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Live Learning Experience: *Beyond the immediate response to the outbreak of COVID-19*

Digital Technologies and the COVID-19 pandemic

Briefing & Learning Note
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*Launched jointly by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Metropolis, and UN-Habitat on March 25th, 2020, the **#BeyondTheOutbreak** Live Learning Experience (LLE) virtual sessions aim to bring together Local and Regional Governments (LRGs), their associations, and partner organizations to allow and promote meaningful exchange as they find themselves confronting the COVID-19 crisis while maintaining an orderly functioning of public services. Following an initial consultation held during the launching session, the **fourth thematic LLE**, held on Wednesday, April 15th, **was devoted to promoting a collective reflection on the relationship between digital technologies and the COVID-19 crisis.***

Local and Regional Governments at the forefront of the COVID-19 crisis

Local and regional governments are the first responders to the COVID-19 crisis and play an essential role in guaranteeing rights protection via local public service provision, including to the most vulnerable populations living in informal settlements or slums within and around cities as well as older persons, women, children, persons with disabilities, migrants and refugees.

Technology has proved a useful and necessary tool to help ensure that local and regional governments on the frontline of the emergency continue to provide essential public services during the COVID-19 crisis. As the coronavirus continues to spread around the world, governments have put in place important restrictions on the movement of people, the functioning of services, and rules on physical distancing. Within this context, technology can have a profound effect on citizen's daily lives and ensure them access to health services, access to information, and communication with competent authorities, among other things.

Local and regional governments on the frontline of the COVID-19 crisis have resorted to digital technologies to monitor, anticipate and influence the spread of the disease, as well as to provide education for students who cannot access school as well as foster social cohesion while we respect physical distancing. At the same time, local and regional governments need to ensure that, when using digital technologies, human rights are protected.

Overall, technology will be vital in protecting communities in the aftermath of the crisis and digital tools must ensure that citizen's rights are being protected as well as serve to bridge the socioeconomic divide and promote the transformation needed to achieve the global agendas. Moreover, local and regional governments have to ensure that the digital revolution does not leave anyone or any place behind in a context where existing inequalities, in developed and developing countries, risk being widened further.

Indeed, as the demand for digital technologies grows, local and regional governments are increasingly **committed to improving the lives of all populations under the principles of privacy, freedom of expression and democracy**. In this sense, the Coalition of Cities for Digital Rights was launched in November 2018 to lead the way in securing a people-centred digital future where local and regional governments make use of digital data and technologies as a tool to improve their public policies. Along with Eurocities, UN-Habitat and over 40 cities from around the world, UCLG participates in this coalition aiming to bridge the gap between the work of the group and the positions of local and regional governments as a whole, as well as to support the inclusion of the Coalition's positions into international political processes.

Nevertheless, the rapid expansion of COVID-19 can force competent authorities to take rushed and complex decisions involving digital technologies that, while effective in the short term, may entail negative long-term impacts on digital rights and other spheres of local governance. Moreover, during the post-COVID-19 recovery phase, digital technologies will undoubtedly be at the core of ensuring that citizens and communities return to their daily lives in a safe and orderly manner and that the provision of services runs smoothly once again. For this reason, **local and regional governments will play a crucial role in shaping digital technologies in a way that ensures transparent, open and inclusive decision-making processes.**
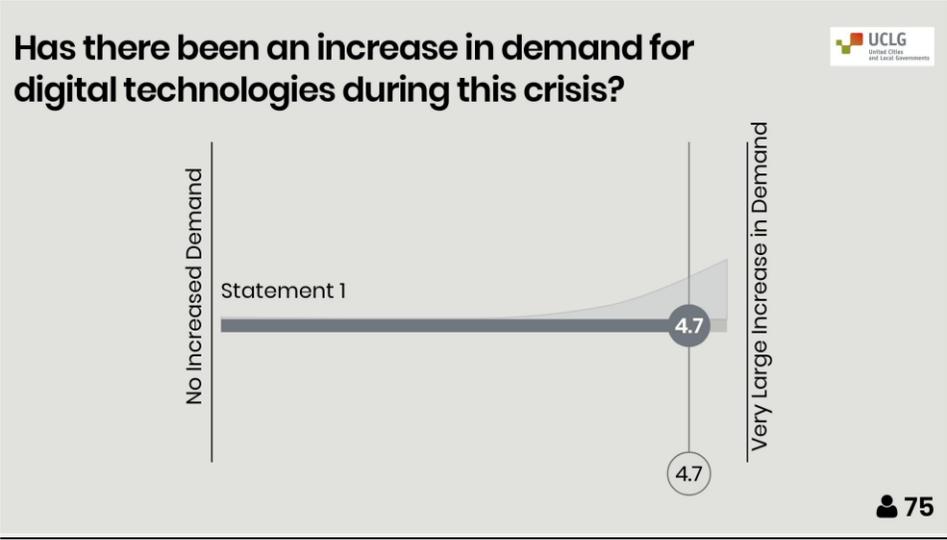
COVID-19: How are digital technologies being used to face the pandemic?

