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Pitfalls**

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Milan

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1. INTRODUCTION

Among Italian cities, Milan is perhaps the most elusive and difficult to define, shaped as much by what it is not as by what it purportedly claims to be. Even when confined within its formal geographical limits – those of the municipality, the metropolitan authority, and their respective jurisdictions –, the city fails to coincide with its functional urban reality. This misalignment seems to expose a persistent tension between territorially bounded legal authority and an urban space that is inherently open, fluid, and organised around social, economic, and political networks that exceed formal boundaries.

Despite its limited territorial size, Milan's functional and structural reach extends well beyond its statutory borders: residential districts merge seamlessly into an array of neighbouring municipalities, and its economic, social, and cultural networks operate on a metropolitan scale that surpasses any formal delineation. In its capacity as a "metropolitan city", it remains an institutional abstraction endowed with some legal *status* yet lacking a cohesive political identity or shared sense of territorial belonging. Functionally, the urban area is virtually boundless, but it lacks the infrastructural integration and administrative coherence capable of effectively support this expansion.¹

This ambiguity extends to the city's own inhabitants, who still ask one another, upon meeting: "*But are you from Milan proper?*" – a question commonly phrased in Italian as "*ma sei di Milano Milano?*".² This seemingly casual inquiry presupposes a (fictional) distinction between Milan itself and its surrounding urban area, revealing a boundary that is at once geographic, social, and implicitly juridical. Situated at the heart of the Pianura Padana plain – *medio (p)lanum*, as its Latin name perhaps suggests –,³ Milan lacks any morphological features capable of anchoring its contours or constraining its expansion.

In the absence of externally imposed restraints, the city has long relied on a strong ethos of self-organisation and pragmatic self-reliance, epitomised by the local expression *ghe pensi mi* – loosely translatable as "I'll take care of it myself" – which captures a deeply rooted "do-it-yourself" orientation that informs both everyday (urban) life and the broader governance culture. Over time, this (neo)liberal disposition has shaped both Milan's physical development and institutional architecture, adapting them to shifting socio-economic pressures, to the point that the city itself has become a brand.⁴ Such adaptive dynamism, while frequently celebrated as a source of innovation and resilience, has also produced a persistent disjunction between the city as it is lived and the legal and administrative frameworks through which it is formally governed.

Devoid of any natural geography capable of anchoring its contours,⁵ Milan has repeatedly intervened in its own landscape, creating what was not there: it has constructed a 'mountain',⁶

¹ Lodigiani, R. (Ed.). (2015). *Milano 2015: La città metropolitana: sfide, contraddizioni, attese*. FrancoAngeli.

² On the social production of urban boundaries, see further Simmel, G., *The metropolis and mental life* (1903); Lefebvre, H., *The production of space* (Blackwell, 1991).

³ Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana. (2010). Milano. In *Dizionario di Storia*. [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/milano_\(Dizionario-di-Storia\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/milano_(Dizionario-di-Storia)/); see also Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana. (n.d.). Milano. In *Enciclopedie Online*. Retrieved February 22, 2026, from <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/milano/>

⁴ Dinnie, K. (2011). *City branding: Theory and cases*. Palgrave Macmillan.; Rolando, S. (Ed.) (2008) *Brand Milano: Come e perché promuovere l'attrattività di una città con un'immagine piuttosto disallineata da quella della sua nazione*, FrancoAngeli.

⁵ Del Fabbro M., 'Concettualizzazioni e rappresentazioni dell'area urbana di Milano (1986-2016)' (2017) 48(120) *Archivio di Studi Urbani e Regionali* 73.

⁶ Monte Stella is an artificial hill in north-western Milan, created between 1946 and 1955 from the rubble of buildings destroyed during the Second World War. Designed by the architect Piero Bottoni, it forms the core of the QT8 experimental housing district. See Costa, A. (2025). *MilanoInCima: Sentiero urbano dal Duomo al Monte Stella*. Meravigli.

excavated a ‘water basin’,⁷ diverted and culverted rivers,⁸ opened and sealed canals,⁹ and dismantled and rebuilt entire neighbourhoods.¹⁰ Little remains of the city as it existed a century ago, and even visitors returning after only two decades would struggle to recognise it.¹¹ Over the past two decades, Milan’s skyline has been profoundly reshaped,¹² a transformation that has gone hand in hand with deep, and at times troubling, shifts in the social and functional fabric of numerous neighbourhoods.¹³ The famous Milan of ‘fog and panettone’,¹⁴ once ‘filtered’ through television, has now receded, replaced by a city strategically branded through fashion, design, digital culture, and weekend consumption. Former industrial zones have been repurposed as event spaces and co-working districts, as the city shifts from production towards circulation – of images, capital, and, most significantly, people, together with their aspirations, desires, and needs.

In a national context often anchored in historical continuity and inherited traditions, Milan’s readiness to embrace change and novelty is frequently met with scepticism or irony. Yet for the authentic *Milanese*, the city’s ‘golden age’ is invariably imagined as lying ahead. This constant forward thrust produces a city that rarely pauses to reflect on its own limits – territorial, social, or legal. Like a seductress, Milan refrains from judgment, mirroring itself instead in the eyes of the beholder: welcoming or exclusionary, liberating or engulfing, open or conformist.

Built on sand,¹⁵ Milan offers little resistance to transformation, allowing itself to be continuously (re)shaped through successive cycles of urban intervention. This adaptive capacity for adaptation has enabled the city to invent, cultivate, and commodify new urban desires at remarkable speed.¹⁶ Yet it is precisely this urban ‘plasticity’ that generates a set of concrete legal

⁷ The Darsena di Milano is a man-made harbour basin located at the southern end of the Navigli canal system. It can be described as a former inland dock basin that functioned as the main port of Milan’s canal network and today serves as a redeveloped public waterfront space. On the matter, see AA.VV. (2017). *La Darsena: Dalle origini ad oggi. Milano: Le sue acque e i suoi navigli*. Selecta Editrice.

⁸ Massari, U. (1929). *La deviazione del fiume Olona secondo il tracciato di piano regolatore (legge 12/7/1912, n. 866) e la sistemazione del fiume Lambro Meridionale*. Stabilimento Tip. Stucchi.

⁹ Cassone, A., Biscardini, R. (2014). *Riaprire i navigli si può: Un grande progetto per Milano*. Biblion; Boatti, A. (2015). Milano ri-trova l’acqua e la sua storia: Gli elementi naturali e le risorse idriche come nuovi valori della qualità urbana nella metropoli. *Ricerche per la Progettazione del Paesaggio*. <https://doi.org/10.13128/RV-17547> Tyson, J. (2021, February 9). Milan: Italy’s lost city of canals. *BBC Travel*. <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20210208-milan-italys-lost-city-of-canals>

¹⁰ Cutini, V., Farese, D., Rabino, G., ‘Milan: The configuration of a metropolis’, in Papa R., Fistola R., Gargiulo C. (Eds.), *Smart planning: Sustainability and mobility in the age of change – Green Energy and Technology Series* (Springer, 2018) 343-357.

¹¹ Biferale, L., Al-Mejren, M., Benudiz, N. L., Bonzi, G. M., Dal Brollo, F., Hofer, E., Lattanzi, S., Dubini, P., ‘Cultural investments and gentrification: An urban transformation study of the city of Milan between 2001 and 2021’ (2026) 170 *Cities* 106651.

¹² Petsimeris, P., ‘Social and ethnic transformation of large social housing estates in Milan, Italy: From modernity to marginalisation’, in Hess, D., Tammaru, T., Van Ham, M. (Eds.), *Housing estates in Europe*, The Urban Book Series (Springer 2018) 265.

¹³ D’Ovidio, M., ‘Milano, città duale’, in Ranci, C. (Ed.), *I limiti sociali della crescita: Milano e le città d’Europa, tra competitività e disuguaglianze* (Maggioli 2009), pp. 9 ff.; Consolazio, D., Benassi, D., Russo, A. G., ‘Ethnic residential segregation in the city of Milan at the interplay between social class, housing and labour market’ (2023) 60(10) *Urban Studies* 185.

¹⁴ The trope of the “Milan of fog and panettone” evokes the city’s late-industrial identity as a manufacturing and financial hub of northern Italy, characterised by winter smog and bourgeois commercial culture. On Milan’s transition from industrial capital to post-industrial global city, see Bigatti, G., Meriggi, M. (Eds.), *Storia d’Italia: Le regioni dall’Unità a oggi. La Lombardia*. (Einaudi 2001); Balducci, A., Fedeli, V., Curci, F. (Eds.), *Post-metropolitan territories* (Routledge, 2017).

¹⁵ On the alluvial and fluvio-glacial composition of the Milanese subsoil, see Regione Lombardia, *Carta Geologica della Lombardia – Foglio Milano*. On the hydraulic re-engineering of the city and its artificial landscape, see Regione Lombardia, *Carta geologica della Lombardia: Foglio Milano*; Bocchi, S., Consonni, G. (Eds.), *Milano e le sue acque* (Abitare Segesta 2005); Bauman, Z., *Liquid modernity* (Polity 2000); Brenner, N., *New state spaces* (Oxford University Press 2004).

¹⁶ Budzynski, S. J., *Evoking the new city: Milan from post-World War II reconstruction through the economic miracle* (Mimesis International, 2020).

and normative questions. As the city's functional footprint persistently exceeds its formal territorial and institutional boundaries, uncertainty emerges regarding the allocation of decision-making authority, the distribution of responsibility for urban transformation across different governance levels, and whose interests are ultimately prioritised through these transformations.

These tensions are far from merely theoretical; rather, they materialise in differentiated levels of access to adequate housing, public space, welfare systems, and political participation. Examining these distinct yet complementary dimensions enable a more refined assessment of how urban rights are articulated, disputed, and exercised on the ground. From this perspective, Milan emerges as an international urban actor whose growing engagement in city diplomacy and global policy arenas unfolds within a normative framework informed by human rights obligations, sustainability agendas, and the open-ended horizon of the right to the city.

1.1 Milan as an Emerging International Urban Actor

Milan occupies a distinctive position in the European urban landscape. Long established as Italy's leading economic centre and a hub of fashion, design, finance, and innovation, it has evolved far beyond its industrial origins into a diversified and knowledge-intensive metropolis. Today, Milan serves as a key node for global capital flows, cultural and creative industries, scientific inquiry, and environmental governance. As a result, it increasingly performs the functions of an international actor, taking part in transnational city networks (TCNs)¹⁷ – such as, *inter alia*, Eurocities, C40 - Cities Climate Leadership Group, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Fast-Track Cities, Mayors for Housing, Mayors for Peace, European Forum for Urban Security (EFUS), and, as founder, Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP) –¹⁸ aligning with global sustainability agendas, and embedding European and international norms within its local policymaking.¹⁹

This contemporary phase of internationalisation also finds resonance in the historical legal traditions of urban autonomy in the Italian peninsula. As highlighted by Susanne Lepsius – quoting Magnus Ryan –, the major northern Italian communes of the Later Middle Ages (including Milan) were portrayed in legal-political doctrine as *civitates sibi principes*: self-governing urban entities, largely independent from external control and capable of generating their own norms through frequently revised statutes and supplementary council enactments, most notably in areas such as, for instance, food provisioning.²⁰ Their institutional architecture was designed around republic self-government and rotating offices, with short terms intended to prevent the accumulation or consolidation of power, and with a dense administrative apparatus spanning judicial, fiscal and infrastructural domains.²¹ For medieval jurists, however, the defining element of this autonomy was jurisdiction itself: the expansive competence of communal courts, including over criminal matters, was interpreted as perhaps the clearest indicator of political independence, prompting scholars to characterise these communes as possessing *summum imperium et iurisdictionem*, a concept approaching later notions of sovereignty.²²

¹⁷ On the growing diffusion and prominence of the phenomenon of so-called transnational city networks (TCNs) see, *inter alia*, Foster, S. R., & Swiney, C., 'City networks and the globalization of urban governance' in Aust H.P., Nijman J.E. (eds.), *Research Handbook on International Law and Cities* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022) 368.

¹⁸ A comprehensive list of the transnational city networks (TCNs) in which Milan participates is available at: <https://www2.comune.milano.it/aree-tematiche/relazioni-internazionali/city-to-city-cooperation/reti-e-coordinamenti>.

¹⁹ Blank, Y., 'Localism in the new global legal order' (2006) 47 *Harvard International Law Journal* 263; Porras, I. M., 'The city and international law: In pursuit of sustainable development' (2009) 36 *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 537; Pavoni, R., 'Sustainable development as a cornerstone of cities' engagement with international law (2021) 30(1) *Italian Yearbook of International Law Online* 59.

²⁰ Lepsius, S., 'The legal system among Italian city republics', in Aust and Nijman (n 17) 41.

²¹ Cf. Waley, D. *The Italian city-republics* (3rd ed., Longman, 1988).

²² Lepsius (n 20), at 42.

At the same time, this autonomy was neither uniform nor uncontested.²³ The Holy Roman Emperor long retained a supreme authority – empowered, at least in principle, to adjudicate disputes, impose truces, require oaths, appoint imperial vicars, and promulgate norms –, yet the actual reach of imperial control considerably depending on circumstances. During the frequent periods of imperial absence, Italian city republics interacted with one another through overtly diplomatic practices, somehow withering, if not overtly altering, the ‘Westphalian’ order: leagues, alliances, treaties, negotiated access to roads and markets, rules on asylum and exile, and arrangements concerning tolls and territorial claims.²⁴ Alongside these instruments, a shared legal lexicon drawn by a ‘mixture’ of both Roman and canon law – the *ius commune* – further provided a common framework for interactions across diverse and fragmented statutory traditions.²⁵ Therefore, the medieval city system – and not only the Italian one – wove together robust claims to internal autonomy with continuous external coordination, legal pluralism, and jurisdictional contestation.²⁶

This historical constellation is not meant to imply any equivalence between medieval city republics and present-day municipalities. Contemporary Milan lacks sovereignty and its action is straitjacketed within constitutional constraints. Nonetheless, the aforementioned genealogy remains revealing, as it emphasises a long-standing tension in the Italian urban tradition between territorially bounded legal authority, on the one hand, and the city’s practical capacity to act beyond its formal confines through law-like tools, institutional expertise, and inter-urban cooperation, on the other hand. Against this background, Milan’s current involvement in TCNs, soft-law regimes, and global policy initiatives and platforms can be read not only as an adaptive response to globalisation, but also as a contemporary rearticulation – under radically different legal conditions – of older patterns of urban external agency.²⁷

In this regard, the Mayor and the municipal administration of the City of Milan can count on the support of its International Relations Department, whose main task is to consolidate the city’s role at an international level, unfolding its potential appeal and enhancing its international presence through three operational units.²⁸ First, the City Relations and Cooperation Unit, which organises and manages the agenda of international meetings and missions for the Mayor and his delegates, welcomes delegations from other countries and oversees the signing of agreements with foreign ‘twin’ cities, maintains relations with the Consular Corps and the diaspora in the city, provides support for the organisation of international events in Milan, promotes international cooperation and solidarity by participating in projects in countries in the southern hemisphere – with a particular focus on metropolitan areas – and implementing global citizenship education initiatives. Second, the European Affairs Unit, which mainly coordinates Milan’s participation in Eurocities and, more broadly, manages relations with European bodies and European cities for activities aimed at presenting projects and exchanging know-how. Last (but not least), the International Partnerships Unit, which participates in the activities of international city networks, such as the C40 Climate Leadership Group, in collaboration with other units in the area and in conjunction with the relevant departments and directorates, prepares the City of Milan’s

²³ For an overview, see Sossai, M., ‘Invisibility of cities in classical international law’, in Aust and Nijman (n 17) 64-74.

²⁴ Sassen, S., *Territory, authority, rights: From medieval to global assemblages* (Princeton University Press, 2009); Vormann, B., ‘Global city networks and the nation-state: Rethinking a false tradeoff’, in Aust and Nijman (n 17) 90.

²⁵ Van Caenegem, R. C., ‘*Ius commune*: The first unification of European law’, in *European law in the past and the future: Unity and diversity over two millennia* (Cambridge University Press, 2001) 22; Padoa-Schioppa, A., ‘The medieval *ius commune*’, in *A history of law in Europe: From the early Middle Ages to the twentieth century* (Cambridge University Press, 2017) 193.

²⁶ Boestad, T., ‘Legitimizing interurban cooperation in the Middle Ages: The legal system of the Hanse’, in Aust and Nijman (n 17), 29-40.

²⁷ Acuto, M., Rayner, S., ‘City networks: Breaking gridlocks or forging (new) lock-ins?’ (2016) 92(5) *International Affairs* 1147.

²⁸ Comune di Milano (City of Milan), International Relations, <https://www2.comune.milano.it/en/aree-tematiche/relazioni-internazionali>.

application dossiers to host international organisations or events or to obtain international awards or recognitions.

Over the last decade, Milan's external projection has intensified through a constellation of developments that have significantly redefined its place in European and global urban networks. Among these initiatives, there are the transformative legacy of Expo 2015, which established Milan as a major international convening site²⁹; its emergence as one of Europe's principal smart-city and innovation hubs;³⁰ the governance challenges and opportunities linked to its central role in national migration dynamics;³¹ the international visibility afforded by the Milano-Cortina 2026 Olympic and Paralympic Games;³² and its strategic aspiration to function as a southern gateway within European innovation and cultural circuits.

Although this list is not intended to be comprehensive nor exhaustive, it identifies the most salient drivers of Milan's expanding international projection. Across these domains, Milan employs international and European norms not merely as rhetorical references but, rather, as instruments capable of structuring policy priorities, legitimising interventions, and enabling participation in internationalised governance arenas. Yet Milan's international openness also exposes a deeper set of contradictions. The same strategies that allow the city to align itself with global agendas – through sustainability frameworks, human rights discourse, and participation in TCNs – contribute to worsening socio-economic disparities and uneven access to urban resources. Put it otherwise, Milan's efforts to enhance civil and political rights and promote progressive narratives often coexists with growing inequalities in economic, social, and cultural rights, including access to housing, welfare provision, and cultural inclusion. The city's global orientation is thus far from frictionless. The selective mobilisation of international standards thus frequently clashes with national regulatory constraints and uneven administrative capacity, also triggering possible domestic political contestation. At the same time, the ever-growing reliance on soft-law instruments, global benchmarking practices, and transnational networks prioritises policy areas endowed with strong institutional and financial resources, while marginalising local actors less equipped to operate within internationalised governance settings. Taken together, these dynamics worsen already existing socio-economic hierarchies and limit the transformative potential of global norms when they are translated into the local urban 'arena'.³³

Milan's approach thus aptly illustrates both the enabling and constraining effects of the growing reliance of urban governments on global norms. On the one hand, the mobilisation of international standards allows the city to access resources, enhance legitimacy, bypass domestic institutional and political bottlenecks, and pursue progressive policy agendas in areas such as sustainability, inclusion, and cultural rights. On the other hand, this mode of governance exposes a structural paradox at the heart of Milan's international projection. Indeed, while engagement in TCNs and global policy arenas advances certain dimensions of urban citizenship

²⁹ Di Vita, S., Erba, V., *Milano Expo 2015: Un'occasione di sviluppo sostenibile* (FrancoAngeli, 2010).

³⁰ Armondi, S., Bruzzese, A., 'Contemporary production and urban change: The case of Milan' (2017) 24(3) *Journal of Urban Technology* 27.

³¹ For an historical retrospective, see Foot, J., 'Immigration and the city: Milan and mass immigration, 1958-98' (1999) 4(2) *Modern Italy*, 159-172. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13532949908454827>; Foot, J., 'Migration and the "miracle" at Milan: The neighbourhoods of Baggio, Barona, Bovisa and Comasina in the 1950s and 1960s' (2002) 10 *Journal of Historical Sociology* 184-213. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6443.00036>; for a more recent assessment, see instead Bini, V., Gambazza, G., 'The reception of asylum seekers in urban areas: The case of the city of Milan' (2019) 1 *Belgeo*; European Commission. (2024). *Italy 2023 overview: Migrant presence in cities*. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/whats-new/publications/italy-2023-overview-migrant-presence-cities_en.

³² Raco, M., Di Vita, S., 'Replacing place with space: The influences and the challenges of the new norm on the Milan-Cortina Winter Games 2026' (2024) 39(3) *Planning Perspectives* 701-719, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2024.2336124>

Bazzanella, F., Bichler, B. F., Schnitzer, M., 'Collaboration and meta-organisation in event tourism: Effects of the Olympic Agenda 2020 on planning the 2026 Winter Olympics' (2022) 41, 100939, *Tourism Management Perspectives*.

