Towards social cohesion: understanding local migration governance's barriers in global south smart cities

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Abstract. Smart cities (SC) are becoming increasingly popular around the world. Within the scope of SC studies is governance, which is directly related to the success of planned actions. Refugee migration is currently a challenge all over the world. But at the local level (cities) it can be better examined. The local migration governance network is one way for welcoming and integrating refugees in cities. However, there are barriers that can influence smart governance as well as migration governance. It is important that cities can be more inclusive and effective in welcoming migrants and refugees by promoting social cohesion. This study aimed to identify barriers of local migration governance in two smart cities in order to reflect on the possibility of increasing social cohesion for immigrants and refugees. A multiple case study was carried out on the local migration governance networks of two smart cities in the Global South: Porto Alegre-BRA and Cape Town-ZA. Twenty-five interviews were collected with migration experts and local migration governance actors, nine documents were analyzed, and observations were made in both cities. The data was analyzed through content analysis. The results of the research pointed to sixteen structural, social and political barriers. Social cohesion can be built through public policies that take diversity into account and where, once integrated, refugees can truly feel that they belong to the community. We propose a frame that summarize the actions that can promote social cohesion for immigrants and refugees in smart cities. We based the actions proposed on the barriers and the possibilities of interventions.

1. Introduction

Smart city (SC) methodologies and initiatives are widespread today, bringing innovative possibilities to the urban challenges we face as a society (Popova & Popovs, 2023). SCs are, by definition, spaces that seek to promote quality of life for the people who live in the city and, to this end, use information and communication technologies (ICT) as tools for urban development (Echebarria, Barrutia, & Aguado-Moralejo, 2020; Ruijer et al., 2023). In order to achieve the objectives of SC, many studies consider that the interactions between governance stakeholders in the urban context are essential to make the necessary improvements and foster development (Mills, Izadgoshasb, & Pudney, 2021).

Within the scope of SC, Pereira, et al., (2018) consider the smart governance dimension to be strongly related to the decisions and strategies necessary for the planned urban actions and policies to be put into practice. It is within the framework of smart governance that policies and actions to build and/or transform an SC are planned and implemented (Bjørner, 2021). Przeybilovicz and Cunha (2024) ponder that in order to be sustainable, smart governance needs to be thought of and implemented as a dynamic process. The sustainability of planned actions is

paramount, as they provide the city with a response to a series of social problems (UN-Habitat, 2022). Smart governance has the potential to help transform the city (Mills et al., 2021) but this also implies including people, especially the most vulnerable, so that the proposed changes can happen and be meaningful for society as a whole. In this sense, Bolívar, Muñoz, & Muñoz (2022) say without practical strategies that really include vulnerable populations, paradoxically SC liable to increase inequalities instead of minimizing them.

UN-Habitat's Envisaging the Future of Cities report considers that, worldwide, growing waves of international migration are transforming urban areas into more culturally diverse spaces and bringing with them a variety of challenges and opportunities (UN-Habitat, 2022). We have seen that in addition to being more populous, the trend is for most cities to become increasingly diverse and for society to have to think progressively about the best ways to address the issues that arise from diversity and people's different needs (IOM, 2022b). Within the scope of migration, one of the groups of migrants who arrive in cities and who require sensitive attention are refugees, as they are a population who face human rights violations and who move to places that will welcome them safely (IOM, 2019). The places that receive this group of immigrants need to think about a series of strategies and reception structures that can be characterized as a governance structure or network (IOM Brazil, 2023). The United Nations Migration Agency (IOM) characterizes migration governance as the set of entities, policies and infrastructures that shape and regulate the processes related to the reception, integration or redistribution of immigrants in a nation-state, as well as the possibilities for cooperation and joint actions with organizations related to migration (IOM, 2022a).

Kvashnin's (2020) study points out that it is usually the national level that designs migration actions, but it is the regional level or even the local level (cities) that implements them, as they have no reference for how to deal with immigrants but end up planning and implementing migration policies. For Stürner (2020), the fact that cities deal directly with the reception and integration of immigrants and refugees on a daily basis, and often without the proper guidelines and resources, has led them to increasingly demand a place in the debates and decision-making spaces of migration governance. The gaps in the dialog between the local and national levels can push immigrants and refugees into spaces where access to information and the provision of public policies is precarious, affecting this population group's enjoyment of health, education and employability services, for example (Skodo & Zanzuchi, 2023).

Thus, there are several factors that can influence local migration governance negatively (barriers) in actions related to the effective reception and integration of immigrants (Caponio, Scholten, & Zapata-barrero, 2019; IOM, 2022). Bolívar, Muñoz, & Muñoz (2022) argue that integrating vulnerable population groups into strategic urban planning is essential to ensure that SC is not just technologically advanced but also socially equitable and inclusive promoting social cohesion. According to Valera, et al. (p.13, 2022) "the term 'social cohesion' has its origins in fundamental questions about the elements that connect people to each other and to society as a whole and that motivate them to be part of it". In this sense, knowing the actors involved in local migratory governance and understanding the barriers of governance can contribute to promoting and/or expanding the quality of life, participation of the immigrant population in the life of the city and social cohesion. In countries classified as developing, the barriers may differ from countries classified as developed, which have more studies on local migration governance. In view of the above, this study aimed to identify the barriers experienced by local migration governance in two SCs located in the Global South and was conducted through a case study carried out in the cities of Porto Alegre-Brazil and Cape Town-South Africa.