Several questions may arise when mobilizing digital technologies in order to respond to the current crisis. Digital technologies may be seen as a gateway to solve many of the problems arising from the crisis: How can we control the spread of COVID-19? How do we continue to provide education to the many people who have to stay at home? At the same time, digital technologies may pose challenges related to several

human rights: Are my digital rights protected? Are local and regional governments acting in a transparent manner when resorting to digital technologies to face the crisis?

To harness the potential for technology to effectively respond to the crisis, it is essential to prioritize the use of technology through a human rights lens aimed at protecting citizens, maintaining essential services, communicating life-saving information, and fostering socioeconomic interactions for the benefit of all.

An interactive consultation conducted during the session was separated into four topics to identify the main challenges, opportunities, concerns about digital rights, and demand for digital technology during the pandemic. The consultation underlined the key challenges and opportunities, which were identified as priority areas by the 180+ participants.

As noted above, local and regional governments are the first responders to this crisis and they play an essential role in guaranteeing rights protection of and safeguarding the health of communities via local public service provision, including to the most vulnerable populations living in informal settlements or slums within and around cities as well as older persons, women, children, persons with disabilities, migrants and refugees.

The main challenges for local and regional governments concerning digital technologies during this crisis, highlighted by the majority of the participants from this live consultation, included the relationship between privacy and security, the digital divide, and accessibility. **Privacy** is a challenge in the mitigation of COVID-19, as governments look towards technology to help trace patterns and movements

of people through contact tracing apps and big data. While these methods are controversial and may infringe on rights to privacy, they appear at first to be effective measures to rapidly control and limit the spread of the virus. Beyond the lens of privacy, the responses to COVID-19 have further brought to light that the digital divide is ever present and barriers to accessibility of technology continue to exacerbate inequalities. Participants also identified key opportunities stemming from the use of digital technologies in response to COVID-19, including tele-working, reducing the digital divide, ensuring education and learning, and promoting the ecological transition. The opportunities identified highlight a few key areas that local and regional governments could prioritize in response to the aforementioned challenges.

To address the challenges and harness the opportunities offered by digital technologies during this crisis, participants shared a concern to recognize and protect digital rights in particular around the areas of privacy and inclusion. Application of digital technologies must be responsive to and inclusive of all members of population and close the digital divide. The last question reaffirmed the increased demand for digital technologies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and stressed how it is imperative for local and regional governments to prioritize digitalization.

COVID-19 and Digital Technologies: Harnessing digital technologies during and beyond the outbreak

Technology's enabling power during and beyond the crisis

As local and regional governments around the world work tirelessly to effectively address the COVID-19 crisis, it is extremely important to acknowledge that, whether in or beyond times of crisis, digital tools must act as an enabler to reach the goal of the competent authorities: i.e., safeguarding citizens' health, promoting social cohesion, and the protection of human rights, including at the digital level.

One of the core ideas underlying the approach to digital technologies mentioned during the session was related to the vision of technology as an enabler that permits the support of a broader strategy to combat COVID-19, as was stressed for instance by the city of Milan and the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR). A concrete example brought up was on how digital technologies allow for physical distancing which is crucial to curb the virus' spread while permitting for social proximity and serving as a tool to enhance social cohesion.

