Reinforcing citizen participation in shaping urban digital ecosystems

Recommendations from the Cities Coalition for Digital Rights

Key messages:

The Cities Coalition for Digital Rights (CC4DR) is committed to ensuring that everyone should have full representation on the internet, and the ability to collectively engage with thy city through open, participatory and transparent digital processes. To enable residents to participate in shaping local digital infrastructures and services and, more generally, city policy-making for common good, CC4DR is calling to:

1. **Ensure that no one is left behind in the participation process.** It means to increase the accessibility and the skills of people so that they can understand the impacts of digital technologies on their rights and access the participatory initiatives led by local governments.

2. **Increase systemic transparency and rebuild the trust between citizens and public administrations.** Local, national and international governments need to work on these related issues by developing a holistic approach.

3. **Empower public administrations officials** with the necessary skills to understand the implications of new digital techologies and ensure a rich and constructive participation in public debates.

4. **Update existing policies and rules** on citizen engagement, participatory processes and procurement standards more impactful.

5. **Implement sandbox environments,** to unblock innovation in public services by allowing to test innovative technology driven prototypes before implementation.

Introduction

As cities increasingly rely on digital technologies to provide public services, the protection of digital human rights has become an important area of focus. Cities must balance innovation with the protection of fundamental rights like privacy, data security, and non-discrimination. It is one of our principles to ensure that people impacted by technologies used in cities have the ability to engage with the city through open, participatory and transparent digital processes. This means that **citizens should be able to actively participate in decisions about the development and deployment of digital technologies.**

The Cities Coalition for Digital Rights is dedicated to protect digital rights and, through its "Mission 1: transparency and participation in the governance of digital technologies", it focuses on the role of citizen participation in shaping the future of urban digital ecosystems and in boosting transparency regarding the use of data and digital technologies by city administrations.

Upholding democratic values in technological changes

The digital human rights landscape includes data protection, freedom from algorithmic bias, and upholding democratic values in technology. Cities, as primary interfaces for digital services, must lead in adopting rights-respecting technologies, with citizen participation central to these efforts. Engaging citizens enables their voices to shape technology, aligns innovations with public values, and ensures diverse needs are reflected. Moreover, citizen participation also helps to identify potential challenges and risks related to certain technologies in an early stage.

Transparency is essential for genuine participation, fostering trust and preventing exclusion. Participation must also be accessible and inclusive, allowing everyone - not just tech experts - to influence decisions. This might involve providing clear information, translation services, or simplifying complex technical terms. Moreover, inclusivity is key to capturing the diverse perspectives within a community.

As a coalition, we are committed to advancing citizen participation in the development and governance of digital technologies. However, cities face significant challenges related to citizen participation.

Existing barriers for citizen participation in urban digital landscape

Through participatory workshops run by CC4DR in 2024, city representatives identified the numerous challenges cities face when attempting to organize citizen participation in the development and deployment of digital technologies. Examples of these challenges are:

- Complexity of digital technologies: the technical nature of digital tools can make it challenging for the average citizen to engage meaningfully in discussions about their use.
- Lack of awareness: many citizens are unaware of how digital technologies impact their rights, limiting their willingness or ability to participate.
- Diversity: cities serve diverse populations with varying concerns. Balancing these competing interests while ensuring fair representation can be a difficult task.
- Limitation of resources: organizing and facilitating meaningful public participation requires time, expertise, and financial resources, which cities may not always have.
- Trust deficit: there can be a lack of trust between citizens and governments when it comes to digital technologies, leading to citizens not wanting to participate.
- Digital accessibility: not everyone has equal access to technology. Some citizens lack access to the internet, devices or the digital literacy necessary to participate meaningfully. If participation is organized using technological means, vulnerable or marginalized groups are likely to be excluded from the participation process.
- Superficial involvement: citizens are placed in a consultative role without real impact or power on the decision-making. This can lead to participation washing: cities engage citizens for the appearance of inclusion without genuine impact.
- Public administration fragmentation: some cities have a fragmented administration and a lack of bridge-builders to connect different stakeholders, which can lead to a fragmented process.
- Dynamic nature of digital technologies such as AI: AI systems do not behave predictably and are subject to internal and external feedback loops, meaning that the systems are able to adjust and evolve based on inputs, both from within the system itself and from its interactions with the outside world.

Strategies and solutions at local level

As described above, cities face numerous challenges in organizing meaningful citizen participation. To address these challenges, cities can adopt several solutions and strategies that ensure inclusivity, accessibility, transparency and adaptability.

CC4DR's participatory workshops also allowed city representatives to develop and share various solutions and strategies to address the challenges cities face in organizing meaningful citizen participation around the use of digital technologies.

