Municipalities and Migration Governance

Ambiguous Surveillance and Assistance in Tunis

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> Samuel: Even before Covid, migrants did not go to their local municipal offices because they did not know there were services available for them there [...] if I tell you, for example, there is the United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA office – which provides healthcare, many migrants do not know that these services are also available to them and if this information is not communicated to them, they will be unaware and not go.
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> Some, as long as they are not reached [by us], will continue their precarious situation, and their status – of irregularity.
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> Their fear will prevent them from accessing available services.
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> Hence, the importance of community leaders. The municipalities have this idea of recruiting us as leaders of migrant associations, to be community liaisons with whom they can work in relation to conduct outreach to migrants in their districts. We are also here to address a certain number of issues, issues that migrants face in Tunisia: related to work, access to residence permits, integration, and in particular racist behaviour [from locals], which persists, even though the law has been passed [against it].
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> Interview with Samuel, former head of a migrant association (July 8, 2021)

In recent years, cities have been at the forefront of challenging securitised approaches to migration deployed by their national governments. While states have usually seen migration through the lens of national security, regulating migrants' access to territory and legal status at a national level, local governments have been more concerned with the day-to-day aspects of migrant integration policy. This can be attributed to the fact that migrants' everyday struggles to access housing, decent work, and healthcare mostly take place in cities, with local authorities being most directly impacted when migrants are unable to meet their needs. Furthermore, city spaces are places of encounter between residents and foreigners, and city streets are where local and national migration policies are implemented, negotiated, and contested.

As a result, policy discourses surrounding the involvement of local authorities in migration governance have typically been celebratory: local governments are seen as progressive, pragmatic, and unburdened by the focus on national security. They are considered more willing to address the practicalities of improving migrants' living conditions without being pre-occupied with issues of legal status. While cities have indeed contested restrictive migration policies in certain contexts and have deployed more welcoming policies towards migrants, this humanitarian, caring approach to migration at the local level can also reinforce the premises upon which the national state bases its restrictive national migration politics. As scholars have recently shown, humanitarian techniques of government, while providing assistance and care, can often operate through benevolence and charity rather than through a defence of human rights (Fassin 2007; Ticktin 2011; Topak 2019). In Tunisia, some local governments have become more involved in assisting migrants. The types of assistance provided, while filling a critical need, do not contest the underlying legal and political principles determining migrants' access to legal status. This leaves migrants in continuous dependence on the benevolence of local governments (and their donors) to obtain support while residing in Tunis. At the same time, the key problem of their lack of access to legal status remains unresolved and depoliticised amidst the focus on social assistance and care. Thus, with the growing involvement of local government in migration issues in Tunisia, it is important to critically examine the role these local authorities play in the surveillance and containment regime against migrants.

In this chapter, I analyse the work carried out by two municipalities in the Greater Tunis Area – La Marsa and Raoued – with migrants[1] from Sub-Saharan African countries through two initiatives: first, the provision of vouchers and essential supplies to migrants during the Covid-19 pandemic; and second, the set-up of information help-desks for migrants within the framework of the programme Inclusion, Migration, Integration and Governance[2] (I-MIGR). Through a close-up examination of these initiatives, I argue that it is premature to interpret local governments' involvement in migration work as necessarily liberatory, or as a positive development for migrant rights per se. Rather, I show how the work of these municipalities is enmeshed within the multi-scalar, multi-actor border regime that targets migrants in North Africa and seeks to contain their transnational mobility towards Europe. As this chapter demonstrates, local governments are not outside the state: they are an extension of state power that seek to shape migrants' conduct through positive reinforcement of desirable behaviour. Rather than presenting a promising avenue for defending migrants' legal rights, local governments' role in migration governance works in tandem with the control tactics deployed at a national level. Rather than using coercive measures, municipalities adopt the approach of managing

1 In this chapter, I use 'migrant' as an all-encompassing term to refer to those who travelled to Tunisia to study, work, claim refuge, or join family, regardless of legal status.

