COVID-19: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERCULTURAL LOCAL AUTHORITIES
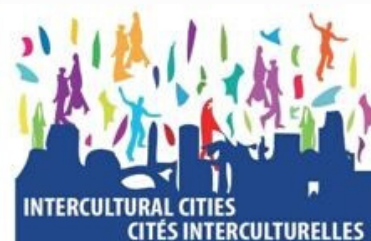
SUMMARY REPORT
ONLINE MEETING
23 APRIL 2020

INTERCULTURAL CITIES

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CITÉS INTERCULTURELLES

BACKGROUND

Since the spread of the COVID-19 virus and disease, public authorities worldwide at all government levels are facing a large-scale emergency situation which is new to most of societies today. Apart from the immediate threat to health posed by the pandemic, the long-term impact is already providing challenges to our human rights *acquis*, social, economic and institutional structures, with obvious implications in all areas of our shared daily reality. Yet, medium- and long-term strategies to address these can be designed through participatory and inclusive approaches already now, with a view to ensuring a prompt response and treating this crisis as an opportunity for a deeper intercultural paradigm shift.

To this end, the ICC programme convened its member cities to an online meeting on 23 April with a view to:
1)   Collect and share the best practices/measures/initiatives implemented by the local authorities with the view to inspire and support each other. The focus of the discussion was on interculturalism and the intercultural lens, which consist of practices based on the ICC core principles of diversity advantage, equality and positive interaction.
2)   Prepare the cities' response based on the challenges identified and on the suggested solutions.

Representatives of the following cities/ICC networks participated in the meeting: Bergen, Botkyrka, Bradford, Bursa Osmangazi, Camden, Donostia/San Sebastian, Dublin, Dudelange, Haifa, Ioannina, Kristiansand, Kobe, Leeds, Limassol, Lublin, Mexico City, Modena, Montréal, Novellara, Odessa, Olbia, Oslo, Québec, Reggio Emilia, Reykjavik, Stavanger, the coordinators of the ICC National networks in Italy, Portugal, Spain, and Ukraine, a representative of the Australasian Network, and representatives of UNCHR and the Centro Pace Forlì.

Participants were asked to answer through examples, whenever possible, the following questions:
- How to harness community resources and foster intergroup solidarity?
- How to prevent a raise in xenophobia and deepening divides?
- How to mobilise intercultural creativity and support intercultural leadership on a grassroot level?
- How to support local businesses?
- How to continue intercultural communication and exchanges?
- How to make new partnerships and dynamics launched during the crisis sustainable?

PART I – CITIES INTERCULTURAL EMERGENCY RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC

OSLO, NORWAY

PUBLIC SERVICES

Although Norway has not proceeded to a complete lockdown, social distancing has immediately proven its ability to hinder integration and inclusion. Oslo's priority during the emergency has therefore been to ensure the citizens, and vulnerable groups in particular, receive adequate services and protection. Big efforts have been deployed to ensure that education continues at home for all the students, and that families living in small apartments with many children are supported with specific aid. The situation of undocumented migrants and homeless people has also been taken into account. Regular online meetings between the vice-mayor for diversity and the NGOs has enabled to address the specific issues affecting the youth and devise solutions to minimise the negative impact of the closure of the schools and of extra-school infrastructures, including sport clubs. They have created dedicated digital platforms and used tools such as Youtube to arrange online contests, meetings and other engaging activities. On a positive note, the city realised that all communities have sufficient access to online tools and this has helped people maintaining relationships while staying apart from each other. Yet, the city is looking into strengthening the digital infrastructure even further, so that citizens can access digital platforms for a wider range of activities, including bigger meetings, advice, learning, concerts and festivals etc.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND POSITIVE INTERACTION

The contribution of OXLO's Network[1] has been very important when it comes to translation and dissemination of information related to the Covid-19 preventive measures and recommended behaviours. The Mosques and small and medium businesses have also contributed to the dissemination effort. Additionally, in a video message addressed to the citizens, the vice mayor for diversity – a Muslim himself - gave five recommendations on behaviours to follow during Ramadan. These were disseminated on social media by both the city and the NGOs and relayed by mainstream media. The Mosque's networks also gave own advice on their digital channels and remain closed for the time being. The youth has also been mobilised to act as health ambassadors and to distribute information. All these experiences have been indicators for politicians that the measures and efforts devoted to citizens and network's empowerment in the past years have produced good results and contributed to better equip the society to respond to unforeseen and emergency events.

