New UN guide keeps people in charge of AI in smart cities

United for Smart Sustainable Cities marks 10 years with guidance for using artificial intelligence in city services

Barcelona, 4 November 2026 – The United Nations today launched its first system-wide toolbox designed to ensure that people, rather than machines, remain accountable for public decisions in smart cities in the era of artificial intelligence (AI).

AI is already at work in city halls around the world: chatbots answer residents, algorithms select roads to repair, software drives administrative decisions. While such applications can make city services more responsive, they can also introduce risks related to bias, privacy, human rights and accountability.

The new United for Smart Sustainable Cities (U4SSC) *Toolbox for People-Centred Smart Cities in the AI Era*, issued by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and UN Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), gives mayors, city managers and policymakers real-world guidance for deciding how AI can improve public services, what safeguards are needed, and when the technology should not be used.

“Smart, sustainable cities are defined by how well people benefit from technology designed to improve everyday living,” said Doreen Bogdan-Martin, ITU Secretary-General. “The U4SSC toolbox helps city officials turn international standards and responsible AI principles into guidance for better public services and lasting trust.”

The U4SSC resource provides the tools to support mayors, city managers and urban practitioners to advance from fragmented digital projects to sustainable urban transformation by harnessing digital technologies and encouraging global collaboration for smarter cities.

“Artificial intelligence and digital innovation must help cities better respond to the needs of communities, especially those living in informal settlements and other underserved areas,” said UN-Habitat’s Executive Director Anacláudia Rossbach. “This means addressing gaps in data, protecting human rights and ensuring that residents and civil society meaningfully participate in shaping urban decisions.”

From principles to practical decisions

Built around real-world smart-city solutions from Helsinki, Finland to eThekwini, South Africa, the U4SSC Toolbox helps cities address practical questions throughout the life cycle of an AI project: What problem is the city trying to solve? Who could benefit or be harmed? How should an application be monitored? Who is accountable for its decisions? And when should the city change course or stop using it?

To answer these questions, the resource sets out four core rules: begin with the urban problem rather than the technology; keep public decisions under meaningful human control; apply stronger safeguards as potential impacts increase; and recognize that deciding not to use an AI system can be a responsible outcome.

A decade of supporting smart cities

The launch of the new toolbox comes on the 10th anniversary of United for Smart Sustainable Cities, a global UN initiative coordinated by the ITU, UN-Habitat and the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), with support from 19 other UN agencies and programmes.

U4SSC provides an international platform for collaboration and develops practical resources to help cities advance sustainable digital transformation and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Alongside the toolbox, U4SSC is releasing a series of publications covering urban AI governance, measurement of people-centred digital transformation, security for digital public infrastructure, city data platforms, anticipatory governance and data-enabled destination management.

The publications provide city and national authorities with a common UN-backed reference for using AI and data to build fairer, more resilient and more responsive cities.

Together with the toolbox, the resources give city leaders, ministers and city teams shared guidance for a growing challenge: how to use AI and data so that cities become more fair, more resilient and more responsive to the people who live in them.

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Notes to editors

Download the toolbox and other new U4SSC publications: https://u4ssc.itu.int/publications/

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About U4SSC: United for Smart Sustainable Cities (U4SSC) is a UN initiative launched in 2016 and supported by 22 UN agencies and programmes. It develops practical tools, methodologies and Key Performance Indicators that help cities accelerate their sustainable digital transformation.

About ITU:
The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) is the United Nations agency for digital technologies, driving innovation for people and the planet with 194 Member States and a membership of over 1,000 companies, universities, civil society, and international and regional organizations. Established in 1865, ITU coordinates the global use of the radio spectrum and satellite orbits, establishes international technology standards, drives universal connectivity and digital services, and is helping to make sure everyone benefits from sustainable digital transformation, including the most remote communities. From artificial intelligence (AI) to quantum, from satellites and submarine cables to advanced mobile and wireless broadband networks, ITU is committed to connecting the world and beyond. Learn more: www.itu.int

About UN-Habitat: UN-Habitat is the United Nations entity responsible for sustainable urbanization. It has programmes in over 90 countries supporting policymakers and communities to create socially and environmentally sustainable cities and towns. UN-Habitat promotes transformative change in cities through knowledge, policy advice, technical assistance, and collaborative action. To know more, visit unhabitat.org or follow us on social media @UNHABITAT.