

**Critical Issues in the Design and Implementation of Local Migration
Policies: An Analysis of Municipalities in Contemporary Argentina**

**Nudos críticos en el diseño e implementación de políticas migratorias
locales: un análisis de municipios en la Argentina actual**

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to identify and analyze the emerging critical issues in the design and implementation of local migration policies based on the experience of Argentine municipalities during the 2019-2024 period. It finds support in a qualitative methodological strategy that triangulates document analysis, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews. Based on the analytical framework of state capacities, the paper shows that the main critical issues are related to the lack or deficiency of certain technical-administrative capacities of local governments and others of a political or relational nature. The topic is part of an underexplored line of research within the field of Latin American migration studies, which is linked to experiences of the effective recognition of rights.

Keywords: 1. local government, 2. migration policy, 3. international migration, 4. institutionalization, 5. Argentina.

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es identificar y analizar los nudos críticos emergentes en el diseño e implementación de políticas migratorias locales a partir de la experiencia de municipios argentinos durante el período 2019-2024. Se emplea una estrategia metodológica que triangula el análisis documental, la observación participante y las entrevistas semiestructuradas. Con base en el esquema analítico de las capacidades estatales, el *paper* demuestra que los principales nudos críticos se relacionan con la ausencia o el carácter deficitario de ciertas capacidades técnico-administrativas de los gobiernos locales y otras de tipo político o relacionales. La temática se inscribe en una línea de investigación subexplorada dentro del campo de los estudios migratorios latinoamericanos, que encuentra vinculación con experiencias de reconocimiento efectivo de derechos.

Palabras clave: 1. gobierno local, 2. política migratoria, 3. migración internacional, 4. institucionalización, 5. Argentina.

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INTRODUCTION

Argentina is a historical and contemporary recipient country of international migration (Devoto, 2009). During the first quarter of the 21st century, save from some setbacks or temporary amendments, a national migration policy paradigm with a human rights approach has prevailed in this country, based on Migration Law No. 25,871 (2004).² This internationally recognized legal framework (United Nations Network on Migration in Argentina, 2023), developed from broad social and political consensus, enshrined the human right to migrate, equal treatment for migrants and nationals in terms of access to social rights, the State's responsibility for migration regularization, and the redefinition of irregular status as an administrative offense, formerly a crime, among other advancements.

It is in this context that certain Argentine local governments³ with high rates of immigration began to promote local policies aimed at migrants during the last decade. The predominant approach has been that of public intervention, focused on socioeconomic inclusion and the effective guarantee of rights, in many cases closing or narrowing accessibility gaps or shortcomings in action left by the central government (Nicolao & Carcedo, 2022a, 2020b; Nicolao & Penchaszadeh, 2023; Nicolao, 2024). As analyzed in this article, far from a top-down logic or an instrumental function pertaining the implementation of migration policies defined by higher levels of government, these experiences reveal the role of municipalities as drivers of their own migration agendas.

Among the diving factors that have promoted this dynamic, certain global trends and others specific to the national context can be counted. In the first case, *a*) an international migration pattern increasingly concentrated in cities and large urban centers, which renews the challenge for local authorities in facing the challenge of initial reception and long-term integration (International Center for the Promotion of Human Rights [CIPDH acronym in Spanish for *Centro Internacional para la Promoción de los Derechos Humanos*], 2018; Kerr, 2019; International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2022); and *b*) a consequent recognition of the strategic role of cities in global development agendas, materialized in instruments and consensuses that call for their intervention

² Days before finalizing this manuscript, the Argentine government issued Decree of Necessity and Urgency No. 366/25, which substantially amended Law 25.871 (among other legislation), thus violating basic rights and guarantees recognized by the National Constitution and international treaties ratified by Argentina for all inhabitants of the country.

³ A local government is considered to be the organization and administrative process adopted by the State at the level closest to the citizens. To this end, it develops instruments for fiscal management, the production and provision of public goods and services to citizens, and the exercise of other functions within the powers conferred by law, interacting with citizens, their organizations, and development agents (Gaitán Rodríguez, 2003). Throughout this text, the expression *local government* is used synonymously with *municipality*, given its alignment with the third level of government within the Argentine federal structure, which includes national, provincial, and municipal governments.

in this field and from there extend to the area of human mobility (CIPDH, 2018; Ortega & García, 2022; Gottero, 2025).

Two contemporary political processes have converged in the Argentine context. The first involves the diversification of municipal agendas, which, since the 1990s and in successive waves (Díaz & Schneider, 2024), have transcended their role as mere managers of the traditional sphere of basic service provision to begin assuming responsibilities for local development within their territories, with varying competencies in the management of diverse public services. Since the consolidation of democracy and the 1994 constitutional reform, which granted municipal autonomy to local governments,⁴ and then the decentralization process that was triggered as part of the neoliberal agenda, their agenda grew increasingly complex, consequently transforming municipalities into natural recipients of all citizen demands (Fernández Arroyo, 2012). In turn, the COVID-19 pandemic further solidified this trend (Díaz & Schneider, 2024).

The second process is linked to the sphere of migration policy itself. While the regulation of migration has traditionally been a centralized matter in Argentina, since the 21st century, with the aforementioned migration law and from a human rights approach, the need for multi-level state coordination to fulfill its mandate has become evident, both in the letter of the law and practically (Nicolao, 2024). This is based on the understanding that the proximity and direct contact of municipal institutions with the migrant population and their organizational structures enables certain level of effective guarantee of rights in every corner of the territory that the central government would not achieve on its own. In addition, the progress in recognizing the political rights of migrants at the subnational level in many Argentine provinces, which allows foreign residents to vote in municipal elections, has placed their organizations and leaders in a position of increasing recognition in certain cities across the country (Rodrigo, 2023).