This study is justified by the need to better understand the dynamics of migratory governance in the local context, as well as the arrangements and influences suffered in actions to welcome immigrants in SC, especially regarding to refugees. Popova and Popovs (2023) address the importance of looking at the barriers of intelligent governance in a broad way and Moolngearn and Kraiwanit (2024) conclude that there is still a lack of research focused on the scope of the barriers that prevent the effective development of SCs. In this paper, we propose associating SC concepts with the scope of migration, considering the potential that their combination can bring to both the field of action of local migratory governance networks and SC migration studies.

It should also be noted that there are no specific studies on governance and refugees using the concept of SC (Palacios, Luciano, & Pereira, 2024). However, concern about the agenda of political minorities in the SC research agenda is beginning to gain more prominence (Burns & Andrucki, 2021). From a managerial point of view, it is important that actions to welcome immigrants do not lead to their exclusion. In this sense, it is interesting to look at how SCs welcome refugees, also thinking about the possibilities of integrating them into the welcoming and decision-making processes. We argue that the lack of good local migration governance can impact the possibility of effective refugee integration and social cohesion. Cardullo and Kitchin (2019) see SCs as spaces with great potential for encouraging citizen participation in decision-making processes. As citizens, immigrants and refugees (both urban residents) can participate in local migration governance as stakeholders and contribute to initiatives and actions to welcome and integrate this population into the SCs. The UN's 2030 Agenda has included the refugee agenda in several of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This study is specifically aligned with two of the SDGs: SDG 11 and SDG 16. SDG 11 - Sustainable Cities and Communities - proposes making cities and human

settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable (UN, 2017). SDG 16 aims to achieve Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development by providing access to justice for all, with an emphasis on building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. In addition, target 10.7 in SDG 10 - Sustainable Development is closely linked to the migration agenda: "10.7 - Facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies (UN, 2017).

2. Literature review

This session presents essential concepts that ground this study in terms of local migratory governance and barriers of migratory governance, as well as barriers of smart governance.

2.1 Local Migration Governance

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2024) considers the protection (and subsequent reception and integration) of refugees as a shared task between public entities, private actors, NGOs, academia and international institutions, as only joint and synergistic approaches are capable of producing comprehensive responses to the needs of immigrants and refugees. With the need to look at the actions of the different levels of government, the scope of migration governance includes multilevel governance, which involves the alignment and joint action of nation-states, states and/or provinces and cities (Caponio & Pettrachin, 2023; Sabchev, 2022). Multilevel migratory governance is interesting when it interacts with and addresses the combined actions of the different levels of government. However, multi-level governance is not the reality in many cities around the world, especially cities in the Global South (Palacios et al., 2024) and the focus of migration governance is still strongly on securitization and protectionist policies at the national level (Elander, Granberg, & Montin, 2022).

Graauw's (2019) study, however, proposes that in Europe in particular, there has been a "Local Turn", in other words, a shift in perspective with more attention being paid to the local level of migration governance. Even though the local level is still a space for applying global (national and international) and multi-level actions, from this perspective, the local level ends up being the driving force behind migration governance. This paradigm shifts from an international and national focus to a local one can be seen in the literature, from the emergence of the terms "City Governance of Migration" or "Local Governance of immigrants or migration" (Zapata-Barrero & Cantle, 2019) and "*modes of city network mobilization*" (Caponio & Pettrachin, 2023), for example.

Tab.1 - Framework for a welcoming governance agenda for refugees/immigrants.

Approach	Definition
A deliberate approach, based on values and rights	city governance, by definition, must be welcoming, inclusive and explicitly announced in formal city policy
Services for all	universal and equal access for migrants and refugees to basic human and social services, without discrimination on any grounds
Promoting integration and social cohesion	equal treatment and opportunities and the prohibition of discrimination as essential components of city legislation, planning, policy and practice
Broad and committed campaign against discrimination, racism and xenophobia	promoting equal opportunities and outcomes for all migrants and refugees. An integral part of this campaign would be the integration of gender equality perspectives into local policies and practices
Ensuring the "right to the city"	deliberate and comprehensive inclusion and integration measures, recognizing migrants and refugees as inhabitants, social actors and political agents engaged in creating opportunities and achieving solutions
Celebrating culture and diversity	recognize cities as genuine places of diversity, taking into account their dynamism and offering the best prospects for future development
Incorporate seven key components for effective city governance	extensive knowledge base, rights-based and gender-specific legislation, deliberate policy, interdepartmental coordination, focal points, urban planning and evaluation
Involving all stakeholders	in consultative, decision-making and implementation bodies of city governance, especially economic actors, social partners, migrants and refugees, civil society organizations and social service actors
Multi-level governance	governance, dialogue and cooperation on various levels, national and local, to obtain the political "space" and support for cities that welcome and integrate migrants and refugees
Financing services for all	social cohesion and maintenance of the workforce should be reflected in allocations for programs, targeted outreach, trained personnel and specialized administrative departments, as well as the necessary infrastructure
Media work and public relations	deliberate strategy on migration and migrants as a key strategy to shore up public attitudes and gain voter support
Accountability on all levels	at all levels, by all actors as an essential aspect of ensuring welcoming cities for refugees and migrants

When managing initiatives for immigrants and refugees, local migration policies can both diverge from and complement national efforts (Filomeno, 2019; Palacios et al., 2024), where local governance can even take control of integration policies in the absence of overarching national structures (Graauw, 2019). In this sense, there are some relevant elements for formulating strategies aimed at welcoming local migration governance for immigrants and refugees (Table 1). Some cities receive migrants in completely different contexts and find themselves having to redesign urban strategies and actions that were initially designed just for their citizens (Gross, 2019). According to Zapata-Barrero (2024), local governments are dealing with several challenges that diverge each other, and which can overload scarce public resources, demanding innovative responses. For this reason, in certain scenarios it is necessary look at governance models and implies to consider the complex and overlapping identities of migratory flows.