2 The help-desks were set up through project I-MIGR – Inclusion, Migration, Integration and Governance (Raoued and La Marsa) (ICMPD et al., n.d.). The project ran in two phases: the first was funded by the Italian Agency for Cooperation and Development and ran from late 2019 to late 2020 and the second phase (2022) was funded by ICMPD through its Mediterranean City-to-City Migration (MC2CM) programme (ICMPD et al., n.d.).

migrants' aspirations in relation to onward mobility. By working with migrants to change the conditions in which they live to make staying a more viable option, while also counselling them against the dangers of the Mediterranean crossing, municipalities reshape migrants' relationships to the migratory possibilities they have ahead of them. In this way, they engage in the borderwork that seeks to curb irregular onward migration to Europe from Sub-Saharan countries. The ultimate result, however, is that migrants remain in a precarious legal situation with their access to their rights curtailed, while relying on the local government's benevolence to access assistance on an *ad hoc* basis.

This chapter draws on data from my doctoral research that was carried out in Tunis in 2020 and 2021. It consists of semi-structured interviews with 41 migrants, activists and professionals working on migration, of informal conversations and observations in migration-themed events, along with a review of project reports and documents related to migration and migration governance in Tunis. The following section will elaborate on the tensions and continuities in migration governance between the national and local level. I will then outline the growing role of municipalities in migration governance in Tunis, against a background of growing securitisation of Sub-Saharan migration to the country over recent years. Finally, I will examine the two afore-mentioned initiatives undertaken by some municipalities of Tunis, exploring their merits and limitations in improving conditions for migrants in Greater Tunis.

Migration Policies at the National and Local Level

The growth of sanctuary and solidarity movements around the world in recent years has signalled a willingness on the part of some local authorities to push back against draconian national immigration policies criminalising migration. Sanctuary cities have held promise for migrants as spaces of refuge, safety, and distance from the violence of borders, securing their rights to work, education, and services regardless of legal status. These movements have taken different forms, some of which involved a refusal to cooperate with national authorities in order to protect refugee claimants or illegalised migrants (San Francisco being one of the earlier and more famous examples; cf. Mancina 2012); others adopted a policy of not collecting migrants' legal status in spaces and services where identification is usually required, or not sharing that information with national authorities (Bauder 2019). While not fully effective in protecting illegalised migrants from the risk of detention or deportation, these policies have discursively created a culture of welcome and acceptance towards newcomers. On the other end of the spectrum, some cities – one example being Phoenix, Arizona (Varsanyi 2008) – have been hostile towards undocumented migrants, as demonstrated by their support of intensified policing and surveillance of migrants, contributing to the latter's' socio-economic and geographic marginalisation (Gilbert 2009; Coleman/Stuesse 2014; Stuesse/Coleman 2014; Bauder 2019).

With migration increasingly being seen through a prism of security, there are a variety of ways through which the state governs the perceived threats posed by migration: the state categorises migrants, contains them, pushes them back, confines, and finds other ways to govern migrant populations through ambiguity, opacity, and other grey areas

that do not neatly fall into Foucault's biopolitical binaries of 'making live or letting die' (Tazzioli 2021: 3). Surveillance in various forms becomes a central element to finding, categorising, filtering, and governing populations of migrants; state surveillance deployed against migrants in the form of monitoring and data collection renders them more visible and knowable to the state, and therefore easier to manage. Through an awareness of being watched, and known, migrants regulate their behaviour, keen to show displays of 'good citizenship' – through civic engagement, labour market participation, minimising confrontation with law enforcement or local citizens – in the hope that this will eventually improve the state's perception of them, potentially leading to easier access to a residence permit.

To understand how these modes of governing migration are deployed, experienced, and contested, we look to cities to examine the tensions and contradictions between the national and local level. Cities are where the state's policing of migration takes place, but – as with sanctuary and solidarity movements – the nation state's techniques of migration governance can also be challenged at the local level. 'The city may become a space for a politics of critique relative to the state, a politics that refuses specific forms of governmentality – most notably the abjection of those displaced' (Darling 2017: 192).

