

# International Guidelines on People Centred Smart Cities - Pillars



## Our knowledge products



### Our playbooks

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## Global initiatives

### International guidelines on people-centred smart cities

At the second session of the UN-Habitat Assembly in June 2023 in Nairobi, Kenya, 193 countries approved a Resolution which requested UN-Habitat to develop guidelines on people-centred smart cities. The guidelines will serve as a non-binding framework for developing national and local smart city regulations, plans and strategies, to ensure that digital urban infrastructure and data contribute to making cities and human settlements sustainable, inclusive and prosperous and respectful of human rights.

### UN Innovation Technology Accelerator for Cities

UNITAC is a UN entity managed by UN-Habitat in partnership with the UN Office for ICT and HafenCity University, a technical university focused on the built environment. Using an accelerator model, UNITAC harnesses digital technologies, data, and innovation to drive sustainable urban development. The team applies cutting-edge methods in innovation, prototyping, and applied research to develop solutions aligned with the UN System-Wide Strategy on Sustainable Urbanization and the SDGs. These solutions are tested and piloted with local governments and global partners through established networks including UN-Habitat's country and regional offices.

### Global Alliance for Mayors on Digital Cooperation (MDC)

Launched in 2023 in partnership with the UN Office for Digital and Emerging Technologies, the Mayor's Alliance unites and empowers city leaders to leverage the transformative potential of digital technologies collaboratively. It accelerates digital innovation for sustainable development by elevating cities' voices in global digital dialogues, offering innovative tools and solutions, and fostering a digitally united, future-ready global community that serves urban residents.

## Experience on the ground

### Climate Smart Cities

Accelerating the shift to climate neutral and smart cities through challenge-driven and mission-oriented innovation, to drive systems transformation that bring cities, innovators and communities together to design and demonstrate solutions for the climate transition.

### Digital Human Rights

As local governments undergo their digital transformation journeys, UN-Habitat supports them in ensuring that human rights are protected and promoted when developing, accessing and using technologies in an ethical, inclusive and sustainable way.

### Smart City Strategies

UN-Habitat helps develop smart city assessments, plans, roadmaps and strategies to drive long-term progress and prosperity leaving no one and no place behind. They ensure the governance landscape fits the digital era, builds people-centred smart cities, promotes inclusive society and economies by strengthening public institutions and empowers people online and offline.

## Get in touch

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# People-Centred Smart Cities



# The challenge

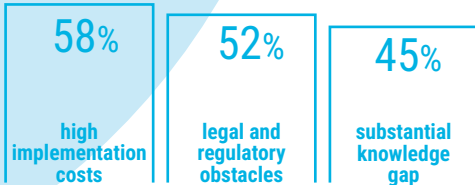
The world is rapidly urbanizing. Today, **more than 57 percent of the world's population lives in urban areas, a figure estimated to rise to 68 percent by 2050**. At the same time, the world is becoming more digital with 63 percent of the world's population online, it is progressively clear that digital technologies have the potential to unlock sustainable urban development. Big data, artificial intelligence, connectivity and the new digital economy are shaping the future of our societies and economies.

However, there are still 2.4 billion people without affordable access to the internet. This severely restricts the ability of cities to ensure an even digital transformation of society. There is a strong inequality component to this challenge: among the world's 47 least-developed countries, more than 80 per cent of the population is still offline, and the gender gap in connectivity continues to widen. Women are approximately 20 per cent less likely than men to have access to the internet in many parts of the world.<sup>1</sup>

Disparity being particularly pronounced in developing countries and among marginalized communities excluding women and other groups further from participation at all levels and in being considered in important urban decisions. Many households, schools and neighbourhoods are still not able to access remote education, telemedicine and teleworking due to weak, absent or unaffordable internet connectivity or lack of digital tools.