2.2 Barriers in migration governance

There are several barriers that shape migration governance. According Bassi (2019) we can talk about barriers from a macro perspective where, for example, the nation-states view where they need to guarantee their sovereignty have that receiving immigrants can weaken state domination. This interpretation gives rise to the so-called **securitization of migration** (Haddad, 2008), which is overly concerned with security and less with the management and integration of migrants and can be a major barrier to migration governance (Ibreck & Seeka, 2022). Nonetheless Caponio et al., (2019) indicate that migration governance challenges and barriers can be better seen at the local level.

The lack of knowledge (of public actors and civil servants) about procedures, can be an obstacle to accessing services even in cities where migratory governance is more structured. In this sense, the **absence of standardized and integrated procedures** in public institutions that sometimes also prioritize national security (due to **securitization**) over the provision of essential services to migrants and refugees (Caponio et al., 2019). Such an approach can result in challenges to migration governance, intensification of the social and economic marginalization of migrants in vulnerability, perpetuating legal issues, and reinforcing xenophobic or distorted narratives about migrants.

Racism, for example, is another of the social challenge (Johnson, 2022; Zapata-Barrero, 2023), as is **xenofobia** (Hillmann & Pang, 2020; Mourad, 2021). These factors not only hinder the integration of migrants, especially refugees, but also contribute to the reproduction of **structural inequalities** and **social tensions** in host cities and communities (Zapata-Barrero & Cantle, 2019). The **marginalization of immigrants** and refugees can lead to the existence of what Caponio et al., (2019) call "**legal shadow zones**", where these groups are forced to rely on informal networks, parallel economies and precarious sources of income, as well as **lacking adequate representation**. Ambiguity laws and regulations can also serve as barriers both to immigrants and governance (Kloosterman, 2019). This condition of **ambiguity** not only reduces migrants' adaptive capacity but also intensifies their social and economic exclusion (Huq & Miraftab, 2020; Norman, 2021). Although often associated with institutional and legal factors, ambiguity also manifests itself in social and economic dimensions, contributing to precarious living conditions (Zapata-Barrero, 2023). It can reinforce nationalist, xenophobic or racist narratives, further exacerbating marginalization and perpetuating structural inequalities in host cities (Caponio et al., 2019).

Kloosterman (2019) considers that the **Language barriers**, **the lack of reliable information** and **knowledge about rights** can lead to more ethnically homogeneous networks of migrants and refugees, where these groups often fail to integrate into society. In addition, Yüksel (2023) points out the level of **institutional processes complexity**, coupled with language barriers and **limited access to information** in public institutions, that makes the enjoyment of rights by migrants and refugees more inaccessible, which makes governance need to think about the need for greater accessibility and institutional capacity building. Graauw (2019) reflects that municipal bodies dealing with migrant issues coordinate and streamline local efforts to promote integration. In everyday life, migrants have similar needs to the native population, but barriers caused by the difficulty of communicating well in the language of the place of reception and legal status (as a citizen) hinder access to services. I also can undermine **trust between migrants and municipal agencies**, highlighting the need for inclusive and culturally sensitive approaches (Graauw, 2019).

Solidarity can influence the reception and integration of refugees. However, the **informality of actions** that make refugees depend exclusively on the solidarity of the local population to receive refugees is a sensitive barrier to structured governance (Bazurli, 2019; Dimitriadis; Ambrosini, 2022; Ibreck; Seeka, 2022). Some migration governance approaches present itself **barriers to the social participation** of immigrant groups in the city, as they are often considered passive subjects and clients of public services (Cappiali, 2019). Even though some studies point out that migrants improve the capacity for adaptation and diversity for host communities, there is often a clash between social values and the results of receiving immigrants' actions (Caponio; Scholten; Zapata-Barrero, 2019). It can lead to conflicts and barriers to governance and adaptation for immigrants.

2.3 Barriers in SC

The barriers and challenges faced by governance are part of the daily life of cities seeking more intelligence (Bello, et al. (2024). In the SC scenario, identifying the possible barriers involved in smart governance is of paramount importance to ensure the effectiveness of the actions (Popova & Popovs, 2023). In their study on the effects and externalities of smart governance, Popova and Popovs (2023) addressed the barriers in different aspects: (i) the relationship with the use of information and communication technology (ICT), (ii) the digitalization process, (iii) new strategic visions and (iv) the rigidity of government opinions. The same study considers six different elements that impact smart governance: "information, efficiency, citizen focus, transparency, digital exclusion and regulation"(Popova & Popovs, p. 1114, 2023). When designing and implementing SC initiatives in digital transformation, for example, unintended effects can occur and reinforce inequalities in the city being barriers to the development, so it is of paramount importance to pay attention to this regard (Pereira et al., 2020).