Another example brought up during the session was related to the relationship between privacy and security and how technology can act as an enabler for public health measures safeguarding citizens, but that this does not necessarily have to entail the violation of people's right to privacy. Within this context, the President of the Italian Innovation Fund referred to the fact that a false dichotomy should not exist between the protection of health of citizens and their digital rights. Competent authorities must work towards ensuring that an either/or situation does not exist between the use of applications meant to track the spreading of the virus and the full protection of the communities' privacy.

"From the very beginning of the crisis we used technology as an enabler, considering citizens at the center. Technology and digital tools have been part of every single task-force we have built." **Roberta Cocco**, *Deputy Mayor of Milan for Digital Transformation*

COVID-19: an opportunity to propel efforts towards bridging the digital divide?

Equitable access to digital infrastructure has never been more important than now. Despite the increased demand for digital technologies in response to the COVID-19 crisis, there is the risk that the rapid application of these technologies during the current emergency will broaden the **digital divide**. Although the existence of a digital divide is not new, the current crisis adds a new dimension of urgency to address its bridging. Communities and households with limited access to the internet will consequently have little access to vital health-related information and to the socioeconomic opportunities that digitalization brings about. As was put by Barcelona, the pattern followed by digitalization is radically transforming the distribution of power and will continue to do so, either mitigating or reinforcing existing inequalities.

Consequently, LRGs are taking bold steps forward and working to ensure that the digital technologies measures taken to combat COVID-19, contribute to closing the digital divide. Initiatives range from increasing connectivity by ensuring populations' access to technological devices, particularly for the most vulnerable such as children and older persons, as well as by data collection and **partnerships** with the private sector to expand access to digital infrastructure.

To better understand the needs of the communities, LRGs are making important efforts to **generate and collect data** that reflects the situation of all members of the community. In Bogotá, the city developed and deployed surveys to identify citizens who urgently needed assistance and who fall outside of the official census, stressing the idea that comprehensive data that reflects the entirety of the population is needed for evidence-based policymaking. In Milan, dashboards were utilized to understand where citizens were located on the city map and how they could connect them to private sector offering services. Within this context, partnerships were identified as a key component to ensuring that digital responses to the pandemic leave no one behind and addresses needs. Stemming from the data dashboards and in partnership with a telecommunications company, the city of Milan was able to provide free internet access to vulnerable families connected to the internet. LRGs raise the crucial point that maintaining such partnerships beyond the outbreak is key in order to overcome the digital divide for good and trigger structural change towards equality.

All the previous practices underpin the idea highlighted by the Open Government Partnership that the development and implementation of digital agendas requires an open, holistic and multi-stakeholder approach. LRGs further highlighted the need to address the digital divide by ensuring the application and availability of technology as a way to foster social inclusion. Stay at home policies have not effectively considered the use of digital technologies that guarantee social inclusion and currently risks furthering inequalities for vulnerable groups of the population because of the lack of equity and access to the digital infrastructure. Digital technologies and mediums have been essential for local and regional governments in communicating lifesaving information and assessing the needs of our diverse population during the pandemic. In Barcelona the program Vincles is aimed at ensuring **social inclusion** by providing digital literacy training to senior citizens, to keep them connected to their families. In Bogota, the city is promoting community engagement and social solidarity by creating a digital platform using social networks offering exchanges through networks such as assisting neighbours with shopping and offering rides to medical facilities.

The ability to connect with our communities and services during this time is essential to the well-being of all people and continued functioning of economies around the world. In response to interventions, G3ict echoed a message from the city of Chicago around the idea that emergencies often bring topics to the forefront that should have been addressed before. One reality is that our digital infrastructure is not **accessible**, particularly to the most vulnerable. This lack of digital accessibility has an enormous impact to the current response, for example in providing access to life-saving information for people with disabilities and those with limited literacy.

