

PRESS RELEASE:

Digital Technologies and the COVID-19 Pandemic

#BeyondTheOutbreak

Covid-19 distancing policies are accelerating the digital transition. Yet even in the wealthiest cities vulnerable people are often not connected. Access to the internet and digital public services are now being seen as essential for dignified living, leaving no one behind. Cities are at the forefront to balance the equality of services, performance, accessibility, choice, security and rights of all citizens.

The 5th Live Learning meeting was again hosted by UCLG, Metropolis and UN-Habitat on April 15. The series started late March and has brought together over 1,000 participants from local and regional governments, the UN system, partners from the civil society and the private sector. Cities across the globe have shared their experiences, initiatives and actions in response to the pandemic. They also shared their frontline views on how cities may transform beyond the outbreak.

The live learning session on Digital Technologies highlighted the role of new technologies during the pandemic and beyond.

Mousa Hadid, Mayor of Ramallah, the Deputy Mayors of Barcelona, **Laia Bonet**, and Milan, **Roberta Cocco**, as well as representatives from **Bogotá**, **New York City**, **Amsterdam**, and **Xi'an**, together with partners from the **UN Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights**, the Global Initiative for Inclusive ITCs (**C3ICT**), and the **Head of the Open Government Partnership Local** took part in the session, introduced by **Emilia Saiz**, Secretary General of UCLG, **Maimunah Mohd Sharif**, Executive Director of UN-Habitat, and **Anna Lisa Boni**, Secretary General of Eurocities.

Maimunah Sharif, Executive Director of UN-Habitat, expressed her concern regarding the **digital divide**, and mentioned how cities and regions can contribute to ensuring that digitalisation leaves no-one and no place behind. On the principle of Human Rights First, also online, she commended the Coalition of Cities for Digital Rights on their work on advancing universal access to technology, data security, transparency, and non-discrimination.

“Half the world’s population is connected to the internet – the other half is not,” she observed. “Existing inequalities in developed and developing countries will be widened further. Cities can do a lot to ensure that the digital revolution does not leave anyone or any place behind,” she said.

The Executive Director of UN-Habitat also highlighted that it is time to look at the outcome of COVID-19 as “the new normal”, and how **lockdown unlocks opportunities** for introducing new technologies and for alternative ways of working.

Anna Lisa Boni, Secretary General of Eurocities, highlighted how the pandemic was showcasing new ways of working that had not been implemented at this scale until now, and warning that technology is not a fix-all solution, stated that: “We need to strike a balance. We need to make sure for the future that we watch out to ensure technologies won’t infringe people’s rights.”

The first part of the session, aimed at showcasing digital actions undertaken by municipal governments from all over the world and how technology can be shaped by communities in the midst of the outbreak, was moderated by **Francesca Bria**, President of the Italian Innovation Fund, and UN-Habitat Adviser on People-Centred Smart Cities. The second part, facilitated by UCLG, highlighted the use on technology on the ground, and how the pandemic was affecting our daily lives.

Laia Bonet, Deputy Mayor of **Barcelona**, described how the city is reducing the digital divide, as a cornerstone of its broader efforts to guarantee universal public services, and how Barcelona had brought in the private sector.

“We have witnessed the fact that digital technologies delineate social inequalities. What we are learning is important: if such inequalities can be addressed in a context of crisis, they can also be addressed after the outbreak. We should approach digitalization as a human rights issue”

Privacy was one of the key issues, with Barcelona focusing on the management of data in the aftermath of the pandemic, and **Roberta Cocco**, Deputy Mayor of **Milan**, looking at how the city should support citizens through technology, but not if this posed a risk to rights. The concept of **smart living** beyond implementing tele-working was also introduced by Cocco, pointing to a full digital transformation having been started.

“We put citizens at the very centre of our action plan. Digital technologies have been the backbone of our response, playing a fundamental role from delivering public services, to securing the basic necessities for those most in need. Now we

are working on the tools and a robust digital inclusion strategy that will serve the reopening of our cities to make sure that no one will be left behind.”