SC also faces **privacy concerns in the massive collection of data**, the **dominance of ICT multinationals** over global urban policies, the exclusion of socially vulnerable groups in digital transformation processes, insufficient urban development, the imposition of ready-made and centralized (top-down) governance models, which together amplify inequalities (Caragliu & Del Bo, 2019). Moolngearn and Kraiwanit (2024) points out the lack of suitable financial resources for planned initiatives and policies is the most important barrier a SC can face. It is therefore crucial that stakeholders, especially governments, support cities with resources. Colding, Barthel and Sörqvist (2019) suggest **resilience** is an indispensable enabler and that it is often necessary to **apply analogue solutions combined with technological** ones to preserve democracy and respect public choice, while also calculating the costs of automation for learning and human resilience.

In an article on barriers and facilitators in global South SCs, Bello et al. (2024) highlight challenges related to integrated urban transformation, socio-economic equity, governance and infrastructure where critical interventions are still needed to break down these obstacles. The study also points to 20 barriers (Bello et al., 2024). The main barriers include: **lack of social awareness**, **digital exclusion** (lack of access to technology), **resistance to change**; **fear of digitalization**, **social exclusion** and **gentrification**, **lack of qualified human capita**l, **high cost of urban infrastructure** (operation and maintenance), imbalance of investments and **lack of resource sharing** (Bello et al., 2024).

3. Method

This qualitative and exploratory study was carried out as a multiple case study on the local migration governance networks of two cities: Porto Alegre, Brazil and Cape Town, South Africa. We choose two cities classified smart in global south emerging countries. The data collection techniques employed were in-depth interviews, observation and document analysis. The interview protocol was built on existing literature and was face and content validated by experts from universities in both countries.

Initially, migration governance networks the actors and organizations were mapped and then were contacted by email and LinkedIn. We also used the snowball technique. From May 2023 to August 2024, we collected in-depth interviews with 25 migration experts, (civil servants, managers, universities and third sector workers) (Table 2). The interviewees are listed from I1 to I25, to ensure anonymity. There were 7 interviews in Cape Town and 18 interviews in Porto Alegre. The average interview time was 64 minutes, and all the interviews were recorded (in person or virtually using the Google Meet platform). The interviews were conducted in Portuguese or English and verbatim transcribed.

To triangulate data and according to Richardson's (2012) recommendations, we analysed documents and made observations. 9 documents, including laws, reports and documents from institutions in both cities, were collected during the same period as the interviews. The documents are identified as D1 to D9. The observations were non-participant in Cape Town and non-participant in Porto Alegre (at the Porto Alegre Local Migration Conference which took place in March 2024). For the observations, a field diary was kept with notes and photographs for researcher's use.

Tab. 2 - List of interviewees

Interviewd	Smart City	Sector	Time
I1	Cape Town	University	52min56s
I2	Cape Town	Third Sector	1h4min
I3	Cape Town	Private sector	30min19s
I4	Cape Town	Third Sector	40min23s
I5	Cape Town	Third Sector	41min
I6	Cape Town	Third Sector	1h28min
I7	Cape Town	Third Sector	51min19s
I8	Porto Alegre	Third Sector	1h23min
I9	Porto Alegre	Third Sector	1h7min
I10	Porto Alegre	Third Sector	1h31min
I11	Porto Alegre	Public	1h8min
I12	Porto Alegre	Third Sector	2h37min
I13	Porto Alegre	Third Sector	1h4min
I14	Porto Alegre	Public	1h12min
I15	Porto Alegre	Third Sector	1h e 1 min
I16	Porto Alegre	Third Sector	44min42s
I17	Porto Alegre	Third Sector	1h42min
I18	Porto Alegre	Public	2h16min
I19	Porto Alegre	Third Sector	1h23min
I20	Porto Alegre	Third Sector	34min55s
I21	Porto Alegre	Third Sector	55min37s
I22	Porto Alegre	University	1h7min
I23	Porto Alegre	Public	51min1s
I24	Porto Alegre	Public	34min47s
I25	Porto Alegre	Internacional Agency	1h37min

Source: Research data (2025)

To analyse the data, we opted to carry out content analysis following the recommendations of Bardin (2016). As mentioned above, the interviews were transcribed so that all the data was in text form, after which the statements of the interviewees and the texts of the documents were coded in a systematic way. NVivo 15 software for Windows was used.

4. Cases

The two local migration governance networks studied are in Porto Alegre, Brazil and in Cape Town, South Africa. Porto Alegre has several SC initiatives, especially in governance, such as the Participatory Budget, which was set up over thirty years ago and is still in operation today (Porto Alegre, 2020). Cape Town is one of South Africa's capital cities and is considered resilient when it comes to promoting disaster mitigation actions and stands out when it comes to sustainability and poverty reduction (UN-Habitat, 2022). Cape Town has many SC initiatives (Bright Cities, 2022).

Brazil and South Africa apply the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees (United Nations General Assembly, 1951). Brazil has it own law on migration (Brazil, 2017). The Ministry of Justice is largely responsible for the migration issue, but it works in conjunction with other national bodies. CONARE is responsible for deciding on refugee requests (Ministry ff Justice and Public Security, 2025). In 2024, the Ministry of Justice set up the National Forum of Migrant, Refugee and Stateless Leaders (Fomigra) (Ministry of Human Rights and Citizenship, 2024), and local, state and national stages of the National Conference on Migration, Refugees and Statelessness (Comigrar) were held. South Africa started follows the 1951 Convention after Apartheid ended and has been a member of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) Refugee Convention since 1995. In South Africa, it is the Department of Home Affairs and the Refugee Reception Offices (RRO), located in the country's capitals (including Cape Town), that are responsible for carrying out the legal steps of reception, although RRO Cape Town remained closed for some periods while refugees continued to arrive in the country (Johnson, 2022). Porto Alegre is home to approximately 30,000 to 35,000 refugees of various nationalities, most of whom are displaced from the Global South-South Cape Town has approximately 400,000 foreigners, including a large number of refugees of various nationalities, especially from central and southern Africa.