Cities and Migration Governance in Tunis

In spite of its long history, the migration of Sub-Saharan nationals to Tunisia has become a politicised issue in the last decade. While Tunisia has been a destination country for Sub-Saharan students, workers, and visitors for a long time, the country has traditionally focused on its emigration flows, which have been much bigger in number, rather than immigration flows. Its legal framework regarding immigration, most of it based on legislation from the 1950s, is highly restrictive with regards to migrants' access to work authorisations and long-term residence permits. For students intending to stay and work in Tunisia following graduation, and for workers in construction, agriculture, domestic work, hospitality and other industries, obtaining a residence permit or a work permit is nearly impossible, leading to a high level of informality among Sub-Saharan migrant populations. Foreigners from the Global North are subject to the same legal restrictions in theory. However, elements of race and class have led to a double standard in which their lack of legal residence has not been criminalised in the same way as that of Sub-Saharan migrants.

Although not occurring in a systemic way or on a large scale until 2023, workplace raids, arrests due to lack of papers, detentions, and deportations of migrants carried out by national state authorities take place frequently in Tunisia, producing an everyday condition of deportability (De Genova 2002) among Sub-Saharan African migrants. This makes them more vulnerable to exploitation by landlords, employers, and other actors taking advantage of their limited abilities to pursue livelihoods under such restrictive conditions. Undocumented migrants are legally entitled to public healthcare and primary education for their children – yet many fear seeking those services due to concerns that providing identification might make them more visible to authorities, increasing their list of being captured and deported.

While these conditions have been due to national state policy and practice, migration issues carry a transnational dimension due to the EU's heavy financial investment and political interest in preventing migrants' onward migration to Europe (Raach et al. 2022). Since 2015 in particular, Tunisia has thus witnessed a rapid growth in budget for a number of humanitarian and development programmes focusing on migration funded by the European Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) and the Swiss Development Cooperation. At the same time, Europe has pressured and funded Tunisia to strengthen its border security, enhance its surveillance capacities, and reinforce its fight against irregular migration.

Humanitarian and development funding has mostly gone to international NGOs, UN and intergovernmental organisations, and has mainly supported the delivery of migrant protection and assistance programmes. Seeing that cities have tended to be more willing partners than national government counterparts, international agencies have increasingly designed projects targeting municipal authorities as implementing partners or as beneficiaries (cf. Ben Medien, this volume). One of the largest EU-funded programmes focusing on cities and migration is Mediterranean City-to-City Migration (MC2CM), implemented jointly by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), and the United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-Habitat). The programme ran in 22 cities across two phases, from 2015 to 2022. In Tunisia, the cities of Tunis, Sfax, and Sousse were the main sites of intervention for programme activities (ICMPD, n.d.). Targeted city actions were developed through a call for proposals aimed at local or regional governments, local or international NGOs, associations, and networks, urging applicants to focus their interventions on 'contributing to foster rights-based urban migration governance and advance social cohesion in the region' (UN-Habitat, n.d.).

While this was the main programme promoting greater municipal engagement with migration issues in Tunisia, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), with EU funding, also supported municipalities' participation in regional forums on cities and migration, and in the provision of material assistance to migrants, such as supermarket vouchers, hygiene kits, and other in-kind assistance, particularly during Covid-19 lockdowns in 2020 (Mixed Migration Centre/UNHCR 2022).

