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SISTER-LED **DIALOGUE**

# ON MIGRATION

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## CONTEXT

UISG is a membership organisation for the leaders of Catholic women's congregations, numbering 1,903 Superiors General who represent over 600,000 Catholic Sisters worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Alongside its core mission of training, supporting and connecting members, UISG acts as an umbrella organisation for Sisters engaged in tackling some of the world's most pressing development challenges.

UISG Sisters have identified the urgent need for an integral, integrative and inclusive approach to development, that can link local experience to global decision-making with coherence and accountability. In this spirit, UISG has hosted two Sister-led dialogues in 2023, as part of a journey culminating on October 23<sup>rd</sup>-24<sup>th</sup> with its first-ever Advocacy Forum.

## MIGRATION

Nearly 3,800 people died on migration routes within and from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region between January and December 2022 - the highest number recorded since 2017, and over 11% higher than the previous year.<sup>2</sup> Worldwide, more than 50,000 migrants have died between 2014 and 2022, without counting those lost at sea, kidnapped or missing in transit.<sup>3</sup>

These deaths reflect, in the words of Pope Francis, the *globalisation of indifference*,<sup>4</sup> as does the unfathomable suffering of thousands of migrants trapped at the European borders. Since migration is, and always has been, an integral part of the human experience, UISG believes the international community has a responsibility to overcome its indifference, provide assistance to all migrants and refugees, guarantee the full respect of their rights, and facilitate their integration in host communities.

## DIALOGUE

UISG's Sister-led dialogues, delivered in collaboration with the Global Solidarity Fund,<sup>5</sup> are conceived as a space to reflect on key development issues from a variety of perspectives, identify measures to empower communities on the global margins, and build a coalition of people and institutions to advocate for a safe and prosperous future for all.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July 2023, UISG's second Sister-led dialogue was oriented around three key themes:

- 1. Root causes of migration in a global economy**
- 2. Humanitarian assistance and human rights**
- 3. Integral human development and social cohesion**

July's dialogue welcomed representatives of UN bodies, Vatican institutions, religious-led organisations, faith networks, civil society, academia and the press to join Sisters in discussing key migration issues, with a focus on the needs of migrants and refugees. 20 participants shared their knowledge and experience from different parts of the world, and explored where and how resources should be allocated to foster inclusive, sustainable solutions to one of the most urgent challenges of our time.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations emerged from UISG's Sister-Led Dialogue on Migration.

### Building capacity

1. Support internally displaced people and international migrants through language education, skills training and capacity-building projects that can enhance resilience to the challenges of migration.
2. Support people in transit by providing timely and accurate information, particularly about the dangers of journeying to Europe, in order to counter overwhelming misinformation.

### Building bridges

3. Promote the integration of migrants and refugees by fostering a sense of safety and belonging, particularly through affective and relational community action.
4. Engage immigrant and host communities in shared intercultural endeavours that can help to bridge social and cultural differences.

### Building new narratives

5. Utilise the informative and educational potential of media platforms to raise political awareness on the realities of immigration.
6. Advocate for a linguistic shift from discourses of fear, threat, emergency and war towards conversations about inclusion, integration, development and mutual enrichment.
7. In particular, model and promote a shift in media narratives by creating space for the voices of people with lived experiences of migration and platforming not only their concerns, but also their proposed solutions.
8. Establish alliances between aid agencies, religious institutions and media organisations to jointly resist anti-migrant propaganda, and develop a shared vision for overcoming legislative obstacles.

### Building new realities

9. Collaborate with governments of transitory, non-EU countries in adopting and implementing ethical measures to respect the dignity of all people, and curb smuggling and abuse.
10. Lobby EU governments to institute laws – scripted to reflect the EU's ethical values and humanitarian vision – that allow fair, equal and legal access for all migrants to the EU, regardless of their reason for migration.

## REPORT: SESSION 1

# ROOT CAUSES OF MIGRATION IN A GLOBAL ECONOMY

*What are the main challenges for migrants and refugees in the current social and historical moment, particularly in the Euro-Mediterranean context? At the national and international level, migration issues are often politicised and polarised in public debate: what are the main policy changes needed to support migrants and refugees? What kind of advocacy initiatives could impact the international agenda?*

Migration is, and has always been, an integral part of the human experience. Its main causes have remained relatively constant throughout human history, and are often rooted in struggle: they include resource imbalances between geographical areas, conflict and violence, inequality and oppression, persecution and human rights violations, climate change and natural disasters. Yet **migration is, and should be valued as, an essential force in the development of human societies.** It can enrich host communities at cultural, societal and economic levels, if properly contextualised and supported.