5. Analysis and Discussion

The findings regarding the data collected through interviews, documents and observations, which had already been coded and related to the theoretical framework, were organized into three different topics. In this way, it was possible to examine the barriers to local migratory governance in both cases studied, as well as the possibilities for building social cohesion.

5.1 Governance context

First, it is interesting to consider that Brazil has been receiving refugees for a longer period of time, while South Africa actually started taking in refugees after the end of the Apartheid regime. Brazil is also considered to be a transit country, as the entry of foreigners is much easier than in other Latin American countries, for example (IOM BRAZIL, 2017). The process of applying for refuge is different in the two countries. In Brazil, it is an electronic process through digital government platforms such as GOV.BR, Sisconare and Sismigra, where the migrant applicant registers their information, receives communications and can monitor the status of their process (Ministry ff Justice and Public Security, 2025). In South Africa, the process is more analogue, and it was only after the pandemic (in 2020) that the refugee application form began to have a digital version (pdf) that is sent by email to the competent body (I1 to I7). And there are only a few cities in South Africa that receive this documentation, Cape Town being one of them. But it is very difficult for applicants to get to one of these offices, as there are only five in the whole country (I1, I2, I4, I5 and I7). The Cape Town office had been closed since 2012 to new applicants, so it was not possible to apply (Johnson, 2022), and the Cape Town RRO only reopened in 2023.

Although the agency responsible for carrying out the legal steps of protection, reception and documentation in Cape Town remained closed for some periods, refugees continued to arrive in the country (Johnson, 2022). The decision to close was made at national level (I1- I7). This closure had a direct influence on Cape Town's migration governance network and prompted a series of advocacy actions by civil society for the reopening of the RRO, which not only mobilized the governance network but also changed the dynamics in the city. In this sense, local migration governance in Porto Alegre is not directly involved in documentation and registration, and the Cape Town network had to manage the issue of documentation by thinking about how to make new applications in neighbouring RROs viable.

The local migratory governance network in Porto Alegre is part of a context in which there are more multi-level interactions (I8-I25). whereas the one in Cape Town has less interaction between the different levels of government, for example. In the Brazilian context, there are a greater number of institutions involved in the reception and integration of refugees. The level of proximity and dialogue with public bodies at the different levels is an aspect that can be extremely relevant to the barriers and success of the actions that the local level proposes to undertake. It should be noted that in both cities there is a massive presence of NGOs, religious organizations and immigrant associations, as well as the presence of universities actors.

5.2 Barriers

In terms of the aspects that influence and are part of the dynamics of local migratory governance networks, sixteen different barriers were found, classified into three different levels: structural and managerial, social and cultural or political.

Lack of infrastructure and financial resources are management barriers that have a direct impact on the governance network and the scope and success of the actions undertaken. The lack of infrastructure is more related to the city itself, when it has an adequate reception system, either with hostels or specific orientation spaces for immigrants, for example. In both cases, NGOs as well as legal practice centres linked to universities end up voluntarily playing the role of providing guidance on documentation, basic items and information pertinent to the first steps of reception (I1, I12, I22). In Porto Alegre, for a brief period, there was an immigrant shelter (Zero Hora, 2021) which closed due to a lack of resources (I8, I14 and I24). The underutilization of existing resources, for example, where in Porto Alegre there are empty buildings that could be renovated and used as hostels for immigrants (i20) expresses how practical and (even low-cost) solutions could be implemented to increase reception capacity.

The lack of training and **awareness of procedures**, especially among civil servants, can become an obstacle to accessing services, even in cities where migration governance is more structured. The lack of staff to assist migrants and refugees, especially staff fluent in the languages most spoken by migrants, is pointed out as a barrier. In Cape Town, for example, the translators at the Department of Home Affairs are all volunteers, and it can happen that on a day when there is more demand for translation services in a particular language, the translator for that language is not present (I1, I2, I4, I7). In Cape Town in particular, there is a great deal of dependence on solidarity efforts and volunteers (who are often foreign students doing university practical) (I2, I4).

The **lack of resources** is a critical barrier and has the potential to impact on the emergence of other barriers. Moolngearn and Kraiwanit (2024) consider the lack of resources to be the most critical barrier in a SC. In addition to the lack of infrastructure, some actions of the governance network may have to be discontinued due to lack of funds. Stürner (2020), among other aspects, discusses the demand for more resources from the federal level to the local level because the local level is, in fact, the space where public policy is applied, which is in line with I14's statement. However, in Porto Alegre, even with the approval of a municipal law establishing a migration policy (D9), there is no binding budget, which prevents specific actions for immigrants and refugees from being funded from the public budget. And without a budget, it is difficult for laws that have been passed to be translated into concrete actions to welcome and integrate people. I24's statement about the approval of a law without the

subsequent approval of binding funds demonstrates the need for migratory governance to have political strength, because when the time came to define financial resources, they were not approved.