³³ Bigatti, G., 'Milan, the Story of an Urban Metamorphosis', in Berger, S., Musso, S., Wicke, C. (eds.) *Deindustrialisation in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

– such as, *inter alia*, public participation, symbolic recognition, and cultural expression –, it simultaneously relies on governance instruments that are selective, uneven, and strongly capacity-dependent. These instruments tend to privilege actors, specific policy domains, and territories best positioned to mobilise expertise, funding, and international visibility, while sidelining those with fewer institutional or material resources. Therefore, Milan’s internal governance landscape does not merely reflect pre-existing disparities but often reproduces, and at times exacerbates, entrenched socio-economic inequalities that shape everyday access to housing, welfare, and social rights. In this sense, Milan emerges not so much as an ambitious international urban actor, but rather as a city whose cosmopolitan orientation coexists with enduring internal inequalities and social stratifications, thereby raising questions about the distributive scope and transformative depth of the commitments it projects outward.

1.2 Sketching a General Theoretical Framework: City Diplomacy, Human Rights, and Urban Governance

Over the past two decades, cities have increasingly emerged as relevant actors in the domain of global governance, engaging directly with international organisations, TCNs, and broader global policy agendas. This growing role has been conceptualised and recognized through expressions such as ‘city diplomacy’,³⁴ ‘urban paradiplomacy’,³⁵ and ‘local internationalism’,³⁶ each seeking to capture the diverse modalities through which cities are able – and increasingly expected – to act beyond the traditional confines of the Westphalian nation-state. While these notions slightly differ in emphasis and nuance, they converge on a common insight: cities are no longer merely administrative units charged with the implementation of national policies, but participate in the production, circulation, interpretation, and realisation of international norms and standards.³⁷ Milan’s global engagement must therefore be situated in the context of a broader reconfiguration of political authority, where urban actors are increasingly willing to navigate complex multi-level governance environments while seeking to project influence, attract resources, and shape policy agendas across local, national, and international scale.

In this regard, the phenomenon of so-called ‘city diplomacy’ commonly refers to the multifaceted array of activities through which local governments seek to articulate international objectives and develop transnational partnerships with a view of positioning themselves within global governance arenas. These practices increasingly occur in policy domains historically reserved for state sovereignty or international cooperation at the state level – among others, migration and refugee law, human rights, climate action, and sustainable development –, thus unsettling traditional assumptions surrounding the territorial allocation of competences.³⁸ In operational terms, city diplomacy takes multiple forms, such as participation in TCNs,³⁹ the adoption of global frameworks such as the 2030 Agenda and related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within municipal planning and strategies, the negotiation of city-to-city agreements and broader partnerships,⁴⁰ and the strategic use of mega-events, policy forums, and international conferences as instruments of agenda-setting and norm ‘vernacularisation’, often

³⁴ Marchetti, R., *City diplomacy: from city-states to global cities* (University of Michigan Press, 2021).

³⁵ See, e.g., Smith, H.J.M., ‘City Networks and Paradiplomacy as Global Public Policy’, in Stone D. and Moloney K. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Global Policy and Transnational Administration* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

³⁶ Wexler L., ‘The Promise and Limits of Local Human Rights Internationalism’ (2010) 37 *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 599.

³⁷ Barber, B.R., *If Mayors Ruled the World: Dysfunctional Nations, Rising Cities* (Yale University Press, 2013).

³⁸ Sossai (n 23), at 71-72.

³⁹ Loges, B., Jakobi, A.P., ‘Stabilising contested normative orders: how international city networks contribute to preventing norm decay’ (2025) *Global Constitutionalism* 1, doi:10.1017/S2045381725100166.

⁴⁰ See, e.g., Ruffert, M., ‘Transboundary Cooperation between Local or Regional Authorities’, in *Oxford Encyclopedia of Public International Law*, January 2011; for a concrete example of such agreements, see Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *City-to-City Partnerships to Localise the Sustainable Development Goals*, OECD Urban Studies (OECD Publishing, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1787/d2fe7530-en>.

contributing to prevent norm decay thanks to their stabilising capacities.⁴¹ Yet such forms of city diplomacy rarely proceeds through formal legal authority alone. Instead, it draws on a variety of nuanced instruments, such as soft power, networked forms of governance, acts of leadership, and policy experimentation. This special combination renders cities particularly effective agents of normative diffusion, also raising complex questions regarding democratic accountability, international legal responsibility, and the relationship between international commitments and local implementation.

Human rights have become a central *leitmotif* of contemporary city diplomacy. Across regions, municipalities increasingly frame local policies in human rights terms, adopt rights-based approaches to service provision, and engage (directly or indirectly) with international human rights supervisory mechanisms and networks. This development reflects both normative and strategic considerations. On the one hand, human rights offer a relatively universal idiom through which cities can articulate claims to legitimacy, inclusion, and justice. On the other hand, they provide a *repertoire* of standards that municipalities may mobilise to complement – or, at times, to contest – national policy choices, particularly where state-level approaches are perceived as inadequate or exclusionary. In this sense, human rights operate not only as legal norms but also as political resources that cities deploy to recalibrate their position within multi-level governance.

This ‘urban turn’ has also been captured in the notion of human rights cities.⁴² A growing number of local governments have explicitly embraced the ‘human rights city’ label, presenting human rights as “fundamental values and guiding principles” of local governance and everyday life – as reflected, *inter alia*, in the 2011 Gwangju Guiding Principles for a Human Right City⁴³. The designation remains informal and uneven in practice, yet it signals an emerging movement in which cities seek to ‘bring international law close to home’ through localised norm translation, horizontal peer networks, and internal governance reforms.⁴⁴ This dynamic mirrors the proximity-based approach to rights implementation – often articulated through the principle of subsidiarity –, long affirmed in international human rights law, which emphasises that human rights should be realised at the level of governance closest to rights-holders.⁴⁵

⁴¹ See, e.g., Fitzgerald, T., Maharaj, B. ‘Mega-event trends and impacts’, in Wise N., Maguire K., *A Research Agenda for Event Impacts* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2022) 181; Green, S.J., ‘Staged Cities: Mega Events, Slum Clearance, and Global Capital’ (2003) 6 *Yale Human Rights & Development Law Journal* 161.

⁴² On the concept of ‘human rights city’ see, more generally, Oomen, B., David, M.F., Grigolo, M., *Global Urban Justice: The Rise of Human Rights Cities* (Cambridge University Press, 2016); Van Den Berg, E., Oomen, B., ‘Towards a Decentralisation of Human Rights: The Rise of Human Rights Cities’, in Lettinga, D., Van Lindert, T. (eds.), *The Future of Human Rights in an Urban World. Exploring Opportunities, Threats and Challenges* (Amnesty International Netherlands, 2014) 11; Davis, M., ‘Finding international law close to home: the case of human rights cities’, in Aust and Nijman (n 17), at 202; Tieghi, G., ‘Human Rights Cities: lo Human Rights-Based Approach per la governance locale’ (Human Rights Cities: the Human Rights-Based Approach for the Local Governance) (2019) 40(3) *DPCE Online*, <https://doi.org/10.57660/dpceonline.2019.784>.

⁴³ World Human Rights Cities Forum. *Gwangju Guiding Principles for a Human Rights City*. Adopted 17 May 2014, Gwangju, Republic of Korea. World Human Rights Cities Forum, available at: <https://www.uclg-cisd.org/en/documents/gwangju-guiding-principles-human-rights-city-2014.pdf>.

⁴⁴ See Human Rights Council, *Role of Local Government in the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights – Final Report of the Human Rights Council Advisory Committee*, A/HRC/30/49; See also Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). ‘Partnership with Local Governments’, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/about-us/what-we-do/partnership/local-governments/>.

⁴⁵ Carozza, P.G., ‘Subsidiarity as a Structural Principle of International Human Rights Law’ (2003) 97(1) *American Journal of International Law* 38.

While Milan is not explicitly listed among the self-declared ‘human rights cities’⁴⁶ in the same way as some Northern European⁴⁷ and Northern American⁴⁸ municipalities are, it consistently frames its governance through the language of rights and inclusion. The city’s motto – «*Milano città aperta*»,⁴⁹ loosely translatable as «Milan is an open city» – has become a political and symbolic anchor, especially during moments of national and international tension over civil and political rights, migration, housing, and pandemic emergencies. The ‘localisation’ of human rights at the urban level, however, is neither linear nor unproblematic. Although cities may, and indeed do, embed human rights discourses within their day-to-day commitments, their ability to enforce, guarantee, and operationalise these obligations remains inherently circumscribed by national legal hierarchies, fiscal dependencies, and fragmented competences. This tension becomes particularly evident in metropolitan contexts, where the functional urban area extends beyond municipal borders and responsibilities are ‘diluted’ across multiple layers of governance. Milan stands as a paradigmatic example of this complex dynamic, as it is a city whose global and international projection and normative aspirations operate alongside entrenched institutional fragmentation and enduring jurisdictional ambiguity. Far from constituting comprehensive legal guarantees, the urban implementation of human rights often takes the form of partial, uneven, and experimental practices.⁵⁰

Sustainable development is another essential pillar of contemporary urban governance and city diplomacy. Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, cities have come to be explicitly recognised as pivotal actors in achieving global development objectives, chiefly through the ‘localisation’ of the SDGs. Urban interventions in areas such as housing, mobility, food systems, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability are increasingly couched in SDG-oriented language, allowing municipalities to align local agendas with internationally endorsed standards. This alignment, however, presupposes a demanding process of translation whereby abstract objectives are recalibrated to fit specific urban contexts, political constraints, and socio-economic asymmetries. As in the case of human rights, the urban embedding of sustainable development raises questions about coherence, accountability, and the potential drift toward symbolic compliance. In this respect, Milan’s submission (together with *Regione Lombardia*) of its Voluntary Local Review at the United Nations (UN) High-Level Political Forum in 2022 provides

⁴⁶ See, e.g., Davis, M.F., Hansen, T.G. Hanna, E. (eds.), *Human rights cities and regions – Swedish and international perspectives* (Raoul Wallenberg Institute and Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, 2017); Grigolo, M., *The human rights city: New York, San Francisco, Barcelona* (Routledge, 2019); Garcia-Chueca, E., Vidal, L. (eds.), *Advancing urban rights: Equality and diversity in the city* (CIDOB, 2019).

⁴⁷ Human Rights Cities Network (HRCN), *Global Cities Hub*, <https://globalcitieshub.org/en/hrcn/>. The HRCN is a not-for-profit organisation (*association sans but lucratif*). It is governed by a team of experts supported by an Advisory Board of senior human rights specialists, which sets its direction and oversees its work. Today, the network counts seven guest member cities as inspiring models: Graz, Lund, Middelburg, Nuremberg, Utrecht, Vienna, and York.

⁴⁸ US Human Rights Network, ‘Human Rights Cities Alliance’, <https://ushumanrightsnetwork.org/human-rights-cities-alliance>.

⁴⁹ The expression “*Milano città aperta*” functions as both a descriptive and symbolic formula. It portrays Milan as an “open city” – open to economic flows, international investment, innovation, and social transformation. At the same time, the expression carries a normative dimension: it presents Milan as a model of dynamism and global integration within Italy and Europe. Thus, “*città aperta*” is not merely a geographical description, but a conceptual framing that emphasizes openness as a defining feature of the city’s political, economic, and cultural identity; see Sommella, R., *Milano città aperta* (Baldini+Castoldi, 2020).

⁵⁰ In this sense, the emergence of two different ways in which local governments ‘engage’ (a term that conveys a proactive contribution) with human rights has been recognized: on the one hand, “actors inside local governments who aim to establish their own vision and meaning of the human rights city within venues formally placed outside the local government, in which other actors participate (...)”; on the other hand, “the institutionalization of human rights within the local government, a process within which human rights become urban policy and tools for governing the city”; see Grigolo, M., ‘Towards a Sociology of the Human Rights City – Focusing on Practice’, in Oomen, Davis, Grigolo (n 42) 276.

a telling illustration of the city's commitment and willingness to embed local policy priorities as part of the broader global normative discourse as regards sustainability objectives.⁵¹

Milan's engagement with city diplomacy, human rights, sustainable development, and its pursuit of global visibility must therefore be understood as unfolding across a multilayered terrain of norms, narratives, and public-facing practices. The city's international initiatives are less the outcome of a coherent strategic design than the product of overlapping and sometimes competing logics – economic competitiveness, social inclusion, symbolic reputation-building and institutional constraint. Mega-events such as Expo 2015 and 2026 Milano-Cortina Olympics and Paralympics Games, together with cultural festivals and digital-innovation events (which, at times, raises questions about a possible 'performative' use of public spaces) simultaneously configure Milan's international posture and deepens its weaknesses. These (virtuous) attempts to intervene in the transnational governance of 'common public goods' do not dispel existing tensions; rather, they uncover them, providing a suitable vantage point from which to scrutinise the democratic and distributive stakes of Milan's expanding global presence.

This broader conceptual and normative framework informs the analysis that follows. Rather than assessing and evaluating Milan's policies through the lenses of legal compliance or administrative effectiveness, the report examines how human rights, sustainable development, and outward-facing practices – such as, among others, symbolic commitments, various forms of civic mobilisation, and mega-events – become integrated into the city's diplomatic repertoire. Particular attention will be devoted on the ways these forms of governance affect access to urban resources, shape public visibility, and reconfigure arenas of decision-making. In doing so, the present analysis situates Milan in the context of contemporary debates on city diplomacy and urban governance and scrutinises the public-facing, at times performative, dimensions of urban internationalisation.

1.3 Background: Cities in the Italian Constitutional Order and Milan's Normative Capacity

The Italian Constitution recognizes cities and metropolitan areas a status that significantly exceeds the confines of administrative decentralisation. From its opening provisions, the constitutional text holds together two complementary commitments: the unity of the Italian Republic, on the one side, and the recognition of local autonomies (also known as 'enti locali'), on the other side. This structural tension is already articulated in the very first part ('Titolo I') of the Italian Constitution, whose Article 5 describes the Italian Republic as "one and indivisible" while simultaneously emphasising that it "recognises and promotes local autonomies".⁵² Far from constituting a discretionary transfer of powers, decentralisation emerges as a foundational principle of the Italian constitutional order.

This design becomes even more explicit following the so-called 'Riforma del Titolo Quinto' – translatable as '2001 Reform of Part V' – of the Italian Constitution,⁵³ which marked a decisive shift towards a more 'layered' system of territorial autonomies. This reform significantly recasted the relationship between the State, regions (the first-level administrative divisions), provinces (the second-level administrative divisions), metropolitan cities (operative since 2015 as a special

⁵¹ Lombardy Region, Voluntary Local Review of Lombardy, July 2022. United Nations High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development; Metropolitan City of Milan, July 2022, Voluntary Local Review – Supplementary Document (*Agenda Metropolitana per lo Sviluppo Sostenibile*); available at: https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/vlrs/2022-07/lombardy_voluntary-local-review-rl-eng-high-quality_english.pdf. On the matter, see Ortiz-Moya, F., Reggiani, M., 'Operationalising the follow-up and review of the sustainable development goals at the local level: insights from European cities and their voluntary local review experience' (2025) 11(1) *Journal of Urban Ecology* 1-12.

⁵² Italian Constitution, Article 5: «La Repubblica, una e indivisibile, riconosce e promuove le autonomie locali; attua nei servizi che dipendono dallo Stato il più ampio decentramento amministrativo; adegua i principi ed i metodi della sua legislazione alle esigenze dell'autonomia e del decentramento».

⁵³ Italy, Legge costituzionale 18 ottobre 2001, n. 3, *Modifiche al titolo V della parte seconda della Costituzione*, Gazzetta Ufficiale, n. 248, 24 October 2001.

kind of provinces, not to be confused with ‘metropolitan areas of Italy’),⁵⁴ and cities (the lowest level administrative division) through the expansion of sub-national competences, revising the division of legislative powers and formally recognising local authorities as integral components of the state. Article 114 of the Italian Constitution explicitly lists municipalities, metropolitan cities, regions, and the State as ‘constitutive elements’ of the Italian Republic.⁵⁵ The formulation is significant insofar as underscores that cities are not peripheral extensions of the State but, rather, institutional actors embedded in the same constitutional ‘fabric’, whose existence and autonomy are constitutionally guaranteed.

The practical consequences of this constitutional status become even more ostensible in other provisions. Article 118 provides for the principle of subsidiarity, whereby administrative functions are attributed to the level of government closest to citizens, unless considerations of adequacy or efficiency require allocation elsewhere.⁵⁶ The same norm also recognises horizontal subsidiarity, thus legitimising forms of civic participation and shared governance between public authorities and social actors. Furthermore, Article 119 reinforces this framework through the recognition of financial autonomy, allowing municipalities to raise and manage the resources necessary to perform their functions.⁵⁷

At the same time, the Italian Constitution explicitly anchors multi-level local governance in the broader framework of fundamental rights protection. Article 2 guarantees inviolable human rights,⁵⁸ while Article 3(2) imposes on the Italian Republic ‘as a whole’ – and, thus, including its local authorities – the obligation to remove the social and economic barriers capable of hindering equality and participation.⁵⁹

Against this background, municipal intervention in crucial areas such as housing, welfare, public space, and social inclusion acquires a constitutional significance, as these activities are not merely framed as administrative services but, rather, they assurge as concrete mechanisms through which equality and fundamental rights are implemented in everyday urban life.

In addition to that, the recent amendment of Article 9,⁶⁰ which introduced the protection of the environment, biodiversity, and the interests of future generations in the Italian Constitution,

⁵⁴ *V. infra.*

⁵⁵ Italian Constitution, Article 114: «La Repubblica è costituita dai Comuni, dalle Province, dalle Città metropolitane, dalle Regioni e dallo Stato. I Comuni, le Province, le Città metropolitane e le Regioni sono enti autonomi con propri statuti, poteri e funzioni secondo i principi fissati dalla Costituzione. Roma è la capitale della Repubblica. La legge dello Stato disciplina il suo ordinamento».

⁵⁶ Italian Constitution, Article 118: «Le funzioni amministrative sono attribuite ai Comuni salvo che, per assicurarne l'esercizio unitario, siano conferite a Province, Città metropolitane, Regioni e Stato, sulla base dei principi di sussidiarietà, differenziazione ed adeguatezza. I Comuni, le Province e le Città metropolitane sono titolari di funzioni amministrative proprie e di quelle conferite con legge statale o regionale, secondo le rispettive competenze. La legge statale disciplina forme di coordinamento fra Stato e Regioni nelle materie di cui alle lettere b) e h) del secondo comma dell'articolo 117, e disciplina inoltre forme di intesa e coordinamento nella materia della tutela dei beni culturali. Stato, Regioni, Città metropolitane, Province e Comuni favoriscono l'autonoma iniziativa dei cittadini, singoli e associati, per lo svolgimento di attività di interesse generale, sulla base del principio di sussidiarietà».

⁵⁷ Italian Constitution, Article 119: «I Comuni, le Province, le Città metropolitane e le Regioni hanno autonomia finanziaria di entrata e di spesa, nel rispetto dell'equilibrio dei relativi bilanci, e concorrono ad assicurare l'osservanza dei vincoli economici e finanziari derivanti dall'ordinamento dell'Unione europea. I Comuni, le Province, le Città metropolitane e le Regioni hanno risorse autonome. Stabiliscono e applicano tributi ed entrate propri, in armonia con la Costituzione e secondo i principi di coordinamento della finanza pubblica e del sistema tributario. Dispongono di compartecipazioni al gettito di tributi erariali riferibile al loro territorio [...]».

⁵⁸ Italian Constitution, Article 2: «La Repubblica riconosce e garantisce i diritti inviolabili dell'uomo, sia come singolo, sia nelle formazioni sociali ove si svolge la sua personalità, e richiede l'adempimento dei doveri inderogabili di solidarietà politica, economica e sociale».

