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On migration: Palermo's perspective

According to the World Bank, climate change could displace some 150 million people by 2050. While many governments have sought to close their borders, the Sicilian capital has welcomed migrants, with inspiring results

By **Leoluca Orlando**, Mayor of Palermo

"How many migrants do you have in Palermo?" This is one of the most common questions I get asked when talking

with foreigners or journalists about the migration policy of our administration.

The answer is simple and yet complex at the same time: no one single migrant lives in Palermo, because all people living or arriving in Palermo are considered to

be Palermo's citizens – or Palermitani. Of course, this answer does not consider the legal aspect of citizenship. The mayor or

▲ 358 migrants, rescued between Sicily and north of Africa, disembark from Italian Navy ship *Libra* in Palermo

municipality do not, according to Italian legislation, have the power to award Italian citizenship by themselves. What we do have, however, is the possibility to promote and build a welcoming environment, reflected and supported by a welcoming policy and a welcoming set of services. This is Palermo today. Migration flows, meanwhile, have fallen drastically since 2014–16, when more than 35,000 migrants arrived, escaping from violence, poverty, disasters and war.

Five years ago, the Mayor proposed, and the City Council created, a so-called ‘council of cultures’. This is an official body comprising 21 citizens elected by and representing all those living in Palermo that hold a passport other than an Italian one. Each geographical area of the world is represented, in proportion to the presence of those communities now in Palermo. The current president is from Côte d’Ivoire, supported by a vice-president from Sri Lanka. Past presidents have been from Palestine and Cape Verde. More than half of the members are women, many of whom are active in local civil-society organisations. The council is not only a place where the interests of different communities are represented, but is also where many intercultural initiatives are organised and proposed to the city. It’s the place where the slogan ‘all different, all equal’ becomes a daily truth.

The council of cultures represents the tip of a vibrant and diverse iceberg. In Palermo every culture and religion is considered as part of what I call ‘Palermo’s mosaic’. Each small piece of the mosaic has its own role. Everyone’s role is relevant, but only by looking at the full picture can you understand the beauty and balance of the image.

A different approach

Is this just a ‘humanitarian’ approach to migration? No, it is not. We choose to refuse both humanitarian and security approaches to the migration issue.

If you use a security approach, there will always be someone who has a more secure answer to the problem. If you say: “We should not give freedom of movement in

Europe to migrants”, there will be someone who will say, “We should not allow them to enter Europe at all”. And if you say: “We should not allow them in Europe”, there will be someone else who will say, “We should shoot their boats in the Mediterranean”.

If you choose a purely humanitarian approach, there will always be someone or some state that is poorer or more fragile than another, and which you feel you must prioritise, that in the end you will not recognise migrants’ rights.

We have chosen a different approach. This is summarised in the Charter of Palermo, a document approved in March 2015 by lawyers, representatives from NGOs and public officers. The simple idea behind the charter is that every single migrant is a person and, as such, owner of all human rights. This may sound obvious. But in today’s political scenario it

‘permit to stay’, we (as a municipality) have no power to change our national laws on migration or citizenship. So what practically can we do? The answer is that we can – and do – take concrete and symbolic actions every day.

The Mayor of Palermo – a Catholic – officially participates in all religious celebrations of the city’s communities: Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and Christian Orthodox. He participates not in a private capacity, but instead wears the tricolour band that is the official symbol of his public authority and representation of the state. This makes it possible for each Muslim, Jewish, Hindu or Buddhist believer to feel and be perceived as a citizen of Palermo.

Unlike in other Italian or European cities, if a Muslim who is perceived as dangerous arrives in Palermo, the first one to alert

If a Muslim who is perceived as dangerous arrives in Palermo, the first one to alert authorities is the Imam. Why? Because the Imam feels he is part of the community and because he cares for the community

is frankly revolutionary to say that mobility is a human right – in other words, a fundamental and basic human right for all.

In the hyper-connected world in which we live, almost everything has freedom of movement but people. You can move goods, money or data fairly easily. But you cannot freely move if you are a person from the ‘wrong’ country.

If, however, you look at migration as a natural human phenomenon, as the consequence of a desire for a better life, of a yearning to escape poverty, disasters, wars and violence of different kinds, then you can only assume that any limitations to movement are a new form of slavery. In many cases – the Mediterranean, the Balkans, the Mexican–US border, as well as others – limitations to movement can be viewed as a new form of mass death penalty.

But back to Palermo. Even if we promoted the abolition of the so-called

authorities is the Imam. Why? Because the Imam feels he is part of the community and because he cares for the community.

Only in Palermo can Catholic authorities donate to the Jewish community to transform a former church building into a synagogue. Only in Palermo do Hindu and Muslim believers volunteer to be part of the team that moves the heavy chariot for the ‘Festino’, the most important Catholic festival in honour of the patron saint of the city. This same open and inclusive approach is applied in every aspect of our municipal life.

In the rest of Italy, many municipalities run by Lega (a national far-right political party) or other right-wing mayors look for ways to exclude children from migrant families from public services such as kindergartens or school canteens. In Palermo, we try to make these services as cheap as possible and free for families in



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financial hardship, whether from a migrant background or not.

In Italy and Europe, people willing to welcome refugees and migrants into their home do so without a legal framework to refer to. In Palermo, we established and promote an official list of voluntary tutors for young unaccompanied migrants. We give those tutors training, legal counselling and official status when dealing with the authorities. I could go on, but hopefully it is clear why we talk of Palermo as a model, particularly when compared with the realities migrants face elsewhere in Europe and beyond.

One of the obvious criticisms of our approach is that Palermo is too small to welcome all migrants. This is true, and it is true to say that Italy, too, is too small. But what if we talk of 27 or 28 European

countries? What if we talk of more than 500 million European citizens compared to the small number of migrants arriving in Europe? Is Europe really too small?

Added benefits

Let me also say that welcoming migrants benefits our city as a whole. Just as some years ago when convincing people to fight against the Mafia I had to explain why legality is economically beneficial, now I assure people that opening our city is beneficial too. Thanks to our recognised policy of welcoming migrants, Palermo has become one of the most important tourist destinations in Italy over the last few years. While the entire tourist market in Italy grows between three and four per cent per year, every year Palermo welcomes some 15 to 18 per cent more tourists than the

▲ A 'No Borders' street party, organised to promote racial unity, in the Ballaro market area of Palermo, Sicily

previous year. While the economic crisis continues to strangle small and medium-sized businesses throughout Italy, in Palermo our economy is showing signs of recovery, driven by the tourist boom and the city's new cultural vitality.

Once known as the Mafia's capital, in 2018 Palermo was awarded the Italian Capital of Culture. The reward reflects not just the city's arts nor how its architecture still illustrates the many people that have lived here over centuries. It is our culture of welcoming, of multiculturalism and our approach to migration that has turned Palermo into a place opportunity – for all communities. ●