Common statement for European Support to Cities' Action for Digital Inclusion: A Europe and Cities partnership for digital inclusion

This letter expresses the alignment of the undersigned cities and city networks with the principles outlined in the European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles. As key actors close to citizens' daily lives, we cities witness firsthand the profound digital inequalities pervading society. The digital divide and associated ethical, financial, and social risks produce tangible collective and individual effects they face routinely.

We fully embrace the Declaration's ambition to place human rights at the core of the digital transformation across its six chapters: ensuring equitable tech access and digital freedoms; combating discrimination; protecting data privacy; providing digital education and skills; promoting trustworthy and ethical AI serving the public interest; and enabling sustainable digital development.

This commitment aligns with cities' existing work to develop local projects to address digital inequalities, build a safer environment for all and ensure transparency and reliability in times of fake news. Some initiatives have become good practices potentially beneficial for cities across Europe. However, scaling and adapting them to other municipalities requires another level of formalization and support to gauge effectiveness, replicability, costs and implementation complexity.

Europe can today count on dozens of leading cities with a reservoir of practices that can be tomorrow's ready-to-use “commons”, effective in achieving the goal of a digitally inclusive Europe. They could benefit hundreds of less involved cities and towns, especially smaller ones lacking resources to spontaneously develop such initiatives themselves. Areas could range from local observatory of digital inequalities to supporting caregivers' role in reducing inequalities and more.

To drive this goal, we call for a European Union-led collaborative dynamic to:

1) Help align leading cities with common European local benchmarks, to assess the situation of their constituents at local level.
2) Effectively scale up existing good practices by adapting them into easily transposable, implementable tools.

This upscaling requires European intervention to provide the needed coordination, reference documentation, support, and project constraints that cities' limited resources cannot offer today, leading to sporadic exchanges.

The need for this European intervention to stimulate multi-city cooperation projects between several countries is also linked to the critical size and the real risk of a *double penalty* for smaller cities. They tend in many cases to suffer comparatively more from digital inequalities, especially since they host, for example, fewer young, qualified populations linked to the presence of a university pole, etc. Moreover, they also do not have the engineering to develop local responses or even to adapt existing good practices born elsewhere if they are not presented to them in an appropriate format.

Existing networks of cities show a common will to act in a European fashion, helping to strengthen the visibility of European action at local level, thus shedding light to our cities' constituents on the role of Europe in addressing common challenges.

Driving multi-city consortia projects across countries could formalize good practices into "commons" ready for low-cost adaptation, providing a starting point for scaled digital inclusion policies across European cities. After three years, evaluating these efforts could guide launching further similar initiatives.

While not the entire solution, this pragmatic, rapidly actionable proposal can amplify existing trends to make a visible, measurable impact on digital inclusion by leveraging the leadership of pioneering cities through European collaboration.

This is why we are writing to you, to benefit from your support in putting this topic forward and making sure it will be supported and addressed in the future programs.

We eagerly anticipate your support and collaboration in advancing this initiative for the benefit of all European citizens.

Truthfully yours,

Christine Borst
President of Bordeaux Métropole
Head of the European Chapter of the Cities Coalition for Digital Rights

ANNEX

Content

ANNEX 1: A Common Adherence to the Principles of the European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles

We, cities and city networks, proclaim our full alignment with the principles set out in the European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles.

As key actors in the daily lives of our citizens, we, cities and local governments, witness the profound digital inequalities that run through our society. Far from being an abstract issue, the digital divide and the exposure to the ethical, financial and social risks linked to digital technologies produce multiple collective and individual effects that we face on a daily basis. This is why we welcome the ambition of the European Declaration to place human rights at the heart of the digital transformation. We are aligned with the entire spirit of the Declaration, and we confirm our full endorsement of each of its six chapters, which echoes our daily concerns and commitments:

The first chapter, by placing human rights at the heart of the digital transformation, resonates with our desire to ensure equitable access to technologies for all our citizens, guaranteeing their freedom of expression and information in the digital age.

The second chapter, which aims for digital freedom, inclusion and non-discrimination, reflects our unceasing efforts to combat the digital divide, whether economic, generational, disability-related or based on origin.

The protection of personal data and privacy, the pillar of the third chapter, guides our initiatives aimed at preserving confidentiality while empowering our citizens about their digital footprint.

The fourth chapter on digital education and skills echoes our training programs, for our agents at counters, our colleagues working in the various positions that make up a city's administration, which often suffers from an internal digital divide, as well as for the public. Everyone needs digital skills and, more broadly, digital culture, which are essential for enabling everyone to fully benefit from digital technology, be it in the job market, in private life, or in social relationships, which are today partly played out there.