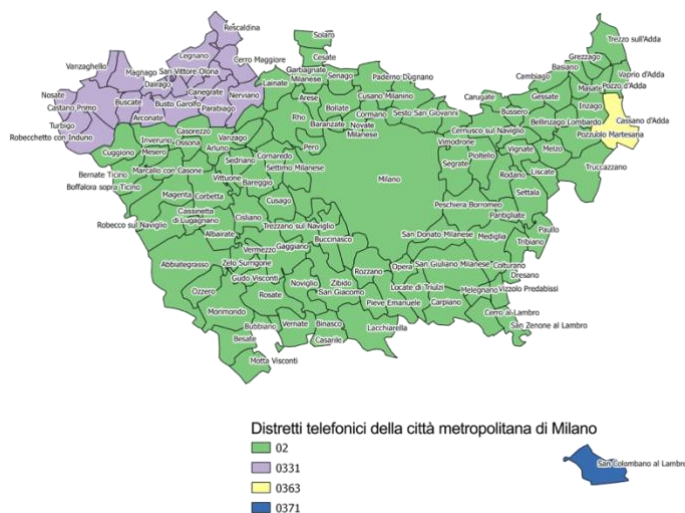
⁵⁹ Italian Constitution, Article 3(2): «È compito della Repubblica rimuovere gli ostacoli di ordine economico e sociale, che, limitando di fatto la libertà e l'eguaglianza dei cittadini, impediscono il pieno sviluppo della persona umana e l'effettiva partecipazione di tutti i lavoratori all'organizzazione politica, economica e sociale del Paese».

⁶⁰ Italy, Legge costituzionale 11 febbraio 2022, n. 1, *Modifiche agli articoli 9 e 41 della Costituzione in materia di tutela dell'ambiente*, Gazzetta Ufficiale n. 44, 22 February 2022.

expands the fields in which local authorities are normatively involved.⁶¹ Urban planning, mobility, and environmental governance now are expected to operate within a constitutional mandate that explicitly connects territorial management to sustainability.

Finally, the Italian Constitution places cities within a multi-level normative system that is open to European and international law. Article 10 aligns domestic law with international law.⁶² Article 11 allows limitations of sovereignty in favour of international cooperation, especially for the purposes of maintaining international peace and security.⁶³ Most importantly, Article 117(1) requires all legislative and administrative powers, including those exercised at the local level, to comply with European Union law and international obligations.⁶⁴ This provision creates a direct normative channel through which supranational frameworks become relevant references for municipal action. Taken together, these provisions frame cities as autonomous, rights-relevant, and normatively connected actors within a multi-level constitutional system.

Ordinary legislation translates these constitutional principles into operative competences for municipalities. The Consolidated Law on Local Authorities ('Testo Unico degli Enti Locali') provides the general framework for municipal powers.⁶⁵ It attributes to municipalities regulatory and administrative authority in domains such as urban planning, local welfare services, housing policies, management of public space, cultural promotion, and local economic development. Within these domains of intervention, cities and municipalities can adopt binding regulations ('regolamenti'), planning instruments, and general administrative acts that directly affect access to rights and urban resources.



Città metropolitana di Milano – Karplus (author own work), 5 February 2011, licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

Law 56/2014 – commonly referred to as *Legge Delrio* – profoundly reshaped the whole 'enti locali' system and introduced a further structural element through the broader reorganisation of (already existent) Italian metropolitan cities, including the Metropolitan City of Milan.⁶⁶ This reform acknowledges that Milan's functional urban space, like that of other major metropolitan areas, extends far beyond its municipal boundaries and requires governance arrangements specifically 'tailored' to address and better regulate the metropolitan scale. Strategic planning, mobility infrastructures,

⁶¹ Italian Constitution, Article 9: «La Repubblica promuove lo sviluppo della cultura e la ricerca scientifica e tecnica. Tutela il paesaggio e il patrimonio storico e artistico della Nazione. Tutela l'ambiente, la biodiversità e gli ecosistemi, anche nell'interesse delle future generazioni. La legge dello Stato disciplina i modi e le forme di tutela degli animali».

⁶² Italian Constitution, Article 10(1): «L'ordinamento giuridico italiano si conforma alle norme del diritto internazionale generalmente riconosciute».

⁶³ Italian Constitution, Article 11: «L'Italia ripudia la guerra come strumento di offesa alla libertà degli altri popoli e come mezzo di risoluzione delle controversie internazionali; consente, in condizioni di parità con gli altri Stati, alle limitazioni di sovranità necessarie ad un ordinamento che assicuri la pace e la giustizia fra le Nazioni; promuove e favorisce le organizzazioni internazionali rivolte a tale scopo».

⁶⁴ Italian Constitution, Article 117(1): «La potestà legislativa è esercitata dallo Stato e dalle Regioni nel rispetto della Costituzione, nonché dei vincoli derivanti dall'ordinamento comunitario e dagli obblighi internazionali».

⁶⁵ Italy, Decreto legislativo 18 agosto 2000, n. 267, *Testo unico delle leggi sull'ordinamento degli enti locali*, Gazzetta Ufficiale n. 227, 28 September 2000.

⁶⁶ Italy, Legge 7 aprile 2014, n. 56, *Disposizioni sulle città metropolitane, sulle province, sulle unioni e fusioni di comuni*, Gazzetta Ufficiale n. 81, 7 April 2014.

environmental coordination, and territorial development are thus called and expected to operate within an integrated framework that situates Milan within a broader and more interconnected urban region.

Sectoral legislation further expands the reach of municipal action, providing (metropolitan) cities with a rich legal ‘toolbox’ through which they can regulate and shape everyday urban life. Law 328/2000 on social services set out the framework for constructing integrated local welfare systems, enabling municipalities to coordinate and supervise social assistance, health services and third-sector actors in the context of territorially defined ‘Piani di Zona’ (land-use or zoning plans)⁶⁷. Legislative Decree No. 42 of 22 January 2004 – commonly known as the Cultural Heritage and Landscape Code or *Urbani Code*, after the surname of its proponent, Giuliano Urbani, former Ministry of Culture and the Arts in the 14th Italian legislature – is a legislative decree ruling on the protection and enhancement of Italy’s cultural and landscape heritage, capable of influencing urban regeneration strategies, land-use decisions, and the government of public space.⁶⁸ Civil protection legislation (Legislative Decree 1/2018) simplifies and renders related provisions more straightforward, assigning municipalities essential responsibilities in risk prevention, emergency response and post-emergency assistance, including roles in the reception and management of both migrants and refugees in the course of humanitarian or civil-protection emergencies.⁶⁹ Environmental legislation, further strengthened after the recent constitutional reform of Article 9 of the Italian Constitution, increasingly intersects with local planning competences.

Although Article 117(1) of the Italian Constitution does not refer expressly to municipalities, it requires that legislative and administrative activity ‘at all levels of government’ must be conformed to European Union law and international obligations. Since municipal powers are exercised within the legal framework defined by State and regional legislation, this provision indirectly situates local action in a broader supranational legal framework. International treaties such as, *inter alia*, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union,⁷⁰ the (Revised) European Social Charter,⁷¹ the European Convention on Human Rights,⁷² as well as other soft-law instruments such as the 2030 Agenda and related SDGs,⁷³ the New Urban Agenda⁷⁴ and the Global Compact on Refugees⁷⁵ do not in themselves create actionable obligations on behalf of cities. Rather, they function as normative and political references that inform local policy design at a bottom-up level, support the justification urban action, and facilitate the city’s participation in transnational governance networks.

Against this background, Milan’s engagement with cross-cutting issues such as human and social rights, sustainable development, and city diplomacy should be understood neither as a symbolic overreach nor as an expression of sovereign authority, but as an institutional effect of Italy’s constitutional and legislative framework, implying a multi-level legal order that constrains

⁶⁷ Italy, Legge 8 novembre 2000, n. 328, *Legge quadro per la realizzazione del sistema integrato di interventi e servizi sociali*, Gazzetta Ufficiale n. 265, 13 November 2000.

⁶⁸ Italy, Decreto legislativo 22 gennaio 2004, n. 42, *Codice dei beni culturali e del paesaggio*, Gazzetta Ufficiale n. 45, 24 February 2004.

⁶⁹ Italy, Decreto legislativo 2 gennaio 2018, n. 1, *Codice della protezione civile*, Gazzetta Ufficiale n. 17, 22 January 2018.

⁷⁰ European Union, *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union*, OJ C 326/391 (26 October 2012).

⁷¹ Council of Europe, *European Social Charter (Revised)*, ETS No. 163 (Strasbourg, 3 May 1996).

⁷² Council of Europe, *Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*, ETS No. 5 (Rome, 4 November 1950).

⁷³ United Nations General Assembly, *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, UN Doc. A/RES/70/1 (25 September 2015).

⁷⁴ United Nations. *New Urban Agenda*. Adopted at Habitat III, Quito, 20 October 2016, available at: <https://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/>.

⁷⁵ Global Compact on Refugees, UN Doc. A/73/12 (Part II) (2 August 2018); Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, UN Doc. A/RES/73/195 (19 December 2018). On their content, see also McAdam J., ‘The Global Compacts on Refugees and Migration: A New Era for International Protection?’ (2018) 30(4) *International Journal of Refugee Law* 571-574.

municipal powers while simultaneously relying on cities as ‘grass-root’ sites for the everyday making and implementation of international legal guarantees.

2. MILAN’S HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED URBAN AGENDA

Human rights protection represents one of the most significant and yet multidimensional arena in which the City of Milan acts and engages both locally and internationally. While, as already anticipated, Milan does not explicitly brand itself as a ‘human rights city’ in the official and proper sense endorsed by some other cities, its governance model, policy language, and institutional practices reveal a consistent commitment to uphold human rights standards. Such principles profoundly shape Milan’s approach to social inclusion, anti-discrimination, migration governance, access to adequate housing, gender equality and digital transformation, further informing the city’s active participation in TCNs and its contributions to global debates on urban governance.

Milan’s engagement with human rights is essentially driven by a combination of structural, political, and historical factors. Structurally, the described ‘decentralization’ reforms of the early 2000s transferred substantive responsibilities for social welfare, education, and local services to municipalities, making them frontline implementers of rights-based policies. Historically, Milan has long been a city shaped by migration, industrialisation, and social movements, which have cultivated a civic culture attentive to fundamental rights, participation and social justice. Politically, Milan’s leadership – particularly under current Mayor Giuseppe Sala’s mandate – has embraced a narrative of openness, diversity, and solidarity, positioning the city as a progressive actor within the Italian and European urban landscape.

The following subsections aim to examine Milan’s current human rights agenda through three distinct yet interconnected key dimensions. After outlining the city’s broad human rights framework and international engagement, the analysis turns to the right to housing (and related urban inequalities), LGBTQIA+ rights and anti-discrimination policies, and Milan’s positioning *vis-à-vis* current global crises, such as ongoing international conflicts. As the analysis will eventually show, these domains should not be understood as ‘compartmentalised’ or ‘self-contained’ areas of action. On the contrary, they constitute intersecting and mutually reinforcing spheres of urban governance, where human rights norms, institutional practices and transnational engagements interact and overlap. Each subsection is informed by an analysis which emphasises concrete initiatives adopted by both institutional actors and civil society, while tracing the ways in which Milan mobilises international norms and transnational networks across these interconnected policy domains.

2.1. The Glocalization of Human Rights at the City Level

As might have been anticipated, Milan’s human rights agenda does not crystallise into a single, consolidated policy instrument. Instead, it unfolds across a constellation of municipal plans, sectoral projects and strategies, and institutional practices that, collectively, embed human rights principles into the city’s governance.⁷⁶ This ‘dispersed’ configuration is indicative of two interrelated phenomena. Firstly, it reflects the fragmented nature of urban administrative structures. Secondly, it is an indicator of Milan’s inherently pragmatic governance orientation. Instead of relying on a single declaratory statement of human rights identity, the city embeds human rights-based frameworks within the everyday functioning of its administrative machinery. This encompasses both general competencies and sector-specific practices.

⁷⁶ See Grigolo, M., ‘Towards a Sociology of the Human Rights City: Focusing on Practice’ (n 50).

This governance model is sustained through a layered institutional architecture, in which human rights principles are channelled through specialised departments, transversal policy instruments, and dedicated interface with civil society and international actors.

Nevertheless, the institutional architecture enabling and supporting this agenda appears to be both robust and differentiated. At its core stands The Welfare and Health Directorate, which coordinates welfare provisions and anti-discrimination initiatives, while providing support for vulnerable populations across various policy sectors.⁷⁷ The *Casa dei Diritti* (House of Rights), established in 2013, has become a cornerstone of Milan's rights-based governance, working as a central hub for rights-oriented service provision, combining legal assistance, psychological support, and anti-discrimination programs.⁷⁸ Its activities span a widespread range of different issues, from gender-based violence and hate crimes to LGBTQIA+ rights and the protection of migrants and refugees, thereby translating human rights principles into concrete forms of urban welfare and protection. Together with these locally oriented structures and related initiatives, the City of Milan's International Relations Office operates as an outward-facing interface, ensuring coherence and integration between local policies and international frameworks and facilitating Milan's participation in global networks. At the same time, cross-cutting strategies such as the *Politica per la parità di genere* (Gender Equality Plan)⁷⁹, the *Piano di Sviluppo del Welfare* (Welfare Development Plan)⁸⁰, and the *Piano di prevenzione e contrasto delle discriminazioni* (Prevention and Punishment of Discriminations)⁸¹ explicitly reference principles derived from international human rights law, including equality, non-discrimination, and the right to dignity.

Milan's policy documents frequently invoke rights-based language. For instance, the *Piano di Sviluppo del Welfare* frames access to services not as a matter of charity, but as a matter of rights, emphasizing equal dignity and the removal of structural barriers, echoing the principle of substantive equality. The *Politica per la parità di genere* adopts a similar approach, articulating gender equality, disability inclusion, and the protection of LGBTQIA+ rights as obligations rooted in both constitutional principles and international commitments. Even in areas not traditionally associated with human rights – such as, *inter alia*, digital transformation or urban regeneration – , the city increasingly adopts a rights-based vocabulary, mentioning (or implicitly referring to), concepts such as privacy, accessibility, and an emerging right to the city.⁸²

At the international level, Milan participates in a dense network of urban coalitions and platforms that promote human rights, social inclusion, and equality from different point of views. Through Eurocities, the city contributes to working groups on human rights, housing, and migrant inclusion, sharing best practices and advocating for stronger recognition of local authorities in the governance of the European Union.⁸³ Milan is also active – albeit in its 'province' capacity – in

⁷⁷ Comune di Milano, 'Direzione Politiche Sociali, Salute e Diritti' [institutional webpage], <https://www2.comune.milano.it/comune/amministrazione-trasparente/organizzazione/articolazione-degli-uffici/organigramma/direzione-welfare-e-salute>.

⁷⁸ *Casa dei Diritti* is an institutional hub for the development of activities and projects aimed at combating all forms of discrimination and prejudice. Its goal is to foster social environments in which every individual, regardless of ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, socioeconomic status, age, or religion, can have full access to their rights and contribute to collective well-being. See Comune di Milano, 'Casa dei Diritti' [Established 2013 - Official Documentation and Annual Activity Reports, available here: <https://www.comune.milano.it/argomenti/welfare/casa-dei-diritti>].

⁷⁹ Comune di Milano, 'Politiche per la parità di genere', available at: <https://www2.comune.milano.it/comune/amministrazione-trasparente/disposizioni-general/atti-general/politica-della-parita-di-genere>.

⁸⁰ Comune di Milano, 'Piano di Sviluppo del Welfare 2025-2027', available at: <https://www.comune.milano.it/argomenti/welfare/il-piano-di-sviluppo-del-welfare-2025-2027-della-citta-di-milano>.

⁸¹ Comune di Milano, 'Piano di prevenzione e contrasto delle discriminazioni', available at: <https://www.comune.milano.it/argomenti/welfare/il-piano-di-sviluppo-del-welfare-2025-2027-della-citta-di-milano>.

⁸² See, e.g., Pieterse, M., 'Towards a Right to the City? The Slow Convergence of Rights to Housing and Land in South African Constitutional Jurisprudence' (2022) 11(1) *International Human Rights Law Review* 36.

⁸³ Eurocities is the leading transnational city network (TCN) of over 200 major European cities across 38 countries, representing over 150 million people; founded in 1986 by mayors from six larger cities – including Milan and Barcelona

the context of the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights, where it engages in discussions on urban rights, participatory governance, and the localization of international norms.⁸⁴ Its involvement in the *Inclusive Cities For All Programme*⁸⁵ and the *Fast-Track Cities Initiative*⁸⁶ further demonstrates its commitment to rights-based approaches in areas such as migration and public health.

Civil society plays a crucial role in shaping Milan's human rights agenda. The city's vibrant and diverse 'ecosystem' of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), humanitarian associations, and philanthropic legal foundations – including *Emergency* and *Caritas Ambrosiana*, Fondazione ISMU (Iniziativa e Studi sulla Multietnicità), Fondazione Housing Sociale (FHS), Fondazione Banco Alimentare, Opera San Francesco per i Poveri (OSF), *CityAngels*, Casa della Carità, and *Arcigay Milano*, among others – acts as both a partner and a catalyst for municipal action. These organizations provide essential services, advocate for rights, and contribute to policy innovation. In order to better pursue its objectives, Milan frequently engages with civil society actors through co-design processes, participatory governance mechanisms, and public-private partnerships, mirroring a broader global trend in urban governance, where cities increasingly mobilise civil society not only as a strategic implementing 'partner' for rights-based policies but also, and with ever-growing frequency, as a functional complement to increasingly strained national welfare systems.

Milan's approach to human rights is therefore best characterised as pragmatic rather than purely ideological. The city does not officially introduce itself as a human right city, nor has it adopted a single instrument explicitly incorporating human rights norms and related obligations into a unified policy framework; yet its policies and practices consistently reflect those standards in substance. Such 'understated' posture enables Milan to navigate Italy's politically polarised environment while advancing progressive agendas, boosting the city's credibility in international and transnational arenas debates, capable of articulating rights-based perspectives grounded in practical experience.

2.2 LGBTQIA+ rights and inclusive urban citizenship in Milan

At the outset, the degree of protection granted to LGBTQIA+ rights within the Italian legal system remains comparatively limited and unsatisfactory whenever set against the standards prevailing in other Western European domestic jurisdictions.⁸⁷ Although same-sex relationships have long been decriminalised and procedures for gender recognition have been in place since

–, it connects local governments to share knowledge, influence EU policies, and promote sustainable urban development; see more at: <https://eurocities.eu/>; see also Comune di Milano, 'Reti e Partnership – Eurocities', available at: <https://www.comune.milano.it/it/amministrazione/relazioni-internazionali/milano-internazionale/reti-e-partnership#eurocities>.

⁸⁴ United Cities and Local Governments, Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights, available at: <https://www.uclg.org>.

⁸⁵ Eurocities, *Inclusive Cities 4 All*, Milan's Pledge to the European Pillar of Social Rights, available at: <https://inclusivecities4all.eu/pledges/milan/>.

⁸⁶ Launched in 2014, *Fast Track-Cities Initiative* it is a global partnership aimed at ending the AIDS epidemic and achieving broader urban health equity goals. It brings together cities, municipalities, and partners committed to accelerating progress toward the UNAIDS 95-95-95 targets and eliminating HIV-related stigma and discrimination. The initiative is coordinated by the International Association of Providers of AIDS Care (IAPAC), in collaboration with UNAIDS, UN-Habitat, and the City of Paris. Fast-Track Cities Initiative, 'About the Fast-Track Cities Initiative', available at: <https://ftcinstitute.org/>.

⁸⁷ Prearo, M., 'Paradigms of LGBTIQ+ equality policies in Europe: insights from the Italian case', in Mattoni A. (eds.) *Handbook of Progressive Politics* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025) 297; Donà A., 'Somewhere over the rainbow: Italy and the regulation of same-sex unions' (2021) 26(3) *Modern Italy* 261; Ragone S., Volpe V., 'An Emerging Right to a 'Gay' Family Life? The Case *Oliari v. Italy* in a Comparative Perspective (2016) 17(3) *German Law Review* 451.

the early 1890s,⁸⁸ the national normative framework continues to display structural deficiencies, particularly as concerns marriage equality, parental rights, and the existence of a comprehensive regime of anti-discrimination protection.⁸⁹ The introduction of civil unions for same-sex couples in 2016 represented a crucial, albeit incomplete, development;⁹⁰ however, the persistent formal separation from marriage – most notably through the exclusion of the right of joint child adoption – has entrenched a differentiated status that falls short of full legal equality.⁹¹ Generally speaking, Italy still lacks an overarching national framework prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity beyond the specific sphere of employment and labour, notwithstanding reiterated exhortations at the European level and the failure of subsequent legislative initiatives aimed at remedying this lacuna.⁹²

In the wake of this institutional and political apathy, social attitudes have undergone a slow but prominent transformation.⁹³ Empirical evidence gained from opinion surveys and bottom-up initiatives indicates increasing levels of societal acceptance of LGBTQIA+ people and growing majoritarian support for civil unions, marriage equality and, although with some ambivalences



Participants arriving in Piazza della Scala during Milan Pride 2008 - Photograph by Giovanni Dall'Orto, licensed under Creative Commons BY-SA, via Wikimedia Commons.

among society, same-sex adoption. The coexistence of progressive attitudes against enduring legislative inertia produces a pronounced disjunction between social reality and legal regulation. It is within this gap – between evolving social norms and static legal frameworks – that the role of cities as a local setting of rights articulation and experimentation becomes particularly salient.

