



Palermo

The open harbour city challenging European migration politics

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1. Abstract & Takeaways

Key Takeaways

1

Palermo shows how influential cities can be where political will exists: The city repeatedly criticised both EU and national approaches to migration, capitalising on the institutional authority and reputation that a city administration can bring in.

2

Palermo demonstrates the importance of having multiple actors engaged in dialogue about migrant-oriented solidarity, from grassroots initiatives to city administration. Constructive criticism, and even confrontation, strengthen both local and cross-local practices

What is unique about the city?

Overcoming the European border regime: Palermo represents an extremely relevant example of a city committed to raising awareness and advocating for deep change in EU and national border policies, with a particular focus on maritime migration and search and rescue (SAR) activities in the Mediterranean Sea.

What are the key factors?

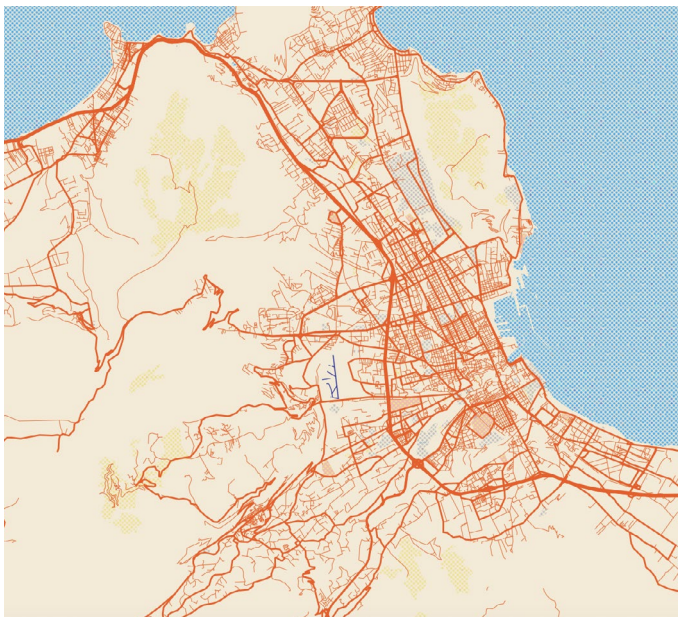
Grassroots activism meets a spirited mayor: Refugee-oriented solidarity in Palermo is the result of a mix of grassroots activism, civil society, and institutions. However, outside city boundaries, this reputation is strongly connected to Mayor Orlando's agenda and political capital. By repeatedly declaring the city's openness—at times almost pursuing a "migrant friendly" branding of the city—the mayor has been able to project a renewed image of Palermo, arousing interest and fascination from abroad. This interest plays on the contrast between the city of the Mafia, as Palermo used to be well-known for in the past, and a city of rights and solidarity.

What are the most outstanding results so far?

A European forerunner of alternative policies: Building on city administration's commitment and the credibility of grassroots initiatives, Palermo has become increasingly visible across Europe and has led city engagement for new migration and border policies at EU level. The city of Palermo successfully shaped an EU-wide counter narrative and policy discussion, related to both EU and national migration policies. The Charter of Palermo and the open harbours policy are two of the most significant approaches in this regard.

Political activities and advocacy beyond the city level?

Advocacy and contestation efforts by the city of Palermo have managed to go beyond rhetoric. They have produced important changes in political positioning of municipalities and further promoted cross-local networking and cooperation. The Palermo Charter Platform Process, and its most recent initiative “From the Sea to the City,” are particularly meaningful, insofar as they capitalise on this advocacy work, both in practical and symbolic terms. Cross-local cooperation with other cities has also been a key component in these advocacy efforts, and can be important in the coming future, where Palermo aims to contribute to a network of solidarity cities opposing exclusionary EU migration policies.



Population

647,422 inhabitants (2019)

Location

Palermo is a port city, capital of the autonomous region of Sicily, in Southern Italy.

Mayor

Until 2022 Leoluca Orlando

2. Local background and context

Migration-oriented policies and practices in Palermo are the result of a mix of institutional and non-institutional initiatives. This has led to the emergence of several positive examples, which yet present some room for improvement. The overall relationship between the municipality and grassroots movements is complex. However, in contrast to other Italian cities, Palermo significantly improved the living conditions for migrants over the last years. This is particularly visible i.a. in the city's commitment in the voluntary asylum seekers' reception system and in its efforts related to migrant housing.