The City of **Amsterdam** argued against the concept of “*techsolutionism*”, and the idea that technology, in itself, is enough to combat the pandemic. It was further highlighted that it was critical to avoid false dichotomies between security and privacy by ensuring that the use and ownership and data are with public interest in mind. This sentiment was also echoed by Scott Campbell, representative of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, who argued that, while technology is an enabler, it is up to governments at all levels to use technology in a way that can protect human rights. An **all-of-government response to digitalization** was called for by Amsterdam, and resonated as well with the **Open Government Partnership**, who called for a multi-stakeholder approach to address digitalization, and in particular to ensure that the data being accessed by companies and governments does not interfere with the rights of the individuals.

An important aspect when addressing the digital divide is how it affects people with disabilities, with **G3ICT** stating that the recovery phase after the outbreak needs to ensure more accessibility as we move towards the digital era.

Mousa Hadid, Mayor of **Ramallah**, argued that local and regional governments have a responsibility towards their citizens to guarantee safety, and stated that Ramallah had worked to ensure a response from day one and was already thinking about how technology could be used in rebuilding

“We are seeing the engagement of people in the city through technology, and it is important to think about the aftermath, the day after the crisis finishes, we need to think about the psychological aspects, how we can use technology to service communities then.”

Dubai shared their experience of implementing working from home, and how over 70,000 public employees were able to do so after a simulation implemented before the crisis hit. The city of **Bogotá** highlighted **digital education** as a cornerstone of their work, and argued that this had exposed some of the underlying **inequalities** both digital, and economical that students face, and called for a wider alliance to ensure technology reaches all who need it.

John Farmer, Chief Technology Officer of **New York City** highlighted how the digital divide was both a human rights issue and about public health. The city was working to accelerate the delivery of the #InternetMasterPlan to bridge the digital gap also in urban areas by bringing universal broadband and providing universal access to the Internet in the city.

"Folks talk about digital divide as rural vs. urban, but it also affects urban dwellers, and this can be seen from neighborhood to neighborhood. There's work that needs to get done to fix this. Let's bring the Chief Technology Officers as change makers in the picture."

The city of **Xi'an**, which is now in the recovery phase, also emphasized their efforts to ensure on-line education since the beginning of the outbreak to students of all ages. It further presented their initiative to create a Big Data Bureau to contribute with information supporting sanitary measures, such as location of people with symptoms.

Emilia Saiz, Secretary General of UCLG, closed the session, recalling the relevance of the key principles that guide the work of cities for digital rights in facing the global pandemic. The technical and human infrastructure for smart citizens is enabled by technology, she argued, but it is necessary to enhance the role of local and regional governments in gathering and protecting their citizens' data. She also touched upon the consideration of access to the Internet as a basic service, stating that *"it is critical to ensure service provision in order to ensure accessibility, and this entails bringing all actors, even the private sector on board. We need to define access to information as critical, and cities will need to lead the way in the defence of digital rights. Our role, as local government networks, will be to foster and put together strategies to ensure this happens."*

Cities were called to upload their experiences in the platform www.citiesforglobalhealth.org where over 200 cases can be found.

The live learning exercises will continue throughout the month, taking place on Wednesdays and Thursdays during the crisis. Migration, Culture, Local Economic Development, and Local Finances will be among the topics covered as cities around the world are looking at how to overcome challenges with a new generation of solutions.

About United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG):

UCLG is the global organization of local and regional governments and their associations that represents and defends their interests on the world stage. Representing 70 per cent of the world's population, UCLG members are present in all world regions: Africa, Asia Pacific, Europe, Eurasia, Middle East-West Asia, Latin America and North America - organised in seven continental sections, a metropolitan section and a regional forum. This network covers more than 240,000 cities, regions and metropolises and more than 175 local and regional government associations present in 140 countries. UCLG includes among its main areas of political interest local democracy, climate change and environmental protection, the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals, local finance, urban development and city diplomacy for peacebuilding. Visit www.uclg.org and follow [@uclg_org](https://twitter.com/uclg_org) for more.

About UN-Habitat

UN-Habitat is the UN agency focused on our cities, towns and communities. UN-Habitat works in over 90 countries supporting people in cities and human settlements for a better urban future. Working with governments and local partners, its high impact projects combine world-class expertise and local knowledge to deliver timely and targeted solutions. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes a dedicated Goal on cities, SDG 11 – to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Visit www.unhabitat.org and follow [@unhabitat](https://twitter.com/unhabitat) for further information.

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