



Livorno

Multicultural tradition and participatory dynamics

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1. Abstract & Takeaways

Key Takeaways

1

Livorno has a unique history as a multicultural and cosmopolitan city for over five centuries, open to welcoming people from different foreign communities. Due to its designation as a free port and duty-free area since the late 16th century¹, many merchants of any nation or religious background could long trade on equal terms until the late 19th century.

2

Today, Livorno is committed to fostering political representation for migrant and refugee communities through decentralised local governance structures such as Livorno's Migrant Council (*Consulta delle Comunità dei Cittadini Stranieri*).

3

Migrant-led associations in Livorno have been active both locally and globally. At the local level they help newcomers access essential services and integrate smoothly into city life.

What is unique about the city?

The long history of an open port: Livorno stands out for its unique history as a multicultural and cosmopolitan city that for over five centuries has been welcoming populations from all over the world. As a historical witness describes it, already in the 16th century the city was known as “a continuous fair of foreigners”². While this historical background does not correspond to the principles of modern ‘solidarity cities’ – as the reason for the free port in the past was purely economic – foreign communities have in fact enjoyed access to political, cultural and social representation in the city for many years. Thanks to its geographic position as a port and its historical policies of multiculturalism and religious tolerance, Livorno's population serves as a historic example of cultural and social intermingling. In this regard, the Livornina constitution of 1593 represents a historic political project of reception and integration at the local level³.

¹ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23801883.2023.2280091#d1e164>

² https://api.pageplace.de/preview/DT0400.9780192509239_A35502773/preview-9780192509239_A35502773.pdf

³ “La Livornina. Alle origini di Livorno, città cosmopolita in età moderna” a cura di Lucia Felici, Viella, 2024

“A source of pride for the city of Livorno, which has never backed down or complained, even in the face of a national context that often perplexes and bewilders with its baffling government decisions. (...) Livorno is a welcoming city, always ready for the future and for offering hospitality. It is the very nature of this city and its people.”⁴

Luca Salvetti, Mayor of Livorno, 24 July 2024

The city’s legacy of tolerance and cultural diversity continued to shape Livorno’s identity long after and has transformed Livorno into a welcoming city, even during the recent context of ongoing Mediterranean Sea rescue operations⁵. Since January 2023, the Italian government has been forcing sea rescue NGOs to disembark at so-called safe ports located extremely far from the areas of operation, imposing grueling and unnecessary days of sailing on the vessels and the rescued people on board. Despite the efforts by the central government to limit access of sea rescue NGOs to Italian ports, Livorno stood out as a place of safety. For example, in August 2024, 57 rescued persons were brought to Livorno⁶, with the local authorities facilitating their disembarkation. The cooperation of local authorities highlights the city’s ongoing involvement in the safe landing and integration of migrants and refugees. From December 2022 to December 2024, Livorno hosted 16 disembarkations in total⁷.

Already on the occasion of the tenth disembarkation in February 2024, the Mayor of Livorno Luca Salvetti declared:

“On the reception front, Tuscany is at risk of falling into disarray. Tuscany manages well from the perspective of port operations: Livorno and Marina di Carrara have now developed effective systems. In less than two hours, operations start and finish, thanks to the coordinated rescue chain involving municipalities, civil protection, the prefecture, volunteers, and ASL8. The system runs smoothly. However, I am concerned about what happens after the disembarkation process. In Livorno alone, we have handled 10 ships in 13 months, with nearly 1.000 migrants received in our safe harbour. We were asked to do this, and we delivered, demonstrating the utmost efficiency, civility, and solidarity.

That said, I raise two questions. Firstly, does it make sense to assign distant ports to people who are already being forced to endure very long journeys? Secondly, the ongoing wave of migration shows no signs of slowing down – in fact, it has doubled. Is it possible that there is still no cohesive policy for managing not only the landings but also what happens afterwards? The reduction in funds allocated to migrants to ensure their proper integration into our country is obvious. Otherwise, we risk pushing them into the hands of criminal organisations. This is not the right path.”⁹

⁴ <https://corrieretoscano.it/livorno/politica/a-livorno-oltre-1-200-migranti-sindaco-un-orgoglio-per-la-citta/>

⁵ <https://ecre.org/mediterranean-ongoing-crossings-and-rescue-efforts-despite-criminalisation-of-rescue-organisations-by-italian-authorities-open-arms-ship-facing-20-days-of-detention-while-ocean-viking-retur/>

⁶ https://ansabrasil.com.br/english/news/2024/08/18/rescue-ship-geo-barents-reaches-livorno-with-57-migrants_2a72818f-ab64-4e25-81bd-5148e4e79977.html

⁷ This experience is documented in the book “Livorno Porto Sicuro. Storie di migranti e accoglienza”, subtitled “Here no one is a foreigner,” published by the City of Livorno in 2024.