"The digital divide is the greatest challenge and the Lockdown exposes its worst consequences. We must prevent physical distancing from turning into social distancing, and it is our duty as public administration to ensure public services are universal." ***Laia Bonet***, *Deputy Mayor, Barcelona*

"In Bogotá we started to work on the topic of digitalization from a standpoint of social solidarity, online education, and open data and transparency." *Felipe Guzmán Ramírez*, *High District Councilor for Technology and Innovation, Bogotá*

"Folks talk about digital divide as rural v. urban, but also affects urban dwellers, this work needs to get done. Far too many don't have internet connection." *John Farmer, Chief Technology Officer, New York City*

Digital technologies as a means to ensure the provision of basic services and livelihood opportunities

The provision of many services falling within the competence of LRGs is often hindered by the lack of resources and capacities that directly infringes upon citizens' wellbeing. This pandemic has increased the urgency with which LRGs need to act upon in order to offer solutions to the population with the same limited means and in the framework of the restrictions imposed. In most cases, digital technology has become an essential tool. However, it is important to bear in mind that a very large portion of the world's population is not connected to the internet and LRGs have a prominent role in ensuring that, by applying these technologies, they do not contribute to further widen existing inequalities in both developed and in developing countries.

Health is without a doubt the LRG competence that has been most affected by the pandemic. LRGs have reacted promptly, sometimes even faster than their national governments, to order lockdowns, prepare hospitals and other facilities, involve health workers and ensure the provision of medical equipment and supplies. For many of them, digital technology has been key to coordinate these decisions. For example, in order to avoid high-risk cases to spread COVID in communities, Xi'an created a QR code to trace confirmed symptomatic cases and locate them for their close contacts. In New York, the city government coordinated a joint response with the Brooklyn Navy Yard, an important local technology hub, to provide additional personal protective equipment for doctors, again reinforcing the idea mentioned above that partnerships with private stakeholders are highly necessary to deal with the pandemic. In the same vein, Barcelona worked with private suppliers to provide access to internet in hospital wards.

Many cities and regions are putting many efforts into ensuring that this academic season and **education** can continue as smoothly as possible, and technological solutions have emerged to make it happen. Bogotá has put in place a multi-channel strategy that involves the public TV and radio broadcasters and which aims to offer virtual contents for children so that they can continue their education. The engagement of teachers is also worth underlining, who are relying on the technological tools available (phone, email, WhatsApp) to maintain communication with children, keep the exercises and exams going and check on their wellbeing. Xi'an made online education available in all schools as of February 10th, and has ensured that even kindergarten students are able to continue learning from home.

Also without losing sight of the people most in need, Amsterdam distributed around 5,000 laptops to the members of the community who were most in need. Amongst others, these devices have allowed these groups, along with the whole community, to have access to theatre and operas online as the local government is making an effort to keep **culture** alive while supporting social interaction and community engagement, albeit remotely.

In their effort to avoid discontinuing the provision of basic services to the citizens, LRGs have also strived to **bring the government closer** to them, also underpinning the idea that smart cities are about smart citizens. Related to the promotion of social media tools to maintain everyone informed and communicated, New York is using text alerts, has created a specific website on COVID-19 offering updated information on the state of the spread of the pandemic and with toolkits for social engagement, and has disseminated an orientation toolkit for citizens newly arrived to the city.

Dubai aimed to maintain services functioning and communication with the population through the Dubai Mobile app, which allows visitors and residents to use 160 services that facilitate access to health and utilities. Additionally, a nationwide digital signature has created a secure mechanism that allows people to digitally sign their documents and companies can participate in public tenders through online applications. Digital technologies have likewise been essential to ensure continuity of local services inasmuch as they have made it possible for thousands of public employees and officials to telework. To this aim, in Barcelona, the number of laptops for municipal employees has increased in 30% and a number of online systems have been habilitated. Ramallah has worked towards ensuring that virtual meetings involving public staff and officials contribute to guaranteeing the provision of services to the citizens.

Participants also highlighted that, the provision of basic services being strongly linked to LRGs' proper **financial schemes**, LRGs need to ensure that those digital services benefiting from local infrastructures and services, and which have proved essential partners in times of COVID-19, also contribute to the revenues of the territories they are established in.