In the face of this scenario and these constraints, heterogeneous experiences and highly diverse levels of activism have been observed among Argentine municipalities that develop their own local migration policies (LMPs). Assuming that this matter is not a conventional area of intervention for municipalities, a core question emerges: what are the challenges, boundaries, and limitations that local governments are met with in this area?

The aim of this article is to identify and analyze the critical issues emerging in the design and implementation of local migration policies, based on the experience of Argentine municipalities in the period from 2019 to 2024. The central premise is that the main challenges pertain the lack or deficiency of certain state capacities of local governments, specifically in terms of the technical-administrative and political spheres.

This paper is organized into four sections: first, the theoretical and conceptual framework for the study is laid out; the second section introduces the methodological approach employed; in the

⁴ Its implementation varies in each local government, as the regulation of the municipal system is a power reserved for the provinces.

third, the results based on the characterization of the identified critical issues are presented; the fourth section is the final conclusion.

LOCAL GOVERNMENTS AND MIGRATION: AN UNDEREXPLORED FIELD

In various countries around the world, local governments have been intervening in migration policies for decades now, and this has begun to impact academic literature since the late 1990s (Nicolao, 2025).

This process has been referred to as the “local turn” in the political approach to migration (Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017), stemming from the understanding that, by their very nature, certain dimensions of migration management transcend now the exclusive control of the central government, thus stimulating diverse mechanisms of coordination and cooperation with both local authorities and civil society. Furthermore, this trend is underpinned by a view of local agency as having the greatest capacity—due to factors such as territorial proximity, among others—to affect the living conditions and guarantee the rights of migrants (Doomernik & Ardon, 2018). However, this recent line of research continues to demand the accumulation of systematic empirical research if it is to contribute to grounded and situated theorizations (Tshitshi, 2020).

A broad overview of the literature available on the subject makes it evident that in North America, especially in the United States, the research agenda surrounding migration policy is largely focused on understanding the behavior and reactions of cities, counties, and states to the immigration guidelines established by the federal government, particularly regarding police control of irregular migration. The survey of experiences of both “sanctuary” and anti-immigrant cities, along with the interpretation of the causal factors that determine one direction or the other (Huang & Liu, 2016), occupies a significant portion of the knowledge production on the topic, under the predominant theoretical framework of migration federalism (Spiro, 2001; Schuck, 2007; Varsanyi et al., 2012; Cruz, 2019, and others).

In the European context, the study of LMPs is largely dominated by multilevel governance approaches as analytical frameworks for the relationships between local, regional, national, and community-level governments (Scholten, 2016; Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017; Caponio et al., 2019). Within these frameworks, the distribution of powers is a central variable of analysis (Da Mata, 2021), particularly when it comes to policies for the integration of migrants. The theorization and modeling of local responses to migration also involves a significant portion of specialized research (Tshitshi, 2020), the challenges of “managing diversity” to achieve “social cohesion” being a recurring concern found therein.

The Latin American research agenda on LMPs is comparatively less developed, both in terms of time and volume of knowledge production, given the later involvement of local authorities in migration issues in the region. That is why a lack of approaches and categories able to contribute

to the contextualized interpretation of this phenomenon, avoiding the uncritical extrapolation of external views and models, has been diagnosed.

There is, however, a common denominator in the research that has been generated in recent years on LMP experiences in cities in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Mexico⁵ (these being among the most investigated) and that is accounting for the municipal intervention in the field of migration from a perspective linked to the recognition of rights. With diverse nuances and imprints, linked to constitutional frameworks, different levels of centralization and decentralization, and migration policies in force in each national territory, these studies all agree in highlighting the role of local governments as institutions able to facilitate the access to rights for migrants within their territories (Sampaio & Baraldi, 2019; Baraldi & Meunier, 2019; Nicolao, 2020, 2024; Nicolao & Carcedo, 2020a; Nicolao & Penchaszadeh, 2023; Colmenares & Abarca, 2022; Stefoni et al., 2024; Gottero, 2025; Colmenares et al., 2025; Cárdenas-Alaminos et al., 2025).

Taking into account the political relevance of this role and the lack of traditional involvement among municipalities in this area of public intervention (Nicolao, 2020; Nicolao & Penchaszadeh, 2023), this paper seeks to identify and analyze critical issues in the design and implementation of LMPs in Argentine municipalities, thus enabling dialogue and reflection on what is happening in other experiences in the region.

LOCAL MIGRATION POLICIES, LOCAL POWER, AND STATE CAPACITIES

Following Subirats (2016), this paper understands the function of local governments from a perspective that goes beyond the simple management of decisions and policies defined at the central government level, appealing to a comprehension of local power as a political power with the capacity for self-governance, that is, for decision-making and with room for maneuver in developing policies.

From this starting point, a broad definition of LMPs is adopted, allowing for the incorporation of diverse empirical experiences, given the recent nature of the phenomenon under study and its limited level of consolidation (Nicolao, 2024). These policies are defined as the courses of action, practices, regulatory and legislative measures adopted by a non-central government with respect to populations in situations of international mobility, particularly with regard to their comprehensive access to rights (Filomeno, 2017; Nicolao, 2023, 2024). These policies may encompass various areas of action, ranging from advisory services for immigration regularization procedures to a whole range of public interventions linked to the social, cultural, and economic inclusion of migrants in the local community, along with those that promote their political participation (Nicolao, 2024; 2025).