⁸ ASL - Azienda Sanitaria Locale (Local Health Authority)

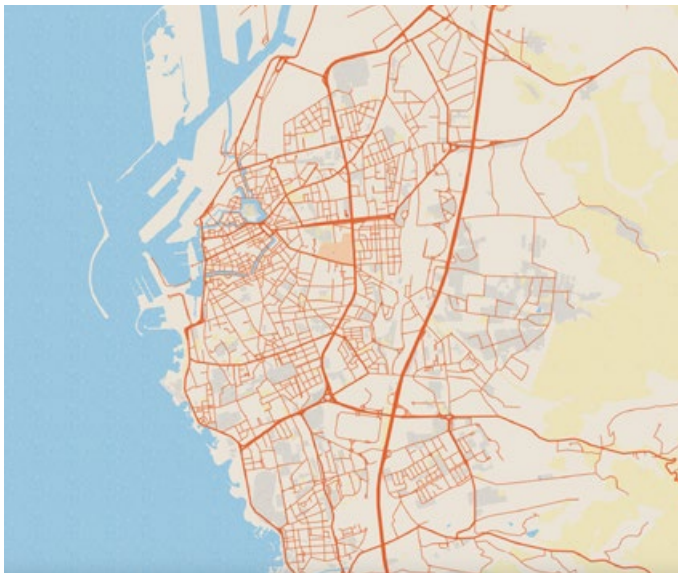
⁹ <https://www.lanazione.it/cronaca/migranti-emergenza-a3368f40?live>

What are the key factors?

Migrant-led associations: By offering free-of-charge services such as legal and social support to ensure that newcomers can navigate municipal resources, migrant-led associations in Livorno have contributed significantly to a smooth integration of different communities and to the city's rich diversity. Not only by connecting with newcomers but also by maintaining strong connections with their countries of origin (in particular the Senegalese, Bangladeshi and Kurdish community), Livorno's migrant associations demonstrate a global sense of solidarity and support.

What are the most outstanding results so far?

Political representation of migrants and refugees: The political representation of migrants and refugees in Livorno has evolved significantly. In recent years, local political structures have increasingly incorporated migrant voices to ensure broader inclusion in decision-making processes. For example, the city government has fostered better communication channels between the municipality and its migrant communities through the creation of Livorno's Migrant Council (*'Consulta delle Comunità dei Cittadini Stranieri'*) and has encouraged migrant participation across all neighbourhoods in local issues such as urban planning and social services. This reflects a commitment of the city to ensure that diverse perspectives and proposals of foreign communities are considered in the formulation of local policies.



Population

154.927

Location

Livorno is an Italian port city on the west coast of Tuscany

Mayor

Luca Salvetti since 2019 (reelected in 2024)
coalition of centre-left parties

¹⁰ The 5-Star Movement, founded in 2009, is a political movement of protest, often described as populist. Positioned as a "third pole," it has garnered widespread support and governed between 2018 and 2022 – initially in a coalition with the centre-right, and later with the centre-left.

2. Local background and context

Livorno is the city where the Italian Communist Party was founded in 1921. Since 1946, it has been governed by leftist administrations or centre-left coalitions, with the exception of a 5 Stelle¹⁰ administration between 2014 and 2019.

While Livorno's foreign-born population stood at 8.1 percent in 2022 – slightly below the national average – its cosmopolitan tradition and socio-economic history has shaped its migration patterns. Until 2022, the city had not been directly involved in migrant disembarkation and remained, for geographical reasons, outside the autonomous transit routes of migrants travelling from southern to northern Italy.