## 1. VALUES-DRIVEN LEGISLATION IN EUROPE

Thousands of people across the Euro-Mediterranean region are trapped in the double injustice of being forced to leave their own countries in search of safety and sustenance, yet having no means to safely and legally enter the EU. Many would prefer to build a life in their countries of origin, surrounded by their families and communities, yet have no opportunity to work there, provide for loved ones, or live a secure and dignified life, and thus come to see journeying to Europe as the only way to survive. At the same time, they are faced with the intractable reality that **there is no way to enter the European Union, other than illegally and at great risk to their lives.**

This doubly desperate situation forces many to make treacherous journeys by land or sea, often leading to their death. The Messenia boat disaster,<sup>6</sup> which occurred off the coast of Greece on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June 2023 and claimed at least 500 lives, shone a harsh light on the struggle of migrants seeking to escape conflict- or disaster-stricken countries. Survivors of the capsized boat included a Syrian man who lived in Turkey for seven years, attempted six illegal and unsuccessful crossings into Europe overland, was pushed back by Bulgaria and Greece, and ended up in detention in Libya, in inhumane conditions; desperate, he finally boarded that boat to Greece. Of some 350 Pakistani nationals who joined him on that boat, 12 are thought to have survived,<sup>7</sup> only to face certain deportation under an agreement between the Greek and Pakistani governments.

When it comes to migration, particularly from Africa and the Middle East, **political agendas in Europe are more focused on closing borders than on saving lives.** The political establishment tends to represent the number of (particularly African) immigrants as an emergency, generating negative public sentiment which is then harnessed to justify anti-immigration policies. Moreover, the narrative distinction between “types” of migrants – which focuses on the difference between political and economic motivations for migration – also shifts public opinion against anyone who is not directly fleeing a war zone. Values-driven legislative action is needed to **ensure that governments establish safe and legal access routes to Europe for all migrants,** regardless of their reason for migration, in the spirit of fairness and equality, and with the ultimate objective of saving lives.

## 2. PERSON-CENTRED LEGISLATION IN COUNTRIES OF TRANSIT

The situation in Tunisia – both a source of migration towards Europe and a country of transit – is an example of the hardships that many migrants face on their journeys through the MENA region. These are mainly due to the interconnectivity of national and international smuggling networks, and to subsequent exploitation and abuse. The absence of anti-racism laws in Tunisia, which enables racism against the mostly sub-Saharan migrant population, indirectly encourages this highly lucrative business to continue operating undeterred. **Governments of non-EU transit countries must be supported to pass and implement legislation that can protect migrants en route**, and curb smuggling and abuse.

## 3. NEW NARRATIVES FOR A GLOBAL PHENOMENON

While the safety and wellbeing of migrants is an urgent humanitarian issue, it is also important to consider the longer-term view of migration as an ongoing geopolitical phenomenon, omnipresent throughout human history and certain, by any means of prediction, to continue growing in scale and impact throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century. **The narrative around migration needs to change, so that European host communities are ready to embrace this phenomenon as a necessary and enriching opportunity**, rather than a threat.

We need a thematic and linguistic shift in media narratives on migration from discourses of fear, threat, emergency and war towards conversations about inclusion, integration, development and mutual enrichment. In particular, media platforms should model and promote this shift by creating more space for the voices of people with lived experiences of migration and platforming not only their concerns, but also their proposed solutions.

*“We need to listen carefully to the voices of refugees and migrants,  
and identify the real problems: the emergency of government negligence,  
rather than migrant arrivals.”*

Hannah Kummer – Social Worker, Mediterranean Hope, Federation of Evangelical Churches

## REPORT: SESSION 2

# HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

*Reflecting on projects to support and build the capacity of migrants and refugees, what initiatives could be scaled up and replicated in the areas of humanitarian aid and rights-based policy development?*

A roadmap of successful initiatives to build the capacity of migrants and guarantee the full respect of their rights should include the following components:

- **Rights-based policy development** that emphasises the principles of dignity and non-discrimination for all individuals, regardless of migration status.
- **Holistic and multi-sectoral approaches** that encourage collaboration across areas such as health, education, employment and social inclusion. By adopting a holistic perspective, interventions can be more impactful, avoiding duplication and optimising resources.
- **Migrant and refugee inclusion** in decision-making processes around programme design, implementation and evaluation, ensuring that lived experiences are accurately represented, and leading to more effective interventions.
- **Integration of new technologies** such as mobile applications, digital platforms and data analytics that can enhance communication, information-sharing and coordination among stakeholders. These technologies can also facilitate the delivery of essential services and enable remote monitoring and evaluation, enhancing the efficiency of interventions.

