



Digital rights in the COVID-19 era

Around the world, cities have stepped up in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, forcing changes to our daily lives. Developing better resilience against future threats, including pandemics, has become a core concern for many city administrations.

Digital technologies have proven to be a key part of solutions during this crisis, allowing local and regional governments to continue to offer essential public services, ensuring an avenue for many businesses to continue operations and keeping people in touch while following COVID-19 related public health measures. Digital technologies will also be pivotal to the future sustainability of towns and cities everywhere, particularly as we enter the Decade of Action to address the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

The potential of digital technology to be a transformative power for cities is clear and so should the commitment to bridge the digital divide. ***Local and regional governments will and must play a crucial role in shaping this transformation and they will need support to ensure equitable transparent access that will strengthen governance processes.***

Local and regional governments are proving their commitment to addressing and reducing the barriers to technology and the digital divide through participatory policies and programs that include groups and areas which remain marginalized and excluded from the benefits of digitalization.

However, the rapid adoption of digital technologies in response to crises such as COVID-19, can compel authorities to take decisions involving digital technologies without giving due consideration to the complex and long-term impacts on human rights and their adherence to the principles of transparency and accountability.

To address these challenges and to harness the opportunities offered by digital technologies to leave no one and no place behind, city leaders, administrations and key stakeholders, will need support to develop actionable frameworks that allow them to lead discussions in their cities around digital technologies for access to and the delivery of key services.

The Coalition of Cities for Digital Rights, an initiative launched initially by the cities of Amsterdam, Barcelona and New York City with a membership of over 50 cities worldwide, recently published a [set of recommendations](#) to guide city leaders, urban managers and other stakeholders as they use technology in response to crises such as COVID 19. These recommendations provide a framework that places human rights at the centre, providing guidance on how to involve the beneficiaries of technology and how digitalization can be managed and monitored to promote inclusive access and positive impacts for all in urban communities.

These recommendations focus on areas such as consent and trust, openness and transparency, fairness and inclusion and social innovation; and are particularly valuable at this time given the impact of COVID-19 on diverse populations within cities. We also see growing social and racial inequalities, partly based on unequal access to technology. Within this context, enhancing the capacity and role of local and regional governments to make the most of digital technologies, through knowledge and financing mechanisms that support inclusive and non-discriminatory digital



development and public procurement processes, will ensure that communities are at the forefront of digital innovation and that their rights are protected.

That's why we encourage city leaders and managers to use the recommendations as a starting point for conversations within their organizations and amongst their constituents to promote the understanding of and improve access to technology. We also encourage cities to join the [Coalition](#) and be part of the ongoing momentum to strengthen digital rights.

The Coalition will put these recommendations into practice and document activities and good practices so that cities and organizations can learn how to apply them and understand their impact on urban communities. Furthermore, the Coalition will seek to partner with academia and other key stakeholders on these recommendations. Case studies will be presented at the Coalition's annual convening conference/session in September.

It is time to take action and build inclusive digital systems and provide opportunities in our cities that reduce the digital divide and promote cities for all.

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Cities who would like to learn more about the Coalition, please review the [checklist](#) of digital rights actions and fill out [this form](#) to formally indicate your interest in joining.