

# Positioning cities as champion of digital inclusion

Recommendations from the Cities Coalition for Digital Rights

## Key messages:

The Cities Coalition for Digital Rights is committed to providing universal and equal access to the internet. Everyone should have access to affordable and accessible internet and digital services on equal terms, as well as the digital skills to make use of this access and overcome the digital divide.

- 1. Developing essential, basic digital skills for the population.** Developing basic digital skills and countering the digital divide is a priority in cities all over the world, in particular for the poorest, elderly people, women and migrants.
- 2. Supporting residents in the short term to carry out their administrative procedures online.** The dematerialisation of services has created a social emergency for residents to access their rights straight away.
- 3. Ensuring equal access to the services and participation in the digital space.** Advocating for affordable connectivity, inclusive devices and access to digital equipment for the most vulnerable ones, including visually impaired, neurodivergent, youth and senior people, is still a priority in cities.
- 4. Recreating the link between residents and public institutions,** by reaching out to audiences who currently don't have contacts with the municipalities, the most vulnerable people have difficulties to access the digital mediation initiatives, though they are often the ones with the most needs.
- 5. Scaling-up and adapting good practices in cities to other municipalities.** To implement structural changes, the International Community and more particularly Europe can today count on dozens of leading cities with a reservoir of practices that can be tomorrow's ready-to-use "commons", effective in achieving the goal of digitally inclusive cities. They could benefit hundreds of cities and towns, especially smaller ones who are lacking resources to spontaneously develop such initiatives themselves. Areas could range from local observatory of digital inequalities to supporting caregivers' role in reducing inequalities.

## Introduction

As key actors close to residents' daily lives, we cities witness firsthand the profound digital inequalities pervading society. The digital divide and associated ethical, financial, and social risks produce tangible collective and individual effects that residents face routinely. It shows how the digitalisation of our society, as it is currently driven, is increasing social inequality that persists in cities, while still bringing many opportunities. Such context raises the following question - how to develop digital tools as an enabler for social inclusion and not as an exacerbation of existing inequalities?

## Human rights implications of the digital divide

Far from being an abstract issue, the digital divide and the exposure to the ethical, financial and social risks linked to digital technologies produce multiple collective and individual effects that cities and their residents face on a daily basis.

Today, and increasingly so, acquiring digital skills, and more broadly, digital literacy, is necessary to access basic services, be in the job market, enjoy private life and social relationships. For cities, digital inclusion means to ensure equitable access to technologies for all our residents, guaranteeing their freedom of expression and information, and their ability to conduct the most basic daily operations such as making appointments online. But digital inclusion also means providing access to civic participation in the digital age: Granting all voices an opportunity to contribute to democratic processes can help the fight against the manipulation of digitally disconnected communities. Finally, digital inclusion enables people to protect themselves from cyber threats, which strengthens overall cybersecurity by reducing the gaps vulnerable to attacks.

The rapid pace of digital innovation is making it hard for digitally excluded people and for the stakeholders who help them to keep up and to get continuous autonomy. It concretely means that a person not in need today can fall into exclusion - not being able to access digital technologies. Such a risk is even higher for vulnerable people and communities who are already facing situations of poverty, discrimination and exclusion. Empowering these groups, as well as the global society, on their rights and skills, is essential to help them in situations of online harassment, risks of addiction and overexposure to harmful content.

That is why a priority for the Cities Coalition of Digital Rights is to drive unceasing efforts to combat the digital divide, whether economic, generational, disability related or based on origin. We aim at responding to the growing needs on digital topics from residents, and to tackle digital inequalities on the ground. In particular, there is a strong need in cities for skills development, including long-life learning programmes, training for low-skilled people, and early education on digital skills.

## The realities in urban areas

As the closest democratic institutions to their communities, cities deal with important challenges when it comes to tackling the digital divide. The risk of digital exclusion of vulnerable population groups from access to technologies and the internet has increased exponentially during the COVID-19 pandemic and has remained high since. In addition, some groups of residents do not have the level of digital skills required to perform even basic online operations and remain therefore excluded from online public services. This multifaceted situation of connectivity, affordability, and digital literacy problems makes it difficult for cities to measure and therefore address this digital divide.

Cities are suitable actors to promote and defend digital rights and have in many cases already implemented initiatives fostering digital inclusion at the local level. However, one of the major obstacles to the consolidation of these initiatives is the lack of additional funding beyond the initial pilot phase. This issue leads cities to look for other funding sources, creating an unsustainable and insecure situation.

This funding gap can be exacerbated for smaller cities with less than 150,000 or 100,000 inhabitants. In many cases, they suffer comparatively more from digital inequalities, especially since they tend to host fewer young, qualified populations linked to the presence of a university pole, and are more likely to lack the engineering needed to develop local responses or existing good practices.

## Strategies and solutions at local level

When facing the digital divide, cities can be agile testbeds for new policies and rules and can actively promote digital inclusion at the local level. In this spirit, they have developed practices and projects to measure, reduce, and compensate for digital inequalities on the ground.