## 1. ALLIANCES TO SHIFT NARRATIVES AND POLICY

A major challenge to the safety of migrants is the discourse of hostility that – as well as characterising conversations about migration more broadly – specifically affects humanitarian assistance, and particularly assistance at sea. Emergency assistance for people crossing the Mediterranean Sea, or any other European border, is not a debatable act of charity, but a human right. However, organisations aiding migrants are often negatively portrayed in the media, and targeted by politicians with damaging accusations, which can hinder or entirely block their operations.<sup>8</sup> Their dangerous work becomes even more complicated when anti-migrant propaganda transcends the media sphere and is written into legislation, delaying and damaging vital rescue operations. There is an urgent need to **establish alliances between aid agencies, religious institutions and media organisations to jointly resist anti-migrant propaganda, and develop a shared vision for overcoming legislative obstacles.**

## 2. HOLISTIC APPROACHES TO EMPOWERMENT

A nuanced approach to supporting migrants is required, in order to balance the need for medical and psychological support with the importance of avoiding institutionalisation and re-victimisation. Medical narratives about refugees, in particular, have often reduced them to objects of trauma, in need of constant therapy and possessing little agency to help themselves. In reality, the majority of refugees can and do overcome trauma, particularly when supported through a community-based approach.

This approach is central to the mission of religious Sisters. Catholic Sisters are first responders, says Sister Maryanne Loughry, of the International Migrants & Refugees Network at UISG: they are “*often there before the humanitarians come, or stay when others go to the next crisis. Sisters are consistently present, and have a capacity to network with community, neighbourhood, faith communities.*”

Using terms like “accompaniment” to describe their work with people on the move, **Sisters strive to depict migrants as people who benefit from company, kindness and understanding, just like anyone else.** Their ultimate objective is empowering migrants to flourish independently: to this end, Sisters recognise a need to be well equipped as first responders, to be trained in trauma-informed approaches, and to be familiarised and consistent with international development standards.

The Centro Astalli – the Italian branch of the Jesuit Refugee Service –<sup>9</sup> adopts an integrated approach to supporting migrants by focusing on the affective, relational and spiritual needs of each person. Besides providing food, shelter, and legal and linguistic assistance, its projects focus on the human need for existential meaning. This need is met by offering community support and fostering friendships which, while normally taken for granted, can sadly become a privilege for people uprooted from their homes. Making newcomers feel welcome, and providing a sense of interaction and care through co-housing or volunteering projects, for example, can facilitate integration. In particular, Sisters working with the Centro Astalli have noted that sharing core religious values can bring people closer, even when immigrant and host communities do not share a formal religious affiliation. The success of their work highlights the importance of **promoting the integration of migrants by fostering a sense of safety and belonging, particularly through affective and relational community action.**

Another projecting assisting migrants, and creating sustainable alternatives to migration towards Europe, is the inter-congregational collaboration in Ethiopia between the Missionaries of Charity, the Ursuline Sisters, the Salesian Brothers and Sisters of Saint John Bosco and the Jesuit Refugee Service, coordinated by the Archdiocesan socio-pastoral commission of Addis Ababa. Supported by the Global Solidarity Fund, this project provides quality assistance both to internally displaced people and to refugees from neighbouring countries, with a particular focus on women who are single mothers.<sup>10</sup> The project offers vulnerable people a chance to build a life of dignity and hope by providing shelter, vocational training and employment. The initiative is also featured by Vatican News as an ongoing series entitled Voices of Migrants,<sup>11</sup> **channelling the success of this work on the ground to generate good-news stories and positive examples of integration.**

