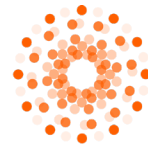


C-MISE

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Amsterdam meeting:

17–18 March 2021

CONFERENCE BRIEFING

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On 17–18 March, the city of Amsterdam hosted an international C–MISE city dialogue on irregular migrants. The online meeting included 17 cities from across Europe in the discussions. Steered by Amsterdam’s longstanding experience in responding to irregular migrants, the meeting focused on migrant victims of crime, shelter and counselling, and how to involve local residents in the provision of services to irregular migrants. With the COVID–19 pandemic enduring, the meeting also offered a chance for cities to exchange knowledge on how to ensure access to healthcare (including vaccinations) to migrants regardless of status during the pandemic. The meeting was organised in partnership by COMPAS and the City of Amsterdam.¹

The dialogue was opened by Amsterdam’s Deputy Mayor Rutger Groot Wassink who welcomed European cities joining Amsterdam (although in a remote online format), and by Jan Braat (City of Utrecht, and C–MISE Chair).

Safe reporting of crime for victims with irregular migration status: learning from Amsterdam’s ‘Free in, free out’ practice

Throughout Europe, migrants who are in an irregular condition are overexposed to falling victims to crime and exploitation because of their reluctance to report crime out of fear that interacting with the police would lead to their deportation. With a view at ensuring victims’ protection but also improving more broadly the police’ oversight on crime happening in migrant–populated areas of the city, Amsterdam’s local police has been a precursor in adopting one of the most–advanced “[safe reporting](#)” practices of Europe: the “[Free in, free out](#)” policy. Presented to C–MISE by an Amsterdam’s police representative, the policy allows migrant victims or witnesses entering into a police station and reporting a crime to be guaranteed to freely leave without being arrested or detained on account of their irregular status. The policy began as a local pilot project of Amsterdam’s police in partnership with the Dutch Ministry of Justice and in coordination with the municipality and local civil society organisations. Given the pilot’s successes in improving trust and interactions between the local police and migrants – particularly in the South–East areas of the city – the policy was subsequently extended at national level by the Dutch Parliament in 2015 alongside the implementation of the [EU Victims’ Directive](#). The ‘Free in, free out’ represents an excellent example of an innovative local initiative that inspired policy change at national level, through a bottom–up and multi–level partnership approach. Today, the ‘Free in, free out’ is recognised internationally as a [best–practice](#) in Europe and is the only known national–level example of official ‘firewall protection’ for migrant victims in Europe.

Besides such ‘firewalls’, a number initiatives could be adopted or promoted at local level to improve safe reporting of crime by migrant victims and witnesses. The ones identified in the *Safe reporting project* were presented by COMPAS’ researchers. It was recalled how well–placed municipalities are in playing an intermediary role and in promoting initiatives in partnership with the national authorities in charge of crime and immigration enforcement. Local initiatives in this area include promoting, in partnership with local law enforcement actors, a wider use of the protective visas for victims offered by national legislation; offering dedicated legal counselling to migrant victims; facilitating the training of key actors, such as the local police; providing shelters for victims escaping crime, such as domestic violence; and promoting partnerships between the local police and NGOs assisting migrant victims. Inspired by the experience of North–American cities (such as Montréal’s ‘[cellule d’intervention et de protection personnes immigrantes victimes d’actes criminels ou d’abus](#)’), European cities may develop their own “municipal hubs” to collect crime reports from migrant victims and witnesses and offer legal counselling and victims’ accompaniment towards crime reporting.

Municipal shelters providing sustainable solutions to homelessness and irregularity: local experiences with national impact in the Netherlands and Belgium

In most countries, migrants with irregular status are not entitled to work and their access to social benefits is severely restricted. Low–paid jobs in the informal economy may often be insufficient to sustain housing costs. Therefore, among a city’s homelessness population it is likely to find many irregular migrants. For a city to address [homelessness](#), it may therefore be of paramount importance to concomitantly address migrants’ irregularity.