A complex and rich civil society network

The Forum antirazzista is an informal network gathering a number of associations and individuals and promoting a concrete, action-oriented approach, based not only on political claims, but also on the expertise of professionals (such as lawyers), which makes this an “extremely ‘competent’ activism.”¹ The Forum is able to “make a difference” insofar as it provides visibility for migration-related activism in Palermo, with regular networking actions and weekly meetings.²

¹ Interview #2, Activist, 10 June 2021, Skype.

² Ibid.

The activities carried out by Arci Porco Rosso and its Sans Papiers drop-in are also worth mentioning. They provide “a permanent base for many people who are on the move, somewhere you can turn to when times get tough, whether to find a lawyer, a doctor — or just some friendly advice or help filling out a form. Most of the people we support are outside of the official Italian system for asylum seekers and refugees, whether because they were unjustly blocked from entering it at the start of their journey in Italy, or because they have already passed through it.”³

The local university is also engaged in this process, by establishing a **Human Rights Legal Clinic** (CLEDU, in Italian), jointly with the non-profit organisation L'altro diritto.⁴

Palermo hosts a complex network of actors involved in migration-related activities. These include grassroots initiatives, individual activists, cultural associations, the nonprofit sector, the university and – even more importantly – migrant people.⁴ Some of these initiatives predate 2014-15 – when migration became a highly salient issue across Italy and the EU.

Political Participation of Migrants

The Council of Cultures (Consulta delle culture) provides a clear example of such an engagement process. Established in 2013, this municipal consultative body seeks to ensure the political participation of migrants. Non-Italian citizens who reside in Palermo over the age of 18 can periodically participate in the election of the 21 members of the Council. These, in turn, will have the responsibility i.a. to promote initiatives to improve migrants' living conditions and to ensure their political, social and civil rights, to file motions to the city administration and to the City Council and to express their opinions related to the city migration-related legislation.⁵

In the words of one person who took part in the founding process, its “original function was [...] to temporarily cover for the voting right for immigrant citizens, [considering] that they have not been granted [such right].”⁶ This democratisation pattern also encompassed the preliminary steps, insofar as immigrant communities brought about the very first draft.⁷

The preparatory work leading to the Council of Cultures shows that some important institutional initiatives predated the current mayorship of Leoluca Orlando.⁸ However, it is fair to state that Palermo's current reputation as a migrant- and rights-oriented city is intrinsically connected with the new course inaugurated by Mayor Orlando.

Leoluca Orlando's mayorship and municipal engagement

When Leoluca Orlando started his fourth mandate in 2012, he was already very well-known across Italy for being the mayor during the “Palermo spring” back in the 1980s – when the city was devastated by Mafia massacres and murders and he led a process of resistance and renova-

³ ARCI Porco Rosso, The ‘Sportello Sans-Papiers’ at ARCI Porco Rosso in Palermo is a weekly drop-in space run by a community of grass-roots activists from across the globe. Retrieved from <http://www.arciporcorosso.it/>

⁴ Interview #3, Member of the Council of Cultures, 11 June 2021, Zoom.

⁵ Comune di Palermo. Regolamento per l'istituzione e il funzionamento della Consulta comunale delle culture, per la partecipazione politica dei cittadini stranieri ed apolidi. Retrieved from: <https://www.comune.palermo.it>

⁶ Interview #3.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

tion in the local political system. The political phase inaugurated in 2012 was clearly marked by the ambition of shaping a new image for the city – from a violent place of Mafia massacres to a welcoming city, able to ensure the protection of everyone’s rights.⁹

A number of important initiatives can be placed in this framework. Besides the Council of Cultures, the **Charter of Palermo** (2015) marked another meaningful moment – this being a political declaration which affirms the inalienable right to human mobility.