⁵ In the case of Mexico, the bulk of the literature has focused on interventions by subnational governments toward Mexican citizens who have emigrated or returned, especially those residing in the United States.

Thus, understanding LMPs as public policies designed and implemented by the local government, this research draws on the concept of state capacities—a concept widely developed in political science and public administration studies (Bernazza & Longo, 2014; Diaz & Schneider, 2024)—which encompasses the set of “resources of extractive, interventional, regulative, and mediative capacity that the State develops in the long term” (Alonso, 2007, p. 21).

As Bertranou (2013) argues, this analytical tool, by its very nature, cannot be employed in the abstract, but rather in relation to the aims and even goals that the analyzed entity must fulfill. In this sense, it is understood as “an instrumental concept, an attribute that is reinterpreted according to the historical-temporal context or the paradigm in which it is embedded” (Completa, 2017, p. 116).

As a result of systematizing the contributions that originally promoted the concept (notably, the pioneering work of Guillermo O’Donnell, Harry Smith, Mary E. Hilderbrand, Merilee S. Grindle, and Peter Evans, which emerged in the 1990s), and the subsequent efforts of a new generation of scholars seeking its redefinition and operationalization (Alonso, 2007; Repetto, 2007; Bertranou, 2013, 2015; Completa, 2017; Chudnovsky & Leiva, 2022), two core dimensions in the analysis of state capacities applied to the field of LMPs are identified and synthesized. These dimensions merge an inward- and an outward-looking view of the state apparatus: one related to the internal management of government, and the other to the capacity to advise, formulate, and implement policies in relation to other public and private actors (Rodríguez-Gustá, 2004).

The first type, termed technical-administrative (Alonso, 2007), relates to the attributes and possibilities of the municipal organization itself, and may encompass a wide range of components such as administrative structures, human resources, infrastructure, equipment, financial resources, and technical capacities. The second type, relational (Alonso, 2007) or political (Repetto, 2007) capacities, refers to the social capital of the municipal body as a network of relationships with other non-state and state actors for the design and implementation of policies.

METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGY

The identification and analysis of critical issues in the design and implementation of LMPs in Argentine municipalities focuses on the years from 2019 to 2024, given the intensification of observable experiences of this kind during the period (IOM, 2022; Undersecretariat for Population Policies of the Ministry of Government of the Province of Buenos Aires, 2023; IOM, 2023; Nicolao, 2024; Gottero, 2025).

This study is based on a predominantly qualitative methodological approach, which triangulates document analysis, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews conducted over the last five years.

The documentary analysis integrates a broad corpus of technical documents prepared by specialized international organizations, such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the International Centre for the Promotion of Human Rights (CIPDH-UNESCO), as well as regulatory and state management documents (minutes of Population Councils and the Interministerial Migration Board (*Mesa Interministerial de Migraciones*) of the Province of Buenos Aires; management reports from municipal migration departments, among others).

Participant observation stems from the author's involvement in various technical assistance programs for Argentine municipalities between years 2022 and 2025. These programs included consultancies for international organizations (2024, 2025) and training sessions for Argentine and Buenos Aires Province municipal officials on the integration of migrant populations into local communities (2022) and international cooperation for local development (2022).

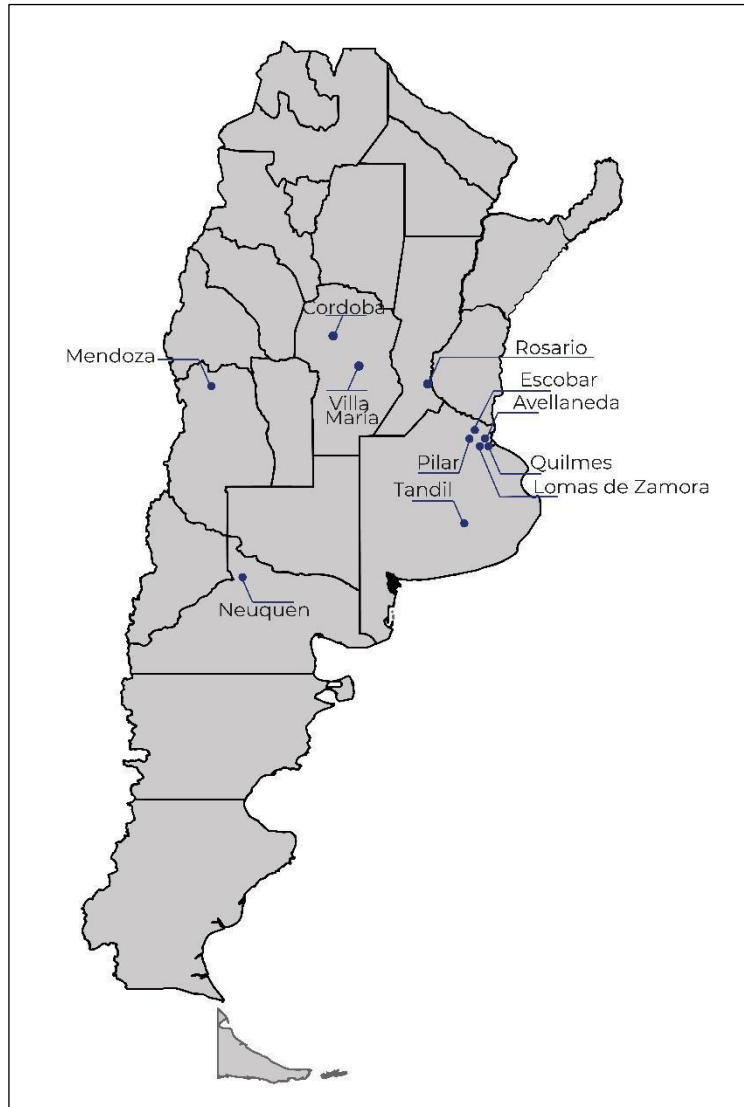
These initiatives involved systematic and continuous exchanges with public officials working in municipal areas that provide services to migrants, engaging in dialogue with more than 50 Argentine local governments throughout the country, especially in cities in the Province of Buenos Aires (PBA, for its acronym in Spanish), Córdoba, and Mendoza, the three jurisdictions (excluding the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires) that concentrate the highest proportion of migrants in the country: 51.4%, 3.4%, and 3.4%, respectively (National Institute of Statistics and Censuses [INDEC, acronym in Spanish for *Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos*] 2024). Furthermore, as part of one of the aforementioned training sessions, a data collection instrument related to addressing migration issues at the local level was administered, this data also having been taken into account in the analysis.⁶