[1] OXLO - Oslo XL is a long-term city-wide awareness-raising campaign for diversity

BUSINESS SECTOR AND ACCESS TO EMPLOYMENT

The Norwegian government has launched programmes that help business to face the loss of income. These include unemployment benefits to the employees, so that they can keep their jobs. Another 1 MRD NOK has been set aside for sport clubs and cultural actors who are losing their income. At the level of the city, Oslo has adopted a plan which has set up aid for small and medium sized businesses, most of which earn money through the delivery of services.

ANTI-RUMOURS

The city has also faced a problem of the spreading of rumours targeting minority groups accused of not following the rules properly, and thus contributing to the spreading of the virus. To address this problem the city partnered with the national and local media to put emphasis on the real causes for a presumed higher number of contagions among minority groups, mainly due to less healthy working conditions, a bigger use of public transport, etc. One of the lessons learned from the situation is the need of making the strong nexus developed between the city services and the NGOs a lasting legacy of the crisis.

REYKJAVIK, ICELAND

MULTILINGUALISM AND INFORMATION SHARING

There have been some delays in triggering a response in Iceland at the state level but the first action taken has been to make information available in the main languages spoken in the countries. Once the state made available a special Covid-19 page in eight languages, the city focussed on the outreach asking how to ensure that the information reaches the population, in particular those communities which do not speak Icelandic? This was all the more important as the schools and kindergartens did not close but attendance is submitted to specific rules which is crucial to be aware of and follow. Some advertising agencies tasked with the dissemination of state information contacted the city after realising the reach out to the migrants was not optimal. This has been a good opportunity for both making diversity visible and starting new partnerships that hopefully will last. Yet the situation highlighted a few challenges related to cultural diversity, among which the difficulty for the migrant populations to understand the approach of the Icelandic authorities. The latter relies very much on individual sense of responsibility rather than on a centralised approach. Many migrants turned to their own national media to feel reassured. One of the lessons learned is that the city and state authorities have to devote more energy on building trust and links with the migrant communities.

PUBLIC SERVICES

LUBLIN, POLAND

In Poland the response to the emergency is very much centralised at the state level. Lublin is a city counting around 7.000 migrants, most of whom are foreign students and workers. An important part of the foreign population has Ukrainian roots, but the students come from everywhere in the world. As in other places, the first issue the migrant population faced was the language barrier in accessing official information, a challenge that has been addressed by translating relevant material into the most spoken foreign languages. Besides, a special page with daily information targeting foreign students has been made available online, and special measures have been adopted to ensure adequate access to healthcare for people that are not entitled to a social security number.

One of the restrictions that have been put in place by the national level is the prohibition for minors to go out alone. However, some of the foreign students in Lublin are below 18 and live alone in the city. Therefore, the city has set up a system allowing adults to volunteer for accompanying this population during their grocery shopping.

BUSINESS

The entrepreneurship and strategy department is preparing online training modules on how to move the business to online activities. More information will be communicated in due time. Similarly, Dublin informed that the Irish government has also launched programmes to assist businesses with loss of income; in addition, the Local Enterprise Office of the Dublin City Council has launched a Covid-19 Business Support network in place with staff available to provide advice.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND POSITIVE INTERACTION

The city has made greater use of its network of partner cities (over 40) to share information and help each other. Many of these partner cities are from Ukraine, a country which is two weeks behind Poland in terms of the impact of the pandemic.
This allows the Ukrainian cities to learn from the experience of their neighbours and better prepare. In a win-win spirit, they all collaborated to the setting up of online special pages in Ukrainian which are consulted by both the population in Ukraine and the foreign students of Ukrainian origin in Lublin.

Finally, the city has communicated extensively around the solidarity and volunteering initiatives of the minority groups so as to contribute to a better image of these fellow citizens.