Today, Livorno likely “attracts” new foreign populations – less due to favourable socio-economic conditions and more because of the presence of established foreign communities in the area. These communities act as mediators, enabling newcomers to integrate into the city's social fabric. Indeed, Livorno represents a city where the foreign population is relatively well integrated into social life, largely due to the active participation of migrant communities in public spaces and the implementation of inclusive local policies.

In recent years, the presence of asylum seekers and refugees in reception centres – both temporary reception centres (CAS) and second-line facilities (SAI) – within the city has been relatively limited and has not been a central political issue for local governance. However, since December 2022, in response to measures imposed by the Italian government on search and rescue NGOs operating in the Mediterranean – which require rescued individuals to disembark in ports far from the areas of intervention – Livorno has reactivated its tradition of hospitality. Both civil society actors and local authorities have mobilised intensely, drawing on the city's cosmopolitan history. By appealing to this tradition, Livorno, as both an administration and a civil society, has asserted its desire to be a welcoming port.

Initially, reception efforts were limited to disembarkation operations, as people were subsequently transferred to reception centres outside the province. However, the growing practice of assigning NGOs to northern and central Italian ports for disembarkation appears to be influencing the future organisation of reception facilities on the territory. In response, the Prefecture¹¹ has issued four new calls for tenders to manage the reception of migrants for a three-year period from 1 October 2024 to 30 September 2027. These tenders aim to select multiple economic operators to establish framework agreements for an estimated 1.050 places in reception centres across the province. In the future, these reception centres may include housing units with a maximum capacity of 50 places and collective reception centres of varying sizes: the smallest accommodating up to 50 persons, the medium ones for 51 to 100 persons and the large ones with a capacity of 101 to 300 persons.¹²

Collaboration between foreign communities and public actors

The presence of foreign communities organised at the associational level, alongside a robust third sector focused on solidarity practices, has fostered fruitful collaboration over the years. This synergy, combined with a local government committed to inclusive policies, has enabled over the years the development of participatory initiatives and policies.

¹¹ The prefect is the general representative of the national government in each province, and works under the supervision of the Minister of the Interior.

¹² <https://www.gazzettadilivorno.it/provincia-di-livorno-migranti-bandi-per-laccoglienza.htm>

Mobilisation of the cosmopolitan and welcoming tradition: “Here no one is a foreigner”

Since 2022, the series of disembarkations facilitated by sea-rescue NGOs (16 over two years) has reignited Livorno’s cosmopolitan spirit. Although those who disembark rarely remain within the municipality and are typically relocated to other centres across the region, the city administration and civil society have reaffirmed Livorno’s welcoming tradition. This commitment is encapsulated in the slogan: “Here no one is a foreigner.” The slogan was adopted by the city and its network of organisations and associations from December 2022 when the Port of Livorno was identified by the national government as a ‘safe port’ for docking ships for the disembarkation of people rescued by humanitarian organisations on the Mediterranean migration routes.

3. Selected local approaches

3.1. Multilingual service ‘Oltrefrontiera’: Unconditional access to city services

The municipality and the third sector work together to facilitate and ensure equal access to services for all local residents. A key tool is cultural and language mediation.

Oltrefrontiera (in English “Beyond Border”) is a successful example on how municipalities can support migrant-led initiatives. The project is a public-private initiative serving the territories of the Municipality of Livorno and of the neighbouring Municipality Collesalvetti. It offers a multifunctional and multilingual support system aimed at both foreign and local citizens to improve access to local services. This way Oltrefrontiera ensures a smooth welcome process and provides bureaucratic support so that foreign and local citizens can enjoy city resources on equal terms. The desk is open to everyone, offering orientation free of charge as a complement to the private agencies that offer only paid services.

Oltrefrontiera is funded by municipal and regional authorities and managed by public and private actors jointly: the women migrant-led association CeSDI¹³ and the Odissea cooperative¹⁴ (as part of the CO&SO Consortium for Cooperation and Solidarity¹⁵), alongside Livorno’s Social Services Department. The services provided by the Oltrefrontiera centres are totally free of charge. Currently, there are two centres in the Municipalities of Livorno and Collesalvetti where local citizens and foreigners can access their services face-to-face, previously having requested an appointment. Oltrefrontiera mediators (around 14 in total) have been active for years in the healthcare sector, prisons, schools and other public institutions as part of the CeSDI community. They can provide support in the most spoken languages among Livorno’s migrant communities (e.g., Arabic, Albanian, Spanish, Ukrainian et al.).