The governance networks receive transfers from the federal government, but in both cases the resources used come more from donations and transfers from international agencies. In other words, most of governance actions and projects are also funded by the IOM and UNHCR, which in turn receive funds from the signatory countries and then distribute them among the territories. It is worth noting that after a wave of anti-immigration speeches around the world, in January 2024 the US government announced the suspension of transfers for UN actions with migrants and refugees; this decision will have a direct impact on the actions funded by the UN in Brazil (Lima, 2025). With this budget cut, both migratory regularization actions, humanitarian assistance, protection, health, technical support, migratory advice and the development of integration policies and plans will be affected in cities across the country, including Porto Alegre.

The **discontinuity of actions** in both cases ends up being a barrier that also stems from a lack of staff, infrastructure and resources, as well as political issues. I16 mentions the reduction in the capacity of actions due to a lack of resources and then the discontinuity of actions. For Ibreck and Seeka (2022), discontinuity is strongly linked to the belief that with donations and solidarity actions, it is not so necessary for the government to invest its own public resources because, in the imagination, there are already enough resources. As a result, there is no effective public policy, and the scope and continuity of actions and programs are undermined. It's interesting to note that solidarity can be seasonal and, in more vulnerable places, for example, it can be less effective because people with fewer resources may donate less. The most critical example of the consequences of a lack of continuity of action concerns the closure of the refugee reception offices (RRO) in Cape Town and the lack of local infrastructure in South Africa, which ended up accumulating applications and renewal requests, detention of undocumented people and a series of negative effects (I1 to I7). The decision was taken by the federal government citing a lack of resources and the RRO only reopened after joint advocacy actions (Johnson, 2022).

Lack of migrant's documentation, or even expired documentation, specially makes it difficult for immigrants to access education, health and social assistance, which reveals the knock-on effect of lengthy or poorly designed administrative processes (electronic or otherwise). As a result, the administrative burden is also a more strongly perceived barrier in Cape Town in relation to the documentation process. The lack of supply or access to public services (including security, employment and housing) leaves migrants in situations of extreme vulnerability. In this sense, I1 gives an example of the administrative burden and lack of documentation in Cape Town, where it is difficult to register children with their parents' names due to the parents' lack of documents, which leads to a situation of statelessness (which also violates fundamental rights). Thus, it is possible to see that administrative complexity directly affects the inclusion of immigrants and can also contribute to reinforcing social vulnerability. Most refugees are at a higher level of social vulnerability (UNHCR, 2024). It is therefore necessary for the governance network to pay attention to the need to modify processes so that they are more efficient, comprehensive and simplified.

There are **levels of institutional voids** and a **lack of multi-level coordination** in reception and integration in both cases. In the Brazilian case, the role of each level in relation to immigrants is still a little more defined and, due to the trend towards decentralization, the city has greater responsibility. In Cape Town, on the other hand, most decisions seem to be taken at the national level without alignment with the local level. In this sense, the institutional arrangements of the countries also have an impact on the local governance network. Gaps in the dialogue between the local and national levels can push immigrants and refugees into spaces where access to information and public policies is precarious, affecting this population group's enjoyment of health, education and employability services, for example, which is in line with the studies by Skodo and Zanzuchi (2023).

Failures in e-government systems or the **lack of digitization** are perceived as barriers because, even with the use of ICTs, some systems are not available in accessible and intuitive language and are used by a population group that may find it more difficult to use the technology. Despite the potential of ICTs to digitize processes (Przeybilovicz & Cunha, 2024), the implementation of technologies in migration regularization procedures can remain limited because they are generally the responsibility of federal governments. In Brazil, the process of applying for refuge is entirely electronic, carried out through three systems (GOV.BR, Sisconare and Sismigra), but these systems can present some flaws and require a higher level of digital literacy (I22). In South Africa, on the other hand, there is no e-government initiative in the refugee application process, which leads to a longer waiting time for documents to be registered and issued and a greater possibility of failures (I1, I3, I7). These aspects have an impact on the local level because documentation is important for refugees to be able to regularize their status and access the public services they need.

Lack of data and lack of knowledge management are also challenges faced in both cases. SC studies emphasize the importance of data-based decision-making (Popova & Popovs, 2023). There are no precise figures on the number of refugees living in each of the cities. This situation hinders the generation of data on the migrant population and knowledge about the problems faced in local migration governance. As many reception actions are

voluntary, there are no integrated systems where actors can record information.

Language and cultural barriers are factors that hinder the actions of the governance network. Without good infrastructure, language barriers can make immigrants even more socially vulnerable. When asylum seekers arrive asking for protection, they usually don't speak the language of the host country/region. I18 exemplifies how specific cultural practices, such as the consumption of salty tea in Haiti, can impact the health of migrants when there is no education or adequate communication. With a lack of proficiency in the local language, refugees end up experiencing what Svensson (2023) calls the dynamics of the "speaking subject" and the "other", where the capacity for interaction between natives and immigrants is limited, which influences integration and social cohesion. According to Valera et al. (p.13, 2022) the term social cohesion has its origins in fundamental questions about the elements that bind people to each other and to society as a whole and that motivate them to be part of it". The lack of language and cultural translation hinders the integration of immigrants into the community. Caponio et al. (2019) addressed diversity management, which is often overlooked in governance strategy. In this sense, the governance network needs to be prepared and able to offer language teaching and translation services. It is interesting to note that when there is a larger influx of a group or population, there may be an established community that is willing to help interpret the necessary information so that the refugees can make their first steps in the host city. In Porto Alegre there are significant communities of Haitians, Venezuelans and Warao (indigenous Venezuelan refugees), and in Cape Town of Somalis, Congolese and Sudanese, for example.