LIMASSOL, CYPRUS

The health situation in the island has improved, however the economy is mainly based on the tourist sector which is now frozen, something which will soon result in problems. One of the crucial questions the city had to answer was how to reach out to the people in need. This question is intimately linked to interculturalism and will be discussed further within the ICC programme. As a first response, the mayor maintained close contacts with the intercultural council and the representatives of the migrant communities through an online meeting convened to assess special needs and challenges. A few ICC member cities participated in the exchange and helped by sharing practices. The ICC team also provided useful links to Covid-19 resources available in several languages, which enabled the city to gain time and resources.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND POSITIVE INTERACTION

Despite social distancing, the situation has resulted in more solidarity and community engagement. For instance, the Vietnamese community has donated food packages to help other minority or vulnerable groups. In general, the intercultural structures put in place within the city and the migrant communities showed they can generate a solidarity network themselves, which is a good capital for future.

PUBLIC SERVICES

The city has rethought some of their social services to be able to devote increased energy to first aid needs, including delivering food to the most vulnerable, assessing and taking care of the situation of the homeless, facilitating access to Covid-19 tests for all, offering social and psychological support, and connecting translators with the populations facing language problems.

DUDELANGE, LUXEMBOURG

PUBLIC SERVICES

The city departments realised the population was experiencing distress and anxiety and decided to immediately increase social support and services, including opportunities to ask questions about the virus. Information on rules and behaviours to follow during the quarantine was also massively spread, as well as more practical information, for example about which restaurants remain open for take away. The latter is also a way to help the small businesses, many of which are run by the migrant population. Besides, the municipality has suspended the payment of the rent for local shops (mostly migrant owned) for the next three months, while the State has set up a financial support for small businesses (5.000 euros each).

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND POSITIVE INTERACTION

A special survey was launched online to collect the needs of the citizens, including those of the migrant communities. The city also made available online programmes providing homework support for the kids, coffee breaks and social activities, concerts, etc. From the private sector, two hotels have opened special accommodation for the victims of domestic violence. The city encouraged volunteers to sew masks: more than 4000 were produced and distributed around the neighbourhoods. Finally, the scouts mobilised to help in delivering groceries to the population submitted to a lockdown obligation.

PUBLIC SERVICES

BURSA-OSMANGAZI, TURKEY

The restrictions have started a month later than most European countries, and the situation is currently getting worse. They have implemented a partial lockdown for persons below 20 and over 65; these are the groups for which the municipality is taking the most immediate actions. For instance, the municipal police is arranging free of charge the grocery shopping for people locked down, and the city offers free transportation through ambulances to enable the population to go to the hospital for regular care without having to use the public transport. The city also put the rentals and tax recovery from small business on stand-by for the moment. Special "quarantine apartments" have been put in place free of charge for people in need, providing they are residing legally in Turkey. A dedicated hotline for social support has been put in place: it received around 200 000 calls in one week, 10% of which have come from Syrians.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND POSITIVE INTERACTION

Social gatherings have been cancelled which is particularly challenging during Ramadan. Yet, the religious authorities have shown great cooperation and contributed to spread around the information regarding the behaviour to follow during the crises and dispensed the elderly from fasting during Ramadan.

BRADFORD, UNITED KINGDOM

MULTILINGUALISM AND INFORMATION SHARING

As many other cities Bradford has been confronted with the need of reaching out to the whole citizenry – including the most isolated - in view of disseminating crucial information to flatten the Covid-19 curb. To do that, they have used an i-van which drives in different areas of the city sharing information on the virus, in 12 different languages. This is an interactive information tool whose impact has been further increased through targeted communication on social media. It is estimated that so far there have been around 27 000 interactions with the van.

PUBLIC SERVICES

In preparing its response to the Covid-19 crisis the city has devoted special efforts to making sure that migrants, asylum seekers, Roma people and other groups, are not left out from essential public services and information sharing. They have been promoting online activities for both adults and children, and these included language courses to learn the languages spoken in the city. The city has also conducted a campaign to recruit volunteers for reducing social isolation. Finally, it is worth noticing that the city was engaged into a big research work involving over 30.000 people whose health and well-being was being monitored and assessed. The research has now been expanded to assess how the Covid-19 crisis is affecting people, considering also the different impact on social classes.