One of the key barriers to effective participation is the digital divide, which excludes citizens who lack access to technology or have limited digital literacy. While countering the digital divide, cities should ensure as well that no one is left out of the participation process by adopting hybrid participation models that combine both digital and traditional methods. This includes offering in-person meetings, community forums, or paper surveys alongside digital platforms. By providing multiple ways for citizens to engage, cities can reach a broader audience and reflect their cities' diversity in the decision-making process.

At the same time, cities should prioritize creating accessible digital platforms that cater to all citizens, including those with disabilities. For example, cities can provide visual aids for individuals with visual impairments and offer content in multiple languages. Additionally, simplifying technical content into easily understandable formats can make digital tools more inclusive.

In addition, cities should invest in digital literacy programs to help citizens understand how digital technologies, such as AI, work, how their data is used, and how their input influences decisions. This educational approach can build trust and demystify the process, hopefully leading to more likelihood to participate and hold governments accountable.

One of the major challenges in citizen participation is the need for transparent and trustworthy processes. Cities should clearly communicate how citizen input is being used and show how it affects decision-making. Establishing regular feedback loops, where citizens are informed about the impact of their participation, is crucial.

As described above, some digital technologies such as AI, are dynamic. This means that their behavior and outputs can change over time. To keep citizen participation relevant, cities should implement flexible, iterative processes. This involves allowing citizens to continuously provide input as AI systems evolve. This adaptive approach ensures that participation keeps pace with the rapidly changing nature of AI, making it possible to adjust policies and systems in response to both technological developments and evolving citizen needs.

Lastly, cities should aim to empower citizens by giving them meaningful decision-making power rather than viewing participation merely a consultation exercise. Citizens should be involved in the participatory processes from the beginning, that means from the design of the process itself. This means that citizens are not only heard but have a real influence on the direction of digital policy.

But among all these strategies and solutions, there is one that lies at the heart of them all. The main conclusion of the CC4DR's work is that, to overcome most of the challenges identified, the quality of public debates needs to be significantly increased. **The main policy recommendation is therefore to have rich and pluralistic debates on the use of technology in public administration as a means of meeting citizens' needs while preserving their digital rights.** To this end, it is crucial to increase the capacity of citizens and experts to engage in public debates, in public discussions. In this sense, the Socratic method has proven to be a good tool to develop fruitful debates and help citizens improve their discussion skills.

Policy recommendations

Based on these reflexions, the Cities Coalition for Digital Rights is calling all level of governance to reinforce the role of citizen participation in shaping the future urban digital ecosystems by:

1. **Ensuring that no one is left behind in the participation process.** It means to increase the accessibility and the skills of people so that they can understand the impacts of digital technologies on their rights and access the participatory initiatives led by local governments. Local, national and international levels should therefore:
   - Address social inequalities by addressing the digital divide. We believe that the policy recommendations developed in our paper "Positioning cities as champion of digital inclusion" will help residents to access technology by enhancing their digital skills and ensuring inclusive content, especially for thos with disabilities.
   - Develop digital literacy programmes that evolve in line with the dynamic nature of digital technologies to avoid the emergence of new digital divides.

2. **Increasing systemic transparency and rebuild the trust between citizens and public administrations**. Local, national and international governments need to work on these related issues by developing a holistic approach that:
   - Adapt transparency ordinance to new needs i.e. enable informed citizen participating by making the use of digital technology by local governments transparent.
   - Mainstream the use of AI systems algorithm registries used in public administration
   - Develop communication campaign to advertise on the use of digital technologies in (cities) administration to enable informed citizen participation
   - Improve democratic participation programmes by involving citizens in processes happening ahead of the decision-making and by clearly communicating how citizens inputs are used and how it affects decision-making.

3. **Empowering public administration officials.**
   - Civil servants should have the necessary **skills** not only to understand better the implications of new digital technologies, but also to ensure a rich and constructive participation in public debates that includes, respects and protects everyone, including the civil servants themselves.
   - We call local, national and international governments to empower public servants with debating skills for rich and constructive participation in public debates, and improve the recruiting taking into account the required understanding of the role of new technologies in the running of public administration.

4. **Updating existing policies and rules**
   - Increase the transparency of citizen engagement processes by clearly communicating how citizens inputs are used and how it affects decision-making.
   - Fight lack of trust and superficial involvement in participatory processes by increasing quality of public discussions
   - Define new procurement standards that takes include policy templates like AI vendor checklists, impact assessments, and adhering to frameworks like the UNESCO ethics of AI.

5. **Implementing sandbox environments**, to unblock innovation in public services by allowing to test innovative technology driven prototypes before implementation.