These programmes must be understood in the context of the Tunisian municipalities' transformation through a process of decentralisation and the promotion of local governance as part of 'good governance' reforms taking place during the country's democratic transition over the past decade (Amara-Fadhel et al. 2020). This has encouraged some municipalities to include migration governance within their mandate and to design programmes for the humanitarian assistance to and integration of migrants in their respective cities. The points of contact between migrants and local authorities had traditionally been restricted to civil administrative procedures, such as the legalisation of a home rental contract, or the registration of a birth or marriage. However, municipalities have expanded their outreach to migrants to include information help-desks, mediation

services[3], language classes, and integration programmes, in addition to the humanitarian drive to distribute essential supplies that municipalities were involved in during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, municipalities have no authority over residence and work permits for migrants, nor do they have any say on health, education, and security policies. The national ministries of interior, employment, health, education, and social affairs thus remain the primary authorities responsible for these aspects of migrants' lives in the country.

Initiatives in Greater Tunis

The following two examples elaborate in more detail on two initiatives carried out by some municipalities in Greater Tunis for Sub-Saharan African migrants in recent years.

(a) Assistance to Migrants During the Covid-19 Pandemic

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Sub-Saharan migrants were among those most acutely affected by restrictive lockdowns imposed by the government between March and June 2020. Most migrants lost their sources of income, putting them at greater risk of hunger and eviction from rented accommodation (Mixed Migration Centre 2020). During this time an exceptional sense of collective solidarity emerged in Tunis. Local associations and NGOs worked together to collect donations of food, money, and hygiene kits for distribution to migrants and others most acutely affected. Local authorities also emerged as prominent actors in these efforts. In La Marsa – a municipality in the north-eastern suburbs of Tunis that has become home to a large Sub-Saharan worker population – supermarket vouchers were distributed to migrants, who lined up for hours outside the municipal office to obtain them.

In addition to providing direct assistance and coordinating other aid efforts, local authorities also engaged in negotiations with landlords in situations where migrants were threatened with eviction from their homes as they were unable to pay rent (UNHCR 2020). In my conversations with community activists I also learned that some municipalities acted as intermediaries with employers who had withheld migrant workers' wages, negotiating agreements to pay their workers what they owed them.

This sustained and direct engagement, local authorities said, brought them into closer contact with the migrant populations living in their jurisdictions. In a conference organised by Médecins du Monde – an international NGO – and La Marsa municipality in July 2020 entitled 'The Rights of Migrants and the Role of Municipalities during the Covid-19 Crisis', representatives from several municipalities noted that providing such direct assistance to migrants allowed them to gain better insight into the numbers, demographics, living and employment situations of Sub-Saharan African migrants. They

3 As further explained below, mediation services here refers to the work that municipality representatives undertook to negotiate between migrants and landlords or employers in cases of disputes where migrants' wages weren't paid, or where they could not afford to pay rent and were threatened with eviction.

could now quantify, profile, and categorise the migrants in their jurisdictions, making migrants visible as a category of concern, and as a target group. At this conference, local officials were keen to discuss their responsibilities towards their Sub-Saharan 'brothers', as the mayor of La Marsa referred to them in his opening remarks. His and other representatives' speeches were marked by sentiments of compassion, as they made a humanitarian case for why local officials should get involved in migrant assistance (cf. Kahloun/Frische, this volume).

Later, in an interview with Mira, a professional involved in designing and running migrant assistance programmes with an international organisation, I learned that voucher distribution initiatives were organised and financed by international organisations working on migration in Tunis. They chose municipal authorities to be the face of these distribution efforts, she told me, in order to build migrants' trust towards the Tunisian state, especially as migrants had become increasingly distrustful and hostile to any initiatives they knew were initiated by international organisations (Interview with Mira, June 5, 2021).

The work of municipalities during the Covid-19 pandemic however also demonstrated the limits of their potential for enacting systemic change. With a very limited budget, they were wholly reliant on the funding, capacity, and will of international organisations to support them in delivering such support to migrants. Meanwhile, the mediation work they were able to accomplish worked as a temporary relief measure, but it did not address the root of the problem: violations of migrants' rights as workers and tenants. Finally, while these two actions did provide some help, they also contributed to the intensification of surveillance against migrants, as municipalities systematically gathered information that they did not previously have. This data could facilitate state security practices against migrants, such as home and workplace raids, arrests, and detentions, in the future.