MONTRÉAL, CANADA

The city has undertaken several initiatives to reduce the negative impact of the Covid-19 crisis. Most of these actions have been adapted to or specially conceived for ethnocultural communities and migrants. The city has developed an outreach campaign to disseminate essential information to the local and foreign population. Special attention has been given to homeless people, most of which are asylum-seekers whose claims have not yet addressed. Among the measures, the city has created new shelter facilities and decided to keep the public libraries open so that people can go inside to get warm.

➡ **More information**

REGGIO EMILIA, ITALY

Reggio Emilia is the second Covid-19 most impacted region in Italy. Lockdown started on 24th February and since, nobody can go out and all shops except grocery shops are closed. The City Council was confronted by this unprecedented situation including a lack of know-how about how to address the many challenges deriving from it. And yet, the crisis revealed two positive outcomes: the ability of city institutions and civil society to mobilise quickly and effectively cooperate; the solidarity shown in particular by the migrants' communities.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND POSITIVE INTERACTION

The city set-up a special Covid-19 Commission within the City Council to address the main issues brought forward by this new situation. The work of the Commission is supported by an Observatory that serves as a platform for dialogue between the political leadership, the city administration and the civil society. It involves a wide range of stakeholders which main focus is health but who also discusses all sort of communities' issues, including socio-economic issues and other problematics specific to the migrant communities. The 30-member association under the Mondinsieme Foundation umbrella are also involved and have supported the action of the institutions through translation and dissemination of crucial information about the pandemic. Finally, the crisis revealed a strong sense of belonging of the migrant communities to their city, with many solidarity actions that showed they are fully part of the fabric of Reggio Emilia.

More information

STAVANGER, NORWAY

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND POSITIVE INTERACTION

The critical situation to which all communities are confronted has shown the citizens' resilience, solidarity, openness, and willingness to act. Stavanger has efficiently responded to the emergency by setting up "Preparedness groups", of mixed composition, each of which has been assigned responsibility for a specific field. One of these groups is precisely looking at the long-term impacts of the Covid-19 crises, including the likely big negative impact of the situation on the economy and employment opportunities in the city. A dedicated preparedness group is specifically monitoring the situation to prevent discrimination and social tensions. Meetings of the groups are held every second week and they are reporting to a leading group that coordinates actions within the municipality.

Despite the difficulties faced, the lesson learned here is that the groups are working well, are able to create creative solutions, rapid response, and efficient coordination across city departments which were not exchanging information before the crisis. Through the groups, the city also increased its connections with the grassroots association including migrant associations, the civil society in general, the business sector.

MEXICO, NATIONAL LEVEL

MIGRANTS, REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

The National committee on Human rights has issued a Recommendation to the National Migration Institute around three main axes: 1) adopt and implement measures to avoid overcrowding in migration reception centres; 2) monitoring health conditions of migrants, especially vulnerable people including children; 3) ensuring that migrants are kept fully informed, all the time. The government has also provided information in indigenous languages (indigenous people account for 10% of the population). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs sustained its support programmes to Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, to help them containing migratory displacement (particularly from rural communities). The borders of the country remained open. Social programmes are a government priority now, particularly in light of the forthcoming economic crisis that will affect the country due to the fall down of oil price. On a positive note, the crisis has boosted work on the legal reforms prepared to complete the legal framework that Mexico adopted on interculturality and human mobility.

AUSTRALASIAN NETWORK

PUBLIC SERVICES AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The information shared mainly concerns the councils of Ballarat, Melton, Salisbury and Auckland. The focus of their policies is on maintaining relationships between neighbourhoods, communities and people so that intercultural relations and trust will not have to be rebuilt from scratch after the crisis.

Most of the Councils are granting reductions on rentals and other rates, and some have put in place grants for small businesses (up to 20 employees) provided they can demonstrate hardship during the crisis.

Mental health problems have already been observed despite the restrictions not being as severe as in Europe. Ballarat city council has created a pandemic recovery and response plan highlighting that social distancing does not have to mean social isolation: they are maintaining activities within communities and at the neighbourhood level. The plan will be soon available on ICC special Covid page.