¹³ <https://www.cesdilivorno.it/>

¹⁴ www.cooperativaodissea.org/

¹⁵ <https://coesos.org/>

Together, they promote equal opportunities for migrants and local residents through closely interconnected services:

- ◆ an information desk for open questions;
- ◆ a front office providing support for newcomers and their integration process (including legal counselling regarding immigration-, civil-, criminal-, and labour law);
- ◆ a documentation centre with a library focused on themes of migration and intercultural exchange, along with an internet point;

Additionally, the facilities can be used as a meeting point for various cultural, training, educational initiatives for migrants and locals to promote mutual learning and peaceful coexistence in Livorno's multiethnic society.

Since 2001, Oltrefrontiera is an initiative managed by the Centro Servizi Donne Immigrate (CeSDI) and the Odissea cooperative in cooperation with the Municipalities of Collesalveti and Livorno. CeSDI is an association officially established in 1997 with the aim of offering services dedicated to the migrant community and promoting socio-cultural exchanges across the city. The Oltrefrontiera project is a result of the commitment of the CeSDI to provide first-hand information and assistance to newcomers and create a safe space for socio-cultural exchange between them and local residents. It is also a successful example on how municipalities can cooperate with migrant-led initiatives and contribute to the process of refugee integration into the host community, both individually and collectively.

With the aim to help foreign residents better access public services, the Oltrefrontiera public-private project team partnered in 2019 with a network of local, regional, and national companies and non-profit organisations to create an easy-to-read and comprehensive guide and website available in eight languages. With the slogan "Livorno Facile"¹⁶, the guide and website present all services offered by the municipality to provide assistance free of charge (covering local civil services – including the Oltrefrontiera welcome centres – as well as corporate services from participating companies such as water, gas, transportation, waste management, and pharmacies).

3.2. Livorno's Migrant Council: Participation in city governance

The city government is committed to foster diverse voices in municipal decision-making. In 2014, Livorno established a permanent consultative body ('Consulta delle Comunità dei Cittadini Stranieri')¹⁷ to increase the representation and active participation of migrant and refugee communities in the formulation and implementation of local policies. This model has strengthened the relationship between the municipality and its diverse communities by providing a structured platform for dialogue and helped the city administration to design informed and needs-based local policies for all city-citizens.

¹⁶ qualitapa.gov.it/sitoarcheologico/fileadmin/mirror/archivioURP/def_opu001_impaginato_fra2_Livorno.pdf

¹⁷ <https://storicorcl.comune.livorno.it/uploads/regolamento.pdf>

The Migrant Council is based in the premises of the municipality and serves as a bridge between the foreign communities and the local government. Overall, while the Council primarily functions in an advisory capacity, it provides the migrant community with a platform to voice their concerns and contribute to municipal decisions. The Council offers advisory input on various issues, including the municipal budget (non-binding), policies related to immigration, and other relevant topics upon request from the municipality. It also gathers ideas and suggestions from foreign communities and presents them to the Mayor. Furthermore, the Council recommends members for participation in other municipal committees focused on community involvement.

The Council is structured around the assembly, as the primary decision-making body, composed of officially registered representatives from Livorno's foreign communities. Foreign residents aged 16 and over are invited to participate, promoting engagement from younger generations. Each community can appoint a main representative and an alternate. The president, elected by the assembly, oversees the Council, organises meetings and ensures the assembly's decisions are implemented. The vice president supports the president and steps in when needed. The assembly also elects an executive committee, which works alongside the president to carry out the initiatives. The assembly meets at least three times a year, typically led by the president, though the Mayor may also convene meetings. Each role is held for a three-year term to ensure continuity and engagement.

Livorno's Migrant Council was established in 2014 by the Livorno City Council through Resolution no. 32 as a formal consultative and representative body of migrants, refugee and diaspora communities, in alignment with the Council of Europe's Convention¹⁸ regarding the participation of foreigners in public city life. The project's initiation, with strong backing from the administration and migrant-led communities (including those from Senegal, the Dominican Republic, Albania, Venezuela, and other communities) was part of a larger effort to counter discrimination, promote human rights, and support the integration of foreign communities within Livorno's society.