"Regarding remote education, we let schools choose based on guidance of government, we started on-line education and we haven't stopped studying on-line to satisfy the need for students to learn." *Zhang Weiming, Deputy Director of Xi'an Big Data Bureau*

"We need holistic approaches, involving all stakeholders. Digitalization is needed to co-create. Governments that have these forums in place will have a swifter response, in order to keep societies informed." *Rudi Bormann, Deputy Director of Open Government Partnership*

A human-rights based approach to digitalization as a pillar for increased preparedness to disasters

As first responders to this crisis, local and regional governments are playing an essential role in ensuring local public service provision on the frontline to all facets of society. Furthermore, they can play a pivotal role in guaranteeing that the **human rights** of citizens are protected, including at the digital level. To this end, UN Habitat stressed that human rights are as important as ever during this crisis, both online and offline.

At a time when local and regional governments around the world are working tirelessly to effectively address the COVID-19 crisis, it is clear that what is at stake are the human rights of citizens. Not only are access to basic vital services compromised, especially for the most vulnerable parts of the population, but what is also at stake are each and everyone's **digital rights**. As iterated during the session by OHCHR, human rights must be an integral part of public health responses. Within this context, local and regional governments must be at the forefront of recovery and guarantee that digital technologies are used in a manner that is transparent, open, and that works towards leaving no one and no place behind.

Digital technology has the transformative potential to maintain a functioning economy and allow people to access the basic services needed for everyday life, such

as education, health, work, and culture during this time of pandemic. It, however, must be applied in a manner that respects the digital rights of all. Various cities, many of which members of the **Coalition of Cities for Digital Rights**, including Amsterdam, Barcelona, Bogotá, Dubai, Milan, New York City, and Ramallah, have expressed the importance of open and transparent governance, access to information, and strong ethical digital standards related to privacy and data during and in the post-COVID-19 recovery phase. Participants also highlighted the importance of **gender mainstreaming** when applying digital technologies so as to ensure that all citizens' human rights are being protected and that they are working as enablers for **gender equality and women's empowerment**.

New York City, Dubai and Ramallah both stressed the importance of **access to information** for citizens to be able to stay up to date and safe during the pandemic. Information as a digital right can ensure that the communities are informed and aware of the current situation and can take health and safety measures accordingly. Moreover, all citizens should have access to information on the digital systems that will be impacting their lives during and beyond the crisis and have the ability to put into question **discriminatory or unfair practices**. When using digital technologies during the crisis, these cities stressed the importance of **transparency and accountability** towards citizens.

Barcelona and Milan highlighted the importance of **inequality** to be addressed at all levels, including at the digital one, during the crisis. Barcelona and Milan both highlighted that addressing digital inequalities would ensure citizens have equal access to vital public services, keeping them functioning at sustainable levels during the crisis. These efforts include increasing the digital and technological infrastructure to allow municipal employees to continue efficiently with their work. **Universal and equal access to the internet** is a key principle of the Coalition of Cities for Digital Rights and an integral digital right that influences other human rights principles as well as helps bridge the digital divide.

Finally, Amsterdam and Bogotá, stressed the importance of digital rights as cities around the world work to effectively address the COVID-19 crisis and a wide variety of digital technology responses are being used ranging from mobile phones and social media to artificial intelligence. Many of these kinds of solutions can be positive and help policy makers respond quickly and appropriately and, anticipate and influence the spreading of the disease but they must be applied in a manner that is **safe and transparent**. Amsterdam to this end stressed that **data** is key in fighting the virus

and it can be used as a public good for all. Bogotá stressed that we cannot lose the trust of citizens in applying digital technologies when they are key in mitigating the disastrous effects of the crisis.

In a time in which restrictions in personal mobility risk creating **inequalities**, local and regional governments must work to ensure that the digital technologies being utilized to keep students in school, offer ways for people to communicate with medical professionals, and ways for communities to engage in cultural activities reduce the spread of COVID-19 while protecting citizens' human rights at all levels.