In the light of its nature as one of the main port cities in the Mediterranean – and as one of the main disembarkation sites for migrants rescued at sea – Palermo easily emerged as one of the most active cities in challenging the securitisation and externalisation of EU and Italian immigration policies, especially in the Mediterranean Sea. In opposition to government policies which closed off Italian harbours, the City of Palermo advocated for an “open harbours” policy. The Charter of Palermo and the “open harbours” policy will be discussed in detail in the next section. Improving the reception for migrants on the ground

Besides being a clear voice at a national and international level, the municipality of Palermo concretely worked on the ground to implement significant measures aimed at ensuring a proper reception of migrant people. This can be seen, for example, in the city engagement in the municipal voluntary systems of reception for asylum-seekers and refugees¹⁰, where several places were made available over time, both for adults and for unaccompanied minors. Mayor Orlando took direct responsibility for the custody of many of them, as he declared in a 2017 interview with scholar and activist Giuseppe Caccia: “I am, legally, the father of 1200 unaccompanied minors, many of whom have had dramatic life experiences comparable to those of a forty-year-old. I chose for them to be given to me in custody.”¹¹

Other relevant initiatives include dormitories, used by both locals and migrants, regardless of their legal status;¹² an inter-institutional table against human trafficking¹³; a Social Agency for Housing (Agenzia sociale per la casa), to assist those in need of accommodation or of some help to pay for it – which is particularly useful for migrant people leaving the ‘official’ reception system as well as for longer-term migrants.¹⁴

The local government went even further by refusing to apply pieces of legislation that were deemed contrary to basic human rights and constitutional values. This is the case in the “suspension” of the application of article 13 of the Security Decree¹⁵ inspired by the then Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, which “would deny migrants the right to apply for full residency after two-year asylum stays”¹⁶.

Critical Voices

However, criticism is also present. One example is the limited capacity or willingness of municipal offices to comply with political initiatives taken by the local government – especially in key sectors such as the registry office.¹⁷

⁹ Giuseppe Caccia, “From the centre of the Mediterranean: ‘Freedom of movement as a human right’. A conversation with Leoluca Orlando, mayor of Palermo”, Political Critique, 9 June 2017. Retrieved from <http://politicalcritique.org/>

¹⁰ These systems, jointly implemented by the Ministry of Interior and the National Association of the Italian Municipalities (ANCI, in Italian), changed their names over time: Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR, in Italian) from 2002 to 2018; Protection System for Beneficiaries of International Protection and for Unaccompanied Foreign Minors (SIPROIMI, in Italian) from 2018 to 2020; Reception and Integration System (SAI, in Italian) from 2020 onwards. Besides different names, they also provided for different extents and scopes of protection.

¹¹ Giuseppe Caccia, op. cit.

¹² Interview #2.

¹³ Interview #1.

¹⁴ Interview #1; Interview #2.

¹⁵ Decree-Law n. 113/2018, converted with Law n. 132/2018.

¹⁶ The Local, “Sicilian mayor defies Salvini on residency terms for migrants”, The Local, 2 January 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.thelocal.it/>

¹⁷ Interview #1; Interview #2.

Another case is the lack of structural capacity and resources, including financial means, which jeopardises both public and the non-profit efforts in the reception of migrant people. There are cases of non-profit associations working with the municipality that were not able to pay their employees for a long time (even 24 months in a row), because of city administration delays.¹⁸

Even a potential best practice, such as the Council of Cultures, ended up being criticised for several reasons, such as its lack of political commitment,¹⁹ its “grey”, unclear nature and scope²⁰; and, even more so, for being “distorted” from its original purpose and personalised by the mayor²¹.

In several cases, the municipality’s failures are compensated by a strong non-profit sector. Yet, this implies a risk of outsourcing,²² and entails a challenge to the role that should be played by the so-called civil society vis-à-vis the local government: spur or “firefighter?”²³

Overall, a clear difference between public communication and practices on the ground emerged: this drives the complex relationships with the municipality and the “constructive criticism”²⁴ of several grassroots initiatives. However, it was also clearly acknowledged that – based on the municipality’s efforts highlighted above– “Palermo is a liveable city for migrant people”²⁵.

3. Selected local approaches to migration and inclusion policy

Where the city of Palermo did its best is in shaping an EU-wide counter-narrative and policy discussion, related to the EU and national migration and border policies. The Charter of Palermo and the open harbours policy are two of the most significant approaches in this regard

3.1. The Charter of Palermo

The **Charter of Palermo** is a political manifesto, launched in the context of an international conference of institutions and civil society initiatives and approved by the city government in March 2015. It is composed of several chapters, devoted to specific aspects of migration and rights, such as border regimes, the need to revise EU legislation and Italian citizenship laws, protection, political participation, work, housing, health, vulnerable migrant people and unaccompanied minors. Its subtitle reads: “From the [sic] migration as suffering, to mobility as an inalienable human right” – and it captures the essence of the political message behind the Charter.