(b) I-MIGR Help-Desks

In 2019, two municipalities in Tunis – La Marsa and Raoued – set up information help-desks in government offices that were dedicated to providing information to Sub-Saharan local residents in French and referring them to other organisations providing relevant migrant-specific services, based on their needs. These help-desks, advertised as 'Guichets d'Information et d'Orientation' (rlfmedia, 2020) were set up with the input of the NGO Centre d'Information et d'Éducation au Développement (CIES Onlus) Tunisia in partnership with the UTSS (Union Tunisienne de Solidarité Sociale) and Médecins du Monde Belgique.[4] During my fieldwork, I spoke with two people – Wanda and Hala – who had been involved in either the planning or the day-to-day operation of the help-desks. Wanda – a project manager from Europe who was based in Tunisia – worked with one of the organisations designing and funding this initiative. Hala – an activist who had been involved in migrant rights and anti-racism advocacy – volunteered both as a help desk agent and as a team coordinator.

4 For more information about this project, see the information sheet published by ICMPD et al. which funded the second phase of the project.

The project's stated aim was to reinforce the capacities of municipal bureaucrats so that they were better equipped to work with and assist non-Tunisians in accessing their rights. Wanda, who oversaw aspects of the project planning, mentioned that the focus on working with municipalities, and the choice of placing these help-desks in government buildings was to build migrants' trust in local authorities, and to show local governments' openness towards assisting migrants, regardless of their legal status in the country.

Through the establishment of these municipal help-desks, the team gathered information on the types of assistance migrants sought from their local governments. Some of the requests were straightforward: referral to health services, or questions about access to residence permits. In the case of more complicated requests for which an answer wasn't readily available, Wanda told me that the project team set up an Emergency Committee composed of representatives from the UTSS, the local municipality, and the CIES team, in order to decide how to resolve the issue the migrant faced. At the same time, the programme team set up agreements with universities so that international students of Sub-Saharan African origin could staff the help-desks in a volunteering capacity, in a further attempt to gain the trust of the migrant workers who came to seek assistance.

This setup did not do much in terms of increasing Tunisian municipal bureaucrats' exposure or experience in working with migrants given that the help-desk agents and project planners were external to the local government, leading to limits in knowledge transfer or the development of institutional memory about better serving the needs of Sub-Saharan local residents. Further, the help-desks created parallel structures within the municipality that dealt with Sub-Saharans' concerns separately from everyone else's – in a similar mannter to the delivery of Covid-19 assistance measures. Nevertheless, the help-desks served another purpose, related to surveillance.

Sub-Saharan migrants were encouraged to come to the help-desks both to seek information and to share their experiences related to the problems and frustrations they'd experienced in their time in Tunis. According to Hala, the basic information collected by the agents prior to assisting migrants included their full name, their marital status and family situation, the length of time they had spent in Tunis, and their reason(s) for coming to Tunis in the first place (Interview with Hala, August 15, 2021). In conversation that ensued, migrants would inevitably talk about the difficulties they've had, and the reasons why they came to seek support. In response, they received positive reinforcement in the form of advice, counselling, referrals to other organisations providing the services they were seeking (such as health services, for example, legal assistance, or voluntary return), and the attentive ear of a fellow migrant with better access to people in power who could potentially change processes or provide resources that could make a positive impact on their life. In the meantime, this gave the state and the affiliated organisations an opportunity to learn more about – and perhaps eventually intervene in – elements of migrant family and community life that it did not have access to prior.

Wanda underscored the value of this information, mentioning several times during our interview the comprehensive database the help-desk agents had built over time: a database that was accessible to her organisation, the municipalities, and the other partner organisations in the programme, and that they used to better understand the profiles of migrants seeking assistance. Notably, it wasn't the information itself that was the most important aspect; it was the means through which it was gathered. As she told me:

> There is an indirect psychosocial function that is very important, where there are peer educators who are listeners. That really allows one to enter into the personal, familial dimension, where a service run by a Tunisian, or a non Sub-Saharan [origin] person would not have the same impact (Interview with Wanda, June 19, 2021).