As mentioned before, measuring the digital divide can turn out to be a difficult task. However, cities have implemented solutions: Bordeaux Métropole, for example, has put into place an observatory on digital exclusion, aiming to bridge the impact of the digital divide in the metropolitan area. This measuring serves as a basis for cities to bring digital devices closer to populations in need. A key strategy used by several cities, such as Boston, consists in recycling and distributing digital devices from companies, city departments, and other organizations.

But more than merely providing devices and infrastructure, digital inclusion further implies providing residents with tools for using them and navigating the complexity of digitally-available services. Digital mediation plays a key role here, as cities are training “digital helpers” who in turn support the most vulnerable in digital skills, media literacy and online safety. Several cities are taking up the challenge: Ghent and Glasgow, for example, have implemented projects training volunteers, social workers, or civil servants as digital coaches for residents.

Taking the term “digital inclusion” literally, cities have recognised the importance of involving residents directly in the design of digital services and creating avenues for democratic participation. These strategies can take the form of spaces for debate and discussion – such as Rennes’ digital citizen assembly and the digital transformation forum in Niteroi – or using residents’ feedback for the development of digital services, as implemented in Reykjavik.

Residents can have different experiences of the digital divide. A key component of designing digital public services that cities have put into place consists in tailoring them to the specific needs of groups at risk of digital exclusion. For example, In collaboration with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the city of Belo Horizonte offers workshops with specialised professionals initiating hearing-impaired residents to the use of accessible technology with sign-language, and introduced courses teaching programming skills specifically to women, with the objective to lower barriers to participation for women in courses.

A successful strategy for digital inclusion also means involving the private sector, with some cities having already moved in this direction: the city of Utrecht has implemented a “social return rule” in public procurement activities, requiring companies that have been awarded municipal contracts to invest in social efforts, which can take the form of devices provision or the delivery of digital education courses. Social investment is also a component of public procurement in the cities of London and Gothenburg.

## Policy recommendations

The Cities Coalition for Digital Rights is formally advocating for a Digital Rights framework, both at all level of governance, that offers concrete measures on:

- **Developing essential, basic digital skills for the population.** Developing basic digital skills and countering the digital divide is a priority in cities all over the world, in particular for the poorest, elderly people, women and migrants. To do so, we are calling for:
  - Developing pilot programmes to provide training to residents and public officials in collaboration with social and educational services of the city and with the engagement of NGOs and other private partners, through public procurement and social investments.
  - Monitoring and measuring the digital divide through local observatories to fully understand the magnitude of the phenomenon, the people and the areas concerned.
- **Supporting residents in the short term to carry out their administrative procedures online.** The dematerialisation of services has created a social emergency for residents to access their rights straight away. To answer to this emergency, we are calling for:
  - Mainstreaming digital mediation by training digital helpers, meaning any type of profile of digital coaches working at city level (multimedia facilitators, mediators, social workers) and supporting residents with the use of digital services in their everyday life.
- **Ensuring equal access to the services and participation in the digital space.** Advocating for affordable connectivity, inclusive devices and access to digital equipment for the most vulnerable ones is still a priority in cities. This situation must lead to:
  - Developing pilot programmes to provide access to internet access and devices (computers and smartphones).

- Ensuring that online tools are user-friendly, using universal design of digital products and writing texts in a specific way that is easy to read and to translate through machine translation, especially for visually impaired, neurodivergent, youth and senior people.
- **Recreating the link between residents and public institutions**, by reaching out to audiences who currently don't have contacts with the municipalities, the most vulnerable people have difficulties to access the digital mediation initiatives, though they are often the ones with the most needs. This includes:
  - Developing physical "outreach" actions through geographical mobility of support professionals, reopening of offices, actions outside the walls of private and public structures (preventive approach rather than curative).
  - Strengthening the "pedagogical" posture by adapting the support offered to the needs of the population: support for residents, digital mediation or digital and social inclusion schemes should not become the execution of a 'vertical' training programme, but rather that we answered to the needs and issues of the populations.
- **Scaling-up and adapting good practices in cities to other municipalities**. To implement structural changes, the International Community and more particularly Europe can today count on dozens of leading cities with a reservoir of practices that can be tomorrow's ready-to-use "commons", effective in achieving the goal of digitally inclusive cities. They could benefit hundreds of less involved cities and towns, especially smaller ones lacking resources to spontaneously develop such initiatives themselves. Areas could range from local observatory of digital inequalities to supporting caregivers' role in reducing inequalities. To do so, we are calling for:
  - Effectively multiply the good practices already produced on the ground by turning them into actionable and disseminated common.
  - Stimulating multi-city cooperation projects in areas such as local observatories of digital inequalities to support caregivers' role in reducing inequalities.
  - The creation of city consortia for the dissemination of good practices to combat digital inequalities.

## References

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