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Editorial: Resilient cities and migration governance: when developing migration governance capacity becomes a policy priority for cities

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Editorial on the Research Topic

[Resilient cities and migration governance: when developing migration governance capacity becomes a policy priority for cities](#)

In migration studies most of the recent literature on the local turn (Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017) mentions pressures and constraints that cities must face to address migration governance challenges, but very few try to theorize an approach to better grasp these challenges. “Urban resilience” is a research framework that may help to analyze how cities empower themselves and construct their autonomous agency in an adverse environment, combining public management, governance, and claim-making. Taken broadly, the World Bank (Santos et al., 2016) describes urban resilience as the ability of a system to adapt to a variety of changing conditions and to withstand shocks while maintaining its essential functions. The UN-Habitat (2015) provides a less conservative and more transformative approach of resilience that most scholars defend (Yamagata and Maruyama, 2016):

Urban Resilience is the measurable ability of any urban system, with its inhabitants, to maintain continuity through all shocks and stresses, while positively adapting and transforming toward sustainability. A resilient city assesses, plans and acts to prepare and respond to hazards—natural and human-made, sudden and slow-onset, expected and unexpected—in order to protect and enhance people’s live, secure development gains, foster an environment for investment, and drive positive change.

Urban resilience is about developing urban capacities and learning to govern with the spectrum of uncertainties, hazards and risks related to multiple migration-related social stresses. The overall purpose of this Research Topic is to explore how we can draw an empirically informed urban resilience approach that may conceptually nurture future research and policy paths of migration governance.

Resilient cities often look for innovative ways to face pressure in their legal, institutional, and policy infrastructures. This Research Topic looks at how resilience acts as a catalyst for policy innovation and urban transformation. The different contributions show how city autonomy-building is pushing toward resilient migration governance from different avenues: from upper level of governance, from the same

urban context, and from international and national policies, often obsessed by national security. An urban resilient governance approach is particularly aiming at exploring how governance's constraints invite toward strategic and holistic thinking for migration governance. This multidirectional pressure system often determines decision-making and policy officials' behavior, and ultimately shapes the future of migration governance.

One of the increasing resilient strategies showing cities agency-capacity is when we focus on refugees, undocumented migrants, unaccompanied children and vulnerable women. Namely, extreme human situations often produced by external factors, such as the state and/or EU legislation/policies. An urban resilient governance approach is particularly aiming at exploring how the system of governance's constraints increases multi-level governance tensions/cooperation, multi-scalar alliances with civil society organizations networks and trans-local ties with other cities within/outside urban areas. The different contributions are empirically constructed and theoretically motivated by looking at policy strategies affecting norms, services, structures and regulations, and the place of city agency within a regional, national and global context.

The major premise of this Research Topic is that cities are becoming both sites of residence and hubs of human mobility. This evidence frames the different contributions, which seek to nurture the debate at the crossroad of urban and migration studies and develop new avenues of research under the urban resilient category of analysis. This focus places all domains (society, politics, economy, and culture) in a situation of unprecedented instability, full of inconsistencies between universal values, political decisions and policy implementation. The urban resilience lens on migration governance also forces social scientists to question current norms of governance, resources and infrastructure, the role of public opinion, media and social relations in policy decision-making, and even the extent to which the normative foundations underpinning current forms of governance based on substantive values of human rights, justice and equality continue to work. But despite the growing awareness that cities have multi-layered constraints on ensuring their continuity within the urban regime that has been mapped out by States, and that they are paving their own way to ensure their own ecosystem, there is still no broad Forum of debate that seeks to better understand these processes and anticipate their consequences. The current debate on the "local turn" in migration studies can leverage on its role if we try to understand the new contexts and factors that intervene in urban governance, and that invite cities to be more power demanding. Despite being one of its driving forces, this stressful environment has been assumed in most of the emerging local turn literature. It is now time to focus on these constraints.

