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Why are cities relevant for fostering digital human rights and human-centered digital transformation, as well as for providing a political perspective on digital rights?

Cities are where we live, putting them at the forefront of people's everyday interactions with digital technology and public services. This proximity uniquely positions us to protect digital rights and to ensure that digital transformation prioritizes human well-being. Unlike most other actors in direct contact with citizens, we are elected to serve the public trust and to look beyond immediate financial or structural concerns. And we can do this, absolutely – but in order to succeed, we must be bold.

We must advocate for transparent, equitable, and inclusive policies – policies that protect citizens' data, prevent surveillance overreach, and combat digital discrimination. There is a temptation to use this vast amount of data for security, for preemptive surveillance with the use of AI, cameras, information gathered in databases, through mood analysis, and crowd monitoring. Even when done with the best of intentions, this can be an extremely dangerous path to tread.

Our societies are changing fast, perhaps faster than ever in human history, and this pace will only accelerate. We need to be prepared for how new technologies and services, how new needs and demands will impact our lives and our rights. The fundamental philosophies of Human rights and democracy were all conceived in a pre-internet age. If we do not want to get left behind, we must be prepared to safeguard, adapt and expand these rights in the fourth industrial revolution.

At a broader political level, championing digital rights within our cities can set a powerful precedent. This can influence national and even international standards. By prioritizing digital inclusion and security, cities can lead by example – securing that technology is adopted in a way that serves the public good while safeguarding individual freedoms. In an era where technology often evolves faster than legislation, cities have a responsibility to innovate and advocate for ethical digital practices that keep human rights at the core of the digital progress. Otherwise, we risk facing a world where the benefits of automation, of AI and digitalization serve only a select few while the majority of the population becomes ever more disenfranchised.

In your view, what do cities need today to promote and implement digital rights?

Initiative, funding, mandate.



At the local level, cities must first recognize the ethical implications of the changes they implement, the services they offer, and the systems they put in place. Additionally, there is a need for initiatives that raise awareness in our communities. To get people involved, to help them understand their digital rights and the importance of digital ethics, and to get their input on where our boundaries should be drawn.

That's where we must get our mandate – from understanding what information people are willing to share, with whom, and for what purposes and benefits. This could include educational initiatives on data privacy, digital literacy programs, and accessible resources to help residents understand and assert their digital rights. In Reykjavík, we have engaged in a modest program to improve digital literacy among the elderly, but more efforts are needed.

To accomplish this, cities need the appropriate funding and access to the expertise necessary to build secure, inclusive digital infrastructures that prioritize user-centric design, ensuring that all residents, regardless of socio-economic status, can access digital tools and services. The real challenge lies in getting everyone on board with doing things in a new way.

What is missing and needed at regional and global levels to support cities in protecting digital human rights?

Cities need collaboration, not only with neighbouring cities, but also with their respective regional and national governments, to create coherent digital policies that prevent jurisdictional gaps in digital rights. Working together at a regional level can help establish shared standards for data privacy, security, and ethical technology use, creating a unified approach that strengthens digital rights across municipalities. This cooperation makes it easier for cities to implement robust digital rights policies without conflicting regional rules and ensures that state support reinforces local efforts. If national legislatures or supranational organizations fail to take the lead in setting these standards, cities must step up and take the initiative.

Globally, cities would benefit from internationally recognized digital rights standards, supported by collaboration between city governments, national legislatures and global institutions and presented to technology companies from a united front. Establishing such standards would enable cities to hold tech companies accountable and push back against practices that exploit personal data or infringe on digital freedoms.

Cities also need access to shared global resources and best-practice platforms to adopt and adapt digital rights policies that keep pace with rapidly advancing technologies. Ultimately, cities are essential actors in creating ethical and human-centred digital ecosystems. A collective effort across these levels is needed to develop comprehensive digital rights frameworks that empower cities to serve and protect their citizens in the digital age.

More broadly, it is time for cities, as well as for countries, to agree on and establish digital age standards that are rooted in civil rights, for the benefit of humanity. If we do not define our rights, others will do so for us – and we might not like the result.