Within this national context, from the early 2010s onwards, Milan has vigorously emerged as one of the most assertive Italian municipalities in promoting LGBTQIA+ rights and inclusive forms of urban citizenship. Despite being subject to the same set of constitutional and legislative constraints as other local and

subnational authorities, the city has deployed its administrative capabilities and competences, welfare infrastructures, and emblematic resources to implement policies of recognition, protection, and inclusion that, in their practical effects, often surpass national standards.

These commitments have not remained merely rhetorical. Milan's policy initiatives in the LGBTQIA+ domain have, in several instances, anticipated subsequent legislative developments at the national level. The city established a Civil Union Registry before Italy officially recognized

⁸⁸ Italy, *Codice penale per il Regno d'Italia* (Zanardelli Code), Royal Decree No. 6133, 30 June 1889 (in force 1 January 1890). The code effectively decriminalised homosexual conduct in unified Italy.

⁸⁹ Montecchio L., 'Italy's Populist Radical Right and Anti-Gender Discourses: Lega, FdI, and the Case of the Zan Bill' (2025) 60(1) *The International Spectator* 157.

⁹⁰ Italy, *Legge 20 maggio 2016, n. 76*, Regolamentazione delle unioni civili tra persone dello stesso sesso e disciplina delle convivenze, *Gazzetta Ufficiale* n. 118, 21 maggio 2016.

⁹¹ For a comprehensive overview, see Lasio, D., Serri, F., 'The Italian public debate on same-sex civil unions and gay and lesbian parenting' (2017) 22(4) *Sexualities* 69. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460717713386>.

⁹² See, e.g., United Nations Human Rights Council, *Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review: Italy (Fourth Cycle, 48th session)*, UN Doc. A/HRC/59/1/Rev.1, adopted 7 April 2025; Council of Europe, Commissioner for Human Rights, *Report by Dunja Mijatović, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, following her visit to Italy from 19 to 23 June 2023*, CommHR(2023)37, Strasbourg, 21 November 2023, p. 38.

⁹³ Dotti Sani G.M., Quaranta M., 'Mapping Changes in Attitudes towards Gays and Lesbians in Europe: An Application of Diffusion Theory' (2022) 38(1) *European Sociological Review* 124.

same-sex unions, signalling its willingness to use municipal competences to advance equality.⁹⁴ The *Rainbow Desk* and *Casa Arcobaleno* initiatives within the broader *Casa dei Diritti* framework includes LGBTQIA+ rights as the major pillar of their activities, tackling issues such as workplace discrimination, access to services, and the safety of LGBTQIA+ youth.⁹⁵ Milan has also developed anti-bullying programmes with the support of civil society organizations, such as *Arcigay* and *ALA Milano*, integrating LGBTQIA+ and transgender peoples' inclusion into educational settings.⁹⁶

A first, and particularly visible, layer of this urban strategy concerns symbolic positioning. Under the administration of Mayor Giuseppe Sala, the Municipality – alongside the Metropolitan City – has systematically conferred official patronage on *Milano Pride*,⁹⁷ displayed the rainbow flag on *Palazzo Marino* (i.e., Milan's city hall),⁹⁸ the city's partnership with the local transportation company (ATM - *Azienda Trasporti Milanese*) for the introduction of a permanent rainbow livery on one of the historic trams in the urban fleet and employed municipal communication channels to articulate LGBTQIA+ equality as an essential element of Milan's civic *ethos*.⁹⁹ At the same time, this prominence raises a critical question familiar in urban studies: the risk of '*rainbow-washing*', whereby LGBTQIA+ inclusion and visibility contributes to the city's attractiveness, international image, and creative-economy profile without adequately addressing pressing social inequalities (housing precarity among



Budapest Pride 2025 – Photograph by European Greens, Andras Mayer, licensed under Creative Commons BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

queer youth, discrimination in employment, access to trans-specific healthcare).¹⁰⁰ In Milan, the tension between branding and rights is particularly visible in central districts where Pride, fashion, nightlife, and tourism intersect. This dynamic does not invalidate municipal strive for meaningful action as such, but it highlights how LGBTQIA+ rights can become entangled with urban marketing and gentrification dynamics, producing uneven geographies of inclusion.

Recently, in June 2025, the City of Milan participated institutionally in the Budapest Pride, at a moment when LGBTQIA+ rights, whose protection was

⁹⁴ Prior to the adoption of national legislation on civil unions in 2016, the Municipality of Milan had established a Register of Civil Unions (2012), providing symbolic recognition and limited administrative benefits to unmarried couples; cf. Allegri M.R., 'Rimedi palliative all'inerzia del legislatore: i registri comunali delle unioni civili' (2012) *AIC – Associazione Italiana Costituzionalisti*, Vol. 4, 1; Comune di Milano, *Deliberazione del Consiglio comunale istitutiva del Registro delle Unioni Civili*, 2012.

⁹⁵ Comune di Milano, 'Rainbow desk e casa arcobaleno', <https://www.comune.milano.it/servizi/welfare/rainbow-desk-e-casa-arcobaleno>.

⁹⁶ Scuole Aperte Milano, 'Arcigay Milano - Educare alle Differenze', <https://www.scuoleapertemilano.it/-/arcigay>. See also Arcigay Milano, 'Formazione nelle scuole', <https://www.arcigaymilano.org/servizi-e-attivita/#formazione-scuole-e-non-solo>; ALA Milano Ets, Sportello Trans, <https://www.alamilano.org/alamilano/cosa-facciamo/sportello-trans/>.

⁹⁷ Milano Pride Official Site, 'Patrocini e Adesioni' Section, <https://www.milanopride.it/it/>.

⁹⁸ Comune di Milano, 'Diritti. Pride, Palazzo Marino si illumina per quattro notti con i colori dell'arcobaleno', available at: <https://www2.comune.milano.it/-/diritti.-pride-palazzo-marino-si-illumina-per-quattro-notti-con-i-colori-dell-arcobaleno-1>.

⁹⁹ 'Per il Milano Pride un tram arcobaleno e una campagna di affissioni: dalla Stazione a Navigli la linea 10 diventa rainbow', *Milano Repubblica*, 21.06.2022, available at: https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2022/06/21/news/pride_milano_tram_arcobaleno_milano-354856883/.

¹⁰⁰ Tait A., 'Il Pride ha un problema con chi fa rainbow washing?', *Wired*, 23.06.2023, available at: <https://www.wired.it/article/pride-rainbow-washing-aziende-creator/>.

already precarious at the Hungarian national level, were under unprecedented pressure. Such institutional participation was publicly framed as an expression of solidarity and as a defence of civil rights, freedom of expression, and personal self-determination beyond territorial borders.¹⁰¹

Therefore, although Milan does not participate in the Rainbow Cities Network, it designated itself as a ‘freedom zone for LGBTQIA+ people’, pursuing inclusion through municipal equality policies and cooperation with local civil society actors. Such initiatives aptly exemplify how Milan mobilises symbolic presence and inter-urban solidarity as tools of city diplomacy, positioning itself within a transnational constellation of local authorities committed to the protection of civil and political rights, even in sensitive contexts. Pride participation, in this sense, functions as a celebratory event and as a solidarity-driven assertion of ‘para-normative’ alignment and political support, particularly where rights are under pressure.

A second layer of Milan’s approach *vis-à-vis* LGBTQIA+ rights is more service-oriented and protective, translating inclusion into welfare and protection measures at the intersection of migration governance and vulnerability reduction. The *Casa dei Diritti* serves as the institutional backbone of Milan’s LGBTQIA+ general policy. It provides legal assistance to individuals facing discrimination, together with psychological support for victims of hate crimes and specialized services for transgender individuals navigating administrative transitions. The *Casa dei Diritti* also functions as a training centre for municipal civil servants, delivering courses on inclusive language, gender identity, and anti-discrimination practices. Through its inclusion as a ‘trainee city’ in the International Organization for Migration’s (IOM) *Equal(c)ity* project, spearheaded by the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) Mayors Mechanism, Milan explicitly sought to strengthen the capacity of frontline workers to identify and address sexual and gender-based violence within the context of migrant communities, with particular regard to LGBTQIA+ persons.¹⁰² Concretely, this engagement translated into targeted training activities, operational toolkits, and the development of safer and more effective referral pathways for people exposed to multifaceted forms of vulnerability related to, *inter alia*, migration status, gender identity, and sexual orientation. As is evident, LGBTQIA+ protection thus becomes embedded within broader infrastructures of social inclusion, rather than being treated as a discrete or standalone equality policy. This protective dimension is further reinforced through dedicated local initiatives, most notably *Casa Arcobaleno Milano*, a shelter and support project for LGBTQIA+ asylum seekers and refugees developed in tandem with civil-society organisations. *Casa Arcobaleno* provides temporary housing, legal orientation, and tailored social support to individuals who frequently fall outside both asylum-specific reception and mainstream welfare systems.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Hernández-Morales A., ‘Milan hits back at Poland and Hungary’s curbs on LGBTQ+ rights – The city has made itself an LGBTQ+ freedom zone’, *Politico*, 17.05.2022, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/milan-designated-freedom-zone-poland-hungary-curbs-lgbtq-rights/>; Alliva S., ‘Il Pride di Milano e di Budapest, il fronte unico contro Orbán e i regimi’, *Editoriale Domani*, 26.06.2025, available at: <https://www.editorialedomani.it/fatti/pride-milano-budapest-2025-diritti-lgbtq-repressione-orban-qgw5ppn6>.

¹⁰² The GFMD Mayors Mechanism is co-steered by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the City of Mechelen (Belgium). In November 2019, the Mechanism launched the *Call to Local Action on Migration*, inviting local and regional governments to implement the Global Compacts on Migration and Refugees and report progress at global review forums. Milan committed to strengthening multilevel governance cooperation, promoting inclusive economic integration, improving access to healthcare, education and housing, and protecting vulnerable migrants and refugees. Key actions include, *inter alia*, participating in EU and IOM projects (e.g., *Equal(c)ity*, *ADmin4ALL*) to address social inclusion and gender-based violence; promoting legal migration pathways through the MeNTOR initiative; enhancing employment services via CELAV; combating school segregation through projects such as WISH-MI; and establishing a dedicated Service Centre for Unaccompanied Migrant Minors to provide integrated protection, reception, and guardianship support. See extensively, Comune di Milano, Summary of Pledge (2019), available at: https://migrationnetwork.un.org/sites/g/files/tmzbd1416/files/docs/city_of_milan_submission_to_the_ece_regional_review.pdf.

¹⁰³ Tubertini, E., Carbone, A., Santinello, M., ‘Staff Members’ Experience of Italian Shelters for LGBTQIA+ Homeless and Runaway People: An Exploratory Study’ (2023) *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, Vol. 20(13) 6214. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20136214>.

A third layer concerns anti-discrimination governance and everyday inclusion. Milan's equality and non-discrimination policies include awareness campaigns, support desks, and collaboration with associations to address discrimination in schools, workplaces, and public services.¹⁰⁴ These measures connect LGBTQIA+ rights to broader questions of access to the city: education free from bullying practices, safe use of public space, equitable access to health and other social services, and right-oriented visibility without stigma.¹⁰⁵ At the institutional level, the municipality has progressively integrated sexual orientation and gender identity into its equality and anti-discrimination policies. Milan participates in national and European anti-discrimination frameworks coordinated with the *Ufficio Nazionale Antidiscriminazioni Razziali* (UNAR, loosely translatable as National Office for Racial Anti-discrimination), thus adopting local action plans addressing discrimination in access to education, employment, and other services.¹⁰⁶ Within the municipal administration, dedicated offices and contact points dealing with equal opportunities and anti-discrimination play a coordinating role, particularly in relation to training initiatives for municipal staff, educators, and social service providers. These measures seek to ensure that public services are accessible and concretely responsive to LGBTQIA+ residents and their needs, translating equality principles into concrete administrative practices.

Finally, Milan's LGBTQIA+ agenda has a transnational dimension that fits squarely within city diplomacy. The municipality participates in European exchanges on equality policies through networks such as Eurocities where inclusion, anti-discrimination, and diversity management are recurring themes. Through these channels, Milan does not merely showcase itself as an inclusive city; rather, it engages in peer learning and policy circulation, importing practices and exporting its own experiences in managing diversity within a large metropolitan setting.

2.3. Migration and refugees: Milan's rights-oriented local governance and transnational city diplomacy

Migration constitutes one of the policy domains in which Milan's urban governance most clearly intersects with transnational agendas and soft-law frameworks. In this context, city diplomacy does not take the form of autonomous foreign policy – given that, as previously anticipated, in this field, the Italian Constitution reserves regulatory competence to the State – but, instead, evolves into an increasing engagement in networked policy-making and multilevel coordination. This evolution is directed at governing challenges that are experienced locally, such as access to services, the protection of vulnerable groups, and socio-economic inclusion, and is achieved through TCNs, EU-funded experimentation, and the progressive alignment with global normative frameworks. The mass arrival of migrants and refugees in Europe between 2014 and 2015 marked a turning point for the recognition of TCNs such as Eurocities as an interlocutor of EU institutions, and for the network's capacity to reinforce its lobbying activities.¹⁰⁷ The EU's failures to manage

¹⁰⁴ Comune di Milano, 'Spazio Antidiscriminazioni'; further information about this programme are available at: <https://www.comune.milano.it/servizi/welfare/spazio-antidiscriminazioni>.

¹⁰⁵ See, e.g., Bell, D., Binnie J., 'Authenticating queer space: Citizenship, urbanism and governance' (2004) *Urban Studies*, Vol. 41 (9) 1807; Brown, M., 'Gender and sexuality II: There goes the gayborhood?' (2014) 38(3) *Progress in Human Geography* 457; Ceccato, V., Sundling, C., Giori, G., 'The Right to the City: The Experiences of LGBTQI+ and Gender Non-Conforming Individuals in Transit Environments', in *Transit Safety for a Sustainable City* (Springer, 2025) 175, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-97427-4_13; more in general, Doan, P. L. *Planning and LGBTQ communities: The need for inclusive queer spaces* (Routledge, 2015).

¹⁰⁶ See further UNAR – Ufficio Nazionale Antidiscriminazioni Razziali, 'National LGBT+ Strategy: For preventing and combating discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity 2022-2027', in which it is stressed the paramount role of local administration in monitoring and implementing these policies. The report is available at: https://unar.it/portale/documents/d/guest/strategia_lgbt_ita_02.

¹⁰⁷ Oomen, B. 'Decoupling and Teaming Up: The Rise and Proliferation of Transnational Municipal Networks in the Field of Migration' (2020) 54(3) *International Migration Review* 913; see also Caponio, T., 'Immigrant integration beyond national policies? Italian cities' participation in European city networks' (2018) 44 *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 2053, at 2056, 2067.

refugee flows in accordance with human rights, the growing lack of solidarity among member States to agree on a refugee relocation scheme working to redistribute responsibilities,¹⁰⁸ and the deals made with non-democratic governments to curb flows exposed the incapacity, if not political unwillingness, on behalf the EU under its Common European Asylum System to address the challenges at hand, and turned Eurocities into a platform where mayors have the chance to voice their discontent.¹⁰⁹

Milan is no exception to this activism, representing instead as a spearhead in this regard.¹¹⁰ At the local level, reception infrastructures are diverse and extensive. The *Hub di Via Sammartini*, located near Stazione Centrale, serves as a major reception and orientation centre for newly arrived migrants and refugees,¹¹¹ providing essential services, legal information, and referrals to accommodation facilities. Alongside this frontline infrastructure, the city manages a wide range of projects under the *Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione* (SAI) – translatable as Welcoming and Integration System, formerly SIPROIMI –,¹¹² the national decentralised reception framework entrusted to municipalities.¹¹³ Through these projects, Milan delivers reception and integration services – including housing, language courses, job training, and legal assistance – to asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection, as well as other vulnerable groups. Milan has also adopted an *Accoglienza Diffusa* model, distributing refugees across neighbourhoods to avoid spatial concentration and foster community-based integration. This model reflects a rights-based understanding of reception, leveraging human dignity, community integration, and individualized support over emergency containment or segregation.¹¹⁴

Milan's reception policies have often been significantly at odds with national approaches, most notably during periods of restrictive migration legislation.¹¹⁵ The city has publicly opposed measures criminalising NGO search and rescue operations, lowering reception standards, or restricting access to services for asylum seekers.¹¹⁶ During the 2018-2020 period – when reforms seeking to dismantle parts of the reception system have been approved –, Milan maintained its

¹⁰⁸ Bauböck, R, 'Refugee Protection and Burden-sharing in the European Union' (2018) 56(1) *Journal of Common Market Studies* 141.

¹⁰⁹ Çaglar, A., Glick-Schiller, N., 'Introduction. Migrants and Cities', in Çaglar, A., Glick-Schiller N. (Eds.) *Locating Migration. Rescaling Cities and Migrants* (Cornell University Press, 2020) 5-24.

¹¹⁰ See, *inter alia*, 'Profughi, il modello Milano esempio per l'Europa: diventa caso di studio al Parlamento UE' [Asylum Seekers, Milan as a model for Europe is going to be studied by the European Parliament], *Milano Repubblica*, 21.06.2015, available at: http://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2015/06/21/news/milano_profughi_europa-117378776.

¹¹¹ Dazzi Z., 'Milano, profughi accampati vicino alla stazione. "Situazione esplosiva, subito gli alloggi Expo"', *Milano Repubblica*, 9.07.2016, available at: https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2016/07/09/news/profughi_milano-143753225/?rss.

¹¹² Italy, Decree-Law No. 130 of 21 October 2020, converted into law with amendments by Law No. 173 of 18 December 2020, introducing urgent provisions on immigration and international protection and reforming the SIPROIMI system into the SAI (Reception and Integration System).

¹¹³ Comune di Milano - Documento di sintesi del percorso di programmazione e preliminare alla fase di co-progettazione, 'Per un sistema cittadino per l'accoglienza e l'integrazione delle persone richiedenti asilo o titolari di protezione internazionale e dei minori stranieri non accompagnati', p. 2.

¹¹⁴ For a reconstruction of the history of the reception system, see Bovo, M., Mariani, B. and Tagliaferri, A., 'La governance territoriale dei servizi destinati a cittadini di paesi terzi nell'area metropolitana milanese', in Marconi G., Cancellieri, A. (eds.), *Immigrazione e welfare locale nelle città metropolitane* (Franco Angeli, 2022) 70.

¹¹⁵ For a retrospective on the topic, see Ambrosini, M., *Richiesti e respinti. L'immigrazione in Italia. Come e perché* (Il Saggiatore Milano, 2010); for a more recent appraisal as concern the situation in the Lombardy Region, see instead Semprebon, M., *Le politiche di inclusione degli immigrati in Lombardia: tra discorsi escludenti, ordinanze securitarie e sperimentazioni innovative*, Rapporto di Ricerca realizzato nell'ambito del progetto PRIN "Piccoli comuni e coesione sociale: politiche e pratiche urbane per l'inclusione sociale e spaziale degli immigrati", finanziato dal MIUR - programmi di ricerca di interesse nazionale (Prin) 2010/2011, available at: <https://air.unipr.it/handle/11381/2902677>.

¹¹⁶ 'Migranti, Milano chiede un piano nazionale di inclusione. Sala: «Senza di loro la città si ferma»', *Milano La Repubblica*, 7.01.2019, available at: https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2019/01/07/news/migranti_sala_milano-216007284/.

services and collaborated with civil society to mitigate emerging shortcomings.¹¹⁷ Beyond the local scale, the city has consistently advocated for humanitarian corridors, legal pathways, and European solidarity mechanisms, framing these positions in explicit reference to international human rights and refugee law obligations.¹¹⁸

Milan's international engagement in this field is significant. The city participates in several TCNs and other related activities, such as Eurocities' *Integrating Cities Charter* Initiative,¹¹⁹ the *Urban Agenda Partnership on Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees*,¹²⁰ and the *Mayors Migration Council*.¹²¹ Through these platforms, Milan usually shares best practices, contributes to policy development and inclusion, and advocates for a rights-based approach to migration governance at the European and global levels.