Auckland has launched many initiatives to ensure that the citizens are not disengaged and maintain contacts, for instance by providing telephones with internet connection to those who were not equipped. It also provided specific assistance to homeless people including through a food bank.

Salisbury is looking at maintaining and updating the use of the public facilities which are currently closed, thinking about how they can be adapted, regenerated and reinforced after the crisis.

ICC-UA, UKRAINIAN NETWORK

In ICC members in Ukraine the city administrations are working at identifying the challenges posed by the crisis (for instance how to support the business sector) while the NGO sector has been more active in the field and at the grassroot level.

One example of this are the bi-weekly meetings that the Civic Engagement Club, a local NGO in Sumy, is organising with migrant communities about accessibility and reliability of information. As mentioned, the situation of the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) is particularly worrying due to the lack of preparedness to face the crisis - they do not have the capacity to survive a long-term lockdown and the State level has not foreseen a possibility of putting rentals or taxes on hold at the moment. A way forward could be the release of small grants that would help small business go online.

RECI, SPANISH NETWORK

Due to the dramatic situation faced by the country, the Spanish authorities have imposed a very strict lockdown. The latter has emphasised strong inequalities that do not affect only migrants but the population as a whole.

They are based on differences in social classes and already existed before the crisis, even though the present situation brought light to it. Among the main social inequalities there are inadequate housing conditions, job precarity, as well as the digital gap. Positive interaction (or lack thereof) in a confined country is also a big challenge when accessibility to online/alternative tools is not available for all. There is a need to rethink how to promote interaction and interculturalism into this new societal setting where people cannot move within a country or from one country to another.

On a positive note, the citizens have realised how crucial the services usually provided by migrants through low-paid and precarious jobs are for society. Among the many examples there is the work in the agricultural sector, the cleaning of streets, small community shops, and the homecare/elderly-care services. This has had some positive outcomes; for instance, there is a social movement which is gaining importance and is lobbying for the regularisation of all migrants. The government is thinking about facilitating work permits and residence permits for migrants in specific situations. A written contribution about the specific measures adopted by the RECI cities will be submitted and published on ICC Special Covid-19 page.

REMIRI, QUÉBEC

The informal network of the cities in Québec is having weekly online meetings and members are concerned with supporting food banks, making multi-lingual information available, as well as summer camps. They have set up a working group on stigmatisation and hate speech related to the pandemic. More information will be submitted in writing soon.

PART II – PREPARING FOR POST COVID-19 RECOVERY

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

HARNESSING COMMUNITY RESOURCES TO STRENGTHEN SOCIAL TRUST AND DIALOGUE

The economic crisis which is already impacting most of the world will materialise in reduced GDP; society will need to boost their economy and there is a risk for labour rights to be impacted at least on the short and medium term. Stronger social dialogue around the job market, business, and employment will be needed. **Limassol** suggested that the role of diversity mediators could be an asset to bring together actors from all the communities to work together on the best response and to provoke a paradigm shift across political parties. These dialogues could work on the model of trade unions negotiation tables, and include workers, trade unions, employers, representatives of employees, chambers of commerce and investors. This will create a new context in which to work.

INTERCULTURAL CREATIVITY AND MULTI-LEVEL COOPERATION

Preparedness groups following the positive experience of **Stavanger** (see above) could be created in all cities to deal with specific issues that require thinking out of the box and collective effort for systemic change. A permanent dialogue between the city's leadership and the migrant associations and civil society (eg. **Limassol, Oslo, Ukrainian cities**, etc.) should be carried out on a regular basis.

ANTI-DISCRIMINATION AND NO-HATE

As a result of the pandemic globalisation is already being challenged and there is a risk that society turns towards more nationalistic approaches as a response to fear and insecurity. Although there is general awareness about the advantages of diversity in the business sector, there is a need to open a general discussion about social justice, equality, and non-discrimination. **Oslo** is currently working on an action plan against hate, looking at the connections between fear and discrimination. The city is also planning to set up a dedicated secretariat, essentially an ombudsperson, to address discrimination. Such a body could be put in place in the whole ICC network and could have a broader mandate, including carrying out training programmes for managers and leaders on anti-discrimination monitoring and mediation. Other actions include:

- Partnering with local and national media to get the right messages out (eg. **Oslo**);
- Carrying out researches and monitor hate speech and/or discrimination (eg. **Bradford**).