### 3. INFORMATION AND NEW TECHNOLOGIES

One successful tool supporting people in transit by integrating new technologies is the InfoMigrants project,<sup>12</sup> a multilingual news platform with a mission to counter disinformation for migrants at every point of their journey – in countries of origin, en route, and in the places where they hope to start a new life. This is a cooperative project, co-financed by the European Union and coordinated collectively by ANSA, Deutsche Welle and France Media Monde. Social media channels integrate the site and play a significant role in realising this mission, featuring personal stories with a dual purpose: to **inform migrants about the logistical, emotional and social challenges of travelling to and settling in Europe;** and at the same time, to **give European citizens a more nuanced view of migration trends,** particularly to balance misleading statistics and sensationalist headlines. **By giving migrants a voice, these stories individualise and humanise them,** which is a vital first step in the process of integration and inclusion.

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## REPORT: SESSION 3

# INTEGRAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL COHESION

*Human mobility favours the encounter between people from different cultural, religious and ethnic background: what policy and project-oriented measures can facilitate social integration between host communities, migrants and refugees? Giving voice to the most vulnerable entails listening to them, creating the necessary platforms, and stimulating public interest: what do journalists need in order to make space for the voices of minorities and vulnerable people?*

With the creation of the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development in 2016,<sup>13</sup> Pope Francis highlighted an emphasis of the intrinsic value of the human person as a core pillar of his pontificate, with a focus on advocating for and with the most marginalised and vulnerable. In regard to migration, Pope Francis encourage us to “*build bridges that foster a culture of encounter. Today’s migration movements offer an opportunity for us to overcome our fears and let ourselves be enriched by the diversity of each person’s gifts. Then, if we so desire, we can transform borders into privileged places of encounter, where the miracle of an ever wider “we” can come about.*”<sup>14</sup>

## 1. MUTUAL ENCULTURATION

The Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Assisi manage an enculturation programme, designed to support immigrants within host communities through shared engagement in intercultural activities that can bridge social and cultural distances. These activities include cooking and learning about each other’s cuisine, Italian language lessons with volunteers, translation services, legal support, and assistance in finding employment. Home visits are also made to engage with immigrant families within the domestic space, and join in celebrating religious occasions.

Also based in Italy is the Comitato 3 Ottobre, a migrant-led NGO founded after a shipwreck off the coast of Lampedusa (Sicily) killed 368 people on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 2013.<sup>15</sup> The Comitato works with schools across Europe to foster positive narratives on immigration; strives to **honour the victims of maritime migration**, and maintains a DNA database to support families in finding their missing loved ones; advocates for **policies of assistance and inclusion based on the experiences of survivors**; and has set up a Museum of Trust & Dialogue for the Mediterranean Sea in Lampedusa.

Meanwhile in Lebanon, home to 1.5 million Syrian refugees, a similar enculturation process is taking place through education. Understandably, the Lebanese educational system caters mainly to Lebanese children; unfortunately, this means that Syrian children receive no teaching on Syrian history, geography or culture. Consequently, they become detached from their cultural heritage, and often feel invisible or even inferior in their host country. The work of the Adyan Foundation counters this effect by focusing on the richness of Syrian cultural heritage,<sup>16</sup> involving children and parents in sharing their knowledge. The outcome is that children not only learn about their homeland, but also develop a sense of pride in adding value to their host country’s culture.

*“We become truly intercultural when you have changed me and I have changed you.  
Now, that is not a simple journey.”*

Sister Patricia Murray – Executive Secretary, UISG



## 2. RESPONSIBLE MEDIA

Social cohesion is a major challenge for Europe at a time when global geopolitical upheaval is increasing the number of migrants seeking access to EU countries. Unfortunately, many media platforms are guilty of double standards when it comes to reporting on migration, particularly in relation to war and conflict, which negatively impacts the chances of forming and sustaining a European consensus on data-led migration policy. For instance, in the same days when the horrors committed in the city of Bucha, in Ukraine, were discovered and widely reported, ferocious massacres were taking place in the city of Moura, in Mali; this violence was directly attributed to government forces supported by the same Kremlin-linked Wagner Group active in Ukraine, yet did not receive much international coverage.

The last annual report from the Associazione Carta di Roma,<sup>17</sup> an Italian organisation promoting responsible reporting on migration, hailed progress in representing the voice of migrants and refugees in the news. However, digging into the data reveals that increased coverage of migrant voices was due to an increased visibility of Ukrainian perspectives since the start of the war in Europe, rather than a shift in the narrative surrounding immigration from Africa or the Middle East. In other words, this apparently positive trend revealed, in fact, the **deeply ingrained racism of much reporting on migration**.