Civil society plays a key role in Milan's migration governance. Organisations such as NAGA, *Casa della Carità*, *Emergency*, and *Caritas Ambrosiana* provide essential services, advocate for migrants' rights, joining forces with municipal institutions as concerns reception and integration initiatives. This partnership model demonstrates Milan's recognition that effective migration governance necessitates a comprehensive, human rights-based approach involving the entire society.

A prominent entry point into Milan's internationalised migration governance is the GFMD Mayors Mechanism¹²² and its *Call to Local Action on Migration*,¹²³ launched to operationalise, at the local level, the *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration*¹²⁴ and the *Global Compact on Refugees*.¹²⁵ The Call provides a platform, the Mayors Migration Council, through which local authorities can pledge concrete measures and subsequently report their progress in international review forums.

In the context of this framework, Mayor Giuseppe Sala's February 2020 pledge set out a three-pronged approach: deepening internal coordination, enhancing cooperation with national authorities and strengthening international collaboration, while prioritising the inclusive socio-economic integration of vulnerable migrants and refugees. The pledge is significant for two main reasons. Firstly, it is extensive in terms of policy breadth, covering matters such as, *inter alia*, health, education, housing and labour-market integration. Secondly, it explicitly situates Milan within transnational peer-learning 'contamination' and EU project ecosystems. This framing of TCNs and other transnational efforts as governance resources rather than mere reputational stages is a notable achievement.¹²⁶

¹¹⁷ Dazzi, Z., 'Milano, nasce il registro dei richiedenti asilo: mitigherà gli effetti del decreto Salvini', Repubblica.it, 4.02.2019, available at: https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2019/02/14/news/milano_registro_richiedenti_asilo-219135468/?fbclid=IwAR2YV6luPwyDmx4lu_DTe28MPVQKwbOjHixQ8uG1s4MP24AI6E69t4dgWVg.

¹¹⁸ See, e.g., Comune di Milano, 'Welfare. UNHCR e sei città italiane presentano la Carta per l'integrazione dei rifugiati', available at: <https://www2.comune.milano.it/-/welfare-unhcr-e-sei-citta-italiane-presentano-la-carta-per-l-integrazione-dei-rifugiati>; International Organization for Migration, 'Inaugurato il Milano Welcome Center. L'OIM sigla una lettera d'intenti con il Comune di Milano', <https://italy.iom.int/it/news/inaugurato-il-milano-welcome-centerloim-sigla-una-lettera-dintenti-con-il-comune-di-milano>.

¹¹⁹ Integrating Cities Charter - Eurocities commitment to migrant integration, available at: <https://integratingcities.eu/charter/>.

¹²⁰ European Urban Initiative, Action Plan of Inclusion of Migrants and Refugees (2024-2027), available at: <https://www.urbanagenda.urban-initiative.eu/partnerships/inclusion-migrants-refugees>.

¹²¹ The Mayors Migration Council (MMC) was launched in 2018 during the adoption of the UN Global Compacts for Migration and on Refugees to ensure cities had a voice in global policy decisions. Founded by the Mayors of Athens, Amman, Bristol, Freetown, Kampala, Los Angeles, Milan, Montréal, São Paulo, and Zürich, the MMC was created to get mayors a seat at the policymaking table and mobilize resources to turn local solutions into global impact.

¹²² See Mayors Mechanism, 'Cities and regions localising the global migration and refugee compacts', June 2023, <https://www.gfmd.org/process/gfmd-mayors-mechanism>.

¹²³ Local Coalition for Migrants and Refugees, available at: <https://www.localcoalition.org/localaction>.

¹²⁴ United Nations General Assembly, *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration*, UN Doc. A/RES/73/195 (19 December 2018).

¹²⁵ United Nations General Assembly, *Global Compact on Refugees*, UN Doc. A/Res/73/151 (17 December 2018).

¹²⁶ An overview of the different implemented projects is available here: <https://mayorsmigrationcouncil.org/cities/milan-italy/>.

Milan's pledge is implemented through a set of interlocking initiatives that reveal how city diplomacy operates 'from the ground up': through project-based cooperation, technical toolkits, and cross-city learning designed to modify frontline service delivery.

The primary concern is the protection of migrants and refugees who are exposed to sexual and gender-based violence, with a particular focus on LGBTQIA+ individuals. Milan became a participant in the IOM Equal(c)ity project as a 'trainee city', together with Brussels, Amsterdam, Ghent and Leipzig. The explicit objective of the project was to enhance the municipal capacity to recognise and address sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) within migrant communities. The project focused on the establishment of secure environments and the cultivation of specific competencies among frontline workers and volunteers¹²⁷. From a governance perspective, *Equal(c)ity* can be regarded as a paradigmatic example of how cities can import operational norms through transnational training, translating international objectives, such as vulnerability reduction, into concrete local administrative practices.¹²⁸

A secondary strand of implementation is exemplified by Milan's ongoing involvement in ADmin4ALL - Phase 2, a programme implemented by IOM across a total of more than thirty municipalities in seven EU Member States.¹²⁹ Through this project, Milan reframed access to local welfare and integration services as a locus of Europeanised municipal capacity-building. Its focus on stakeholder coordination and structured peer learning demonstrates how the city uses EU governance not as a symbolic reference point, but as a practical mechanism for reconfiguring local inclusion infrastructures and enhancing migrants' access to services.¹³⁰

Milan's pledge is also noteworthy for its explicit engagement with legal migration pathways through co-development instruments, particularly the *MeNTOR* and *MeNTOR 2* programmes, which establish temporary and circular migration schemes between Italy, Morocco, and Tunisia.¹³¹ From an analytical perspective, this dimension is of significance insofar as it positions Milan at the intersection of labour market governance and international mobility architecture. The city's approach to the concept of 'integration' deviates from the domestic perspective, engaging in transnational programmes that transcend national boundaries, integrating training, mobility, and employment outcomes across international borders.¹³²

A pivotal component of Milan's migration governance framework is the Service Centre for Unaccompanied Migrant Minors, which was initiated as a pilot in November 2019).¹³³ The Centre is conceptualised as a multifunctional hub that provides initial reception and focused access to procedures and services that are aligned with relevant national and international standards for the protection of minors. These standards encompass aspects such as age assessment, health and psychological evaluation, and referral to suitable longer-term solutions. It is important to note that the model reduces fragmentation by activating services inside the hub, limiting repeated transfers and administrative dispersion. This institutional choice can be interpreted as a local operationalisation of vulnerability-sensitive governance.¹³⁴

¹²⁷ International Organization for Migration (IOM), 'Equal(c)ity: Preventing and Responding to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Migrant Communities' (European Commission Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme).

¹²⁸ On the role of cities in norm diffusion and multilevel migration governance, see Caponio T., Jones-Correa M. (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of the Governance of Migration and Diversity in Cities* (Routledge 2018).

¹²⁹ International Organization for Migration (IOM), *ADmin4ALL – Phase 2: Supporting Social Inclusion of Vulnerable Migrants in Europe* (DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission).

¹³⁰ European Commission, Urban Innovative Actions Initiative (Regulation (EU) No 1301/2013 on the European Regional Development Fund).

¹³¹ ICMPD (International Centre for Migration Policy Development), *Mobility Partnership Facility and Legal Migration Initiatives*, including the MeNTOR – Mediterranean Network for Training Orientation to Regular Migration project.

¹³² On circular migration governance, see R. Skeldon, 'Going Round in Circles: Circular Migration, Poverty Alleviation and Marginality' (2012), *International Migration*, Vol. 50(1) 43.

¹³³ Italy, Law No. 47 of 7 April 2017 (*Zampa Law*) on the protection of unaccompanied foreign minors.

¹³⁴ On vulnerability-sensitive migration, see Nakache, D., Sagay, C.E., 'Migrant in Situations of Vulnerability', in Chetail, V. (ed.), *Elgar Concise Encyclopedia of Migration and Asylum Law* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025) 307.

Milan's commitment also emphasises structural inclusion through education and child wellbeing, notably via WISH MI – Wellbeing Integrated System of Milan (selected under EU Urban Innovative Actions)¹³⁵. The stated objectives – i.e. reducing child poverty, lowering school dropout rates, countering segregation and improving access to services for minors, including those with a migrant background – place significant emphasis on the core concepts of schooling, neighbourhood opportunity structures and multidimensional wellbeing in the context of migration governance.

Two additional networked initiatives are particularly indicative of this. Firstly, Milan played host to a *C MISE* (City Initiative on Migrants with Irregular Status in Europe) meeting in January 2020, in collaboration with Eurocities and Compas (Oxford).¹³⁶ The primary focus of this initiative is not on foreign policy, but rather on the resolution of municipal challenges within a legally sensitive domain, namely irregular migration. This objective is pursued through structured peer exchange and the identification of viable local solutions. Secondly, Milan's involvement in the ERRIN/REACH OUT project, which sought to enhance outreach and communication regarding voluntary return and reintegration, further testifies the city's experimentation with governance instruments in domains characterised by an intricate interplay between national competences, local service requirements, and human vulnerability.¹³⁷

2.4 Crisis, solidarity, and mayoral positioning: Ukraine and Gaza/Palestine

The migration dossier offers a particularly revealing entry point into Milan's broader international posture, insofar as it demonstrates the intersection of mayoral speech acts, crisis management, and symbolic positioning with the city's engagement in global humanitarian debates.¹³⁸ Although foreign policy remains a constitutionally reserved national competence, Milan has repeatedly articulated public positions on major international crises where these have generated significant local repercussions or raised fundamental human rights concerns. The city's responses to the war in Ukraine, the crisis in Gaza, and the situation in Afghanistan illustrate a calibrated form of urban internationalism: one that seeks to express normative alignment and solidarity while remaining attentive to institutional boundaries.¹³⁹

Following the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 – still ongoing at the time of writing – Milan, together with other Italian cities,¹⁴⁰ rapidly mobilised humanitarian assistance, coordinated the reception of several thousand displaced persons, and set in motion emergency accommodation, schooling, and other welfare services.¹⁴¹ These operative measures have been accompanied by symbolic gestures, including the illumination of public buildings in Ukrainian colours and public statements by Mayor Giuseppe Sala that framed the city as a place of refuge and solidarity.¹⁴² In this context, Milan's international posture was closely tied to its concrete

¹³⁵ City of Milan, *WISH MI – Wellbeing Integrated System of Milan*, selected under the European Commission Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) 4th Call (2019).

¹³⁶ Eurocities, *City Initiative on Migrants with Irregular Status in Europe (C-MISE)*, in cooperation with COMPAS, University of Oxford.

¹³⁷ European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN), *REACH OUT Project on Voluntary Return and Reintegration*.

¹³⁸ For an analysis of mayoral speech acts and symbolic politics in international crises, see Oomen, B, and Baumgärtel, M., 'Frontier Cities: The Rise of Local Authorities as an Opportunity for International Human Rights Law' (2018) 29(2) *European Journal of International Law* 607.

¹³⁹ Cladi, L., 'Italian foreign policy between Ukraine and Gaza: politicisation and war fatigue from Draghi to Meloni' (2026) 48(2) *Journal of European Integration* 311.

¹⁴⁰ European Commission, *Ukrainian Diaspora in Italy* (Data Stories, EU Data Portal), 2023, <https://data.europa.eu/en/publications/datastories/ukrainian-diaspora-italy>.

¹⁴¹ On cities as frontline implementers of refugee protection following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, see UNHCR, *Ukraine Situation Operational Data Portal* (2022-ongoing); European Commission, *Temporary Protection Directive Activation (Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382)*.

¹⁴² See, e.g., Presidenza del Consiglio comunale. Il 24 febbraio Palazzo Marino si illumina con i colori della bandiera ucraina, available at: <https://www.comune.milano.it/w/presidenza-del-consiglio-comunale-il-24-febbraio-palazzo-marino-si-illumina-con-i-colori-della-bandiera-ucraina>.

administrative capacity,¹⁴³ explicitly linking geopolitical uncertainty to municipal concerns such as school inclusion,¹⁴⁴ housing availability,¹⁴⁵ and tailored support measures for unaccompanied children.¹⁴⁶ This framing translated an international armed conflict into the language of urban governance, reinforcing the role of cities as frontline implementers of humanitarian protection even in the absence of formal foreign-affairs competences.¹⁴⁷

In the aftermath of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan in 2021, the city participated in initiatives supporting the evacuation and reception of Afghan families and publicly endorsed efforts to protect Afghan women's rights activists, often in coordination with national authorities and civil society organisations. Once more, the emphasis was placed on humanitarian protection and local reception, as opposed to explicit geopolitical positioning.¹⁴⁸

Milan adopted a more cautious and institutionally restrained posture in relation to other crises. In comparison to other crises, Milan adopted a posture characterised by caution and institutional restraint. For instance, during the ongoing crisis in Gaza, Milan's engagement took a more circumscribed form. It is evident that a number of municipal factors contributed to the facilitation of humanitarian fundraising and the support of civil society initiatives that advocated for a ceasefire.¹⁴⁹ However, discourse among mayors consistently emphasised prudence and the limitations of municipal competence in this regard. Proposals advanced within the City Council concerning symbolic measures – such as the suspension or revision of twinning cities relations – were met with caution, with Sala emphasising that such acts risked exceeding the appropriate remit of local government.¹⁵⁰ This stance exacerbates an enduring tension in Milan's international engagement. On the one hand, the city acknowledges that global conflicts generate local social and political reverberations. On the other hand, it also frames municipal action as necessarily calibrated to avoid encroaching upon domains perceived as state prerogatives.

When considered collectively, these episodes evince a recurrent pattern in the realm of urban diplomacy. It is evident that Milan combines normative sensitivity and solidarity signalling with a persistent awareness of legal and political constraints.¹⁵¹ Concurrently, the differentiated

¹⁴³ For a comparative study, see Bassoli, M., Campomori, M., 'Unravelling the multi-level governance of Ukrainian refugee reception in Italy: a focus on small and medium-sized cities' (2024) *Local Government Studies*, 1-24.

¹⁴⁴ See, e.g., Hughes, R.A., 'Italian School Gives Heartwarming Welcome To Ukrainian Refugee Children', *Forbes*, 15.03.2022, available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rebeccahughes/2022/03/15/italian-school-gives-heartwarming-welcome-to-ukrainian-refugee-children/>.

¹⁴⁵ Comune di Milano, 'Milano Aiuta: per chi cerca un alloggio', <https://www2.comune.milano.it/web/milanoaiuta/per-chi-cerca-un-alloggio>.

¹⁴⁶ Dazzi, Z., Profughi, trecento bambini ucraini a Milano senza genitori: 700 famiglie pronte ad accoglierli, *Milano Repubblica*, available at: https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2022/03/28/news/trecento_bambini_ucraina_senza_genitori_milano_donazioni_comune-343201454/.

¹⁴⁷ See Morgades-Gil, S. 'Humanitarian Corridors: Fairness to International Protection by Means of International Humanitarian Law Instruments', *Diritti Comparati* (29 July 2025), available at: <https://www.diritticomparati.it/humanitarian-corridors-fairness-to-international-protection-by-means-of-international-humanitarian-law-instruments/>. On the increasing engagement of cities with international humanitarian law, particularly in relation to urban areas as theatres of armed conflict, see Sossai M., 'The Place of Cities in the Evolution of International Humanitarian Law' (2021) 31 *Italian Yearbook of International Law* 227.

¹⁴⁸ Redazione Ansa, 'Sala, ci prepariamo a gestire l'accoglienza dei profughi afgani', Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata (ANSA), 17.08.2021, available at: https://www.ansa.it/lombardia/notizie/2021/08/17/sala-ci-prepariamo-a-gestire-laccoglienza-dei-profughi-afghani_9533e8a5-ea81-4724-b548-b24fe1cce7c6.html; see also Fondazione Casa della Carità, 'L'accoglienza della casa per i profughi afgani', <https://www.casadellacarita.org/accoglienza-profughi-afghani-milano/>.

¹⁴⁹ Redazione Milano, 'Bandiera della pace esposta sulla facciata "Cessate il fuoco ora" nella Striscia di Gaza', *Il Giorno*, 12.03.2014, available at: <https://www.ilgiorno.it/milano/cronaca/bandiera-della-pace-esposta-sulla-facciata-cessate-il-fuoco-ora-nella-striscia-di-gaza-01bf2c6b>.

¹⁵⁰ Russo, C., 'Gemellaggio con Gaza, Milano dice sì. Sala: «Si aiuti anche concretamente»', *Milano Pavia News*, 21.10.2025, available at: <https://www.milanopavia.news/cronaca/gemellaggio-con-gaza-milano-dice-si-sala-si-aiuti-anche-concretamente/>.

¹⁵¹ Comune di Milano, 'Palazzo Marino. Il Comune di Milano aderisce alla campagna 24 maggio - 50.000 sudari per Gaza', 23.05.2025, available at: <https://www2.comune.milano.it/-/palazzo-marino-il-comune-di-milano-aderisce>.

intensity and framing of responses across crises expose potential double standards in the city's humanitarian positioning. In contrast, the Ukrainian crisis evoked a pronounced convergence of symbolic support, public rhetoric, and material mobilisation. Conversely, other contexts – most notably, Gaza – were dealt with a degree of caution and restraint, despite exhibiting far-reaching human rights implications and societal mobilisation. Such 'contradictions' cannot, nevertheless, be reduced to municipal discretion alone, insofar as they echo broader geopolitical alignments, national-level sensitivities, and the uneven space granted to cities within contested international debates.

From an analytical perspective, Milan's conduct exemplifies the *modus operandi* of city diplomacy practices in the domain of human rights, whereby there is often selective visibility and calibrated – at times labelled as 'performative' – speech acts. In this regard, the capacity of cities to engage with the global community is not, and cannot, be predicated upon the assertion of sovereign authority. Against this background, they can attempt to translate international crises into governance challenges that are locally legible, whilst navigating the risks of overreach and political backlash. This phenomenon aptly exemplifies the dual capacity and ambiguity of urban actors in the context of global human rights governance. On the one hand, these actors possess the ability to articulate solidarity and implement protection measures at the local level. However, they are also subject to structural constraints and variations in the scope and consistency of their international advocacy.

2.5. Housing as a Human Right: Urban Inequality and Social Inclusion

Housing represents one of Milan's most acute human rights challenges, and has become a substantive juncture where local governance, international norms and standards, and market-driven transformation closely intersect. Curbing rent rates, speculative real-estate investment, the proliferation of short-term rental platforms such as Airbnb or Booking, and a chronic shortage of public housing supply have intensified urban inequalities and raised fundamental questions concerning both the right to adequate housing and, more broadly, the 'right to the city'.

Within international human rights law, housing is recognised as an essential component of the right to an adequate standard of living¹⁵² and, more recently, has been reaffirmed through the 2030 Agenda, particularly SDG 11, which calls for «*inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities*». ¹⁵³ At the urban level, this normative framework increasingly frames housing not merely as a welfare concern, but as a prerequisite for dignity, social inclusion, and effective access to other rights.¹⁵⁴ However, in Milan – as well as in other metropolis –, this rights-based framing collides with long-standing structural pressures (i.e. the rise in property values, the financialisation of real estate, and the socio-spatial polarisation) that have rendered access to affordable and adequate housing one of the city's most pressing governance challenges.

Over the past two decades, Milan has experienced intense real-estate valorisation driven by large-scale urban regeneration, redevelopment projects, and the city's repositioning within

[alla-campagna-24-maggio-50.000-sudari-per-gaza-;](https://milano.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/25_maggio_25/milano-scontro-sul-sudario-per-gaza-esposto-a-palazzo-marino-la-brigata-ebraica-cosi-sala-non-e-sindaco-di-tutti-724ee1cc-879f-4f9a-ba5b-bc5e87d1fxlk.shtml) but see also Evangelista, C., 'Milano, scontro sul «sudario» per Gaza esposto a Palazzo Marino. La Brigata Ebraica: «Cosi Sala non è sindaco di tutti»', *Milano Corriere*, 25.05.2025, available at: https://milano.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/25_maggio_25/milano-scontro-sul-sudario-per-gaza-esposto-a-palazzo-marino-la-brigata-ebraica-cosi-sala-non-e-sindaco-di-tutti-724ee1cc-879f-4f9a-ba5b-bc5e87d1fxlk.shtml.

¹⁵² For a broad overview on the topic, see Majing, C., 'Housing, Right to, International Protection', *Max Planck Encyclopaedia of Public International Law* (June 2010); Hohmann J., *The Right to Housing: Law, Concepts and Possibilities* (Hart Publishing, 2013).