The existence of different types of prejudice: xenophobia, racism, sexism, homophobia and ableism, which also have an impact on local migration governance. I2 brings up an interesting notion which highlights that immigrants and refugees are not a homogenous population and that they have different needs. It is interesting to note that Cape Town receives many LGBTQIA+ refugees, the terminally ill and the disabled, given that in their communities of origin homosexuality is considered illegal, disability brings stigma and social exclusion, and illness makes it impossible to support a family (I2, I3, I4, I5). Thinking that refugees have the same needs masks the different vulnerabilities they face, such as disability or persecution due to sexual identity, making it difficult to respond adequately to their needs.

All this diversity without a consolidated welcoming infrastructure brings more challenges for governance. And sometimes society's prejudices are extended to immigrants and refugees, who end up experiencing racial slurs, xenophobia and other types of prejudice (I1, I2, I6, I7, I9). This situation can be aggravated when the economic situation in the host country is not so favourable. This is in line with the studies by Myers et al. (2024), who say that the local population fears that refugees will increase competition in the job market. Thus, the social situation can also influence the population's dynamics of identification and solidarity and therefore increase xenophobia. I1's account of the use of migrants as "scapegoats" for government failures shows how xenophobia can be a political instrument that perpetuates narratives that blame migrants for structural problems such as unemployment and a lack of quality public services.

Digital exclusion and **low levels of digital literacy** are also present as barriers. Whether in the direct actions of local migratory governance or in broader actions, it is necessary to consider that some digital governance or ICT application initiatives can reinforce social vulnerability. Digital transformation processes often end up excluding some population groups (Menegotto et al., 2020). I22 highlights how digital platforms are not intuitive or accessible for immigrants, especially for those who lack basic knowledge, exacerbating barriers to accessing documentation and public services. Immigrants face difficulties in understanding and navigating digital processes (I1, I6), such as sending forms or using emails. The lack of digital literacy leaves them vulnerable to errors and delays, compromising their access to rights. Digital exclusion goes against the transformative potential of SC (Pereira et al., 2020), which should promote inclusive access to technologies.

To overcome this barrier, it is necessary to simplify the systems, carry out training and capacity building and provide accessible technical support to the actors who are directly linked to the use of e-government tools. In this sense, Colding et al. (2019) talk about the need to combine analogue and technological tools according to different needs. It is interesting to note that artificial intelligence and chatbots may not meet the needs and specificities of refugee care, especially when they are not available in several languages and may contribute to reinforcing vulnerability. It is also interesting to look at the intersectionality of barriers. Cultural and linguistic barriers, for example, amplify prejudice and digital exclusion, creating overlapping challenges. For example, a lack of language skills affects navigation on digital platforms, while cultural prejudices make it difficult to welcome migrants into institutional spaces.

Ambiguities have a direct impact on the actions of migration governance or are derived from the actions of migration governance at various levels. The absence of a clear commitment to migration issues is delicate, especially in systems where decisions depend on political leadership to move forward. Top-down governance, mentioned by I2, can create a vacuum when the central authority does not prioritize migrants. There is often a need for judicialization due to omissions and delays in resolving cases (I5). There seems to be a disconnect between the existence of laws favourable to migrants and the implementation of public policies that offer practical support.

According to I22, although the city "opens the door" to migrants, it does not guarantee an effective welcome. This reflects the existence of protection but also the fact that reception is still weak.

As I24 pointed out, even with recent regulatory frameworks, assistance to migrants depends predominantly on civil society. The dependence on civil society to receive and refer migrants' points to the lack of a solid public infrastructure. This gap can be accentuated by neoliberal visions that tend to transfer the responsibilities of the state to private initiative, as pointed out by I24. Paradoxically, the difficulty expressed by the administrative burden, the backlog of applications and the lack of efficient documentation for applicants and refugees can cause other problems. In this case, many individuals are undocumented due to a lack of efficient state registration capacity. In Cape Town, the large number of pending refugee and renewal applications, scheduled for future years, exposes immigrants to serious risks, such as detention for lack of valid documentation. The lack of administrative capacity may reflect poorly structured public policies or a lack of financial resources. This condition of ambiguity not only reduces migrants' adaptive capacity but also intensifies their social and economic exclusion (Huq & Miraftab, 2020; Norman, 2021). Although often associated with institutional and legal factors, ambiguity also manifests itself in social and economic dimensions, contributing to precarious living conditions (Zapata-Barrero, 2023). In addition, it can reinforce nationalist, xenophobic or racist narratives, further exacerbating marginalization and perpetuating structural inequalities in host cities (Caponio et al., 2019) (Caponio; Scholten; Zapata-Barrero, 2019).

5.3 Reflections on the possibilities for achieving social cohesion for immigrants and refugees

It is considered that at the local level it is possible to closely (and simultaneously) examine the availability or unavailability of public services, the different dynamics, access to resources, the power relations involved in governance, society's prejudices and the social and political conflicts involved in local migratory governance. Based on the barriers experienced by the local migratory governances studied, it is clear that it is possible to increase the strategies that can have an impact on actions to welcome and integrate immigrants and refugees.

