

Joint Global Communiqué

The Role of Local and Regional Governments in the Global Digital Compact

Purpose

We, as organizations representing the interests of Local and Regional Governments (LRGs), convened a consultation 10 September 2024 co-hosted by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), to deliberate on the role of LRGs in the Global Digital Compact (GDC).

Through this Communiqué, we convey our position and call for the explicit recognition of LRGs as pivotal actors for closing the digital divides and localizing the objectives and principles of the GDC for an open, safe, sustainable and secure digital future across cities and communities.

As we navigate the digital age, it is essential that Member States and all stakeholders, including mayors, LRGs, communities, international organizations, private sector partners, civil society, academia, and the global community, unite in efforts to shape a digital future that is inclusive, people-centered, and aligned with the principles of sustainable urban development as framed by the New Urban Agenda and the 2030 Agenda.

We therefore urge Member States to meaningfully engage with and include the views and role of LRGs in the upcoming review processes of the draft GDC towards localizing its principles and objectives.

We further call for an explicit reference, in the GDC, of the role of cities and local governments.

The key role of Local and Regional Governments in implementing the GDC

The digital era is unfolding in a world where most of humanity is urban. In this context, urban and digital transformation are closely linked. Further, as the closest actors to communities and responsible for delivering essential services, LRGs play an indispensable role to ensure that digital transformation aligns with the needs and aspirations of local communities, including the most vulnerable, ultimately fostering inclusive and sustainable digital ecosystems. The key role of LRGs in implementing the GDC should be recognized, as they drive actions towards the following aspirations, with the goal of achieving a people-centred digital transformation:

1. Close the digital divide and accelerate progress across the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

LRGs are essential to bridge the digital divide by ensuring that all residents, regardless of their socioeconomic status, have equal access to digital tools and services. An enabling environment that supports LRGs to foster partnerships, conduct comprehensive assessments, and implement tailored solutions and educational opportunities to address digital capacities is needed so that no one and no place is left behind in the digital age.

2. Expand inclusion in and benefits from the digital economy for all

By creating supportive environments to promote digital innovation and local entrepreneurship, LRGs can empower all residents to participate in and benefit from the digital economy and contribute to building equitable public digital infrastructure. This involves updating regulatory frameworks, supporting digital startups, and ensuring that local businesses can thrive and seize the opportunities of an increasingly digital world.

3. Foster an inclusive, open, safe, and secure digital space that respects, protects and promotes human rights

Given their proximity to people and communities, LRGs have a unique role to ensure that digital environments respect human rights and promote civic participation both offline and online. By raising awareness of both opportunities and threats deriving from digitalization processes, fostering equitable

public engagement and ensuring that digital transformation is rooted in human rights law and development frameworks, LRGs can safeguard the digital well-being of their residents and communities.

4. *Promote a sustainable digital transformation, well-suited to the local needs and that limits the environmental footprint*

Through their digital transformation policies, public procurement processes and investments, LRGs are able to ensure that populations have better access to more efficient services while limiting the resources consumption; to create co-benefits between climate action and inclusion through digital sobriety and promotion of re-employment of the digital devices and recycling channels. LRGs can ensure investments are well-suited to the real needs of their communities, favor solidarity and a better-balanced funding of digital infrastructures between cities and rural areas.

5. *Advance equitable and interoperable data governance*

It is important to support LRGs to build capacity to manage data equitably and securely, develop interoperable data systems and use open standards to ensure that data is managed responsibly with the goal of informing decision-making and improving services' delivery. This includes fostering collaborations to share best practices implementing data governance arrangements for effective use and data protection, as well as enhancing the security and transparency of data management.

6. *Enhance international governance of artificial intelligence and emerging technologies for the benefit of humanity*

As innovation hubs, LRGs are vital to the ethical deployment and governance of AI and emerging technologies. Through sustainable partnership with the international community, cities can bring local communities' needs high on the international agenda. The international community must collaborate with LRGs to ensure responsible AI governance frameworks that prioritize human well-being, use technologies responsibly and address urban challenges. By leveraging AI to enhance urban planning, improve service delivery, and address critical issues like housing, mobility and health, LRGs can lead by example in ensuring that emerging technologies are harnessed for the public good.

Our cooperation must remain agile and adaptable to the rapidly evolving digital landscape. To fully address local needs, we will engage local and regional governments and collaborate with all relevant stakeholders, ensuring each operates within their respective roles and responsibilities.

Conclusion - Call to Action:

As organizations representing the interests of LRGs and in the light of the above statements, we urge Member States to consider the following requests:

Recognition of LRGs as key actors. We call for explicitly recognizing the role of LRGs in the GDC's implementation strategies and plans. We also call for consideration of collaboration mechanisms and international frameworks, such as the upcoming International Guidelines on People-Centred Smart Cities, that recognize the role of LRGs in advancing digital transformation and align the GDC's implementation accordingly.

Inclusive multistakeholder collaboration. We urge Member States to embed mechanisms for LRGs' participation in the governance structures and approaches proposed by the GDC, particularly in areas related to digital public goods and infrastructure, data and internet governance, AI governance frameworks and interoperability standards.

Digital skills and literacy. We call for targeted capacity-building programs and initiatives that build on capacity assessments to empower LRGs to lead digital transformation efforts locally and in strategic partnership with other stakeholders, with a particular focus on small and medium cities including intermediary cities.

Resource allocation and support. We call for equitable, technical and financial resource distribution to enable LRGs, particularly in areas with limited resources, to effectively carry out capacitation and upskilling of local administrations' officers as well as citizens, while ensuring the implementation of digital transformation strategies. We also call for the positioning of normative policy frameworks and strategic partnerships at the local and regional level, in alignment with national frameworks.

Localized Digital Governance. We advocate for inclusive and multistakeholder digital governance approaches that include LRGs in decision-making process at all levels and with delegated authority locally to shape and implement digital policies tailored to the contextual and local needs, while still aligning with global and national standards and frameworks.

Accountability and Monitoring. We urge for establishing clear mechanisms in the GDC for holding different levels of government accountable for their roles in digital governance. LRGs should not only be included in decision-making but also have a say in monitoring and accountability processes to ensure that the digital transformation is truly inclusive and equitable.

To conclude, we call for an explicit mention, in the Global Digital Compact, of the role of cities and local governments as pivotal actors for an open, safe, sustainable and secure digital future, under point 6 (k). We emphasize the need for a sustainable partnership and normative guidance to ensure the ongoing involvement of LRGs in the GDC. This includes establishing a platform for LRGs to engage with global stakeholders, sharing best practices, and contributing to the GDC implementation.