The semi-structured interviews with key informants were conducted with officials responsible for migration (or related) areas, this allowing for an in-depth study in 11 Argentine municipalities between years 2019 and 2024 (the cities: Córdoba and Villa María in the Province of Córdoba; Mendoza, capital of the Province of Mendoza; Tandil, Quilmes, Pilar, Avellaneda, Escobar, and Lomas de Zamora in the PBA; Rosario in the Province of Santa Fe; and Neuquén, capital of the Province of Neuquén) and with two authorities from the Province of Buenos Aires (Map 1 shows the location of these municipalities in the map of Argentina). The interviews were intended to capture their perception of the state capacities involved in the design and implementation of LMPs.⁷

⁶ This training program, The Situation of Migrants in Argentina and the Challenges of Their Integration into Local Communities, was conducted by the Human Rights Research Network of CONICET and the National Secretariat for Human Rights. One hundred municipal officials from across the country participated, 70 of them having completed the self-administered online questionnaire, which was distributed at the end of the training session. The questionnaire consisted of 20 questions divided into three sections: knowledge of the migrant presence at the municipal level; migration within the municipal administration; and inter-organizational coordination.

⁷ The direct quotes from these communications are anonymized here, making use of a random municipality number to prevent the identification of the official.

*Map 1. Geographic Identification of the Municipalities
Where the in-depth Study was Conducted*



Source: Own elaboration.

As for the qualitative data analysis strategy, efforts were made to properly organize otherwise unstructured data (Hernández Sampieri et al., 2006), obtained from the triangulation described, simultaneously and interactively with the data collection process. The process began with a set of numerous problems and challenges, which were then ordered and associated under initial categories that grouped together technical-administrative or political limitations. These categories were later clarified into defined critical issues. This process was achieved by means of the NotebookLM tool, into which the textual transcripts of the interviews and the selected documentation were uploaded.

Finally, for the purposes of this study, it should be noted that according to Article 1 of the 1994 Constitution of the Argentine Nation (CAN, for its acronym in Spanish), the country adopts a representative, republican, and federal form of government. As a form of government, Argentina establishes a federal system in which the national government, provincial governments, and the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (CABA, for its acronym in Spanish) coexist. The internal territorial and administrative division of each Argentine province is the municipality. According to Article 123 of the CNA, each province enacts its own constitution, in accordance with Article 5, thus guaranteeing municipal autonomy and regulating its scope and content in the institutional, political, administrative, economic, and financial spheres (CNA, 1995).

The municipal system of Argentina is characterized by its heterogeneity: it does not have a single form, as each provincial regime grants its local governments varying powers (ranging from full autonomy to different levels of self-governance). Furthermore, each municipality is distinguished from the others by its geographic, demographic, and economic scale, historical context, and other aspects (Fernández Arroyo, 2012; Cravacuore, 2016).

The results presented below seek to find common denominators while detecting the main critical issues faced in this field by those with experience in the design and implementation of LMPs, still taking into account the aforementioned heterogeneity.

RESULTS: CRITICAL ISSUES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION DESIGN OF LMPs

Returning to the conceptual category of state capacities, this section presents four critical issues identified through the data structuring exercise described above.

Low Institutionalization

According to Alonso (2007), one of the components that distinguishes a governance capacity from a state capacity is that the latter refers to the resources that the State develops in the long term; therefore, the temporal variable is considered substantive, and upon it a more maximalist perspective of the concept is built, allowing for a better evaluation of this attribute. It is in this sense that it refers to the “process of institutionalization, that is, the development and consolidation of capabilities and routines by state agencies that, at the same time, operate as stable and predictable frameworks for strategic interaction among actors” (Alonso, 2007, p. 6).

The first critical issue identified constitutes a cross-cutting—and, to a certain extent, determining—factor for the others, and it pertains the low level of institutionalization of migration policies implemented by Argentine local governments. Recent research has highlighted this same characteristic in Chilean local governments, which has been termed “the politics of mood” (Thayer et al., 2020), as much of local migration management continues to depend on the political will of the moment and on leaders politically and socially committed to the issue.

One of the main indicators of institutionalization, in fact, is the existence of a specific area within the municipal organizational structure exclusively dedicated to migration matters. In a 2022 survey of 70 Argentine municipal officials, 41% confirmed that their local government had an area whose main function is to assist migrants and liaise with communities (Red de Investigaciones en Derechos Humanos del Conicet, 2022). This information, however, must be put into perspective within the context in which it was gathered: a training space that brought together municipal agents already invested in the matter.

