use. This is particularly complex in the context of large-scale, externally funded and multidisciplinary projects, where multiple actors and objectives coexist. Strengthening ethical safeguards, transparency and accountability mechanisms is therefore essential to ensure the responsible use of big data in migration research and policy-making.

Funding bodies, including local migration observatories, play a key role in shaping the ethical framework of research and data use. They are responsible for establishing clear and updated ethical standards, as well as transparent requirements and procedures that guide data collection, processing and dissemination.

In this context, it is essential to take into account the diversity of institutional contexts among project partners, including differences in legal frameworks, operational capacities and ethical practices. Ensuring coherence across these actors is crucial to maintain high standards of data governance. Moreover, funding bodies should ensure that the thematic focus and objectives of research calls are fully aligned with the ethical principles they promote. Avoiding

Over the past decade, there has been a significant increase in studies using big data sources to analyse migration-related phenomena, including the estimation of migration patterns

Big data and social media offer new opportunities to analyse migration dynamics, but also raise significant ethical concerns, as risks of data breaches, de-anonymisation and profiling may lead to stigmatisation, hate crime, detention or deportation

contradictions between research priorities and ethical requirements is key to fostering responsible, credible and socially accountable knowledge production in the field of migration.

Data production and dissemination in politically sensitive contexts

Robert Trigwell. *Senior Displacement Coordination Officer. International Organisation for Migration Prithvi Hirani. Humanitarian Data Programme Officer, IOM DTM*

Although not strictly related to the local dimension, this contribution provides a relevant perspective on the ethical challenges associated with the collection and management of migration data. It focuses in particular on contexts involving displaced populations, who are highly vulnerable and for whom the inappropriate use of data may have direct implications for their safety and integrity. More broadly, these contexts offer valuable insights and parallels for reflecting on the ethical considerations involved in the collection and use of data on migrant populations.

The session addressed the challenges of data production and dissemination in politically sensitive contexts, with a particular focus on safeguarding ethics and human rights in data governance. It highlighted the evolution of data practices within the humanitarian field, driven by factors such as institutional dynamics, crisis events, technological developments and governance frameworks.

Trigwell and Hirani set out the importance of understanding mobility patterns in order to better protect vulnerable populations, especially in contexts where migrants may be exposed to exploitation by criminal or trafficking networks. This underlines the need for responsible and context-sensitive data use in humanitarian and migration-related interventions.

DATAFICATION AND CONCEPTUAL CHANGE

The process of datafication has contributed to redefining humanitarian data, which remains an evolving concept without a fixed or universally agreed definition. While certain shared characteristics can be identified, the scope and meaning of humanitarian data have expanded with the emergence of new data collection methods and technological developments. This evolution has generated several recurring challenges such as the repeated collection of information from the same population groups, difficulties in accessing genuinely new or complementary data, and the widespread duplication of datasets. These issues highlight persistent inefficiencies in data production systems and point to the need for improved coordination, data-sharing mechanisms and methodological coherence in humanitarian contexts.

For data governance, funding bodies should ensure that the thematic focus and objectives of research calls are fully aligned with the ethical principles they promote

Responsible and context-sensitive data use protect vulnerable population, especially in contexts where migrants may be exposed to exploitation by criminal or trafficking networks

A particularly important observation was that two contradictory narratives now coexist in the humanitarian sector: there are persistent data gaps and there is too much data as well. These two claims may appear contradictory, but they both reflect real structural problems: some information is missing, while at the same time organisations may be overwhelmed by fragmented, repetitive, or poorly coordinated data production.

COMPETITION, DONORS, AND POWER

The current data landscape is increasingly shaped by donor-driven dynamics and the centralisation of data flows, which contribute to a competitive environment among humanitarian actors. In this context, data has become a strategic resource linked not only to operational needs but also to access to funding, visibility and institutional positioning.

This dynamic exacerbates a number of operational and ethical challenges. These include difficulties in ensuring informed consent, the repeated collection of data from the same populations, and the lack of coordination among actors, leading to duplication of datasets. At the same time, donor-driven priorities can reinforce competition and create or deepen existing power asymmetries between stakeholders, particularly affecting the most vulnerable populations.

Data landscape is increasingly shaped by donor-driven dynamics and the centralisation of data flows, which contribute to a competitive environment among humanitarian actors

Symposium programme and participants

Opening remarks

Sonia Fuertes. Commissioner for Social Action, Municipality of Barcelona

Senén Florensa. Executive President. European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed)

Existing initiatives

This panel aims to present initiatives led by cities and regional institutions with similar experiences, in order to analyse the connections between existing data sources and research actors.

Luca Di Sciullo. Osservatorio di Idos sulle migrazioni a Roma e nel Lazio

Swanie Potot. Observatoire des migrations dans les Alpes-Maritimes – ObsMigAM

Albert Sales. Observatori de les Migracions i el Refugi de Barcelona. Institut Metròpoli

Moderation

Xavier Cubells. Director of Immigrant Assistance and Shelter Services. Barcelona City Council

The importance of data in the migration phenomenon: local production and management

This panel will address initiatives related to the production and management of migration data at the global level and will examine the need to establish strategies and implement local analytical instruments.

Filling the gaps: towards city-relevant data production

Denis Kierans. Consultant, United Nations Statistics Division. Research Affiliate, Centre on Migration Policy and Society (COMPAS), University of Oxford. Visiting Academic, Institute of Economics, Geography and Demography, Spanish National Research Council (CSIC)

OECD subnational data to support innovation in migration governance policies

Ana Isabel Moreno Monroy. Head of the Territorial Statistics and Analysis Unit at the Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities at the OECD

Moderation

Ricard Zapata-Barrero. Full Professor, Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona
Director GRITIM-UPF and Coordinator EuroMedMig

Ethical challenges in data production: the role of new technologies

This panel will analyse the main ethical and political challenges arising from the use of new technologies in the production and management of migration data. It will address key issues to ensure the protection of human rights in data use, including anonymisation, consent, potential impacts on migrants, decisions on data publication in politically sensitive contexts, and the safeguarding of ethics and human rights in data governance, among other aspects.

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Big Data and new technologies: potential and risks

Robert Trigwell. Senior DTM (Displacement Tracking Matrix) Coordination Officer. IOM

Prithvi Hirani. Humanitarian Data Programme Officer, IOM DTM

Moderation

Rim Filali Meknassi. Head, Euro-Mediterranean Policies department. IEMed

Closing remarks