¹⁵³ Birkenkötter, H., 'Make Cities and Human Settlements Inclusive, Safe, Resilient, and Sustainable' in Bantekas, I., Seatzu, F. (eds.), *The UN Sustainable Development Goals: A Commentary*, Oxford Commentaries on International Law (Oxford University Press, 2023) 799.

¹⁵⁴ See UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *General Comment No 4: The Right to Adequate Housing (Art 11(1) of the Covenant)* (13 December 1991) UN Doc E/1992/23, para. 4; see also UN Commission on Human Settlements, 'Global Strategy for Shelter to the Year 2000' (6 June 1988) UN Doc GAOR 43rd Session Supp 3, Addendum 1.

global circuits of capital. Flagship interventions, such as Porta Nuova (featuring the renowned 'Bosco verticale' project by Stefano Boeri) and CityLife are frequently cited in international urban policy debates as exemplars of successful regeneration. The aforementioned interventions have contributed to economic growth, architectural renewal, and global visibility. Concurrently, there has been an acceleration in housing costs and exclusionary dynamics in neighbouring areas, which has had a disproportionate impact on low-income households, young residents, migrants and precarious workers, for whom access to housing has become increasingly uncertain.¹⁵⁵

More recent regeneration trajectories reproduce similar tensions. The transformation of the former Expo 2015 site into the MIND (Milano Innovation District) campus has been promoted within transnational innovation and sustainability networks as a paradigmatic post-mega-event legacy project.¹⁵⁶ Yet its residential components remain largely disconnected from affordability objectives, reinforcing concerns – widely discussed in comparative urban governance literature – about innovation-led development that privileges global competitiveness over social inclusion. Comparable controversies surround the Olympic Village developed for the Milan-Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics.¹⁵⁷ Publicly framed through narratives of sustainability, legacy, and reuse, the Village has been presented as a future resource for student and affordable housing. Rising costs, reliance on complex public-private partnerships, and uncertainty over post-event affordability, however, have fuelled public debate and illustrate the structural tension between mega-event-driven urban development and the realisation of housing as a social right.¹⁵⁸

In response to mounting pressure, the municipality has implemented a comprehensive housing strategy, integrating regulatory measures, social policies, and regeneration tools. The Piano Casa 2022-2030 project has been devised to achieve three primary objectives. Firstly, it seeks to expand social housing provisions. Secondly, it aims to regulate regeneration processes. Thirdly, and finally, the project aims to promote mixed-income neighbourhoods.¹⁵⁹ In this regard, the public agency *Milano Abitare* plays an intermediary role between landlords and low-income tenants through incentives for affordable rents and eviction prevention.¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, the city has embarked on an initiative entitled 'Quartieri 2030' with a view to redressing spatial inequality. This strategy has entailed a substantial investment in peripheral neighbourhoods, with a focus on the enhancement of public spaces, social services and community infrastructure.¹⁶¹

In addition to the utilisation of long-term planning instruments, Milan has initiated the implementation of measures to address acute vulnerability through the provision of emergency and transitional housing. Municipal programmes targeting homelessness and housing insecurity have relied on the temporary reuse of public buildings, short-term accommodation schemes, and rent support mechanisms. Recent initiatives developed in collaboration with civil society

¹⁵⁵ On this topic, see in general ReHousIn Lecture #1 | Understanding Milan's Housing Affordability Crisis, 3.12.2025, available at: <https://rehousin.eu/lectures/rehousing-lecture-1-understanding-milans-housing-aff>.

¹⁵⁶ Milan Innovation District is to be a major new precinct for science, knowledge, technology and innovation. It is a multi-phased, mixed-use redevelopment featuring office, residential, retail, research, university and public space. Located on the former Expo site northwest of Milan's city centre, the site benefits from excellent transport links and infrastructure; see further Milan Innovation District (MIND), <https://www.lendlease.com/ita/projects/milan-innovation-district/>.

¹⁵⁷ Testuzza, C., 'Milan-Cortina: 85 beds in the Olympic Village reserved for Enpam students', *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 19.02.2026, available at: <https://en.ilsole24ore.com/art/milan-cortina-85-beds-olympic-village-reserved-for-enpam-students-AlgeXEWB>

¹⁵⁸ 'In Italia oramai gli studentati a prezzi accessibili sono rarissimi', *Il Post*, 27.11.2025, <https://www.ilpost.it/2025/11/27/studentati-italia/>; Ciaramitaro, S., 'Il futuro del Villaggio olimpico: studentato poco calmierato', *Collettiva*, 11.02.2026, <https://www.collettiva.it/copertine/italia/villaggio-olimpico-studentato-prezzi-okhv8f8a>.

¹⁵⁹ Venni, F., 'Piano Casa, terreni e palazzi del Comune per 3.500 alloggi: rivisti i criteri', *Milano Repubblica*, 23.01.2026, https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2026/01/23/news/piano_casa_comune_palazzi_terreni-425112418/

¹⁶⁰ Comune di Milano, 'Milano Abitare: l'agenzia per l'affitto accessibile', <https://www.milanoabitare.org/>.

¹⁶¹ Comune di Milano, 'Milano 2030', <https://pgt.comune.milano.it/dpmlano-2030-visione-costruzione-strategie-spazi/visione/milano-2030#:~:text=Da%20un%20lato%20la%20Circle,a%20guardare%20oltre%20i%20confini>; Comune di Milano, 'Milano dei quartieri', <https://pgt.comune.milano.it/dpmlano-2030-visione-costruzione-strategie-spazi/spazi/milano-dei-quartieri>.

organisations, such as Housing First *Milano*, mark a shift away from purely emergency-based responses towards more stable, rights-oriented solutions that prioritise access to permanent housing as a precondition for social inclusion. Despite their limited scope, these programmes signify an endeavour to harmonise local policy with international norms concerning the right to adequate housing.¹⁶²

Student housing has emerged as a particularly salient component of Milan's affordability crisis. As Italy's leading academic hub, hosting major public universities, private institutions, and internationally oriented programmes, Milan attracts an ever-growing population of both Italian and international students, whose housing demands and needs intersect with the private rental market. The chronic undersupply of purpose-built student accommodation has pushed students into competition with low-income workers and young professionals, thus fuelling rising rents and intensified pressure in central and semi-central neighbourhoods.

Municipal responses in this field have largely relied on planning incentives, public-private partnerships, and large-scale regeneration projects, rather than on a comprehensive student housing policy. In the context of major redevelopment initiatives, student residences have been strategically deployed within target areas and projects, frequently situated on publicly owned or regenerated land. Concurrently, agreements have been established with academic institutions and private developers with the goal of augmenting the supply of regulated or semi-regulated accommodation in areas that are well-connected. From a governance perspective, however, student housing occupies an ambiguous position: while increasingly recognised as a structural component of urban welfare and accessibility, much of the supply remains market-oriented, with affordability thresholds that exclude lower-income students and risk reproducing selective forms of inclusion.¹⁶³

Within the broader and challenging search for affordability-oriented solutions, Milan has recently advanced intergenerational co-living schemes involving elderly residents and younger cohorts.¹⁶⁴ These initiatives are typically framed, and at times romantically idealised, as mutually beneficial arrangements and plans wishing to repurpose under-occupied housing stock, offer companionship, and provide affordable accommodation, while advancing narratives of social cohesion that risk eclipsing underlying structural constraints.¹⁶⁵ The growing prominence of such 'creative' solutions is revealing. Rather than providing a comprehensive response to the housing crisis, intergenerational co-living operates more as a policy device, reallocating responsibility for housing affordability and care into private households without structurally addressing underlying drivers such as rent inflation, financialisation, and the chronic shortage of non-market housing. From a rights-based perspective, these schemes raise pressing issues concerning voluntariness,

¹⁶² 'Appartamenti ai senza dimora: parte a Milano il progetto di Housing First', *Redattore Sociale*, 13.11.2014, available at:

https://www.redattoresociale.it/article/notiziario/appartamenti_ai_senza_dimora_parte_a_milano_il_progetto_di_housing_first; more extensively on the *Housing First* project, see also Cortese, C., *Scenari e pratiche dell'Housing First: Una nuova via dell'accoglienza per la grave emarginazione adulta in Italia* (FrancoAngeli, 2016).

¹⁶³ Rolnik R. and Rabinovich L., 'Late Neoliberalism: The Financialisation of Homeownership and the Housing Rights of the Poor', in Nolan A. (ed.), *Economic and Social Rights after the Global Financial Crisis* (Cambridge University Press, 2014) 57; Birchall D., 'Human Rights on the Altar of the Market: The Blackstone Letters and the Financialisation of Housing' (2019) 10(3-4) *Transnational Legal Theory* 446; Martinez K., 'In the Face of Financialization: Cities and the Human Right to Adequate Housing' (2021) 30 *The Italian Yearbook of International Law* 107.

¹⁶⁴ See, e.g., School Editorial, 'Co-housing between students and the elderly, project kicks off for an intergenerational solidarity pact', *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 9.12.2024, available at: <https://en.ilssole24ore.com/art/co-housing-students-and-the-elderly-via-project-an-intergenerational-solidarity-pact-AGC6zUfB>.

¹⁶⁵ More generally, on the topic, see Hanum, L., Newcombe, P., Scott, T., 'A systematic review of intergenerational co-residence between older people and adult children' (2024) 30(6) *Journal of Family Studies* 968; Gorjup R, Hand C., Laliberte Rudman D., 'Building Connections among University Students and Older Adult through Co-occupation in Intergenerational Living' (2026) 45(2) *Canadian Journal on Aging / La Revue canadienne du vieillissement* 231.

power asymmetries, and the blurring of boundaries between adequate housing, care, and social assistance.¹⁶⁶

Regulatory interventions have also been deployed as a tentative corrective response to the exclusionary effects associated with platform-driven (over)tourism, signalling an attempt to reclaim public space and curb the indirect housing impacts of short-term rental platforms. In late 2025, Milan's City Council passed a ban on Airbnb-style lockboxes fixed to public infrastructure, citing the improper use of public space and concerns related to security and traceability.¹⁶⁷ While not amounting to a comprehensive restriction on short-term rentals as such, the measure signals a broader regulatory orientation, shared with other Italian cities, and reflects growing concern over overtourism, housing affordability, and the commodification of urban space.¹⁶⁸

Mayor Giuseppe Sala's public statements further illuminate the structural constraints under which Milan's housing policy operates. Speaking at the conference *Emergenza casa, verso un piano europeo* at Palazzo Marino, Sala acknowledged that a comprehensive national housing plan would require investment far beyond municipal fiscal capacity, estimating figures around €100 billion.¹⁶⁹ Housing, he observed, has become one of the most pressing and urgent issues confronting cities, which are increasingly politically accountable for outcomes despite limited financial and regulatory leverage.¹⁷⁰

Against this background, Sala repeatedly framed housing affordability as a paradigmatic case for institutional synergy rather than intergovernmental competition, explicitly welcoming growing attention at the European level, including the creation of a dedicated housing committee within the European Parliament and the appointment of a Commissioner responsible for housing and energy.¹⁷¹ As far as Milan is concerned, he referred to the *Piano Straordinario Casa*, aiming to deliver approximately 10,000 housing units at controlled rents, while openly recognising that its projected cost of €2 billion exceeds municipal capacity, making public-private cooperation unavoidable.¹⁷²

This multilevel framing is reinforced by Milan's active engagement in city diplomacy. The city plays a prominent role within the *Mayors4Housing* alliance, which in May 2025 presented a European Housing Action Plan in Brussels calling for emergency financing streams, reform of State aid rules, stricter regulation of short-term rental platforms, and the creation of a brand-new Affordable Housing Fund modelled on NextGenerationEU. By aggregating municipal voices, the alliance turns urban diplomacy into a capacity-building lever, pressing for regulatory change and direct resources that cities cannot secure individually.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁶ For an early appraisal, see Charlton, E., 'Students in Milan are moving in with the elderly to fight loneliness and save money', World Economic Forum, 22.11.2018, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2018/11/why-some-students-in-milan-are-moving-in-with-elderly-people/>.

¹⁶⁷ 'Milan bans check-in keyboxes for short-term rentals', Reuters, 4.12.2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/milan-bans-check-in-keyboxes-short-term-rentals-2025-12-04/>.

¹⁶⁸ See, e.g., Rossi, I., D'Addona, S., 'The impact of Airbnb on long-term rentals, population, and college enrollments: Empirical evidence from an Italian university town' (2025) 31(8) *Tourism Economics* 1674, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13548166251314063>; Congiu, R., Pino, F., Rondi, L., 'The Uneven Effect of Airbnb on the Housing Market: Evidence Across and Within Italian Cities' (2025) 65(2) *Journal of Regional Sciences* 339.

¹⁶⁹ Comune di Milano, 'Emergenza Casa: Verso un piano europeo', <https://www2.comune.milano.it/-/palazzo-marino-emergenza-casa-verso-un-piano-europeo-l-evento-lunedì-15-settembre-in-sala-alessi>; see also Monaci S., 'Piano casa, dalle città UE appello a Bruxelles: Sala, servono 100 miliardi', *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 16.09.2025, <https://www.ilssole24ore.com/art/piano-casa-citta-ue-appello-bruxelles-sala-servono-100-miliardi-AHRVwBfC>.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Housing Europe, 'The very first EU Commissioner with responsibility for housing', 18.07.2024, available at: <https://www.housingeurope.eu/the-very-first-eu-commissioner-with-responsibility-for-housing/>.

¹⁷² Comune di Milano, 'Piano straordinario casa. Giovedì 22 gennaio a Palazzo Reale l'evento "Milano per l'abitare: la strategia per una città accessibile"', 21.01.2026, available at: <https://www.comune.milano.it/w/piano-straordinario-casa-giovedì-22-gennaio-a-palazzo-reale-l-evento-milano-per-l-abitare-la-strategia-per-una-città-accessibile->.

¹⁷³ Eurocities, 'EU must act now: Mayors of major cities unveil European Housing Action Plan', 27.05.2025, available at <https://eurocities.eu/latest/eu-must-act-now-mayors-of-major-cities-unveil-european-housing-action-plan/>.

Against this background, Milan's housing agenda reveals a tension within contemporary urban governance. While the city increasingly deploys human rights language and standards, SDG 11 commitments, and transnational advocacy to legitimise intervention, its development trajectory continues to favour mainly real-estate valorisation and market-oriented solutions. The implementation of luxury-oriented regeneration projects and mega-projects, in conjunction with the introduction of selective affordability measures, carries the potential to redefine inclusion in a manner that is narrowly defined in terms of market compatibility. This process is occurring despite the rhetorical framing of housing as a right.¹⁷⁴

From a 'right to the city' perspective, the critical question is not merely whether housing is formally provided, but whether processes of urban transformation enable residents to remain in place, access, and actively participate in the social, economic, and political fabric of the city. Milan's housing policies thus illuminate both the possibilities and the limits of urban human rights governance. On the one hand, they demonstrate how cities can mobilise global norms, soft-law frameworks, and city diplomacy to confront enduring structural pressures such as affordability and exclusion. On the other hand, they expose the constraints imposed by real-estate financialization, fragmented competences, and uneven political will. These tensions are not confined to the housing sector, but permeate various domains of Milan's human rights-based urban agenda, including food policy, as will be discussed in the subsequent section.

2.6. *The Right to Food: Milan's Food Policy as a Global Model*

Food policy is one of the most apparent and internationally endorsed pillars of Milan's human rights-based urban agenda. In contrast to domains where fragmented competences compromise municipal leverage, food governance has emerged as a comparatively flexible field through which the city can articulate social inclusion, sustainability, and an outward-facing leadership role. Through a deliberate – and yet strategic – combination of local programmes and transnational instruments, Milan has positioned itself as a reference point for operationalising the right to food at the urban scale.

The contemporary phase of this broader agenda coalesced around Expo 2015 – i.e., the Universal Exposition hosted by Milan from May to October 2015, organised under the theme 'Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life' –, which placed food security, nutrition, and sustainable food systems at the heart of global debate while acting as a catalyst for institutional innovation and reorientation for the city. Beyond its nature as a 'mega-event', Expo functioned as a normative and agenda-setting platform, foregrounding food as a global public concern at the intersection of human rights and sustainable development, positioning cities (and, in the case at hand, Milan) as key sites for policy experimentation and 'localisation' of international norms.¹⁷⁵ Milan's exposure in this regard bolstered an already ongoing process of institutional consolidation, prompting the city to translate the Expo's thematic legacy into a more durable governance framework. In that same year, under the leadership of former Mayor Giuseppe Pisapia, the Milan City Council adopted the *Milan Food Policy*, a groundbreaking integrated strategy spanning access to food, public health, environmental sustainability, and social cohesion.¹⁷⁶ Borrowing from the 1996 World Food Summit (first) definition of food security,¹⁷⁷ the Milan Food Policy

¹⁷⁴ See Martinez (n 161).

¹⁷⁵ Di Vita, S., Basso, M., 'The Planning and Governance of the Expo 2015 and the Post-Event: The Growth of a New Awareness - Overcoming the State of Exception', in Di Vita, S., Morandi, C. (eds.), *Mega-Events and Legacies in Post-Metropolitan Spaces. Mega Event Planning Series* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) 39.

¹⁷⁶ Comune di Milano, 'La Food Policy di Milano', available at: https://www2.comune.milano.it/aree-tematiche/food_policy.

¹⁷⁷ The 1996 World Food Summit defined food security as existing when "all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life". This definition established four distinct yet closely interrelated dimensions: availability, access, utilization, and stability.

expressly frames food as a fundamental human right and assigns the municipality an active role in shaping the urban food system, thereby moving beyond residual charity to a governance architecture grounded in rights, standards, and administrative levers.¹⁷⁸

At the international level, Milan converted the Expo 2015 momentum into a durable soft-law architecture through the conception and subsequent launch of the *Milan Urban Food Policy Pact* (hereinafter, MUFPP, ‘the Pact’) in October 2015, a TCN-like normative instrument explicitly grounded in and projected as part of the Expo’s normative inheritance.¹⁷⁹ Endorsed by hundreds of cities across all areas and regions of the world, the MUFPP codifies a rights-based and systemic approach to urban food governance while also providing a voluntary *Framework for Action* that cities can decide to incorporate into their local institutional settings.

From a political standpoint, signatories commit to: a) developing inclusive, resilient, safe, and diverse food systems ensuring healthy and affordable food and water for all while conserving biodiversity and addressing climate change; b) coordinating across local departments and progressively integrating food and water considerations into social, economic, environmental, education, and waste policies; c) seeking coherence between urban action and sub-national, national, and international frameworks; to engaging all sectors – such as, *inter alia*, civil society, small producers, academia, and the private sector – in design, implementation and periodic assessment; to reviewing urban policies and regulations to enable equitable and sustainable food systems; and d) using the *Framework for Action* and sharing progress with peer cities and higher-level institutions; and to encouraging further municipal uptake.

From an operational perspective, the MUFPP seeks to direct cities in the implementation of a number of key initiatives. These include the development of enabling governance capacities and information systems, the promotion of sustainable diets, and the addressing of diet-related non-communicable diseases through educational initiatives, standards, and public facility regulations; deploy social-protection instruments and reorient school feeding towards healthy, seasonal, regionally sourced food; integrate urban and peri-urban agriculture by securing land access and support short supply chains; invest in equitable food supply and distribution systems, including public markets and proportionate food-safety controls; and reduce food loss and waste through monitoring, regulatory review, and safe recovery according to a ‘food-use-before-waste’ hierarchy. In this way, the MUFPP sets out a comprehensive municipal *repertoire* – encompassing coordination, participation, procurement, regulation, markets, and waste governance – through which the right to food becomes actionable in everyday city administration.¹⁸⁰

The MUFPP appears to be also explicitly coherent with a wide variety of international normative frameworks. In essence, the objectives of the programme are in alignment with the 2030 Agenda, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of *Zero Hunger* (SDG 2), *Sustainable Cities and Communities* (SDG 11), and *Responsible Consumption and Production* (SDG 12). There are also secondary implications for SDG 3 (Good Health and Well Being) and SDG 13 (Climate Action). Institutionally, it positions cities as local implementers of global agendas, including climate commitments under the Paris Agreement,¹⁸¹ biodiversity aims and objectives set out by the Convention on Biological Diversity,¹⁸² and resilience priorities akin to

¹⁷⁸ *Linee di Indirizzo della Food Policy 2015-2020*, at 14: «[...] Il comune riconosce l’importanza per i cittadini di avere accesso fisico, sociale ed economico all’acqua potabile come diritto umano, ad alimenti sufficienti, sicuri e nutrienti che garantiscano le loro necessità e preferenze alimentari per condurre una vita attiva e sana».