The government of the Province of Buenos Aires—the jurisdiction that hosts half of the migrants living in the country (INDEC, 2024)—is the only local one that has made recent efforts to survey the institutionalization of municipal migration departments within its territory. According to this source, of the 135 municipalities that comprise it, 16% have formalized a specific department with responsibilities related to migration; 36% address issues related to the topic, but from non-specific departments; while the remaining 48% have neither record of any actions nor a specific dedicated department (Undersecretariat for Population Policies of the Ministry of Government of the Province of Buenos Aires, 2023). This leads to the conclusion that only a small percentage of municipalities that develop LMPs do so within an institutionalized framework.

The fact that there are municipal offices dedicated to migration primarily expresses the political will to address migration issues from within the district, that way establishing a minimum allocation of resources—human, technical, and financial—for the design of these policies (Nicolao, 2024). It also fosters ties with the migrant population by means of an agency dedicated to working towards the recognition of their rights and their social integration (Thayer & Durán, 2015). However, it is clear that this does not suffice to guarantee institutionalization.

Regarding this, and if other indicators are also taken into account, such as the production of local regulations on the matter (ordinances), or the development of a migration strategy formalized in a public document, such institutional weakness becomes even more evident. The “local migration governance profiles,”⁸ diagnostic reports derived from the implementation of the MigraCiudades experience by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Argentina, in their 2023 and 2024 editions, applied to a total of 16 Argentine municipalities, concur in demonstrating this lack of local migration strategies that include the foundations, principles, and guiding principles for action. Moreover, in the exceptional cases that do exist, these strategies are not always formalized in a public instrument or ordinance. Even less frequently is this topic addressed in local development or strategic plans (IOM, 2023, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d), the main public planning tools available to municipalities.

This undermines the possibility of providing a framework of predictability for municipal action in this field, which then remains vulnerable not only to a change in municipal administration that

⁸ Also known as diagnostic studies; both terms are used by the IOM.

ceases to prioritize the issue, but also to adverse political discourse and climates at higher levels, to the disappearance or weakening of allied organizations in local migration management, among other factors with the potential or actual capacity to alter their performance.

The officials interviewed acknowledge that the low level of institutionalization entails a daily effort to gain internal political legitimacy for every action, as well as to mobilize human and budgetary resources:

Not everyone in the municipal cabinet recognizes and understands the value of the work we do in this area. At times, it can be exhausting to constantly explain why it's important, fighting for minimal resources, and making our actions visible; it drains a lot of our energy for management. (Director of the Migration Area, Municipality 7, personal communication, October 2, 2023)

In line with the above, a diagnostic study prepared within the framework of the Lazos Project (*Proyecto Lazos*), led by the ILO, focusing on the capacities and challenges faced by municipal governments in intermediate cities in Latin America and the Caribbean to facilitate the socioeconomic integration of refugees and migrants, has identified the “institutionalization of successful actions and their sustainability” as a core challenge. This is based on the argument that institutional fragmentation, along with political cycles and limited intergovernmental coordination, generates discontinuities in local policies and programs (ILO, 2025, p. 54).⁹

Local Deficit in the Use and Production of Data

The second critical issue relates to the deficient technical and administrative capacities of local governments for the design and implementation of evidence-based LMPs. This type of capacity reflects the quality of the bureaucratic apparatus in its dimension related to information and management systems (Bertranou, 2015).

This is perhaps one of the main issues faced by current Argentine local governments (INDEC, 2006), and an area where considerable disparity can be observed, with some municipalities—exceptional ones—having robust information and data management systems, while others—most of them—fall far short of expected standards (Braceli & Braceli, 2020). This has a unique impact on migration policies, which are frequently disconnected from evidence and designed for rather political or demagogic ends (Ortega Velázquez, 2014).

In 2019, as a result of technical support provided to cities for the implementation of the *SDGs and the Cities: International Human Mobility Guide for Local Governments in Latin America and the Caribbean* (CIPDH, 2018), with Rosario being the first city in the entire Latin American region to undergo this experience, an LMP diagnostic was carried out in this municipality, leading in turn to an action plan with seven strategic pillars. One of these focused on “producing local

⁹ The diagnostic study was conducted in eight mid-sized cities in Latin America and the Caribbean.

information on the migrant population residing in the city”, in response to one of the areas identified as susceptible to improvement and strengthening (CIPDH, 2019).

In the previously referenced survey of municipal representatives (Red de Investigaciones en Derechos Humanos del Conicet, 2022), 68% of respondents indicated that they lacked information on the number of migrants residing in their territory; more than 50% responded negatively or that they did not know if an official registry of migrant organizations existed in their district; and 41% identified “the lack of information and/or difficulties in accessing data on migration” as one of the main obstacles to addressing policies focused on migrants.

At this point, it is interesting to differentiate issues to different levels: on the one hand, most Argentine local governments are unable (due to a lack of sufficient and trained personnel, if not adequate technology) to regularly make use of available statistical data to develop assessments of the situation and living conditions of migrants in their territory, and to inform the different phases of their public policy cycle. The above aligns with the recent nature of this municipal line of action:

There was nothing of the sort when we took office. Not a single file labeled “migrants” [...] There was no information, no data, no desk, no computer, absolutely nothing. So, this requires a process that, alongside the creation of the department, involves providing it with human and technical resources, working to be able to respond to all these demands [...] and gathering and processing information. (Director of the Migration Area, Municipality 4, personal communication, March 23, 2022)

On the other hand, Argentine municipalities face a significant challenge in producing their own administrative records, that is, those strictly pertaining to local management programs or policies. These records typically do not include fields identifying migrant status (country of birth, nationality, immigration status, year of arrival, to mention the most representative categories), and this applies not only to programs or policies aimed at migrants, but to the entire range of municipal public policies.

