



**UNITED
NATIONS**

HSP/EB.2024/INF/15



UN-HABITAT

**United Nations
Human Settlements
Programme**

Distr.: General
23 October 2024
English only

**Executive Board of the United Nations
Human Settlements Programme
Second session of 2024
Nairobi, 4–6 December 2024
Item 9 of the provisional agenda***

**Briefing by the Executive Director on the implementation of
all resolutions adopted by the UN-Habitat Assembly**

Progress in the development of international guidelines on people-centred smart cities

Report of the Executive Director

I. Introduction

1. At its second session, held in Nairobi from 5 to 9 June 2023, the United Nations Habitat Assembly of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) adopted resolution 2/1 on international guidelines on people-centred smart cities. Through the resolution, Member States requested the Executive Director to initiate the development of international guidelines on people-centred smart cities as a non-binding framework for developing national and local smart city regulations, plans and strategies, which would ensure that digital urban infrastructure and data contribute to making cities and human settlements sustainable, inclusive and prosperous and respectful of human rights.

2. There is an urgent need to maximize the benefits of applying digital technology for urban sustainability while mitigating the associated risks. As national and local governments and other actors rapidly engage with digital approaches to planning, managing, governing and financing urbanization, it is critical to ensure that people are placed at the centre. The international guidelines are expected to contribute to this effort. The present report provides an update on the status of the implementation of resolution 2/1.

II. Global expert working group

3. In November 2023, the Executive Director of UN-Habitat appointed 31 global experts, nominated by Member States, to serve as an advisory body for the development of the guidelines. At its first meeting, held online in December 2023, the global expert working group outlined the road map for its work. Since then, it has provided valuable and sustained guidance and inputs for the drafting of the international guidelines, including through regular monthly meetings. In addition, the group held extended global expert working group meetings in Strasbourg, France, on 17 and 18 April 2024, and in an online format on 26 and 27 September 2024, and has convened a meeting in Baku, to be held on 22 and 23 January 2025.

* HSP/EB.2024/14/Rev.1.

4. The expert working group has, among other things, provided extensive advice on the scope and structure of the international guidelines, the definition of a people-centred smart city, the conceptualization of the key principles and duties inherent to a people-centred smart city approach, the identification of key actors, and the salient conditions for promoting a people-centred smart city.

III. Global consultations

5. While the global expert working group has ensured that the global view is embedded in the development of the guidelines, other consultations aim to collect views, needs and challenges related to geographical, stakeholder and thematic considerations. Thus, in addition to the three extended global expert working group meetings outlined in paragraph 2, the consultation process includes five regional consultations, five stakeholder meetings, one online consultation for external stakeholders and one thematic consultation.

6. To ensure that the guidelines incorporate diverse geographical aspects and contextual considerations, regional online consultations are scheduled to take place in November 2024 for each United Nations region (Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Western Europe and other States). Subject matter experts nominated by Member States will attend and contribute to the discussion.

7. Targeted stakeholder consultations were conducted as follows:

(a) In-person consultations were held with civil society organizations during the United Nations Civil Society Conference in Nairobi on 9 May 2024. Civil society organizations conveyed clear messages, advocating for inclusive development, the addressing of local challenges and the promotion of citizen engagement.

(b) In-person consultations were held with representatives of the academic community in Hamburg, Germany, from 18 to 20 June 2024, in collaboration with the United Nations Innovation Technology Accelerator for Cities (UNITAC). Academic institutions and practitioners focused on how data-driven urban technologies can reduce social inequalities, with the specific goal of jointly drafting recommendations for the guidelines.

(c) Online consultations were held with local and regional governments on 10 September to discuss the role of cities and local governments in advancing digital governance and closing the digital gap. The consultations sought to form synergies between the Global Digital Compact and the international guidelines.

(d) Online consultations were held with international organizations on 25 September, including interested United Nations agencies, international financial institutions and other international organizations, including the European Commission and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, working at the intersection of urban development, human rights and digital technologies. The consultation allowed United Nations-wide knowledge and data to be leveraged, and alignment with existing international frameworks to be strengthened.

(e) In-person consultations were held with representatives of the private sector on 1 and 2 October in California, United States of America, in collaboration with the new west coast office and programme of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The event brought together private sector representatives and policymakers with expertise on current technology transformations in cities and urban areas. The consultations also looked into how private-public collaborations can support the implementation of the guidelines.

(f) UN-Habitat advisory group sessions held on 27 June and 16 October 2024 gathered the views of advisory groups on issues relating to gender, youth, disabilities and enterprises, among others, to ensuring that the guidelines are truly inclusive.

(g) An online consultation was opened from 17 October to 17 November 2024 for external stakeholders, including individuals and organizations, to submit feedback on principles, duties and actors of relevance to the guidelines.

8. In terms of global advocacy, work on the guidelines has been presented at a number of global and regional smart city forums, such as the Africa Smart Cities Investment Forum, held in Kigali in September 2023, the World Smart City Expo, held in Seoul in September 2023, the Smart City Expo World Congress, held in Barcelona, Spain, in November 2023, the Annual Investment Meeting Congress, held in Abu Dhabi in May 2024, and Casablanca Smart City, held in Casablanca, Morocco, in June 2024.

IV. Global knowledge and best practices

9. In accordance with the call in resolution 2/1 for the utilization of existing knowledge, best practices and lessons learned from diverse contexts to inform the drafting of the international guidelines on people-centred cities, UN-Habitat conducted a global assessment, using primary and secondary sources of data, to produce the *World Smart Cities Outlook 2024* report. The report provides empirical evidence and global knowledge on the state of smart city development, including regional variations, insights for future development of smart cities, evaluation of the impact of smart city technologies and strategies on cities and citizens, and recommendations to foster people-centred smart city development in the future. The assessment provides a data-driven foundation for the guidelines to reflect current realities and innovations and respond to real-time challenges and opportunities. The assessment draws on existing UN-Habitat work and partnerships, including the flagship programme on people-centred smart cities and UNITAC, and field research conducted with the support of regional and country offices.