¹⁷⁹ Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, October 2015, available here: <https://www.milanurbanfoodpolicypact.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Milan-Urban-Food-Policy-Pact-EN.pdf>.

¹⁸⁰ Candel, J. J. L., ‘What’s on the menu? A global assessment of MUFPP signatory cities’ food strategies’ (2020) 44(7) *Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems* 919, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21683565.2019.1648357>.

¹⁸¹ United Nations. Paris Agreement. 2015. United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/english_paris_agreement.pdf.

¹⁸² Convention on Biological Diversity, June 5, 1992, 1760 U.N.T.S. 79.

the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction.¹⁸³ Normatively, it resonates with several international human rights law – most notably, Article 11(1) of the International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR),¹⁸⁴ and the ICESCR Committee’s General Comment No. 12 on the right to adequate food –¹⁸⁵ by reframing local procurement, urban agriculture, and social protection as tools for the progressive realisation of the (human) right to food. The voluntary character of the MUFPP, while arguably an operational limitation, reflects the broader logics of contemporary city diplomacy: it relies on a governance model grounded in peer learning, reporting, and reputational incentives rather than formal obligations (and related ‘sanctions’), yet it provides the common grammar through which municipal practice can be coordinated and scaled across multiple (and very diverse) domestic jurisdictions.

At the local level, Milan’s policy instruments and capabilities reflect these commitments. through collaborative efforts with civil society and philanthropic organisations, are designed to address the issue of surplus food wastage from various sources, including supermarkets, street markets, and catering services. The Hubs aim to address the issue of food insecurity and poverty by redistributing recovered food to households in need.¹⁸⁶ Piloted in selected urban districts and significantly expanded during the COVID-19 crisis, the programme has supported thousands of residents and is frequently showcased within MUFPP peer-learning circuits. Yet, because these hubs rely on surplus redistribution, they crystallise a structural question that the MUFPP itself acknowledges but cannot resolve on its own: whether access to food is secured as a right – through structured public entitlements and dedicated budgetary guarantees – or, rather, remains contingent on project-based funding, eligibility criteria, and the availability of surplus.¹⁸⁷

A second dimension of Milan’s food-policy architecture lies in collective catering. School meal programmes increasingly incorporate nutritional, environmental, and social criteria – such as, *inter alia*, organic products, short supply chains, and defined sustainability indicators –, thereby deploying municipal procurement as a tool for shaping local food systems and ensuring equitable access to healthy diets, especially for children from low-income households.¹⁸⁸ During the COVID-19 pandemic, these same infrastructures were rapidly adapted into food-parcel and voucher distribution schemes, entrenching public catering as a *de facto* social-protection mechanism consistent with the MUFPP’s call for robust safety nets and standards in public facilities.¹⁸⁹

Notwithstanding the considerable progress that has been made, there still exists a marked incongruity between the ambitious rights-based initiatives and the philanthropic

¹⁸³ United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030*, adopted at the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, Sendai, Japan, 18 March 2015, UN Doc. A/CONF.224/CRP.1 (2015).

¹⁸⁴ ICESCR, Article 11(1): «The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. The States Parties will take appropriate steps to ensure the realization of this right, recognizing to this effect the essential importance of international cooperation based on free consent».

¹⁸⁵ UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), *General Comment No. 12: The Right to Adequate Food (Art. 11)*, UN Doc E/C.12/1999/5 (12 May 1999).

¹⁸⁶ The EarthShot Prize, ‘The City of Milan Food Waste Hubs’, <https://earthshotprize.org/winners-finalists/city-of-milan/>; for an overview of such (re)distribution techniques, see Casson, A., Valentini, G., Rizzuni, A., Dattu Narote, A., Scotti, G., Guidetti, R., Giovenzana, V., ‘Redistribution through urban food hubs: A comprehensive sustainability assessment’ (2026) 117 *Environmental Impact Assessment Review*.

¹⁸⁷ Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, ‘Action 34, Food Waste’, available at: <https://www.milanurbanfoodpolicypact.org/framework-for-action/food-waste/>; see further Den Broeder, C., Lazer, L., Gisasola-Maiztegi, N., Ruggero, B., Coopmans, I., ‘Challenges, coping mechanisms, and solutions in surplus food redistribution efforts at the city level’ (2026) 7(1) *Discover Sustainability* 123.

¹⁸⁸ Marcotriggiano, V., Stingi, G.D., Nugnes, P.T., Mancano, S., Lagreca, V.M., Tarricone, T., Salerno, G., Pasquale, P., Marchet, P., Sava, G.A., et al., ‘Collective Catering Activities and Official Controls: Dietary Promotion, Sustainability and Future Perspectives’ (2023) 11(9) *Healthcare* 1347.

¹⁸⁹ Pagliarino, E., ‘State school catering in Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic: a qualitative study’ (2024) *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, 8:1387100, doi: 10.3389/fsufs.2024.1387100.

practices that are oriented towards charity. Milan's policy documents, in conjunction with its international positioning within the MUFPP, mobilise the vocabulary of the right to food. However, several interventions continue to rely on unstable elements, including short-term project funding, third sector implementation, and surplus-driven redistribution. Such interdependency has the potential to entrench a model in which food insecurity is managed as a logistical emergency rather than as a matter of structural entitlement. In this scenario, access is rendered contingent upon programme duration and the availability of surplus, as opposed to being guaranteed through durable public commitments. It is important to note that, far from being unique to Milan's food policy, this ambivalence is inherent to the soft law nature of the MUFPP itself. On the one hand, the Pact legitimizes emergency food redistribution as a necessary response to immediate needs; on the other, it advances a broader vision of long-term, rights-based transformation aimed at addressing the structural causes of food insecurity.

As is evident, the stakes at issue extend well beyond subsistence to the conditions of urban citizenship itself, shaping dignity, participation, and social belonging. Policies oriented primarily towards redistribution and crisis management risk depoliticising food poverty, obscuring the structural determinants – such as income inequality, housing affordability, and labour precarity – that condition who can access healthy diets and where. By contrast, a fully rights-based orientation, consistent with the MUFPP's governance pillars and the international human rights framework, would embed access to food within redistributive welfare policies, strengthen public responsibility, and reduce reliance on charitable logics.

3. CITY DIPLOMACY AND THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

3.1. *Climate Action, Transnational Networks, and the Evolution of Milan's International Role*

Climate action represents an additional consolidated and institutionalised dimension of Milan's city diplomacy. The city has progressively conceptualised climate policy not merely as an environmental concern, but as a fundamental component of urban governance, public health, and social resilience. This approach entails the alignment of local strategies with international climate commitments and transnational municipal networks. Milan's engagement in this field is indicative of a broader shift in global governance, whereby cities act as operational sites for the implementation of climate norms developed at international and supranational levels.

A central pillar of Milan's climate diplomacy is its membership in C40 Cities, the global TCN of major cities committed to addressing climate change through ambitious local action.¹⁹⁰ Through C40, Milan participates in peer-to-peer exchanges, technical working groups, and policy benchmarking exercises focused on decarbonisation, sustainable mobility, air quality, and climate adaptation.¹⁹¹ The city has increasingly taken advantage of this 'paradiplomacy' platform to showcase local initiatives – such as *Area B* and *Area C* low-emission zones, investments in cycling infrastructure, and the progressive expansion of pedestrianised areas – as contributions to shared global mitigation objectives.¹⁹² C40 membership situates Milan within a governance

¹⁹⁰ C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group is a group of 96 cities that represents one twelfth of the world's population and one quarter of the global economy. Created and led by cities, C40 is focused on fighting the climate crisis and driving urban action that reduces greenhouse gas emissions and climate risks, while increasing the health, wellbeing and economic opportunities of urban residents. See further C40 Cities: Transforming urban systems for climate action, <https://www.c40.org/>.

¹⁹¹ Sancino, A., Stafford, M., Braga, A., Budd, L., 'What can city leaders do for climate change? Insights from the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group network' (2022) 56(7) *Regional Studies* 1224, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2021.2005244>.

¹⁹² Comune di Milano and Agenzia Mobilità Ambiente Territorio (AMAT), 'Milan's Regulatory Approach to Reducing Logistics Vehicles Emissions' Report, 19.09.2024, available online; C40 Cities, 'Milan's Area C reduces traffic pollution

architecture that prioritises voluntary commitments, policy experimentation, and reputational accountability rather than binding legal obligations, reinforcing the city's role as a norm entrepreneur in climate governance.¹⁹³

In parallel, Milan is a signatory of the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy (GCoM), the largest global alliance gathering cities and local governments committed to climate mitigation and adaptation.¹⁹⁴ Through this framework, Milan has pledged to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, enhance climate resilience, and generally align urban planning with the broader objectives of the Paris Agreement.¹⁹⁵ GCoM requires participating cities to develop emissions inventories, climate risk assessments, and action plans, thereby embedding local climate policy within an internationally standardised periodic monitoring and reporting system. This (tentative) procedural harmonisation strengthens Milan's capacity to translate global climate norms into concrete urban policies and simultaneously enhance its visibility and credibility in international climate forums.

Milan's climate action is explicitly anchored in the framework of the 2030 Agenda, with reference to both SDG 11 and SDG 13. Municipal strategies increasingly reference these goals as guiding principles for urban planning, mobility, and environmental regulation, thereby projecting Milan as a city committed to sustainability-oriented transformation. This broader normative 'ambition' enables and informs the city's participation in international policy arenas where climate action, urban development, and social inclusion are conceived as mutually reinforcing objectives.¹⁹⁶

Concurrently, Milan's climate governance exposes structural tensions that are indicative of leadership in urban climate governance. Despite the city's adoption of ambitious targets and measures designed to enhance visibility, its capacity to address, and adapt to, climate change remains constrained by factors such as fragmented competences, reliance on behavioural incentives rather than binding regulation, and the coexistence of climate ambitions with growth-oriented development models. A plethora of international sustainability narratives frequently utilise the concepts of large-scale regeneration projects, mobility infrastructures and event-led urbanism. However, these projects often generate environmental externalities that complicate efforts to reduce carbon emissions.¹⁹⁷

From an analytical perspective, Milan's climate diplomacy illustrates both the promise and the limits of cities as climate actors. On the one hand, transnational networks such as C40 and the Global Covenant of Mayors enable cities to act collectively, diffuse norms, and accelerate policy learning beyond the pace of intergovernmental negotiations. On the other hand, the voluntary and non-binding character of these frameworks gives rise to questions regarding accountability, distributive justice, and the relationship between symbolic leadership

and transform the city center', March 2015, available at: <https://www.c40.org/case-studies/milan-s-area-c-reduces-traffic-pollution-and-transforms-the-city-center/>; Borgato S., Fermi, F., Chirico, F., 'Toward Zero Emission Transport in European Cities: Milan', Final Report, CleanCities and TRT, 24.11.2023, available at: https://cleancitiescampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/2023-11-24_Zero-Emission-Urban-Mobility_Milan_final.pdf;

¹⁹³ Lin, J., 'The role of transnational city networks in environmental governance', in Aust and Nijman (n 17), 201-213.

¹⁹⁴ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "Covenant of Mayors for Climate and Energy", *SDG Partnerships Platform*, United Nations, <https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/covenant-mayor-climate-and-energy>. Accessed 25 Feb. 2026.

¹⁹⁵ Paris Agreement to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Dec. 12, 2015, T.I.A.S. No. 16-1104.

¹⁹⁶ In this regard, see OECD, *Cities and Climate Change* (29 November 2010), https://www.oecdilibrary.org/governance/cities-and-climate-change_9789264091375-en; see also OECD et al., International Coalition on Multi-Level and Multi-Stakeholder Climate Governance for the Implementation of the Paris Agreement, at 1, (2018) <https://www.climate-change.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/why-is-a-multi-stakeholderapproach-to-climate-change-more-relevant.pdf>.

¹⁹⁷ United Nations News, 'Marrakech: Cities Are Striving to Play a Key Role in Implementing Paris Climate Accord', 10 November 2016, available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2016/11/545002-marrakech-cities-are-striving-play-key-role-implementing-paris-climate-accord>.

and material outcomes. It is therefore evident that climate action has become a paradigmatic field in which Milan's international positioning, normative commitments, and local governance constraints converge, emphasising the increasingly central, yet structurally bounded, role of cities in global climate governance.

3.2. Milan's Cultural Diplomacy Positioning and UNESCO Networks

Milan's cultural diplomacy is rooted in internationally recognised frameworks that extend the city's normative reach beyond economic competitiveness to the preservation, production and circulation of cultural value. Since 2017, the city has been a member of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) *Creative Cities Network*¹⁹⁸ as a *Creative City of Literature*, a designation that acknowledges Milan's historical and contemporary prominence in publishing and literary production.¹⁹⁹ Through this network, Milan collaborates with other creative cities to promote literature as a tool for social inclusion, cultural participation, and community engagement. Participation in the UNESCO Creative Cities Network enables the municipality to implement intercultural exchanges, joint projects with other cities, and inter-city cooperation that foregrounds cultural rights and creative diversity as components of sustainable urban life.²⁰⁰

This positioning is reinforced by Milan's globally recognised heritage assets. The city hosts *The Last Supper* (Santa Maria delle Grazie), inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1980, as well as a dense network of internationally significant museums, foundations, and cultural institutions that operate within transnational circuits of art and heritage governance. The presence of UNESCO-listed heritage situates Milan within the normative architecture of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, that imposes preservation obligations and reporting mechanisms that engage national and local authorities alike. In this sense, cultural governance in Milan is not merely symbolic but legally embedded in international treaty frameworks that bind the Italian state and cascade into local administrative practice.

In addition to its UNESCO commitments, Milan is a member of the Council of Europe's (CoE) National Intercultural Cities Network – Italy, as a «city of dialogue» (*Città del Dialogo*).²⁰¹ This programme, anchored in the CoE's intercultural integration model and grounded in the European Convention on Human Rights, promotes diversity management as a governance paradigm rather than a social problem. Through this network, Milan engages in peer-review exercises, intercultural policy benchmarking, and participatory governance practices aimed at strengthening equal access to public services, anti-discrimination measures, and inclusive cultural participation. Milan's membership signals its positioning within a European normative framework that treats intercultural dialogue as a democratic feature and a structural component of urban governance.

¹⁹⁸ The UNESCO Creative Cities Network was established in 2004 to promote cooperation between cities that have identified creativity as a strategic element for sustainable urban development. It is divided into eight areas corresponding to eight cultural sectors (architecture, crafts and folk art, cinema, design, gastronomy, literature, media arts, and music). See further UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN), available at: <https://www.unesco.org/en/creative-cities/creativity-and-cities>; see also UNESCO (2017) UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UCCN) 'Building a Collective Vision for the Future' Strategic Framework', available at: https://bic.moe.go.th/images/stories/pdf/strategic-framework_uccn_eng_20170705_vf_no_budget.pdf.

¹⁹⁹ Comune di Milano, 'Milano City of Literature', available here: <https://www2.comune.milano.it/web/milano-city-of-literature>; see also 'Cities of Literature – Milan', <https://www.citiesoflit.com/milan>.

²⁰⁰ On the topic, see further Gathen, C., Skoglund, W., Laven, D., 'The UNESCO Creative Cities Network: A Case Study of City Branding' in Bevilacqua, C., Calabrò, F., Della Spina, L. (eds.) *New Metropolitan Perspectives. NMP 2020. Smart Innovation, Systems and Technologies* (Springer, 2021).

²⁰¹ The network "Città del Dialogo" is the Italian Network of cities that collaborate on promoting intercultural policies, defining good practices of local governance, and capitalising on the benefits of cultural diversity. Set-up in 2010, the Italian Network counts already with 32 member cities and is now working on an updated strategic plan for its future development. See more at the following link: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/interculturalcities/italy>.

Milan's cultural diplomacy is further consolidated by its role as host to the UNESCO Observatory on Digital Communication (OCCAM),²⁰² an institution associated with UNESCO's global communications mandate and the United Nations system. The OCCAM operates at the intersection of media studies, digital transformation, and international communication policy, reinforcing Milan's position within normative architectures that connect cultural production, technological innovation, and global dialogue. In doing so, it wisely bridges traditional heritage governance with emerging debates on digital cultural rights and access to information.²⁰³

Taken together, these layers of engagement illustrate how Milan mobilises cultural policy as a dimension of city diplomacy that is simultaneously symbolic and normatively structured. Cultural assets, UNESCO inscription, CoE's membership, and participation in TCNs enable the city to operate within international legal and policy frameworks that treat culture not only as economic capital but as a human right and a vector of democratic participation. This cultural positioning operates alongside more instrumental forms of city diplomacy – such as advocacy in European institutions or participation in World Health Organization (WHO)-linked networks – and stresses how heritage governance, intercultural dialogue, and creative industries increasingly serve as platforms through which cities articulate their responsibilities within global governance regimes.

In this respect, Milan's cultural diplomacy can be considered as indicative of a broader transformation in urban international engagement: cities are no longer confined to promotional branding, but participate in soft normative regimes that influence states, 'permeate' domestic implementation, and situate municipal governance within multilayered systems of international law and soft-law coordination.

3.3 Health Governance and City Diplomacy: Milan in Global Urban Health Networks

Milan's engagement with global health governance cannot be fully appreciated without reference to the COVID-19 pandemic, which in early 2020 transformed the city into one of Europe's first and most emblematic epicentres of the upcoming emergency crisis.²⁰⁴

On 27 February 2020, as infections were already spreading in Lombardy but before the full magnitude of the emergency had been publicly acknowledged, Mayor Sala promoted the social and video campaign «*Milano non si ferma*» ('Milan does not stop'). The message encouraged citizens to continue attending restaurants, cultural venues, and workplaces to protect Milan's economic vitality and international image.²⁰⁵ The social campaign reflected more than a communication miscalculation, as it embodied and reproduced a deeply entrenched urban ideology: Milan as productive, competitive, and incapable of interruption. In this narrative, economic circulation and metropolitan dynamism functioned as both identity and imperative. Suspending activity, even temporarily, appeared to threaten not only the local economy but the city's global standing. The slogan thus revealed how Milan's self-representation as an

²⁰² OCCAM (Observatory on Digital Communication) is an international research center based in Milan and operating under the auspices of UNESCO. It promotes digital communication technologies as tools for sustainable development, international cooperation, and intercultural dialogue, supporting projects aligned with UNESCO's global development and knowledge-sharing objectives. The acronym stands for 'Observatory for Cultural Communication and Audiovisual in the Mediterranean'. See more here: <https://www.occam.org/>.

²⁰³ United Nations Human Rights Council, *Digitalization of Cultural Heritage: Preserving Cultural Rights*. United Nations, 2024. A/HRC/58/60. On the challenges of the digitalization of culture, see extensively Wagner, A., De Clippele, M.S., 'Safeguarding Cultural Heritage in the Digital Era - A Critical Challenge' (2023) 36 *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 1915, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11196-023-10040-z>.

²⁰⁴ Horowitz, J., 'The Coronavirus Stalls Milan, Italy's Economic Engine', The New York Times, 24.02.2020, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/24/world/europe/24coronavirus-milan-italy.html>.

²⁰⁵ Franchini, F., 'Coronavirus, la video-dedica "Milano non si ferma" contro la paura', Il Giornale, 27.02.2020, available at: <https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/cronache/coronavirus-video-dedica-milano-non-si-ferma-contro-paura-1832997.html>.

entrepreneurial and outward-facing metropolitan hub had become intertwined with its political reflexes.²⁰⁶

Less than two weeks later, on 8 March 2020, Lombardy – and therefore Milan – entered



Empty tram in Milan – Photograph by Matteo from Milano, licensed under Creative Commons BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

lockdown under national emergency measures, soon extended to the entire country. The reversal was abrupt. The city that had publicly insisted on continuity became the international symbol of Europe's first large-scale urban shutdown. Images of empty Piazza Duomo and Central Railway Station, deserted shopping districts, and silent tramways circulated worldwide, recasting Milan from icon of economic acceleration to emblem of metropolitan fragility.

In subsequent public interventions, Mayor Sala explicitly acknowledged that the «Milano non si ferma» social campaign and underlying message had been a mistake.²⁰⁷

This admission was politically significant, as it represented a rather unusual moment in which a metropolitan leader publicly accepted the limits of a resilience-based urban rhetoric when confronted with exponential contagion. At the same time, the episode exposed the inherent contradictions of a development model heavily reliant on density, mobility, (over)tourism, and global connectivity. As is evident, the pandemic did not simply interrupt Milan's evolutive trajectory, but it revealed the vulnerability embedded within its 'growth-at all costs' paradigm.