I believe all of this could be done: disaggregating the number of migrants participating in the workshops, fairs, and the various programs we have; but this is evidently not being done, at least not yet [...] because, frankly, until we started asking these questions, it wasn’t something the municipality cared about. In other words, it wasn’t metrics they wanted; nobody was interested. (Director of Migration Area, Municipality 12, personal communication, August 28, 2024)

In other instances, municipal administrative records do meet the recommended standards, yet shortcomings are found in their processing and regular use: “In other words, the data exists, the problem is that nobody consults it, nobody goes looking for it, nobody questions that data [...] and in the municipalities, there is a lack of human resources, of time, money, everything for that” (Director of the Migration Area, Government of the Province of Buenos Aires, personal

communication, July 19, 2023). This is exacerbated by a weak alliance with academic and university centers where the capacity to conduct analyses that move beyond the technocratic view of decontextualized and “neutral” data is concentrated (Debandi & Guemureman, 2023), providing socially engaged frameworks for interpretation.

For example, the municipality of Rosario has robust systems in certain areas such as health and social services, in the latter of which the Social Registry was recently created. This computer system centralizes the database of beneficiaries for each program line of the Ministry of Human Development and Habitat. While the Social Registry incorporates the corresponding fields to capture the migrant status of individuals during data collection, the shortcoming lies in the regular processing, systematization, and periodic analysis of this data to inform public policy (IOM, 2025d).

On top of these situations, there are also problems related to the quality of this data upon capturing: deficiencies in data entry or updating, not to mention the difficulties encountered when integrating or making it interoperable with provincial or national data systems. In this regard, we cannot overlook that local governments play a triple role in implementing (national, provincial, and municipal) policies within their territory, which translates into the need to consider three levels of data and the difficulty of integrating them when making decisions at the municipal level (Di Virgilio & Solano, 2012).

In consonance with the above, all the diagnostic reports that IOM Argentina co-developed with the Argentine municipalities that participated in the first and second editions of the MigraCiudades program identified areas for improvement in strengthening the institutional capacity of LMPs: those pertaining the use and production of data and information (IOM, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d).

For its part, the minutes of the Interministerial Migration Board of the Province of Buenos Aires, in its 2024 planning, also highlight the urgent need to include municipalities in Buenos Aires Province in the training plan, especially those focused on data production (Ministry of Government of Buenos Aires, 2024). The same is evidenced by the Human Rights and Migration Thematic Unit of Mercociudades,¹⁰ which has included in its 2023-2025 work plan, coordinated by the city of Quilmes (Argentina), “promoting the development of measurement, information, and monitoring systems for human rights and local migration governance policies” (Mercociudades, 2023, p. 5).

It should be added that state capacity, in addition to being an organizational attribute, also refers to inter-organizational action capital, which depends on the type of social and institutional

¹⁰ Established in 1995, Mercociudades is the most important network of cities in the region, with 375 participating cities in ten countries, which organize their work into 21 thematic units (see website in the references).

cooperation that the local government unit deploys. The next two critical issues (third and fourth) are thus part of what has been defined as the relational or political dimension of state capacities.

*Lack of formalized and predictable mechanisms
for multi-level public coordination*

This critical issue is linked to a limitation in inter-organizational state capacities. Its main cause is the lack of formalized and predictable mechanisms for multi-level coordination to address the various challenges resulting from the local integration of migrants.

According to the state capacity deficit approach (Bertranou, 2015), this is usually explained by the macro-institutional, regulatory, and rules-of-the-game framework, which can operate by preventing certain actions, leaving legal or operational gaps that do not expressly empower the agencies involved to carry them out, or that do not establish a clear division of tasks.

In Argentina, various aspects of migration management involve concurrent jurisdictions among different levels of government. Migration Law No. 25,871 (2024) explicitly acknowledges the necessary participation of different levels of government (national, provincial, and municipal) to “ensure equal treatment between immigrants and nationals with regard to their access to social services, public goods, health, education, justice, work, employment, and social security” (Art. 6) and to “promote the development of initiatives aimed at the integration of foreigners into their communities of residence” (Art. 14). Still, the implementing decree of this legislation (No. 616/10) completely omits the definition of relevant mechanisms or protocols, leaving this law lacking an institutional framework to organize, systematize, and implement the required multi-level collaboration (Nicolao, 2020; Hoya, 2023).

The situation is further complicated by the fact that Argentine municipalities manage a significant portion of these public services, even though they lack direct authority in defining these policies—whether they are educational, housing, health, or labor-related—which are also subject to specific regulations in each provincial jurisdiction.

Hence, multilevel coordination on migration issues has remained, during the period studied, subject to the ever-changing political will of the day and the “creativity” of each government actor. In most instances, according to the testimony of the officials interviewed, ad hoc, informal coordination mechanisms have been established, aimed at resolving specific situations on a case-by-case basis.