According to the studies by Taran et al. (2016) on the governance agenda for refugees and immigrants, welcoming involves thinking about equal treatment and opportunities and the prohibition of discrimination (whether through legislation, planning, policy or practice) in cities. It is considered important to connect immigrants and refugees to society because being part of the collective of life in society is closely linked to producing social cohesion. Social cohesion helps combat xenophobia since in a cohesive society there are higher levels of solidarity and belonging. Spicker (2014) argues that inclusion and social cohesion are aspects of the same social construction. Therefore, integrating immigrants and refugees into society is part of the list of lasting solutions sought for this population group (Taran et al., 2016). In their book on social cohesion in Latin America, Valera et al. (2022) proposed a political agenda of social cohesion for equality, sustainability and resilience that involves: guarantees of well-being and universal, comprehensive and sustainable social protection systems, social inclusion and social labour policies, policies for a culture of equality based on equality and the strengthening of democratic institutions for trust. In this sense, we propose a framework based on the barriers and the possibilities of interventions that can promote social cohesion for migrants (Table 3).

Tab. 3 - Actions that promote social cohesion for immigrants and refugees in smart cities

Barriers	Potential interventions
Language and cultural barriers	Ideation of programs that encourage linguistic and cultural exchange between immigrants and refugees and all population groups in the city. Expansion of cultural mediation actions focused on immigrants
Prejudices	Educational campaigns in schools and awareness campaigns promoting diversity and inclusion; anti-discrimination training (on different types of prejudice) for civil servants and members of the community. Creating and enforcing legislation on xenophobia and racism
Institutional voids and lack of multi-level coordination	Creation of specific municipal bureaus or sectors, councils and inter-institutional committees to deal with issues pertaining to immigrants as well as to enable the coordination of actions between different levels of government and organizations
Administrative burden and corruption	Propose improvements and standardization of processes; think strategically about how to simplify and computerize administrative processes and implement/or strengthen transparency and control systems to reduce episodes of corruption
Digital exclusion and digital literacy	Offer or expand free internet access points, data packages and technological devices in community centers; promote digital literacy courses to ensure digital inclusion of immigrants and reduce connectivity bottlenecks and participation in social life in the city.
Lack of infrastructure, financial resources and discontinuity of actions	Expansion of partnerships and establishment of shelter and documentation infrastructure. Creating references for migrants. Seeking effective funding to maintain essential infrastructure. Inclusion of actions pertinent to reception in budget laws to guarantee access to resources and expansion of public policies that are also related to the integration of immigrants create long-term action plans

Lack of social participation	Establishing consultative and participatory community councils that can be inclusive and where immigrants and refugees can express their needs and contribute to local decision-making. Promoting and encouraging volunteering and participation in community events
Knowledge and data management	Development of data collection and analysis systems to inform decision-makers, policymakers, governance actions and the general population. Adopt data-based decision-making. Publicize information on the migration agenda to the city's population.
Legal and social ambiguities	Revision and harmonization of legislation to ensure clarity and protection for immigrants and refugees. Prioritize the creation of guiding policies. Involve more experts in migration and social integration to develop and implement effective policies

Source: authors (2025)

These strategies can facilitate integration and strengthen ties between immigrants, refugees and local society, reducing social inequalities and promoting a more hospitable and inclusive environment in cities.

6. Final Remarks

Aiming to identify barriers experienced by the local migration governance network in two SC located in the Global South and reflect on the possibility of increasing social cohesion for immigrants and refugees, this article mapped different barriers (management, infrastructure, socio-cultural and political). It was possible to see that the barriers are interconnected with each other and there are many ambiguities (legal, social or political) that make it difficult for governance to work. Politics are also a factor that influences governance, and institutional voids can even be a strategy to deal with the migration issue in a more effective way.

Even though the cities of Porto Alegre and Cape Town are considered SC, the economic and social context of the local population must be taken into account, which can also face challenges in the area of human rights. Brazil is located on the most unequal continent in the world and South Africa is considered the most violent country in the world. There are also issues of racial prejudice, xenophobia and other types of discrimination in both countries. Brazil, which went through an intense process of colonization and enslavement of immigrants from the African continent, and South Africa, which was also colonized, experienced an Apartheid system for decades (which only ended in 1996). These aspects also influence social dynamics and wicked problems.

Continued efforts and a critical increase in resources are essential to guarantee the rights and dignity of refugees. Smart governance can support migration governance where the use of technology, collaboration and participation tools can be enhanced. However, due to the context of the sensitive data involved in working with refugees, in addition to proposing the use of ICT tools, a cautious and judicious approach is needed, as the aim is not to increase surveillance of migrants, but to use the tools to improve migratory governance in the context of SC.

Finally, in addition to governance barriers, even after being documented and welcomed, refugees can experience difficulties that affect their access to public services and structural benefits in the urban apparatus (which can be more easily accessed by citizens, tourists and other categories of migrants), so thinking about inclusion that leads to social cohesion is important. In this sense, a framework was proposed to think about the possibilities of strengthening social cohesion, which can also lead to overcoming the barriers faced by local migratory governance. As a limitation, we did not interview government actors from Cape Town's migration governance network. Durable solutions may require specific capacities of local migration governance in this sense, and as future research we recommend investigating the impact of underreporting the number of immigrants and refugees in cities of the global south. Looking at the maturity of governance in terms of the continuity of reception and integration actions; analysing discourses and different interests and possibilities of coalition.

Acknowledgement

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