People-centred smart cities
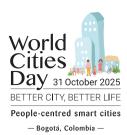
KEY MESSAGES

"There is nothing smart about a city that leaves people behind."

- Smart cities can't be smart without people. Technology should serve citizens, not the other way around.

- Digital innovation must close gaps, not widen them — especially for the 1.1 billion people in informal settlements.

- Digital tools can help tackle the global housing crisis, including upgrading informal settlements and slums, by strengthening data and improving service delivery.

- Smart cities must be rights-based — with housing, water, and sanitation as rights, and land, services, and digital access as essentials to realize them.

- Smart city tools – like early warning systems, geospatial mapping, and predictive data – can save lives by strengthening preparedness, supporting rapid recovery, and building resilience against crises.

- Affordable and reliable internet is as vital as roads and water in today's cities.

- The role of local and regional governments is essential in ensuring an inclusive, open, sustainable, and fair digital future for all globally as per the Global Digital Compact from the Summit of the Future in 2024.

- Technology works best when communities are co-creators, not just users.

- These priorities will drive discussions at the World Urban Forum in Baku (WUF13), under the theme "Housing the world: Safe and resilient cities and communities." We will explore how to tackle the global housing crisis through smart digital solutions.

THE CHALLENGE

- 1.1 billion people in informal settlements and slums are left out of smart city plans and development because of poor data, high costs, and weak connectivity.

- Cities and local governments face barriers in adopting digital solutions, due to limited budgets, low technical capacity, and outdated systems for managing land, infrastructure, and services.

- Without inclusive planning and community participation, digital transformation can deepen inequality, creating a new "digital urban divide" where millions in cities – especially in informal settlements – miss out on decisions and opportunities.

World
Cities
Day 31 October 2025
BETTER CITY, BETTER LIFE
People-centred smart cities
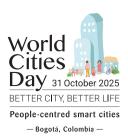— Bogotá, Colombia —

KEY FACTS

- In low-income countries, just over 1 in 4 people use the internet – with access lowest in informal settlements and slums.

- Globally, 2.7 billion people remain offline, while over one-third of urban households lack a computer, limiting access to education, jobs, and essential services.

- More than 1.1 billion people in informal settlements are left out of smart city initiatives, with little access to digital infrastructure.

- Less than 10 per cent of cities have comprehensive digital governance that connects innovation with inclusive service delivery and long-term development.

- Just over one-third of cities have guidelines or ethical frameworks for AI and facial recognition – but most lack the capacity to implement them in practice.

- Nearly 9 and 10 cities include sustainability, energy efficiency, or e-waste management in their digital strategies – yet few track or measure the actual environmental impacts.

HOUSING AND DIGITAL INNOVATION

- Smart city technology can make housing more affordable and accessible – but only if people come first. Without connectivity, strong digital rights, and community involvement, technology risks deepening inequality instead or reducing it.

- Geospatial mapping, AI, and open data can help cities plan better, secure land rights, track housing needs, and improve services in informal settlements.

- Strong public policies, local skills and cross-sector partnerships are essential to ensure innovation delivers better, more resilient housing for all.

- World Urban Forum in Baku (WUF13) in May 2026 will highlight practical approaches and success stories demonstrating how innovation strengthens housing systems, secure land and access to basic services and improves delivery in informal settlements and slums.

SUCCESSFUL SMART CITIES PRACTICES

- In Brazil, UN-Habitat and the State Government of Alagoas turned digital transformation into a driver of inclusion. A people-centred smart cities strategy is now guiding municipalities of all sizes, improving access to housing, services, and connectivity. The approach has made Alagoas a regional leader – recognized with the 2025 LATAM Smart City Award – for showing how innovation can deliver tangible progress on the SDGs and the New Urban Agenda.

- In 2016, UN-Habitat and the Government of Rwanda developed the Smart City Masterplan to harness digital innovation for better services, housing, and urban mobility. Ten years on, it remains the country's reference for smart city initiatives, shaping policies and guiding the Rwanda Smart Cities Hub launched in 2023.

- In 2022, UN-Habitat piloted BEAM (Building & Establishment Automated Mapper) with the city of eThekwini, South Africa. Using machine learning, the tool automates building mapping from aerial images, helping local authorities track urban growth, plan services, and assess vulnerabilities. Today, BEAM is deployed in more than 10 cities worldwide to support faster, evidence-based decision-making for more inclusive and resilient urban development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Plan cities for people first – by ensuring that smart investment in housing, transport, and services are safe, affordable and accessible.

- Create strong digital governance frameworks that link innovation to housing, land, and basic services.

- Build climate resilience into digital planning by using data and predictive tools to protect high-risk communities.

- Strengthen local government capacity through training, peer learning, and support on procurement and data governance.

- Establish clear digital rights protections – safeguarding data, ensuring transparency in algorithms, and enforcing ethical use of emerging technologies.

- Adopt a "digital urban contract" to ensure technology serves people and the planet.

- Embed community participation at every stage so residents are co-creators of digital solutions, not passive recipients.

- Use digital innovation as a tool for reducing urban poverty and inequality – expanding access to affordable housing, decent jobs, and essential services for those most often excluded.

- Leverage data and technology to cut emissions, manage resources, and protect people from the impacts of climate change – ensuring smart cities are also resilient cities.

- World Urban Forum (WUF) is our global platform and coalition to advance these recommendations and convene stakeholders to co-create strategies for digital transformation.

BOGOTÁ AND WORLD CITIES DAY

- Bogotá is positioning itself as a compact, inclusive city that drives economic recovery while protecting the environment. As Colombia's main hub of opportunity, it leads with strong growth, lower unemployment, and the country's lowest levels of multidimensional poverty.

- By using AI, geospatial tools, and participatory digital platforms, Bogotá is strengthening disaster preparedness, addressing housing shortages, expanding essential services, and creating greener, safer urban spaces — all with citizens at the heart of planning.

- The city's investments in sustainable infrastructure, integrated habitat, and inclusive governance show how digitalization can drive climate action, equity, and better quality of life.

- Bogotá generates 31 per cent of Colombia's GDP and houses almost a quarter of its population, making it key to the country's urban transformation.

- With continued investment in habitat, risk management, and data-driven governance, Bogotá demonstrates how cities can combine prosperity with reduced inequalities — offering a blueprint for sustainable urban development in Latin America and globally.