In some other instances, spaces, working groups, and mechanisms have been activated to sustain dialogue, driven by local governments themselves, or by provincial jurisdictions, national agencies, and even international organizations. Some of these are presented below, non-exhaustively (see Table 1):

Table 1. Multilevel Mechanisms for Addressing Migration Issues, Activated During the Period Under Study

<i>Mechanism or device</i>	<i>Jurisdiction</i>	<i>Year</i>
Integration Centers for Migrants and Refugees (CIMRs, for its acronym in Spanish)	National	2019
Municipal Council for Immigrants	City of Catamarca	2020
Interjurisdictional Board for Migrant Support	Province of Cordoba	2020
Provincial Board for Migrants, Communities and Descendants	Province of Santa Cruz	2020
Interministerial Migrant Station Program	Province of Cordoba	2021
Interministerial Migration Board of the PBA	PBA	2022
Population Councils of the PBA	PBA	2022
Local Council for Migrants	Neuquen	2022
Management Board on the Rights of Migrants	City of Mendoza	2022
Coordination Board for the Socioeconomic Integration of Migrants and Refugees	City of Cordoba	2024
Migrant Territories	PBA	2024

Source: Own elaboration based on IOM, 2023, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d, and Hoya, 2023.

Most of the identified mechanisms include broader multisectoral participation motions that encompass multilevel coordination, but they go beyond it, and not all of them have supporting regulations to frame their operation.

The Neuquen Local Council for Migrants, for example, was established in 2022 as an advisory body for the municipality, in which migration organizations and consulates from various countries located in the city participate, as well as provincial and national representatives such as the Neuquen branch of the National Directorate of Migration (DNM, *Dirección Nacional de Migraciones*) and the Integration Space for Migrants (EIM, *Espacio de Integración para Personas Migrantes*) of the Provincial Undersecretariat of Justice and Human Rights. The officialization of this Council is currently a concern for the local government, as it serves as a tool to guarantee its long-term operation, strengthen the commitment of the parties (IOM, 2025a), and enact the agenda they are promoting.

The ideological and political-partisan variable is, of course, a determining factor in defining the possible partnerships and their continuity over time: changes in administration at any level of government often end up resetting the partnerships achieved. For example, the Integration Centers for Migrants and Refugees (CIMRs, *Centro de Integración para Personas Migrantes y Refugiadas*), a decentralized mechanism promoted by the national government since 2019 in various Argentine cities (CABA, Rosario, La Plata, La Quiaca) to foster the integration of migrants, involving inter-institutional collaboration with provincial and local agencies, began to disappear and be stripped of resources after Milei's government took office in December 2023, marking a regressive shift in national migration policy. From this, only two centers remain today.

Similarly, the fading of critical circumstances that had fostered multi-level collaborations also discouraged the continuation of these processes. In 2020, the Interjurisdictional Board for Migrant Support was established in the capital city of Córdoba, a strategic space for intergovernmental coordination to guarantee healthcare for the migrant population during the pandemic, especially vaccination programs. The National Secretariat for Human Rights, its counterpart in the province of Córdoba, as well as the Municipal Directorate for Assistance and Support to Immigrants of Córdoba Capital were part of this mechanism, which was active until the beginning of 2023, then disappearing at the same time as the fading of the “emergency” that gave rise to it (IOM, 2025b).

Another characteristic that is often found, as has been observed in the province of Buenos Aires, is that, despite a clear political will to facilitate coordinated work, efforts are fragmented and approaches overlap among the various departments of the provincial government with jurisdiction over the issue. In the PBA, mechanisms aimed at linking the work of the province and municipalities (and sometimes of the national government) regarding the recognition of the rights of migrants are on the rise: the creation of the Population Council of the PBA by the Undersecretariat for Population Policies, as well as the Interministerial Migration Board and the nascent Migrant Territories initiative by the Directorate of International Migration.¹¹ These efforts, with their different approaches, share the same goal (that of strengthening inter-organizational coordination) and could well be consolidated into a single, strengthened body in terms of resources and political will.

International organizations have also been collaborating in promoting working groups in different parts of the country, although not exclusively focused on multi-level coordination, but rather on the creation of broader multi-sectoral spaces. In Mendoza Capital, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was key in the formation in 2022 of the Management Board on the Rights of Migrants (City of Mendoza, 22/5/2023), while the ILO and UNHCR serve as the technical secretariat for the Coordination Committee for the Socioeconomic Integration of Migrants and Refugees, launched in 2024 in Córdoba (Undersecretariat of International Liaison and Local Development of the Municipality of Córdoba, 2024).

The question that arises in these circumstances is the level of long-term sustainability of these mechanisms in the event of a withdrawal of technical cooperation from these agencies, along with the degree of autonomy that the parties involved hold to develop migration agendas from a rights-based approach, as opposed to the development agendas promoted by these organizations.

Finally, many local governments, such as those in metropolitan areas of various provinces or their capital cities, are in a better position to achieve multi-level coordination than municipalities farther from political and administrative centers, given their geographical proximity to the territory

¹¹ Today known as the Directorate of Consular Affairs.

where the national or provincial public administration operates, or because they have national or provincial agencies located within their territories.

To sum up, the lack of an institutional framework to regulate and organize multi-level action in the field of migration during the period studied has left municipalities without a protocol and at the whim of deficient inter-organizational political capacities for the vast majority of them.

Limited Capacity to Absorb the Demands of Migrants

The fourth critical issue relates to the political capacities of local governments in their relationship with society, and in the case at hand, with the social group under analysis – migrants. This political capacity is linked to the ability of States to address social demands, to allow the channeling and representation of the interests of the different groups and sectors that comprise it, and to include social participation in decision-making, policy design, and conflict resolution (Repetto, 2007; Bernazza & Longo, 2014).

A clearly established practice in most Argentine municipalities is the long-standing shared agenda with local communities, by means of various channels of dialogue and participation established by the local government. These communities constitute an organizational structure comprised of migrants and their descendants, where cultural interests dominate the aggregation of interests (though not exclusively), and where a dominant structuring parameter is based on the country/region of origin (Caggiano, 2011) and local residence. This is typically reflected in their names: Chilean Residents Center in Comodoro Rivadavia, Galician Center of Mar del Plata, Venezuelans in Zárate, to name a few examples.