Even without producing any direct consequence – as critically pointed out by some activists²⁶ – the Charter still represents a key example of potentially innovative and human rights-informed approaches to migration at a local level.

¹⁸ Interview #1.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Interview #2.

²¹ Interview #3.

²² Interview #1.

²³ Interview #2.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Interview #1.

²⁶ Interview #1; Interview #2.

Calling out inhumane EU and national migration policies

To start off with, **the Charter of Palermo** does so by naming and clearly stating – for the first time, all together and in an official document – all those aspects that make EU and Italian migration policies inhumane and unacceptable. The following quote is extracted from the first lines of the Charter: “I am human. Therefore, mobility must be recognized as an inalienable human right. Everything else, including the concept of ‘security,’ too many times and improperly invoked, must be coherent with this approach. Similarly each legislative, administrative, organisational and behavioural solution cannot avoid assuming we must recognize the human right to mobility to all people.”²⁷

One of the core elements of the shift invoked by the Charter lies in the abolition of the need to obtain a residence permit for non-EU citizens.²⁸ This political struggle is paralleled, at an implementation and administrative level, by the efforts to grant full residency to asylum seekers, notwithstanding the provisions of the Security Decree.

The potential of official declarations

The political, idealistic and non-binding nature of the Charter does not make it a purely rhetorical text. On the contrary, the Charter of Palermo had the power – as early as 2015, when the improperly called “refugee crisis” was about to deflagrate – to offer an advocacy and contestation venue to a number of people who were willing to fight the EU and member states’ approach to migration. This is particularly true in the case of those local institutions and civil society initiatives, who echoed the Charter. Examples are the manifesto “We, the cities of Europe”, launched by the mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau, in September 2015²⁹, or the Palermo Charter Platform Process, an initiative which has gathered since 2018 civil society organisations and European cities “to strengthen our work in the Mediterranean Sea and the transnational collaboration between solidarity cities in Europe (...) in the spirit of the Charter of Palermo”³⁰. Overall, the Charter has been a crucial point of reference for those progressive actors who struggle to challenge the existing migration approach across Europe, and much of the advocacy, networking and visibility, which these efforts have experienced, has been in fact facilitated and amplified by the Charter. Clearly naming things in official documents can indeed be an important driver of change in certain historical moments.

²⁷ Città di Palermo. Charter of Palermo, 2015, p. 3. Retrieved from <http://www.comune.palermo.it>

²⁸ Giuseppe Caccia, op. cit.

²⁹ Leoluca Orlando & Simon Parker, “Palermo Open City: From the Mediterranean Migrant Crisis to a Europe Without Borders?”, *Near Futures Online*, 1, March 2016, p. 5. Retrieved from <http://nearfuturesonline.org/>

³⁰ *Mediterranea Saving Humans*, Fourth Meeting of the Palermo Charter Platform Process in Bologna, 28-29 November 2019, 30 November 2019. Retrieved from <https://mediterranearescue.org/>

3.2. The open harbours policy

The case of Palermo further shows that cities also can and do play a role in border policies, notwithstanding the strongly hierarchical and locked-up nature of the concerned decision making process.

Resistance against the national closing harbours policy

As a city with a strong evocative power at an international level – and as one of the main Mediterranean port cities – Palermo has been extremely

active in the locally-based opposition to EU and national policies related to the Mediterranean border. In particular, the city administration was from a very early stage involved in the resistance against Matteo Salvini's "closing harbours" policy, promoting the idea of an open harbours approach instead. When the first incident occurred and the then Italian Interior Minister impeded the docking of the ship *Aquarius* in Italian harbours, Mayor Orlando openly challenged the national government, volunteering alongside other colleagues from Southern Italian major cities (Naples, Messina, Reggio Calabria) to let the ship dock in their city ports.³¹ Although this could have proven problematic in practice, it represented the first crucial step in order to publicly defy the legitimacy of this national policy, opening up a debate which continued over the following years.

In fact, as the government's disengagement from search and rescue at sea was taking place – alongside the growing policing and criminalisation of civil society organisations – Palermo's city administration remained one of the few, clear institutional voices standing up against national policies.

Solidarity with Sea Rescue

This happened not only through repeated public declarations,³² but also through further steps. Examples of this include the honorary citizenship bestowed upon civil society organisations active in search and rescue at sea, such as *Mediterranea Saving Humans*, *Sea-Watch*³³ and *sea-eye*³⁴ – or the official letter sent to the Italian government in order to lift the administrative seizure of SAR vessels³⁵.