In such a broad scenario, resilient urban turnaround in migration governance studies (Zapata-Barrero, 2024) focuses on the crucial tension between what cities might do (sovereignty) and what they can do (constraints) to develop their migration governance capacity. When cities incorporate pressures into their own agenda and these constraints become a constitutive part of their migration governance, they become resilient and begin to look at strategies to overcome these constraints, activating in most cases policy innovation (and imagination). Behind this, there is a shared awareness that doing nothing may increase instability and social

conflict, leading to more spatial slums, insecurity, segregation, and racism. To ensure their urban systems, cities are innovating in terms of public policy and creating new spaces for cooperation and coordination beyond the reach of States. This new pattern is putting traditional paradigms of city-state relations in check, claiming to reconfigure them. Today there is a pressing need to theorize, think normatively how to address these new city agency trends. City diplomacy, city-International Organizations alliances, and city networks are becoming part of a new urban geopolitics.

These four key-contributions contribute significantly to this new path of research. We can consider these as four angles of a same academic space of conversation on urban resilience on migration governance. Three of them take the Mediterranean as a main region, but with the fourth article from Swedish cities, we also underline that the process of urban resilience can also be generalized as a European and global phenomenon. With the first article, Trombetta shows not only how Mediterranean cities are indeed border cities, but also how this spatial specificity of cities is a promising area of urban resilience research. Trombetta analyses how urban resilience helps us to understand new city dynamics, linked to building alliances and cooperation making with International Civil Society Organizations operating in the Mediterranean, with the normative purpose to contribute to a just Mediterranean area of human lifes' rescue. This also shows how important are normative values in driving urban resilience (Zapata-Barrero, 2023).

The second article written by El Arabi on refugee-cities and the governance of Sub-Saharan migration in Moroccan cities is another example showing how urban resilience is not exclusively a Northern issue, but a common and global emerging city pattern in most non-European cities. This places the focus on urban resilience to a level of generalization which avoids to only problematize on a Western-centric and biased manner. While exploring the link between resilience and local hospitable mobilizations, the contribution written by El Arabi highlights the processes underlying the construction of urban initiatives to host dispersed migrants. The author's effort to operationalize urban resilience as a category of analysis are remarkable.

Lacroix et al. offer a third angle on how urban resilience can take the shape of governance activism and network building with other cities. This contentious politics is also part of urban resilience patterns (Zapata-Barrero, 2024) that can be analyzed in the Mediterranean but also beyond, as a global emerging trend of governance activism in migration research. This analysis shows again how the demand of reconfiguring the city-State traditional relations appears again as a leitmotiv for further research, and invites to analyze how urban resilience contributes to power decentralization processes. This is also one added dimension of Trombetta's first article, where she pictures how we are at the beginning of a Mediterranean decentralization processes on migration governance, traditionally dominated by States and their rhetoric of control, security and privileging national constructed values before human rights proviso.

The fourth and last article written by Swedish colleagues Holmqvist et al. also depicts how urban resilience can take a sectoral form, giving the example of housing policies. The contributors argue that housing, besides its key role in the process of settlement and inclusion, may be perceived as a tool of resilience

for local governments, whom may use housing to maintain far-reaching influence over the settlement of migrants with a refugee background by selecting restrictive or generous policy options. At this empirical application of the category of urban resilience, the re-active and pro-active dimensions of residence takes empirical grounds in an illustrative manner. This means that urban resilience can have a conservative or a transformative effect in the city. Furthermore, the Swedish resilient cities particularly show how they are faced with these dilemmas of carrying resilience toward coming back to the previous stage before the pressure, or go forward to a much more transformative approach.

This Research Topic can be taken together as a first step to bring on the scholarly debate this urban resilience approach in researching migration governance, and shows its research potential on how it may help to provide added novel views in which cities are becoming actors instead of traditional mere administrative units of the State, and hence contribute to the local turn debate framing migration studies today. Probably this urban resilience approach may help to channel this local turn toward the transformative and conservative patterns that most cities are today developing, and also toward a better understanding of decentralization processes, as most urban regimes are claiming to deal with challenging global issues, such as international migration. Further applications are needed.

Author contributions

RZ-B: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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