One of Amsterdam’s key initiatives to address homelessness and irregularity was presented by Amsterdam’s officials and a local civil society partner. This initiative has focused on providing shelters to homeless migrants where they would receive counselling towards durable solutions out of homelessness and irregular status. The municipal programme provides 500 places to irregular migrants (mostly rejected asylum seekers) for a maximum period of 18 months, during which a durable solution was sought,

¹ This C–MISE international dialogue was organised jointly by Nicola Delvino (COMPAS, University of Oxford) and Lieselot Spliet (City of Amsterdam) with the support of Marie Mallet–Garcia (COMPAS, University of Oxford).

including voluntary return or regularisation accompanied with measures supporting inclusion in society. The initiative is piloted within the national "LVV" programme agreed with the Dutch government and testing durable solutions through the provision of shelters and counselling in five Dutch cities. Coordinated by the municipality and implemented by local NGOs, the initiative relies on partnerships with national immigration authorities, public health services, and the involvement of local communities. Case-managers and legal counsellors carry out the screening of cases, refer them to shelters (when in need), and provide counselling towards finding a durable solution.

In Belgium, the city of Ghent also addressed the link between homelessness and irregular migration status by providing shelter and counselling. In fact, a municipal representative of Ghent explained how the dialogue with Dutch and other European municipalities, developed through C-MISE, allowed this Belgian city to develop more holistic policies. In particular, exchange with other local authorities helped the city develop its awareness of the need to tackle the presence of residents with irregular status beyond 'voluntary return' (on which the city has been particularly active since 2010 with a success rate of 76% in supporting returns and 7% in facilitating regularisations). It developed a sense of 'normalcy' about municipal action in this area, but also found inspiration in the initiatives adopted elsewhere. Since 2017, Ghent set up its own municipal policy platform to develop clear and consistent city policies on irregular migrants. Because of its 10-year experience on voluntary returns, its participation in C-MISE, one-to-one exchanges with Dutch cities and Belgian local, national and civil society stakeholders, in 2020 Ghent adopted a policy to support the 'sustainable future' of irregular migrants. The most visible outcome of this policy is the city's decision to set up a 'shelter and orientation' project. Irregular migrants will soon be hosted in a municipal shelter where they will also receive legal advice towards either return or regularisation. Significantly, as in the Netherlands, the innovative nature of these initiatives roused the interest of national authorities and in September 2020, the [national government agreement](#) at the basis of the current Belgian federal government coalition included a commitment to fund pilot projects providing orientation to irregular migrants on access to the reception system, regularisation procedures and/or voluntary return.

Involving local residents in projects providing assistance to irregular migrants

Public perceptions of migrants with irregular status can often be [negative](#) and [inaccurate](#), making implementation of initiatives inclusive of irregular migrants particularly challenging for local service providers. Local authorities may be providing services to all regardless of status with a view at benefitting the local community as a whole (e.g. promoting social cohesion, public order or public health). Yet, they may be concerned that a decision to provide such services will be met by local residents with hostility. For these reasons, cities discussed ways to better ensure not only that service provision to irregular migrants is better understood by all residents, but also that locals are duly consulted and involved in the decision and implementation of inclusive initiatives.

Amsterdam shared with the C-MISE group its experience on "*integrating shelters in the neighbourhoods*." In Amsterdam, irregular migrants are hosted in small shelters (with a maximum of 50–80 hosts) scattered throughout the city's different neighbourhood. In order to address potential concerns of local residents, the city developed a process to involve and consult neighbourhood residents before and during the implementation of these initiatives. Before a shelter is set-up, the city informs residents through letters and by setting up a consulting committee made up of the local police, community representatives and local residents. The city provides information on the objectives of the initiative, addressing locals' concerns over the people who will eventually be hosted. Importantly, the city also develops plans to involve neighbours in the implementation of the initiative itself. Once a shelter opens its doors, residents are involved in several activities and in the provision of assistance, including for example the exchange of letters between children hosted in the shelters and local people, fund-raising activities or donations. By adopting this approach, Amsterdam city officials report that not only local hostility reduces, but also that local residents develop an increasing sense of ownership towards supporting the shelters and its hosts with an increase in donations, offers to support, and ultimately, social cohesion.