The mayor's physical presence in the city's harbour has also been particularly meaningful. This has taken place both in occasions of a vessel leaving for a SAR mission³⁶ and when ships would come back after operations in the Mediterranean, as Mayor Orlando himself explained: "Every time a ship arrives in the port of Palermo with migrants stranded in the Mediterranean, I am present to welcome them. On such occasions the harbour becomes a model of civil organisation, everything works to perfection, associations and institutions together. Over the years I have obtained from the Chief of State Police the guarantee that the area will not be militarised, that the immigrants at the time of landing will not see a single uniform, neither police nor military."³⁷

The mayor's recent call for a European civil service for rescue operations also go in this direction.³⁸

As in the case of the Charter of Palermo, the open harbours policy can only partially be measured in terms of concrete achievements realised on the ground. In a policy field which hardly fits within a city's formal competencies, this approach has primarily produced indirect effects: questioning the legitimacy of governmental policy choices, providing fora for public debates, raising awareness and overcoming the smoke-screen which often accompanies policy choices in this domain. The existence of an institutional voice standing against the disengagement from search and rescue and the policing of civil society has proven to

31 Patrick Wintour, Lorenzo Tondo & Stephanie Kirchgaessner, "Southern mayors defy Italian coalition to offer safe port to migrants", *The Guardian*, 11 June 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/>

32 *Mediterranea Saving Humans*, Palermo e il suo sindaco Orlando con *Mediterranea*, 6 October 2018. Retrieved from <https://mediterranea-rescue.org/>

33 ANSA, "Palermo bestows honorary citizenship on migrant rescuers", *InfoMigrants*, 12 February 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.infomigrants.net/>

34 *sea-eye* [[@seaeeyeorg](https://twitter.com/seaeeyeorg)], On Friday night Mayor @LeolucaOrlando1 made the crew of the #SEAEYE4 honorary citizens of the city of #Palermo. [Tweet], 5 June 2021. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/>

35 Comune di Palermo, Migranti – Il sindaco Orlando scrive al presidente del Consiglio dei ministri Conte, 26 November 2019. Retrieved from <http://www.comune.palermo.it/>

36 ANSAmed, "Migrants: Sea Watch 4 leaves Palermo after six months", *ANSAmEd*, 5 March 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.ansamed.info/>

37 Giuseppe Caccia, op. cit.

38 ANSAmed, "«European civil service for rescue operations» – Palermo mayor", *ANSAmEd*, 6 May 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.ansamed.info/>

be one of the most important allies of grassroots initiatives active in this field.

4. Advocacy and networking activities

City of Palermo advocacy efforts have successfully managed to go far beyond rhetoric. Rather, they have triggered political processes, produced important changes in political positioning and further promoted cross-local networking and cooperation

The case of Palermo is that of a city which has done its best in terms of reception and integration policies – where a clear formal competence is provided in existing legislation – albeit with important criticism to be addressed. Rather, it has also been able to stand up against existing inhumane migration and border policies.

Active Advocacy work

To do so, the advocacy dimension, in its broadest meaning, has proven paramount. Consequently, this aspect was also especially considered in terms of meaningful local approaches, with particular reference to the Charter of Palermo and the open harbours policy.

In today's Europe, such an effort cannot be underestimated as mere rhetoric. In the words of a Palermo-based lawyer and activist – who was also critical of actual city administration policies on the ground – the mayor took “strong political stances [...] in every situation” and this makes him “extremely worthy.” Going even further, “all this is important and remarkable and contributes to a model, which other politicians would hardly adopt, as it also creates discontent [...]. Therefore, the fact that he took such a strong stance is extremely important, in my opinion, even if this was not eventually translated, in practical terms, in actually making Palermo ‘the welcoming city.’”³⁹

Migrant-oriented solidarity in Palermo is the result of a mix of driving forces (grassroots activism, broad civil society, and institutions). However, its external dimension, outside city boundaries, is mostly connected with Mayor Orlando's agenda and his political capital. By repeatedly declaring the city's openness – at times almost pursuing a “migrant friendly” branding of the city – the mayor has been able to project a renewed image of Palermo, arousing interest and fascination especially from abroad. This plays on the contrast between the city of the Mafia, as Palermo used to be well-known for in the past, and the city of rights and solidarity.⁴⁰

³⁹ Interview #1 (emphasis added).