To her, this information, and the method of gathering it, was a valuable means to know more about migrant populations, and perhaps to have an entry point for engaging them in a dialogue. To Wanda, it appears that migrants thus lowered their guard, despite being in a situation of vulnerability. Once this relationship of trust was established with their help-desk counterparts, it could potentially make them more receptive to advice and direction. She continued:

> The fact that there is this trust, allows [us] to really be an outlet to resolve problems. Because everyone who comes to see them [the help-desks] is in a situation of vulnerability; so being close to understanding this vulnerability with a psychosocial and anthropological vision, that allows [us] to resolve [the problem] and find solutions together (Interview with Wanda, June 19, 2021).

Here, the motivation for setting up the help-desks becomes clearer, echoing similar reasoning to the Covid-19 supports provided. In both cases, local governments are seeking to become trusted sources of information and support to migrants, using this leverage to exert greater control over migrants through counselling and advice, in what Wanda euphemistically referred to as 'finding solutions together'. This is an important element of borderwork. Whereas peoples' ability to migrate and their desire to do so are key drivers of migration, aspiration is also an important element underpinning peoples' migration decisions. This goes beyond having positive feelings towards moving: aspirations are also influenced by social norms in which migration is seen as a positive step, perhaps to self-fulfilment or socio-economic progress. Migrants' aspirations are shaped and reshaped through their interactions within their socio-economic and geographical context (Carling/Collins 2018; Carling/Schewel 2018). Thus, by intervening to change the conditions in which migrants live in Tunis, while reframing the option of onward movement as dangerous and irresponsible, municipalities manage migrants' aspirations in an effort to contain and curb irregular movement towards Europe. The psychosocial and anthropological vision Wanda referred to is crucial, as local authorities seek to gain more insight into migrants' decision-making and behaviour that goes beyond numbers and statistics.

Hala confirmed that the help-desks have helped dispel misinformation that spreads through migrant communities, overcome administrative hurdles, and access healthcare (Interview with Hala, August 15, 2021). They addressed a gap that hadn't been filled by other actors, and helped uphold migrants' access to their legally guaranteed rights. At the same time, she was also critical of their limitations, which she saw as a lack of sustainability. Hala told me there were significant barriers to the help-desks' ability to make a difference: budget limitations meant that they could only operate for short periods of time, with no substitute service available when funding was depleted. This was due to the fact that a separate service had been created to address migrants' needs that was wholly dependent on outside funding and whim, rather than equipping existing bureaucratic

structures to better serve migrants and resolve their specific issues in a more sustainable manner.

This calls into question the sustainability of such endeavours, and relatedly, municipalities' long-term commitment to integrate migrants and to govern them as equal to national citizens. Neither migrants' legal status (or lack thereof), nor the basis upon which it is conferred, are challenged in the help-desk model, nor by extension, by the municipalities themselves. Help-desks are not facilitating migrants' access to residence documents, arguably the only thing that will make a material, long-term difference in their quality of life as foreigners in Tunisia. Instead, migrants are left with the exhausting position of fighting for – and having to justify their right to access – any basic service needed, from healthcare to education to housing, work, and financial services.