The full potential of the urban digital transformation and the 'smart city' to contribute to the SDGs has not yet been realized. According to 88% of municipalities, their digital skills gap is one of the main constraints to smart cities development.<sup>2</sup> This associated to limited considerations of the impact of digital technologies on human rights and the persistent digital divide,

## Challenges faced while harnessing artificial intelligence (AI)



1, 2 UN- Habitat, World Smart Cities Outlook 2024

(both in terms of usage and accessibility gaps) pose real challenges. According to latest data, while municipalities are increasingly eager to harness the potential of new technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) to enhance essential services, they are faced with significant challenges such as high implementation costs of AI (58%), legal and regulatory obstacles (52%), and a substantial knowledge gap (45%). These issues underscore the urgent need for comprehensive governance strategies and ethical standards to ensure the responsible deployment of technologies.<sup>3</sup>

Aiming to support the implementation of the Global Digital Compact, UN-Habitat is working towards setting a new smart city approach that promotes people before technology and leverage innovations to realize sustain-ability, inclusivity, prosperity and human rights. This will make the urban digital transformation work for the benefit of all. Leveraging collabora-tion frameworks on smart cities and digital transformation with UN sister agencies and other state and non-state actors, such as the Global Alliance of Mayors for Digital Cooperation and the International Guidelines on People Centred Smart Cities, we ensure the programme is implemented as part of a global efforts. **Our priority is the inclusive, resilient and sustainable digital urban transformation for cities and communities responding to people's needs.**

# Our vision of a smart city

Smart cities can have a tremendous positive impact on people's lives, but only when people are at the center of the development process. Unfortunately, many existing smart city initiatives have fallen short on sustainability and inclusion as technology has been implemented according to private interests and without humanitarian guidance. Investments in smart city projects that prioritize technology's capabilities over residents' needs have not delivered the expected impact. Instead, we see trends towards surveillance, private ownership of digital public goods and infrastructure, and the perpetuation of discrimination through automated decision-making powered by artificial intelligence.

We believe in engaging deeply with the needs of all residents and urban stakeholders **through meaningful community participation, bridging the digital divide, developing essential digital infrastructure and governance, and building capacity through multi-stakeholder partnerships.**

3 UN-Habitat, Global assessment of responsible AI in cities, 2024

Member States unanimously endorsed UN-Habitat's definition of a people-centred smart city as a city *that leverages technology to improve the quality of life of people and the social, economic and environmental sustainability and resilience of cities and human settlements. It ensures that smart city innovations are developed through participatory approaches and collaboration, providing equitable access to digital services, skills and infrastructures especially for persons in vulnerable situations. It promotes and protects human rights and fundamental freedoms, with multi-level governance systems and regulations ensuring that technology supports sustainable development rather than becoming the goal itself*".<sup>4</sup>

Through the international guidelines, local governments and other relevant stakeholders now have a benchmark for developing national and local smart city regulations, to ensure that digital urban infrastructure and data contribute to making cities sustainable, prosperous and respectful of human rights.

# The People-Centred Smart Cities Programme

The People-Centred Smart Cities Programme promotes the deployment of technological innovations to realize sustainability, inclusivity, prosperity and human rights. This will make the urban digital transformation work for the benefit of all.

This is an approach to smart cities where human rights and inclusion are placed at the centre and innovative and technological solutions are developed based on people's needs as well as implemented carefully with a clear vision to enhance cities and citizens' quality of life. This means harmonizing digitalization and innovation efforts with key urban objectives such as ensuring access to affordable housing, improving basic urban services and land management, as well as, reducing the environmental impact and use innovation to increase resilience and sustainability in crisis response and reconstruction efforts. It also means overcoming the digital divide and ensuring that smart city initiatives are implemented in collaboration with residents and key stakeholders.

4 UN-Habitat, international guidelines on people-centred smart cities

UN-Habitat works with and empowers partners providing capacity building, policy advisory and technical and financial assistance. Through UNITAC, it has implemented projects to advance the people-centred approach including the deployment of innovative approaches and digital tools for public participation, spatial analysis, mapping and data visualization, as well as the delivery of digital transformation training programmes for city leaders. Over the upcoming years, our focus will be to support our partners to implement the international guidelines using an approach tailored to their needs, through:

# Our value proposition



## 1. Capacity building

Training and peer-to-peer learning opportunities for governments and stakeholders on smart cities and digitalization.



## 2. Policy advisory support

Guidance on regulatory frameworks and governance structures for digital urban transformation.



## 3. Technical and financial assistance

Increased investments and financing in key urban sectors, including housing, basic urban services, transport, land.



## 4. Smart Cities Hubs

Acceleration centers with global and regional scope serving as knowledge sharing. data collection and aggregation points, delivery centers for training, technical support and matchmaking to scout partnerships and funding opportunities.



## 5. Global networks and advocacy

Leveraging a large network of state and non-state actors to advocate for the guidelines and the principles of a people centred smart cities, share good practices and serve as a common repository of digital public goods developed.