In the Spanish region of Catalonia, several municipalities have adopted a range of innovative initiatives relying on the involvement of local residents and the coordination of researchers at the University of Girona. These include projects to host youth with irregular status in local families and the '[Nightingale project](#)' a "buddy"- social mentoring programme matching local university students with recently arrived children of school age. The programme – which was presented by a representative of the Catalan town of Lloret de Mar and a researcher at the University of Girona – is open to all migrant youth, regardless of their migration status, and aims to promote their social, cultural and linguistic integration and raise their educational ambitions. At the same time, the project aims to support the university students in developing their intercultural skills. The project's responsibility is shared between the University coordinating the project and selecting and training the mentoring students, and the municipalities signing up to the programme.

Among these is the coastal town of Lloret de Mar, which due to its tourism role has a particularly diverse population (with residents from more than 92 countries). The municipality joined the programme with the objective of developing a welcoming environment to newly arrived children. School teachers identify mentees – children aged between 11 and 14, regardless of their migration status, in their path to develop local linguistic skills (Catalan) and whose families are engaged in staying in the town and integrate in the local culture. In fact, the project activities tend to involve the children's families in order to foster their socialisation and thus

prevent situations of isolation and ghettoisation. The municipality in this way aims to develop a sense of belonging to the town, confidence and comfort. Ultimately, the goal is to support the academic, social and cultural skills and expectations of newcomer children, with many of them becoming mentors themselves once they enter university.

COVID-19: Ensuring access to healthcare (including testing and vaccinations) and social support for irregular migrants during the pandemic

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the social and healthcare needs across all sections of the population, regardless of residence and migration statuses. Nevertheless, disruptions caused by the pandemic posed new challenges for local administrations in providing services to irregular migrants, these challenges adding to traditional difficulties in providing services to a group of informal residents with limited legal entitlements. Yet, providing healthcare services (including testing and contact tracing) during a pandemic to people at the margins of society is of paramount importance, not least for public health and humanitarian reasons. Although social awareness of the [need to include irregular migrants in public responses against coronavirus](#) and its impacts on local economies increased at all levels of governance, ensuring the inclusion of irregular migrants remains problematic. Eventually, the distribution of vaccines against COVID-19 in Europe increased the salience of reaching out to all residents, regardless of migration status, and posed new questions as to how to make sure that migrants in the shadows of society, with little documentation and fearful of the authorities, can effectively access vaccinations. Local authorities, given their proximity to the local population, can play a key role in ensuring a greater reach to residents with irregular migration status. Their experiences developed during the first months of the pandemic, in providing COVID-19 testing and healthcare support to hard-to-reach populations, may offer valuable insights.

This is the case for the Swiss city of Geneva, where the city funds a community clinic acting as a point of entry to health system to uninsured patients, including irregular migrants. Geneva's experience was presented by the medical doctor and researcher from Geneva University Hospitals, responsible for the clinic.

Through the clinic, the city has been successfully offering free access to COVID-19 testing to irregular migrants, and made it possible to shed light on a worrying aspect, i.e. that infection rates are significantly higher among irregular migrants. In fact, ongoing research in Geneva shows that COVID-19 tended to impact more on socially disadvantaged groups in areas of the city with higher population density. Similarly, civil society initiatives to support people in need also revealed that thousands of people in Geneva, many of them irregular migrants, would line up to receive food bank donations, showing a greater need of support for this group during the pandemic. The city – which reportedly has an estimated population of 10–15,000 irregular migrants, with a majority of them being women – stepped up its efforts during the pandemic and also offered free medical assessments through mobile teams, and follow up through digital means; hotel accommodation to allow for self-isolation; emergency housing, social assistance and food distribution beyond the lockdown periods. In order to ensure access to this assistance, the engagement of NGOs and community groups operating in cooperation with the municipality proved key, together with the gathering and dissemination of information and evidence supporting the need to provide healthcare and social support to this group of migrants. Eventually, this information is offering a fundamental evidence-base for policy development at federal and cantonal level, where decisions have been taken to provide free vaccines to all, irrespective of migration status, and – thanks to support from a local referendum – to set-up a safety net for informal workers, including those with irregular status, who have lost their income because of the pandemic.