The quantity and quality of coverage provided to conflicts and other political crises can greatly influence public sympathy towards migrants from different countries, and consequently influences political decision-makers. Therefore, an important question to address is the extent to which **journalists and media organisations are responsible and can be held accountable for selective solidarity – or worse, for strengthening stereotypes, misunderstandings and inflammatory rhetoric**. As a starting point for ensuring the factual, fair and equal representation of all people, diversity policies should be instituted within media organisations, to promote an accurate representation of different cultural, social and political perspectives.

The visit of Pope Francis to Lampedusa at the start of his pontificate – in July 2013, just months before the shipwreck that claimed hundreds of lives – represents an example of how **public platforms can be used to shift the discourse on migration**. Pope Francis described everyone arriving in Lampedusa as refugees, regardless of whether they were fleeing war or hunger, thus tapping into a collective consensus that refugees have the right to be rescued, to be welcomed, and to build a better life – unlike migrants, in the imagination of many. As a consequence, journalists reporting on that visit were forced to use the Pope's normalising language, and reporters were forced to listen to the people with whom the Pope chose to speak.

*“We are all equally worthy, so it would be good to allocate the same financial resources for the rescue of a dinghy in the sea as for a submarine.<sup>18</sup>  
Any progress towards development passes through a single place:  
the human person.”*

Sister Carmen Elisa Bando – Coordinator, International Migrants & Refugees Network, UISG

# CONCLUSIONS

It was agreed that the upcoming UISG Advocacy Forum, taking place in Rome in October 2023, should further address the following issues.

## 1. MIGRANT VOICES

Traditionally, the participation of migrants in matters relating to their own wellbeing and future has been reduced to tokenism, with individual contributors depending for visibility on the sensationalism of their stories. While it is vital to shed light on the challenges faced by people on the move, it is equally or more important to focus on sharing stories that can promote safe transit, warm welcome and effective integration for migrants in Europe. The best starting point is listening to the voices of migrants, who bring their unique experiences, wealth of knowledge, and new ideas on solving the challenges that they have recently faced.

## 2. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

The UISG Advocacy Forum should consider how European governments can be pushed to assume their responsibilities on migration. Currently, a huge humanitarian burden is lifted by NGOs and faith-based organisations, relieving states of their moral, legal and financial duties. Paradoxically, this allows governments to continue demonising and persecuting aid agencies, while relying on them to cover humanitarian and disaster-management functions that should be operated by the state. Strategies that involve a collaborative and unified approach to tackling this issue are a matter of urgency.

## 3. MEDIA PLATFORMS

In the era of ubiquitous digital information, media platforms have a strong affective function, swaying perceptions and emotions on the issue of migration. Thus, journalists and news outlets have a powerful role to play in educating citizens to be critical of political agendas, and resist stereotyping and prejudice. The role of UISG and its networks in harnessing the positive potential of media outreach should be discussed in the upcoming Advocacy Forum.

## 4. VALUES-BASED ALLIANCES

The critical role of building alliances among UISG networks, as well as with national and international organisations, cannot be overstated. Central to these alliances must be their ethical and humanitarian foundations, especially pertaining to the promotion of political, social and human rights for migrants. The Forum should discuss specific goals for collaboration between networks and organisations, in order to capitalise on existing strengths and opportunities without duplicating initiatives, or running the risk of misallocating resources.

In order to journey together towards a new model of support and inclusion, we must seek to:

1. Connect on issues rather than divide over faith, politics or sector. This means identifying shared goals, developing a common language, and seeking consensus on needs and solutions.
2. Foster collaboration both formally and informally: whilst formal, public-facing action and communication are vital, the slower, backstage building of relationships and trust is equally so.
3. Transition from talk to action: being overloaded with information makes it possible to lose sight of the fact that, ultimately, action and impact are the goal of any conversation.

*“Advocacy at UISG is rooted in a vision of intrinsic human dignity that has underpinned the mission of Sisters for centuries, but it’s also a response to the urgency and challenges of our time.”*

Giulia Isabel Cirillo – Advocacy Coordinator, UISG

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SISTER-LED DIALOGUE

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Sisters  
Advocating  
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INTERNATIONAL UNION  
SUPERIORS GENERAL

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