

## U20 2025 Webinar Concept Note:

### "Digital Transformation and Innovation: Driving Inclusive Urban Innovation"

**26 February 2025, 11:00am – 12:30pm SAST, MS Teams Platform**

Digital technologies have advanced at an unprecedented pace, surpassing any other innovation in human history. This rapid progress presents remarkable opportunities to enhance the quality of life for individuals and the development of urban areas. For example, smart city initiatives can optimise traffic flow, reduce energy consumption, improve real-time monitoring of health and public safety, and better connect citizens and government, making cities even more liveable and efficient.

However, we must also acknowledge that the swift evolution and widespread influence of these emerging technologies bring about new challenges and risks. Some of these risks are already evident, such as data privacy, data governance and sovereignty concerns, cybersecurity threats, labour market transformation and disruptions, and the potential for digital divides. Others are still emerging and not yet fully understood, necessitating a cautious and proactive approach to technology adoption and regulation.

In our current context, it is worth reflecting on how digital transformations and Artificial Intelligence (AI) are rapidly changing the future of metropolitan areas – reshaping governance, environmental management, and economic development – and how cities are now leading a shift away from purely tech-focused approaches towards people-centered ones.

Our goal is to foster a digital ecosystem that is not only innovative but also sustainable, equitable, safe, and secure. This involves creating policies and frameworks that protect human rights, ensuring that digital tools and platforms are accessible to everyone, and provide oversight, promoting improved integration, coordination, transparency and accountability in digital governance. By supporting efficient and responsive e-governance, we can enhance accessibility to public services, increase citizen engagement, capacitation, and inclusion in governance processes, promote partnerships and build trust via digital

systems. Ultimately, we strive to make the benefits of the digital age available to all, ensuring that no one is left behind in this rapidly evolving technological landscape.

Sustainable growth and development of AI technologies require improved economies and a robust regulatory framework to address financing gaps. Key areas for investment include infrastructure, AI education, workforce transformation, energy-efficient technologies, innovation, and well-managed data repositories for access to quality data and evidence-based decision-making.

Lastly, balancing the costs of digital innovation with long-term financial and environmental sustainability is another critical consideration. Cities need to adopt strategies that not only support technological advancements but also ensure that these innovations are economically viable and environmentally friendly. This might include investing in renewable energy sources, promoting green technologies, and implementing cost-effective digital solutions that provide long-term benefits.

This U20 webinar will explore how emerging technologies can create inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities, and explore the support that cities at various stages of the journey require to realize this. Discussions will focus on case studies, strategies and policies to accelerate digital inclusion and maximize the benefits of innovation for all.

Guiding Questions for the engagement:

1. How can cities ensure digital transformation benefits all residents without widening the digital divide?
2. What innovative technologies are most effective in enhancing governance and service delivery in your city?
3. How can cities promote regulation of emerging technology to protect rights and promote inclusion and democratic freedom for all?
4. How can cities balance the costs of digital innovation with long-term financial and environmental sustainability?

### Facilitator

**Albert Lladó**, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG).

The U20 permanent Co-Conveners are C40 and United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG).

### Speakers

**Prof Geci Karuri-Sebina** is a scholar-practitioner who works in the intersection between people, place, time and technological change. She currently serves as an Associate Professor of digital governance at the University of Witwatersrand's School of Governance where she leads the Tayarisha Centre for Digital Governance, and coordinates the Civic Tech Innovation Network. Geci has recently co-edited two seminal volumes on digital governance in Africa: *Digitalisation and Public Policy in Africa: GovTech and CivicTech Innovations* (2025, Palgrave Macmillan), and *Africa's Digital Transformation and its Governance* (forthcoming, African Minds/Leuven University). She is based in Johannesburg.

**Dr Sunil Dubey** is thought leader in urban innovation and smart cities, a distinguished professional in city strategy, economic activation, and international relations. Sunil was Metropolis Global Ambassador, 2007-08 and Senior Advisor for Metropolis World Org, 2008-18. Sunil was the founding board member of Geneva Foundation GPP, board member of Citiscope Publication (Reuters), advisor for UN Compact Cities Program (RMIT), member of World Economic Forum's urban and infrastructure panel and exec committee member of Australia Institute of Urban Affairs. He advises UNSW Cities Institute, Sydney on Asia Pacific Cities collaborations and government partnerships, and is a scientific committee member at Live in a Living City Program at ETI, Pantheon Sorbonne University Paris. His leadership has made a significant impact on emerging economies and urban innovation activation initiatives through city networks and urban diplomacy. He is an adjunct academic at the University of Sydney and UNSW, and jury committee member for Smart City Congress Barcelona, and Institute Associate at Institute of Culture and Society ICS, Western Sydney University. Sunil has global experience and expertise in multilateral funding in supporting innovative precincts and city development projects. He is based in Sydney.

**"Cities Leading the Way for Global Change"**

## Lluïsa Cendón Sierra

Urban innovation expert with extensive experience in sustainability, citizen engagement, and strategic project management. Currently leading urban innovation initiatives at Bit Habitat Foundation – Barcelona City Council, focusing on social, economic, urban, and technological challenges to create a more sustainable, resilient, and inclusive city. Previously, served as Environmental Officer at Cornellà City Council, driving the sustainable urbanism strategy, grant applications, and European projects. Also led social and environmental education programs at Anthesis-Lavola, managing public and private sustainability initiatives. Earlier roles at Rubí City Council involved environmental education, community engagement, and policy advisory.

**For any questions about this webinar contact:** Harvey Phalatse [harveyp@joburg.org.za](mailto:harveyp@joburg.org.za)

## Agenda

Time allocation		Role
5 Mins	Welcome	Executive Mayor
10 Mins	Introduction & Opening Input: Leveraging Digital Innovation and AI for Local Government Success	Facilitator UCLG <b>Albert Lladó</b>
15 Mins	Responses from region context: <b>African perspective</b>  Digital governance and civic tech networks	<b>Associate Professor Geci Karuri-Sebina</b>  Wits School of Governance, Johannesburg
15 Mins	Responses from region context: <b>Australia, India &amp; Asia Pacific Perspectives</b>  Urban innovation and smart cities	<b>Dr Sunil Dubey</b>  UNSW Cities Institute, Sydney
15 Mins	Responses from region context: <b>European perspective</b>  Barcelona's urban innovation strategy	<b>Lluïsa Cendón Sierra</b>  Barcelona City Council
15 Mins	Facilitated Q&A	Facilitator UCLG
10 Mins	Summary: Common positioning and key urban messages	Facilitator UCLG

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