Geneva's experience resonates with the research findings being gathered from across Europe by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). These were presented by a University of London researcher working with the ECDC. The EU agency is monitoring impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable groups, including migrants with precarious status, to develop recommendations on healthcare, including testing and vaccinations. Several studies across Europe confirmed that migrants and ethnic minorities' are overexposed to higher risks of infections and adverse clinical outcomes, including hospitalizations and deaths. Some studies showed that despite a lower testing rate (due to limited interactions with the authorities), infection rates among migrants were significantly higher. Accordingly, other studies show increased mortality rates among ethnic minorities. Several risk factors are at play, including: occupational risks (with migrants being overrepresented in public facing jobs with lower safety nets); living in overcrowded settings, in deprived areas and homeless; barriers to accessing healthcare facilities and public health messaging. Cultural, linguistic and technological barriers also play a role, combined with lower levels of risk awareness. For irregular migrants in particular, major barriers also include a general lack of entitlements to access healthcare, the fear of removal as a consequence of contacting the authorities, and a related mistrust in the public health system. These findings strongly point at a need to develop inclusive and proactive approaches to ensure that vaccinations are made accessible to migrants. In fact, several [European governments seem to have developed a certain awareness](#) of this need and are committed to allowing access to vaccinations for migrants regardless of migration status, including in countries that traditionally developed 'hostile environment policies' against irregular migrants' access to public health services.

Yet it was recalled that changes in this area require a proactive effort by authorities at all levels of governance, including at city level. Meaningful access will be possible only if migrants are made aware of their rights and trust the healthcare system. The healthcare system must be made accessible in practice: administrative procedures must be flexible enough to accommodate those who are undocumented (including lacking a national ID or identification number), homeless, or without access to the internet. Importantly, for this to happen, innovative initiatives must be based on the involvement of migrant communities themselves in planning, developing, creating and disseminating strategies to reach out to all migrants. For any initiative to be meaningful, the social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds of migrant communities must be duly considered (for example, when developing a communicating strategy targeting a certain community); proactive approaches to reach out those at the margins of society must be used (through, for example, mobile units and pop-up facilities). To make vaccinations campaigns visible by all, local authorities should rely on 'community champions' and partner with migrant communities for the dissemination of information and the development of a community dialogue on COVID-19 and vaccines. Ultimately, partnerships between authorities (national and local), migrants' associations, churches, mosques, schools and other key stakeholders is the best way forward.

CITY INITIATIVE ON MIGRANTS WITH IRREGULAR STATUS IN EUROPE (C-MISE)

The City Initiative on Migrants with Irregular Status in Europe (C-MISE) is a knowledge-exchange programme supporting European cities in sharing knowledge on city practices and policies responding to the presence of irregular migrants in their territory. C-MISE is facilitated by researchers at the Global Exchange on Migration and Diversity at COMPAS, University of Oxford, is chaired by the City of Utrecht, and partners with the Eurocities Working Group on Migration and Integration. It is informed by extensive research carried out at COMPAS before and during the project, on national, regional and municipal policy and practice in this field.

www.cmise.web.ox.ac.uk

THE GLOBAL EXCHANGE ON MIGRATION AND DIVERSITY

The Global Exchange on Migration and Diversity is an ambitious initiative at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS), University of Oxford, opening up opportunities for knowledge exchange and longer term collaboration between those working in the migration field.

www.compas.ox.ac.uk/global-exchange

ABOUT

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