The crisis also highlighted the discrepancy between formal competencies and practical responsibility. It is a general rule that public health authority in Italy is primarily allocated to national and regional levels. However, the operational burden of translating emergency decrees into urban reality falls heavily on the municipality. Milan's responsibilities encompassed the coordination of food distribution schemes, the implementation of rent relief measures, the development of digital public services, and the provision of targeted assistance to vulnerable populations. Consequently, the city became the site where international health guidelines, national emergency powers, and local social inequalities converged.

As a result, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly reshaped Milan's international posture *vis-à-vis* health issues. The experience of becoming a global image of lockdown appears to have reinforced the city's subsequent engagement with structured transnational health governance. In 2024, Milan joined the *Partnership for Healthy Cities*, a network co-



Milan, pandemic edition – Photograph by Matteo from Milano, licensed under Creative Commons BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

²⁰⁶ Madonia, M., 'Prima la borsa, poi la vita: #milanononsiferma e non ha mai avuto intenzione di farlo', The Vision, 12.11.2020, available here: <https://thevision.com/politica/sala-fontana-lockdown-milano/>.

²⁰⁷ Giuffrida, A., 'I won't make the same mistake again: Milan mayor on his green Covid recovery plan', The Guardian, 5.01.2021, available here: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/05/milan-mayor-covid-strategy-beppe-sala-pandemic-green-solutions-crisis>.

sponsored by Bloomberg Philanthropies, the WHO, and Vital Strategies.²⁰⁸ The network aims to promote evidence-based regulatory interventions, ranging from smoke-free policies to urban mobility reforms, recognising cities as primary implementers of global health standards. Milan's membership signals an attempt to reposition itself not only as a victim of global crisis, but as a proactive actor within WHO-linked normative frameworks. In parallel, Milan participates in the *Cities for Better Health* initiative, which focuses on integrating health considerations into urban planning and policy.²⁰⁹ As part of this programme, Milan launched the *Milano Diabetes Atlas* and a multi-year action plan (2022-2025) aimed at tackling chronic disease through urban design, prevention strategies and community engagement. The initiative has produced practical measures such as expanded walking routes and targeted interventions to address isolation among elderly populations during the pandemic. These networks place Milan in structured dialogue with peer cities and public health institutions, seeking to transform city governance into a site where global health priorities are translated into measurable urban actions and where municipal policy contributes to, and is informed by, international evidence and best practices.

3.4. Mega-Events as Arenas of Multilevel and International Normativity: The 2026 Milano-Cortina Winter Olympics and their *chiaroscuro*s

The recently concluded Milano-Cortina 2026 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games represent a typical arena of multilevel and inherently hybrid governance, wherein international private norm-setting frameworks intersect with state authority, regional competences, and municipal implementation. In contrast to the vast majority of city-diplomacy-like domains, the Olympic framework constitutes one of the rare settings in which international human rights commitments are not merely invoked rhetorically at the local level but are formally embedded within municipal structures and responsibilities through regulatory instruments.²¹⁰

At the apex of this architecture stands the International Olympic Committee (IOC)²¹¹, which retains normative and supervisory authority through the Olympic Charter (OC),²¹² the Olympic Agenda 2020+5 and, most significantly, the Host City Contract (HCC).²¹³ Since the 2017 reform cycle,²¹⁴ the HCC – a complex contractual construct whose structure encompasses both general principles and detailed requirements with which the host city must comply – expressly incorporates human rights clauses, requiring Organising Committees and Host Cities to respect internationally recognised human rights standards, including labour rights, non-discrimination,

²⁰⁸ World Health Organization, Partnership for Healthy Cities, available here: <https://www.who.int/teams/social-determinants-of-health/ambassador-programme-for-ncds-and-injuries/partnership-for-healthy-cities>.

²⁰⁹ Cities for Better Health, Milan (Europe), available here: <https://www.citiesforbetterhealth.com/network/our-cities/milan.html>.

²¹⁰ For a general perspective on the Olympics, see Hiller, H.H., *Host Cities and the Olympics: An Interactionist Approach* (Routledge 2012); for a brief international law perspective, see instead Lambelet Coleman, D., 'The Olympic Movement in International Law', (2020) 114 *AJIL:Unbound* (Symposium on the Olympics and International Law) 385; for some specific case studies, see Duval, A., 'From global city to Olympic city: the transnational legal journey of London 2012', in Aust and Nijman (n 17), 293-304.

²¹¹ Gauthier, R., 'The International Olympic Committee', in Hessert, B., Goh, C.L., Anderson, J. (Eds.), *Elgar Concise Encyclopedia of Sports Law* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025) 357-380.

²¹² On the constitutional function of the Olympic Committee, see Duval A., 'The Olympic Charter: A Transnational Constitution Without a State?' (2018) 45 *Journal of Law and Society* 245.

²¹³ For a comprehensive analysis of the HCC, see Borowick, J., 'The Olympic Host City Contract: Achieving Relational and Referential Efficiencies to Deliver the Best Games Ever' (2013) 12 *Virginia Sports & Entertainment Law Journal* 126; Gauthier, R., *The International Olympic Committee, Law, and Accountability* (Routledge, 2017) 136-137.

²¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, 'Olympics: Host City Contract Requires Human Rights – New Provisions Could Prevent Abuses That Marred Rio, Sochi, Beijing Games', 28.02.2017, available here: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/02/28/olympics-host-city-contract-requires-human-rights>; see also International Olympic Committee, 'IOC strengthens its stance in favour of human rights and against corruption in new Host City Contract', 28.02.2017, <https://www.olympics.com/ioc/news/ioc-strengthens-its-stance-in-favour-of-human-rights-and-against-corruption-in-new-host-city-contract>.

freedom of expression, and access to remedy. These obligations draw explicitly on instruments such as the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights,²¹⁵ International Labour Organisation's (ILO) fundamental conventions,²¹⁶ and core UN human rights treaties and other relevant instruments.²¹⁷

What makes Milano-Cortina 2026 distinctive is the way in which these obligations cascade downward. While the related HCC is formally concluded between the IOC, the National Olympic Committee, and many sub-national actors and institution – reflecting the unprecedentedly widespread territorial configuration of the Games –, ²¹⁸ its implementation is operationalised



Exterior of Palalitalia (Milano Santa Giulia Ice Hockey Arena), a 16,000-seat arena in Milan - Photograph of Quintin Soloviev, licensed under Creative Commons-Attribution 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

through municipal planning decisions, procurement practices, security arrangements, housing policies, and public space regulation. In this sense, Milan is not merely a beneficiary of Olympic visibility but a frontline implementer of transnational human rights expectations, despite lacking sovereign authority in international law.

The governance structure further complicates accountability. The *Fondazione Milano Cortina 2026* operates as the Organising Committee, coordinating between national ministries, the Regions of Lombardy and Veneto, host municipalities, and private

partners and sponsors.²¹⁹ The Italian state retains control over security, immigration, and major infrastructure funding, while municipalities such as Milan are responsible for urban regeneration projects, local mobility, housing legacy planning, and the management of public space. This dispersion of competences risks diluting responsibility: human rights commitments exist, but their enforcement depends on fragmented administrative actors operating under tight temporal and financial constraints. For Milan, this episode illustrates a broader dynamic in the governance of mega-events: while the legal responsibility for international security arrangements resides with the national state and the Organising Committee, the political implications of those arrangements are absorbed locally. In this regard, municipal leaders can convey normative positions and respond to civic mobilisation, but they cannot unilaterally determine the presence or mandate of foreign law-enforcement actors and institutions.

²¹⁵ United Nations Human Rights Council. *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations "Protect, Respect and Remedy" Framework*. United Nations, 2011.

²¹⁶ See, e.g., International Labour Organization, 'Groundbreaking Olympic Social Charter aims to bring decent work standards to Paris Games', 1.08.2024, <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/groundbreaking-olympic-social-charter-aims-bring-decent-work-standards>

²¹⁷ On the topic, see recently Chappelet J., 'From Non-discrimination to the Guiding Principles and Back: How the Olympics Have Addressed Human Rights until Today', in Ziegler, A.R., Canapa, D., Cardozo M.I. (Eds.) *Business and Human Rights: Emerging Challenges, Issues and Trends* (Brill Nijhoff, 2025) 265.

²¹⁸ As far as 2026 Milano-Cortina Olympic Games Host City Contract (HCC) is concerned, the HCC has been concluded between the International Olympic Committee represented by Thomas Bach and Ser Miang Ng, duly authorised for all purposes hereof (the IOC) and the City of Milano represented by Mayor Giuseppe Sala, duly authorised for all purposes hereof, and the City of Cortina d'Ampezzo represented by Mayor Gianpietro Ghedina, duly authorised for all purposes hereof (collectively, the 'host cities') and the Italian National Olympic Committee (NOC), represented by President Giovanni Malagò, duly authorised for all purposes hereof (the 'host NOC').

²¹⁹ Fondazione Milano Cortina, <https://www.olympics.com/it/milano-cortina-2026/chi-siamo>. Its Statute is available, in Italian, here: https://www.coni.it/images/atrasparente/enti-controllati/2024/2023.01.17_Statuto_MILANO_CORTINA_2026.pdf

These tensions are further sharpened by the role of corporate partners and sponsors of the event. Several official partners of the Winter Olympic Games – including Leonardo, Eni, and Coca-Cola Company – have faced sustained criticism from civil society organisations for their commercial or operational links to Israel, including activities alleged to contribute to or benefit from violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law, including genocide, in Gaza and other occupied Palestinian territories. While such relationships fall formally outside



Demonstrators protest against the environmental, economic and social impact of the Milano-Cortina 2026 Winter Olympics - Photograph of Claudia Greco (Reuters), licensed under Creative Commons, via CyprusMail.

municipal competence, they have nevertheless given rise to local contestation, protests, and wider debates within Milan's public sphere.²²⁰

This widespread discontent has exposed a structural imbalance at the core of Olympic human rights governance. On the one hand, host cities are required to ensure respect for human rights in areas such as labour conditions, accessibility, non-discrimination, and public order. Conversely, cities can exert very minimal influence over the selection of sponsors, the flow of investments, and

the geopolitical entanglements of corporate partners. Consequently, Milan assumes responsibility for the implementation of rights at the municipal level, while maintaining structural separation from the decisions that shape the broader ethical profile of the Games.

In this context, the Olympics function as a site of selective normativity. Human rights are most robustly enforced in areas where they intersect with operational risk. For instance, this may occur in cases of construction sites, volunteer management, security protocols, or accessibility standards. However, human rights remain largely aspirational in relation to global political economy dynamics. This selectivity has fuelled blames of normative inconsistency, particularly when sustainability and human rights narratives are mobilised to legitimise large-scale urban transformation while controversial sponsorship arrangements remain insulated from scrutiny.

From a sustainability perspective, similar ambiguities persist. Recurring narratives emphasise the 'official' alignment with SDG 11, the reuse of existing infrastructure, and post-Games legacy planning. Yet Milan's Olympic-related projects (most notably, the Scalo Romana Olympic Village) are inserted within a broader urban development model characterised by rising land values, financialised real-estate investment, and reliance on private capital. The planned post-Olympic conversion of the Village into student housing has been presented as a social legacy, but escalating costs and pricing structures have prompted concerns that the outcome will likely resemble high-end residential development more than a genuine expansion of affordable housing stock.²²¹

²²⁰ Albanese F., 'From Economy of Occupation to Economy of Genocide: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Palestinian Territories Occupied since 1967', United Nations, 2024. United Nations Human Rights Council, A/HRC/59/23, available here: <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/59/23>.

²²¹ For a general assessment, see Blunden, H., 'The Olympic Games and Housing', In: Lenskyj, H.J., Wagg, S. (Eds.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Olympic Studies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230367463_33; Dos Santos, G.L., Morais De Sà, A., Condessa, B., 'Olympic regeneration vs. social (in)justice: Value capture as a referee' (2025) 156, 105520, Cities; for some specific case studies, see instead Bernstock, P., 'Tensions and contradictions in London's inclusive housing legacy' (2013) 5(2) *International Journal of Urban Sustainable Development* 154; for a comparative analysis, see Watt, P., Bernstock, P., 'Legacy for Whom? Housing in Post-Olympic East London' in Cohen, P., Watt, P. (eds.), *London 2012 and the Post-Olympics City* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) 91; Boyle, P., Haggerty, K. D., 'Civil cities and urban governance: Regulating disorder for the Vancouver Winter Olympics' (2011) 48(15) *Urban Studies* 3185; Suzuki, N., Ogawa, T., Inaba, N., 'The right to adequate housing: Evictions of the homeless and the elderly caused by the 2020 summer Olympics in Tokyo' (2018) 37(1) *Leisure Studies* 89.

Here, the shadow of 2006 Torino Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games remain decisive. Indeed, previous Olympic Games have demonstrated how the regeneration that is driven by the Olympics can produce uneven spatial benefits, long-term fiscal burdens, and underutilised infrastructure.

The aforementioned experience has resulted in the emergence of contemporary scepticism with regard to claims that the implementation of improved governance frameworks is capable of neutralising the structural pressures associated with mega-events in isolation. While Milano-Cortina 2026 is undoubtedly more attuned, at least on papers, to sustainability discourse, the underlying development logic shows significant continuity.²²²

Milano-Cortina Olympics and Paralympics reveal the ambivalence of mega-events as instruments of international norm articulation and diffusion. They represent a rare instance in which international human rights norms are legally binding on municipalities, thus circumventing (only for a moment) the conventional state-centric framework of international law. At the same time, they expose the limits of this model: cities are empowered as implementers but not as agenda-setters, responsible for compliance without control over the economic and geopolitical dimensions that increasingly define the ethical stakes of global sport.²²³ In this sense, Milano-Cortina 2026 acts less as a rupture and more as an intensification of Milan's existing governance trajectory, in which global visibility, city diplomacy, and normative alignment coexist uneasily with market-driven urban transformation and selective accountability. The Games thus offer a privileged lens through which to observe how international law, soft regulation, and municipal governance intersect, and where their promises of rights-based urbanism begin to fray.

4. CONCLUSION: MILAN'S GLOCAL AGENCY BETWEEN NORMATIVE AMBITION AND STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINT

The present City Report has sought to trace Milan's gradual yet unmistakable turn to the international as a strategy for governing local challenges that exceed municipal scale. Milan does not engage with international law and transnational global governance as an abstract exercise in its cosmopolitan projection. It turns outward when confronted with pressures that cannot be resolved within the confines of local competence: housing affordability shaped by financialised real estate markets; migration flows embedded in European and global mobility regimes; climate change driven by planetary processes; public health crises and emergencies circulating across borders; and mega-events governed by hybrid international-private regulatory architectures.

In this regard, Milan's engagement with international law and global policy arenas is fundamentally reactive and instrumental. The city invokes international human rights standards when national migration frameworks restrict local inclusion; it mobilises SDG language and submits Voluntary Local Reviews to situate housing, food, and climate policy within recognised global benchmarks; it relies on WHO-linked health networks after the trauma of COVID-19; it aggregates its voice within alliances such as Mayors4Housing to demand EU-level structural reforms; it participates in C40 and the Global Covenant of Mayors to align local decarbonisation efforts with the Paris framework. When local problems reveal their global roots, Milan activates transnational channels.

²²² Schmidt, R., 'The Carbon Footprint of the Games - International Climate Change Law and the Olympics' (2020) 114 *AJIL Unbound* 362.

²²³ On the impact of the Games on various Olympic cities, see Gold, J.R., Gold, M.M. (eds.), *Olympic Cities: City Agendas, Planning, and the World's Games, 1896–2016* (Routledge, 2011). On London in particular, see Raco M., 'Delivering Flagship Projects in an Era of Regulatory Capitalism: State-Led Privatization and the London Olympics 2012' (2014) 38 *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 176. This change is not necessarily positive, as pointed out in Müller M., 'The Mega-Event Syndrome: Why So Much Goes Wrong in Mega-Event Planning and What to Do About It' (2015) 81 *Journal of the American Planning Association* 6.

At the same time, the report has shown that Milan does not ‘cherry-pick’ international law as a convenient label. It increasingly welcomes international norms into its own administrative fabric. Olympic human rights clauses, UNESCO heritage standards, Council of Europe’s intercultural governance models, and EU-funded migration projects all enter the city’s regulatory ecosystem and shape its day-to-day municipal practice. In domains such as the Milano-Cortina 2026 Games, this dynamic is particularly visible: one of the rare instances in which international human rights commitments cascade contractually into municipal implementation. Milan becomes a frontline executor of norms formulated beyond the state, even as it remains structurally excluded from key agenda-setting decisions.

This dual movement – simultaneously turning outward and internalising – can perhaps be described as a form of «glocal agency». Milan’s approach to navigating the local, national, and global levels is not characterised by a direct contestation of the constitutional order. Instead, it is characterised by a strategic utilisation of the interstices within the existing order. The Italian constitutional framework exerts a dual influence, both constraining and enabling this posture. Despite their lack of formal legislative power and sovereignty, municipalities are constitutionally embedded actors tasked with the concrete realisation of equality and fundamental rights. Article 117 of the Italian Constitution places their action within a supranational normative environment, with subsidiarity serving to legitimise proximity-based implementation. Milan, as well as other cities, thus occupies a structurally intermediate position: dependent on national frameworks, yet indispensable to their execution.

The report also revealed that Milan’s *glocal agency* is neither uniform nor ideologically consistent. The city has demonstrated a willingness to articulate solidarity with regard to recent international crises, while adopting a cautious approach in other situations. This suggests that the city’s capacity to rise its voice in geopolitically charged debates is limited. It comprehensively embraces human rights language in housing and governance, yet concurrently it advances urban development models that worsen socio-economic stratification. It positions itself as a leader in climate action while simultaneously sustaining patterns of growth and regeneration that impede the process of decarbonisation. The promotion of both inclusion and diversity as its inherent civic identity is achieved through a delicate ‘checks and balances’ of the risk of selective visibility and symbolic politics.

For the most part, Milan’s international engagement is shaped as much by its constraints as by its ambition. Its city diplomacy unfolds within enduring structural asymmetries – between what the city aspires to do and the resources it can mobilise, between a rights-oriented political vocabulary and the pressures of financialised urban development, between symbolic visibility and the inherently fragmented competences of multi-level governance. As a result, Milan often finds itself implementing international standards on the ground while lacking the authority to influence the broader economic and geopolitical dynamics that generate local inequalities.

Looking ahead, Milan’s trajectory suggests that the urbanisation of international law will advance not through formal recognition of cities as global actors, let alone as ‘official’ subjects of international law, but through the slow and steady consolidation of practice-based integration. Incremental forms of engagement – such as, *inter alia*, contractual obligations embedded in mega-events, peer-reviewed policy diffusion through TCNs, EU funding conditionalities, and the strategic use of soft law frameworks – will continue to shape the city’s normative reach. Overall, Milan’s experience indicates that cities can expand their normative space not by challenging state sovereignty outright but, rather, by ‘gently’ embedding global standards within municipal governance and by forming coalitions capable of amplifying their bargaining power.

The question of whether this *glocal agency* will ultimately evolve into a more structurally transformative governance remains open. The success of this initiative is contingent upon Milan’s capacity to align its external normative obligations with internal distributive reforms, particularly in the domains of housing, urban regeneration, and socio-economic inclusion. If international law and transnational networks continue to serve primarily as legitimising frameworks for

competitive urban development, their transformative potential will remain limited. However, if these actors are utilised to rebalance growth with redistribution and institutionalise enforceable entitlements rather than project-based inclusion, Milan may consolidate a more substantive model of urban rights governance.

In essence, Milan serves as a prime example of a contemporary metropolitan condition, wherein cities are neither sovereign entities nor passive instruments in the implementation of policies. They function within a layered and multi-faceted legal order, in which local challenges are increasingly intertwined with, and thus inseparable from, global structures. Milan's approach to international engagement is nuanced. While it turns to the global arena when circumstances necessitate, the city also exerts an influence on the international landscape and is in turn shaped by it. As urbanisation persists in redefining the architecture of global governance, Milan's evolving practice suggests that the overall future trajectory of international law will be negotiated not only in intergovernmental 'paradiplomatic' forums, but also in municipal councils, urban plans and projects, procurement contracts, and the everyday infrastructures of metropolitan life. At a time when state-level multilateralism is marked by geopolitical fragmentation and polarisation and declining institutional trust, this fragility may activate and legitimise grassroots and city-driven initiatives, encouraging municipalities to step into governance and normative spaces that states are no longer able – or willing – to occupy.