The Council has not only enhanced integration but also enriched Livorno's social fabric by ensuring that diverse perspectives contribute meaningfully to the city's community and governance. Key achievements include strengthening dialogue between the municipal administration and migrant communities and actively involving them in municipal decision-making. As a concrete example, the Council has recently been integrated into the Zone Councils¹⁹, created in 2023 to encourage residents from all neighbourhoods to participate in local decision-making on issues such as urban planning and social services. With Sociolab's²⁰ facilitation, these zone councils have been instrumental in decentralising decision-making and making it more participatory. The involvement of Livorno's Migrant Council in these bodies has led to greater representation of migrant and refugee communities at a very decentralised scale, helping to amplify their voices on local issues that directly impact them.

¹⁸ <https://rm.coe.int/168007bd26>

¹⁹ <https://www.comune.livorno.it/it/page/consigli-di-zona>

²⁰ <https://www.sociolab.it/>

3.3. The ‘Centro Servizi Donne Immigrate Associazione di Promozione Sociale’ (CeSDI APS): Women migrant leadership

CeSDI’s activities represent an innovative experience at the local level: 30 years of direct engagement of migrant women in the service of reception and integration processes.

The Centro Servizi Donne Immigrate Associazione di Promozione Sociale (CeSDI APS)²¹ plays a particular role in Livorno because it is an association of migrant women for migrant women. The association collaborates with the Municipality of Livorno in various capacities, like co-designing programmes and services and carrying out linguistic and cultural mediation.

The CeSDI offers activities of orientation, support, and accompaniment for migrants and/or those with a migratory background, facilitating their integration into the local social fabric – with a particular focus on migrant women. The CeSDI provides Italian and “citizenship courses”, linguistic and cultural programmes and assistance for migrants and refugees arriving at Livorno’s port, helping them access essential services and adjust upon arrival. In 2023, the CeSDI employed approximately 14 mediators who assisted 200 people including many women (some pregnant), children, and unaccompanied minors.

A key aspect of the CeSDI is that it advocates for women’s rights and well-being, with a focus on combating gender-based violence and addressing issues related to female genital mutilation (FGM) within a human rights framework. The association conducts informational campaigns and awareness-raising efforts, primarily directed at migrant communities to educate and foster discussions around these issues. The CeSDI also hosts conferences and debates on honoring and protecting the female body and collaborates on national and international projects aimed at preventing FGM. Additionally, the CeSDI’s welcoming services support women and families by providing guidance on local services. They assist with school and course registrations, municipal bonuses, and applications for rent and public housing, among others, helping newcomers navigate local bureaucratic processes. As part of the integration journey, the CeSDI also supports individual and collective women’s initiatives to network their skills and strengthen their socio-economic independence and promotes self-management initiatives among women residing in Livorno.

The CeSDI was informally established in Livorno in April 1996 by a heterogeneous group of migrant women from various countries, including Italy. The group began meeting at Amina’s house, a woman of Somali origin, with the intention of building a space for dialogue, support, and mutual listening, thus creating a network of solidarity and mutual aid. From the very beginning, this initial group managed to create a welcoming and stimulating environment, which helped overcome the sense of isolation and loneliness often associated with the migratory condition.

²¹ <https://www.cesdilivorno.it/>

In October 1997, the association was officially established with the aim of offering services dedicated to the migrant community and promoting social activities in the city, with a particular focus on women and children. In these twenty-seven years, the association has welcomed hundreds of women and families, with diverse and sometimes very complex stories and migratory paths, supporting their arrival and welcome process into the community, both individually and collectively.

The CeSDI managed to create a broad cooperation network and to connect and join forces with considerable public and private institutions. E.g. in October 2024, the centre signed an agreement²² with other local organisations to establish an adult literacy programme that promotes an integrated approach within the education system, guaranteeing all foreign citizens the right to learn Italian. Also, the CeSDI provided regular after-school homework support and additional training on cultural mediation for university students in collaboration with the University of Pisa²³, and worked with the Banco Farmaceutico²⁴ for providing affiliated welfare entities with necessary medications free of charge.