SUPPORTING LOCAL BUSINESS THROUGH A NEW ECONOMIC MODEL

Positively enough, in many European countries and cities the pandemic is slowly provoking a shift in mentalities regarding the dominant economic model, turning the focus on green economy as both an inclusive model of economy and an opportunity for more sustainable development. **ICEI** stressed how the pandemic has already changed – even though temporarily for the moment – the way people consume, and the way they look at the environment and climate change. Some of these changes in behaviours will last, some of the jobs lost these days will not come back. The future economic model will have to take into account the gaps and vulnerabilities highlighted by the present crisis, but also prepare to face new crisis.

Other measures could include:
- Support to local business with training programmes on how to diversify their offer by moving online (eg. **Lublin**);
- Free support and advice on marketing and crisis strategies (eg. **Dublin**);
- Providing small grants to test innovative initiatives, or loans to face economic difficulties (many cities);
- Facilitating (or campaigning to facilitate) work permits for migrant workers in the fields they showed to be indispensable.

FOSTERING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITAL TOOLS

Many of the intercultural cities experienced the challenges of providing online services and contact opportunities to the whole population. Online tools are powerful and yet accessibility to them depend on age and, more important, to social classes and to the economic situation of the families. Besides, online tools – and social media in particular – are also widely used to spread fake news, rumours, hate-speech and discriminatory behaviours.

The challenge here is how to use them effectively to spread the intercultural message and, more generally, to promote more efficient communication from public authorities.

One of the priorities for the future should be the creation of a more connected network through a wider use of digital platforms, including by the migrant communities, following the successful examples already shared. At the level of the cities, they need to pay special attention to the digital empowerment of the whole community, and to ways of reducing the "digital gap" between people of different social status and levels of income. The investments dedicated by **Oslo** to this end in the past have proven their value. In particular, cities must be careful not to reproduce segregation in the virtual space. Among the key actions the following were suggested:

- Using online tools to share practical solutions and promoting linguistic support with partner cities on a more regular basis (eg. **Lublin**);
- Implement a communication strategy to inform the majority population about the contribution of migrants to common well-being, solidarity initiatives, and the challenges faced by the most vulnerable (eg. **Reggio Emilia**);
- Ensure all citizens have at least minimum equipment to access online tools (eg. **Auckland**);
- Set up new online platforms to encourage meaningful contacts within society and coordinate joint action (eg. **Limassol, Dudelange**, etc.).
- Sharing information on diverse channels and in various formats (eg. **Oslo, Kristiansand**)

MAKING NEW PARTNERSHIPS AND DYNAMICS LAUNCHED DURING THE CRISIS SUSTAINABLE

The Covid-19 emergency showed the need to engage the whole society, including migrants, in both the emergency and recovery response. One of the biggest obstacles to their swift involvement has been the lack of multilingual resource packages. As soon as these were put in place, their commitment and engagement has been immediate. The following practices shall be maintained and mainstreamed:

- Providing multi-lingual information on a regular basis;
- Using innovative tools to reach out to the most isolated groups (eg. **Bradford**'s i-van with digital multi-lingual messages);
- Organise language coaching, both in the main society language and in the languages of the migrant communities. This is an investment that will pay in the medium-long-term.

REDUCING SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

Adequate housing for the whole citizenry has proven to be a target far to be reached in most of the cities. It is an essential element of well-being and integration. Cities have to find the way to mobilise resources to address this issue. Isolation has also proven to be a problem for the most vulnerable people; and yet many neighbourhoods organised themselves - many times thanks to the impulse of civil society – to help each other and carry out a big number of solidarity initiatives. Cities should continue and promote the recruiting of volunteers to help reduce social isolation and foster intercultural/inter-generational solidarity. Other initiatives that should be sustained concern:

- Homework support (including online) on a regular basis to the most vulnerable families;
- Free online gym/sport/dance lessons aired live to ensure at least virtual interaction ;
- Activities promoting local connections and relationships between neighbours (cultural activities, coffee breaks, intercultural cooking courses, etc.);
- Organising and leading active campaigning for easier access to residence and social rights.