V. The Global Digital Compact

10. The Global Digital Compact, one of the outcomes of the Summit of the Future, held in New York in September 2024, envisions an inclusive, open and sustainable digital future, which aligns closely with the objectives of the international guidelines on people-centred smart cities. As local governments are at the forefront of the digital transformation, they are vital in implementing the principles of the Compact. The guidelines will thus serve as a framework to support local governments in deploying technology that centres on people's needs and rights, ensuring that digital advancements benefit all urban residents. By linking the guidelines to the Compact, UN-Habitat aims to help local governments incorporate the global principles of the guidelines into their strategies and policies for smart cities, thereby contributing to the overall digital transformation envisioned in the Compact and ultimately supporting the broader vision of the Summit of the Future.

VI. Timeline

11. UN-Habitat has drawn on its previous experience in preparing global guidelines to define a road map for the current preparatory process.¹ Key milestones achieved and expected are reflected in the timeline below.

Milestones in the preparation of the international guidelines

Milestone	Description	Date (tentative)
Call for nomination of experts	Member States are invited to nominate experts in the field of digitalization and smart cities to contribute to the development of the guidelines	September 2023
Call for expression of interest in hosting expert working group meetings and regional consultations	Member States are invited, through a global call, to host expert working group meetings and regional consultations	September 2023
Call for partnerships on the global assessment of smart cities	Call for academic partnerships for the preparation of the <i>World Smart Cities Outlook 2024</i>	September 2023
Expert working group kick-off meeting	The global consultation process officially starts with the online meeting of the expert working group, to establish the scope of work, action plan and timeline	December 2023
Zero draft of the <i>World Smart Cities Outlook 2024</i>	Preliminary input to inform the first expert working group meeting	February 2024
Expert working group meeting 1	First in-person meeting of the expert working group in Strasbourg, France	April 2024
First draft of the international guidelines on people-centred smart cities	First draft of the international guidelines following the first expert working group meeting, detailing the key principles and the structure of the guidelines	June 2024

¹ Such as the *International Guidelines on Urban and Territorial Planning* (available at <https://unhabitat.org/international-guidelines-on-urban-and-territorial-planning>).

Milestone	Description	Date (tentative)
Second draft of the international guidelines on people-centred smart cities	Second draft of the guidelines, including the definition of people-centred smart cities and a draft implementation checklist	August 2024
Expert working group meeting 2	Second online meeting of the expert working group and presentation of the results of the consultation process and the findings of the <i>World Smart Cities Outlook 2024</i>	September 2024
Third draft of the international guidelines on people-centred smart cities	Third draft of the guidelines, with a revised and improved structure	September 2024
Fourth draft of the international guidelines on people-centred smart cities	Fourth draft of the guidelines and report of the Executive Board on the guidelines, including inputs from stakeholder consultations	October 2024
Open consultation on the guidelines (online)	Online open consultation for the general public on the draft guidelines	October–November 2024
Launch of <i>World Smart Cities Outlook 2024</i>	Official launch of the report at the World Urban Forum in Cairo	November 2024
Regional consultation meetings (online)	Online regional meetings for Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, and Western Europe and other States	November 2024
Expert working group meeting 3	Third in-person meeting of the expert working group in Baku	January 2025
Final draft of the international guidelines on people-centred smart cities	Final draft of the guidelines submitted to the Executive Board	February 2025
International guidelines on people-centred smart cities finalized	Final draft of the guidelines submitted to the UN-Habitat Assembly for consideration and possible approval	February 2025
Consideration and approval of the international guidelines	Member States are invited to consider and possibly approve the guidelines during the resumed second session of the UN-Habitat Assembly	May 2025

VII. Key challenges

12. The preparatory process faces several critical challenges which require deliberate remedial measures and effective collaboration across actors. These include:

(a) **Balancing ambitions and resources:** UN-Habitat has received only a quarter of the voluntary contributions it estimated would be required. The Government of France pledged \$327,000 on a voluntary basis. The shortfall necessitated time-consuming efforts on resource mobilization and partnerships to secure regional and stakeholder consultations, and the holding of some meetings online. Moreover, UN-Habitat was obliged to make use of core budget and human resources, burdening other programmatic work. In addition, the difficulty of securing hosting entities for in-person meetings led to the second expert working group meeting being held online.

(b) **Ensuring comprehensive consultations:** smart city development is being led, shaped and financed by a multitude of actors cutting across different government levels, sectors and geographies. This complexity requires adequate and inclusive consultations with a wide range of actors and stakeholders. The scope of consultations required is demanding, especially within a context of resource constraints. Despite this, the process remains on track and efforts are being made to ensure the inclusivity and global applicability of the guidelines.

(c) **Managing a rigorous timeline:** the guidelines are expected to be completed in advance of the resumed second session of the UN-Habitat Assembly in 2025. UN-Habitat was thus required to prepare the guidelines within a tight time frame. Ensuring the quality of work within these stringent deadlines would be aided by the provision of additional resources, both in terms of material contributions and financial support.

VIII. Next steps

13. UN-Habitat will continue to apply all efforts to developing the international guidelines for consideration and possible approval by the UN-Habitat Assembly at its resumed second session, counting on the collaboration and commitment of all relevant actors in the preparatory process. The preparation of the guidelines is especially timely in the context of the strategic plan of UN-Habitat for the period 2020–2025, but will also lay the groundwork for its work on smart cities and digital innovation in the subsequent strategic plan for the period 2025–2029.