"Human rights are part of a public health response. We are trying to switch the framework of privacy vs health. Rights and effective public health responses go hand in hand". *Scott Campbell, Senior Human Rights Officer, OHCHR*

"Technology that we have is a net positive, we have to think about how to make this technology available in a good way, for people to share their experiences. We have a responsibility with our communities". *Mousa Hadid, Mayor of Ramallah*

Lessons Learned: key messages and identified ways forward

1. Digital Technologies are not the end but the means

Local and regional governments must keep in mind that digital technologies are only a means to an end, and not an end in themselves. The objective in using technology is that it can be used to help reduce inequalities, lower the risk of spreading the virus, and ease the access to public services during the crisis. In this regard, the participants of the Live Learning Experience stressed that technology should be seen as an enabler that permits all stakeholders to collaborate in combating inequality and COVID-19 and should not have to infringe on citizens' digital rights in doing so.

2. COVID-19: an opportunity to propel efforts towards bridging the digital divide

Digitalization is a growing and lasting trend, with a transformative agenda that will either bring us closer and further separate us. The responses to COVID-19

highlights the importance that digital technology plays in fostering inclusive, just and fair societies. It has also brought to light that the digital divide is no longer a topic, but something affecting people's access to opportunities and inclusion in their communities.

In order to bridge the digital divide, local and regional governments need to adequately understand the gaps and needs of their communities through data. In addition to addressing the community's needs, closing the digital divide also means ensuring technology is non-discriminatory and accessible to all people in the community; including internet access, devices, and information. The imperative for digital inclusion is here and will dictate the future of equity in cities. Digital technologies shall not leave anyone or any territory behind or widen existing inequalities, particularly in the global South.

3. **Digital technologies make it possible for LRGs to maintain the provision of basic services and livelihood opportunities**

LRGs need to keep providing services to the population, particularly those which have been most shaken by COVID-19 (such as health, education, social cohesion, and culture). Within this context, LRGs must utilize technology in several dimensions including offering digital infrastructure (internet services, wi-fi), providing virtual platforms/services and physical devices. It is clear that LRGs need to think broadly about technologies, ranging from high-tech to simpler, low-tech solutions.

In order to bring local public administration and public services closer to citizens, as well as to facilitate communication in all directions, LRGs must boost digitalization in an open, holistic manner throughout their internal and external structures and processes.

4. **Human rights are part and parcel of the public health response to the crisis and to digitalization**

Human rights must be integral to any digital response within or beyond the COVID-19 crisis. They must be protected online and offline and citizens must feel safe in the both the real and virtual worlds. Digital rights including access to affordable and accessible internet, data privacy, accessible and accurate information, and open, transparent and ethical digital standards should be the

norm, even in times of crisis. Participants of the session stressed that human rights have to be integrated into any social or public health response to the crisis and that when using technology, authorities must strive to be as open and as transparent as possible. Within this context, it was stressed that data should be considered a public good and that access to information is key to keeping the virus from spreading.

5. **Partnerships to overcome the digital divide must be maintained beyond the outbreak to push for and consolidate structural change**

All sectors of society have a role in ensuring that we leave no one and no place behind. In the current and post response to COVID-19, it will be essential for LRGs to foster innovative partnerships with civil society and the private sector, to address and progressively close the digital divide. Through these partnerships we can build from this crisis, making access to technology the new normal.

Resources

Resources developed within UCLG and partner organizations

- [UCLG's Manifesto "The Future of Transparency and Open Government"](), 2019;

- [Cities for Digital Rights' Declaration;]()

- OHCHR's website on [COVID-19;]()

- Amsterdam's [Action plan Digital Rights x Corona Surveillance]() (draft version);

- Smart Cities for All [website.]()

Resources shared by LRGs and participants:

- EUROCITIES' [platform]()to collect examples from cities responding to the crisis;

- Mexico City's and Buenos Aires' digital platforms for art and culture during the pandemic;

- The Governance Lab's Living Repository on COVID-19 responses;

- User friendly infographic explaining how human rights and the use of technology in public health responses go hand in hand.