Due to the historical and contemporary evolution of international migration to Argentina, these organizations are typically composed of individuals with a long-standing presence in the cities and their descendants, who have overcome the immediate challenges of local socioeconomic integration—an aspect closely linked to the temporality and construction of social capital (Thayer & Durán, 2015)—and meet primarily with the purpose of preserving their shared roots, conserve their cultural heritage, and reclaim their identity. Moreover, their focus is not on public advocacy for the rights of their fellow citizens (Caggiano, 2011) or overcoming specific challenges in their local integration.

The relationship that municipalities establish with niche communities in their territory, and the channels of participation they open to these groups, usually originates primarily from the Culture or Community Relations departments. This shapes an agenda of commemorative actions focused on promoting or co-organizing events such as traditional community festivals or fairs, and related initiatives. In most cases, these reconcile the goal of showcasing their own cultural heritage with a business objective, both for the organizations themselves and for the gastronomic or artisanal enterprises of their members. The prevailing discourse and meanings that guide these actions are

largely linked to an ideal of *the foreigner, the naturalized citizen, the traditional from abroad*, which fails to integrate social segments experiencing intersectional vulnerability.

In numerous municipalities of the country's inland and the province of Buenos Aires (Concordia, Bahía Blanca, Tandil, General Pueyrredon, Reconquista, to offer but a few examples), this is the predominant local migration policy approach (Nicolao & Carcedo, 2020a and 2020b; Undersecretariat for Population Policies of the Ministry of Government of the Province of Buenos Aires, 2023; IOM, 2024a, IOM, 2024b).

The cultural and identity-based demands of migrants in Argentine cities are of considerable importance, taking into account not only their cultural rights but also their rights to leisure, free time, and recreation for groups that often structure their migration and life projects around work. Nonetheless, the folklorized approaches that typically characterize the interaction between migrants and local governments through the participatory channels described above have been seriously brought into question. This is because they are based on a mode of inclusion that tends to attribute an exotic veneer to migrant difference without delving into the historical and structural foundations that sustain such difference; especially, given how they depoliticize the migrant presence, discouraging the channeling of other types of advocacies and demands from politicized migrant citizens (Beltrán, 2025).

In recent years, a minority of local governments have adopted a broader agenda linked to the effective recognition of the rights of migrants, which is often facilitated by a different configuration of relationships that the municipality establishes with organized migrant groups. When local authorities open spaces for dialogue and participation with migrant organizations that have advocacy agendas, LMP approaches emerge that place migrants and their communities at the center of the stage as full subjects of rights.

Agendas designed from this perspective are more responsive to the demands and needs of recently arrived or more vulnerable populations, and they provide additional value by activating greater involvement of these groups and their broader local political participation. Compelling examples include the collaboration between the municipality of Quilmes and the Marcelina Meneses Center of Ezpeleta (IOM, 2022), illustrated by the appointment of its main representative as Municipal Director of Migrants; the municipality of Lomas de Zamora, with the establishment of Action Hubs for Migrant Women; and the local government of Pilar, which has managed to absorb the demands of the migrant population by means of *migrant nodes* distributed throughout the district (IOM, 2022; Nicolao & Penschaszadeh, 2023; Nicolao, 2024).

The complexity of this critical issue lies in the fact that, with few exceptions, local governments in Argentina have a limited capacity—or even a lack of political will and decision-making—to channel the multidimensional demands of organized migrant groups, or to foster processes of aggregating interests that involve politicized civic engagement. This translates into a reductionist approach to migration, focused on a tangential agenda with an emphasis on cultural aspects, which

disregards the full dimension of the local migrant presence and, consequently, also disregards migrants as subjects of social, political, cultural, and economic rights, among others.

CLOSING REMARKS

This article describes the main challenges that have characterized municipal action in the field of migration in Argentina in recent years: weak institutional anchoring, technical difficulties in informing the entire migration policy cycle, lack of formalized and predictable multi-level coordination mechanisms, and lack of participatory mechanisms that enable the absorption of demands from the migrant population.

The conceptual grounding in the analytical framework of state capacities serves precisely the purpose of recognizing those attributes, qualities, and characteristics that allow us to consider the local state in the long term, beyond the political will of the moment, the current leader and situation, or any emerging contextual constraints. It is for this reason that it retains potential for transferability to contexts other than the Argentine one, and can even enable comparative research with other Latin American cities.

Strictly speaking, the critical issues, identified based on the conceptual framework of state capacities, reconcile an *inward-looking* view of local government units, where organizational aspects carry interpretive weight, with an *outward-looking* view, as an inter-organizational network with other levels of government, organized civil society, international agencies, and others.

Thus, this paper provides a lens through which to view—and assess—the opportunities for continuity, consolidation, and resilience of diverse local government initiatives such as those that have emerged in the last decade in Latin American cities. Despite their multiple shortcomings (due to limited duration, or dependence on alliances or specific political cycles), these policies have demonstrated innovative potential and strategic results in facilitating access to rights and local integration for migrants, linked to the proximity and closeness provided by municipal institutions.

The findings presented here will be further analyzed and monitored through a future research agenda that will seek to broaden the empirical comparison to the regional level and include new aspects such as decentralized international cooperation between municipalities and specialized international agencies, network management, and inter-municipal partnerships, among others.

Translation: Fernando Llanas.

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