Further, the securitised surveillance of migrants through fingerprinting, identity checks, and policing carried out by the national arm of the state is complemented by these other forms of 'humanitarian' surveillance carried out at the local level. The state is using its proximity and closer access to migrants 'on the ground' to influence migrants' conduct, modelling desirable behaviour by influencing them to come to the state with requests for assistance individually, rather than demanding systemic change collectively through political mobilisation. Problems of lack of access to services, or exploitation, are taken up as administrative rather than political concerns: one-off errors to be addressed rather than symptoms of underlying fundamental inequalities. In this way, demands for legal status as a means of guaranteeing rights are depoliticised.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed some of the ways in which municipalities in Greater Tunis have engaged more directly with urban migrant populations and their governance over recent years. While international organisations started supporting local governments in engaging directly with migrants prior to the start of Covid-19, the pandemic provided more reasons and opportunities for these municipalities to expand their outreach in migrant communities, providing services, while gathering more information about this population which they knew little about beforehand. Growing numbers of municipalities are setting up help-desks, providing information to migrants about their rights along with some basic support services such as mediation with employers and landlords.

This however has not yet developed into a systematic and collective undertaking across cities in Tunisia. Rather, in my interviews, certain municipalities' openness to supporting migrants was attributed to the personal characteristics or politics of local decision-makers who were characterised as 'progressive' and 'open-minded'. It could also be the case that certain municipalities worked harder at obtaining funding for international programmes. One of my key informants, Wanda, who has worked on one of these programmes, acknowledged that internationally funded organisations have not coordinated well in choosing which municipalities to work with, leading to duplications and overlaps of work with one or two municipalities in the city (La Marsa and Ariana in particular), while others have remained excluded.

When available, direct assistance and information services to Sub-Saharan African migrant populations are important and positive developments as they offer opportunities for migrants to learn more about their legal protection and about how to navigate the opaque bureaucratic system in Tunisia. However, despite the promising character of such interventions at first glance, there are reasons to be cautious about the extent to which such initiatives could sustainably improve the living conditions of migrants, or even challenge or overturn the status quo regarding the governance of migration in contemporary Tunisia.

The ad hoc funding structure for these programmes, and municipalities' dependence on foreign donors with their own time-limited agenda prevents the development of an autonomous and long-term vision and strategy on the part of Tunisian municipalities. As seen with the I-MIGR help desk project in La Marsa and Raoued, all project activities stopped when a gap occurred between phases of the programme, with no indication given to migrants on whether municipalities were working on building a more sustainable and self-sustaining structure or not. Similarly, during Covid-19, municipalities were chosen by international organisations to be the face of social assistance provided to migrants. However, the municipalities' ability to extend assistance and targeted programming to vulnerable migrants is limited, and can thus only occur in response to situations when external funding becomes available.

Until recently, municipalities' autonomy and legal mandate regarding migration have been quite limited, as a legacy of Tunisia's centralised system. While the process of decentralisation taking place in the country might give municipalities more power over certain aspects of decision-making, key areas where migrants' rights are restricted or services are not easily accessible – work, residence, health, education – remain largely within the purview of the national government. Barring sustained demands for legal reforms, or challenges to the securitised approach to migration being undertaken by the national state, the ability of municipalities to instigate systemic change to improve the living conditions of migrants in their jurisdictions remains quite limited.

At the same time, the type of work that municipalities engage in with migrants contributes to making them more visible to all levels of the state through various surveillance practices. Long frustrated with the lack of information on the number of undocumented migrants in the country, municipalities have used these initiatives to gather more data on the numbers, locations, nationalities, and demographic characteristics of the migrants they have assisted. State surveillance was thus enacted under the cloak of 'humanitarian' concern. As local authorities lent a listening ear to migrants' preoccupations, with the declared aim of providing assistance, they also promoted a model of the ideal migrant subject as one who comes to the government to request support rather than one who works in a collective to challenge the legal basis upon which these rights are selectively distributed.

As these initiatives fail to challenge the existing legal framework through explicit demands or alternative practices, they reinforce the securitarian approach to migration already in place at a national scale. They risk becoming what Ticktin (2011) refers to as 'regimes of care', centring empathy and compassion at the expense of collective mobilisations for rights, thus risking depoliticising certain issues through one-off technocratic solutions and occasional charity. Ultimately, migrants remain in a precarious legal situ-

ation, vulnerable to exploitation, and dependent on ad hoc benevolence to access their basic rights.