Furthermore, the long-established migrant-led association could build upon its own diverse migration and arrival experiences and put this strength to use for newcomers in distress. In that regard, the CeSDI mediators played a key role in welcoming and supporting migrants arriving at the Port of Livorno on rescue vessels. Only in 2024, this included assisting passengers from several NGO-operated ships: so far the linguistic-cultural mediators supported the Ocean Viking with 55 people²⁵ from countries like Pakistan, Syria, Egypt, and Bangladesh in April; Humanity 1 with 200 people²⁶ approximately including children and unaccompanied minors in June; Life Support with 47 rescued migrants²⁷ from African and South Asian countries also in June; and the MSF ship Geo Barents with over 290 migrants in July²⁸ and August²⁹ primarily from African nations.

²² <https://agenparleu/2024/10/16/centro-provinciale-per-listruzione-degli-adulti-inaugurata-la-sede-in-via-giorgio-la-pira-nelle-ex-scuole-pistelli/>

²³ <https://www.unipi.it/index.php/english>

²⁴ <https://www.bancofarmaceutico.org/contatti/le-sedi-territoriali/toscana>

²⁵ <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/56387/italy-rescues-disembarkations-and-deaths-in-the-central-mediterranean>

²⁶ https://www.instagram.com/p/C7rAXEDIZ9W/?img_index=2

²⁷ <https://reliefweb.int/report/libya/life-support-rescues-47-people-libyan-sar-zone>

²⁸ <https://amu.tv/112438/>

²⁹ https://ansabrasil.com.br/english/news/2024/08/18/rescue-ship-geo-barents-reaches-livorno-with-57-migrants_2a72818f-ab64-4e25-81bd-5148e4e79977.html

4. Advocacy and network activities

The local government's political and advocacy activities are currently rather limited as Livorno is not part of any national or transnational solidarity city network. The main supra-local network connections concern collaboration with the National Association of Italian Municipalities (ANCI)³⁰ since 2022 and an exchange network between cities in Tuscany on migration policies, coordinated by the Region of Tuscany. However, local migrant associations carry out advocacy and cooperation activities with their countries of origin and with other migrant communities in Italy and Europe. Worth mentioning is the network built by the association 'Mezzaluna Rossa Kurda'³¹: The head office of the association in Livorno coordinates volunteer offices all over Europe for humanitarian cooperation projects in Kurdistan.

At the level of civil society, there has been a growing network of local actors involved in reception efforts, particularly in the "new" disembarkation cities for migrants rescued at sea by NGOs, such as Livorno. The government's strategy to obstruct NGO operations by assigning disembarkation ports in central and northern Italy (cities like Ancona, Ravenna, Trieste, Livorno, Massa, Carrara, Genoa) has spurred mobilisation among local civil society and solidarity actors. Previously, these groups had not been significantly engaged with arrivals or with issues related to the reception of refugees. This mobilisation is now also progressively involving city administrations, which are grappling with a new and constantly evolving situation in the region.

In December 2024, the publication of the book "Livorno Safe Haven. Here No One is a Foreigner: Stories of Migrants and Reception", by the City of Livorno, chronicling the experience of 16 landings in the city's port since 2022, shows a desire to establish a specific identity as a city of solidarity as well as to seek dialogue with other Italian and international cities, rather than passively submitting to the government's restrictive approach. Instead, the city aims to reclaim an active role in solidarity practices and policies.

For other cities that have recently become ports of disembarkation, efforts are also underway to foster collaboration. These include engagement with national civil society networks such as ARCI (Associazione Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana)³², as well as European networks like *From the Sea to the City*³³.

³⁰ <https://www.anci.it/home/>

³¹ <https://www.mezzalunarossa.kurdistan.org/>

³² ARCI is the most important Italian social promotion organization. ARCI's approach combines "Culture" with "Society", to implement inclusive and inter-cultural social actions addressed at all citizen, being Italian or foreigners, migrants or refugees, with a peculiar attention to those in disadvantaged economic, social and cultural conditions. <https://www.arci.it/documento/arci-association/>

³³ The *From the Sea to the City* Consortium aims to join forces to reimagine the European stance on migration with cities and human rights at the center. With this vision they want to send a strong signal to European institutions that a welcoming and human-rights based migration and refugee policy is not an option but an obligation. <https://fromseacity.eu/>

The **Moving Cities** project provides an in-depth research of progressive cities in Europe, exploring their most inspiring and successful approaches to migration policies. Find more city reports at www.moving-cities.eu/en.

Read more about the project and how it is funded on the website: <https://moving-cities.eu/about>