⁴⁰ Renate van der Zee, “He fought the mafia and won. Now this mayor is taking on Europe over migrants”, *The Guardian*, 18 April 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/>

The Charter of Palermo was a crucial symbolic moment in this process, and has had some resonance abroad. Likewise, the image of Palermo as a safe harbour (literally) for migrants rescued in the Mediterranean Sea has been powerfully evocative. The Palermo Charter Platform Pro-

cess, and its most recent initiative **From the sea to the city** are particularly meaningful in such a perspective, insofar as they capitalise on this advocacy work, both in practical and symbolic terms. Within this framework, the Conference of Cities, held in Palermo in June 2021, was a particularly important moment, with the participation of numerous mayors and deputy mayors from different European cities, civil society organisations, and activists. Besides debates and talks, the conference also marked the open commitment of the city administrations that were present to keep demanding a deep change in migration policies – as publicly declared in a joint statement.⁴¹

A network of cooperating cities

Besides the examples that have been explored so far, cross-local cooperation has also been a key component of these advocacy efforts, and will be important in the future. Once more, the mayor's ideas are very clear on the issue: “[W]e are committed to the goal of building a network of mayors, or rather a network of cities that are able to propose and implement on their own a policy of reception, one that is different from those of national states and of the European Union. A network that may also involve mayors on the other side of the Mediterranean, African and Middle Eastern countries, beyond the formal boundaries of the Union. (...) That is why I say: we must start from the local territories. From cities. Beauty is local. The fundamental values are embodied here. The nation state, on the other hand, is a closed space. The European Union is not functioning precisely because it has become a place for legitimising national selfishness.”⁴²

Looking at migration, reception, and integration policies and practices in Palermo—voice, advocacy, and building horizontal alliances is where the municipality's approach has been most meaningful. On the other hand, evidence shows that there is room for improvement at a practical and implementation level, where the efforts and requests of grassroots actors often remain unheard and much lies on the shoulders of non-profit organisations and activists. Financial and structural constraints – which are particularly heavy and problematic in Palermo and in Sicily more broadly – definitely contribute to existing shortcomings. However, the capacity of the local government to acknowledge and address challenges, failures and missed opportunities is of the utmost importance, not only in order to provide better living conditions for migrant people in the city, but also with a view to strengthening the external credibility of the city and its extremely valuable advocacy efforts.

⁴¹ Comune di Palermo, «From the Sea to the City - A Conference of Cities for a Welcoming Europe» - Nasce oggi la rete «International Alliance of Safe Harbours» («Alleanza Internazionale dei Porti Sicuri»), 25 June 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.comune.palermo.it/>

⁴² Giuseppe Caccia, op. cit.

List of interviews

Interview #1, Lawyer/Activist, 3 June 2021, phone

Interview #2, Activist, 10 June 2021, Skype

Interview #3, Member of the Council of Cultures, 11 June 2021, Zoom

5. Update: What is new in 2023?

- ◆ In the June 2022 municipal elections, Roberto Lagalla (Unione di Centro, the Centre Party) succeeded Leoluca Orlando as mayor.⁴³ He is the representative of a right-wing coalition that has sharply criticised Orlando's open migration and refugee policy for years. This has led to the city breaking away from the most progressive networks on migration, such as the **International Alliance of Safe Harbours**.
- ◆ The Municipality of Palermo and the United Nations Children's Fund (**UNICEF**) renewed their partnership in June 2023 to support unaccompanied minors, refugees and migrant families. Despite the change of government, this renewal is a sign of the City of Palermo's continued commitment to upholding the rights of those in need of protection.⁴⁴
- ◆ In June 2021, the '**HARRAGA2** project' started in Palermo. It builds on the 'Ragazzi Harraga' initiative, which has already created a successful model of social inclusion for migrant minors. HARRAGA 2 extends this model and supports the transition to adult life through training, orientation and job placement measures. The project is supported by the City of Palermo and aims to change the perspective on migration and flight and see it as an opportunity to build an inclusive community.⁴⁵

⁴³ <https://www.nzz.ch/international/kommunalwahlen-in-italien-mitte-rechts-gewinnt-in-palermo-ld.1688549>

⁴⁴ <https://www.comune.palermo.it/palermo-informa-dettaglio.php?tp=1&id=37747>

⁴⁵ <https://www.comune.palermo.it/palermo-informa-dettaglio.php?tp=1&id=31970>

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.

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