We fully recognize ourselves in the fifth chapter calling for trustworthy and rights-respecting artificial intelligence, a guarantee of ethical and beneficial technological development for all: we work together to define specifications that determine an AI that fits our values, we approach the AI revolution with enthusiasm and with the firm will to put it, from the outset, at the service of the public interest, in respect of the most demanding ethics.

Finally, the sixth chapter, which deals with sustainable digital technology, joins our commitment to an ambitious ecological transition, by promoting sober and environmentally friendly technologies, their proper use, and their recycling.

ANNEX 2: Focus on Current Actions

Our alignment with the six chapters of the European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles is all the more natural as cities are working, individually and collectively, to develop local projects to combat digital inequalities. Some have become genuine good practices, which are potentially of interest to all cities in Europe.

Several dozen large cities in Europe have developed practices and projects to reduce digital inequalities, to compensate for them, to measure them. The engineering developed in the field has sometimes led to training either for internal needs of the municipality (new municipal agents or new players called upon to intervene in a project; reporting to elected officials…) or for promotion or exchange purposes in city networks, in local, national, or European forums. The level of formalization of these best practices, however, is very diverse. They often consist of restitution presentations according to the academic plan "context, objective, actions carried out, results obtained"; which does not immediately allow another city to measure the effectiveness and replicability, the adaptation to its needs, the cost, and the complexity of implementation.

Experience has shown us that if the work of transforming these reports into step-by-step-guidelines was carried out once for all and for everyone, it could benefit a large number of European cities; especially those that do not have the internal engineering to spontaneously develop this kind of best practices. These « commons » would be action-templates adapted to their needs.

#1 On the ground example “harnessing spontaneous solidarity, reaching and backing hundreds of millions”
Cities, because they are in direct connection with the citizens, are the ones that have studied the importance of digital helpers. Data: 76% of citizens of a mid-sized city of western Europe are direct “helpers” for their family and relatives. 0% received support. No funding available despite the need to be guided and protected (juridical issues). Potential impact at European level: 2/3 of the population being more supported in actively and daily addressing the digital divide through peer-to-peer help and training.

#2 On the ground example / reaching ten-times more people by “going towards”
According to some studies, only 1% of people in need cross the threshold of multimedia centers or similar places. Some cities have already implemented new types of action in how to “go towards” them. These actions can only be driven at very local level. By reallocating funds with European-scale best practices, cities could reach way-higher numbers of people.

When cities deploy (with funds resulting from Europe’s recovery plan) it results in tens of thousands of people helped in one city

The areas could be as varied as:

- How to set up a training for my municipal employees to take care of and guide people with digital difficulties.
- How to support family caregivers who are today a major invisible actor in reducing digital inequalities
- How to measure quickly local digital inequalities to better guide municipal action
- How to develop in less than a year new practices of “going towards”[1]

Europe can today count on dozens of leading cities with a reservoir of practices that can be tomorrow's new “commons”, effective in achieving the goal of a digitally inclusive Europe. They could benefit hundreds of less involved cities and towns.

ANNEX 3: Scaling Up With Europe

Strengthening the effective dissemination of impactful best practices thanks to common European foundations and a Europe-supported dynamic among cities

We need a dynamic of multilateral collaborative work initiated by the European Union to:

- Give cities a boost in efficiency by helping them align with the common European foundations.
- Effectively multiply the good practices already produced on the ground by turning them into actionable and disseminated commons

The scaling-up that would involve aligning a substantial number of leader cities on European benchmarks and the adaptation of their good practices into easily transposable and implementable tools requires European intervention. Why? Today, cities leading on the subject devote some human resources to exchange in a cooperation logic. But these means are not sufficient to industrialize the exchange process and, above all, to guarantee effective dissemination and replication in other cities.

We are missing the engineering of animation, the production of reference documents, the support and, pragmatically, the good constraints of timing and delivery that a project with defined deadlines usually provides. Due to a lack of specific means to finance this dissemination and due to a lack of a European dynamic on the subject, exchanges are sporadic, opportunistic. The enthusiasm for the discovery of mutual excellence in forums and meetings is quickly replaced by daily necessities. City agents are quickly called back to the urgencies of daily municipal life.

The need for this European intervention to stimulate multi-city cooperation projects between several countries is also linked to the critical size and the real risk of a double penalty for smaller cities, cities of less than 150,000 or 100,000 inhabitants. They tend in many cases to suffer comparatively more from digital inequalities, especially since they host, for example, fewer young, qualified populations linked to the presence of a university pole, etc. Moreover, they also do not have the engineering to develop local responses or even to adapt existing good practices born elsewhere if they are not presented to them in an appropriate format.

Transforming identified good practices into "commons" ready for use, at a low adaptation cost, is undoubtedly a starting point for a scale-up policy in the fight for digital inclusion in

1 The goal here being to not only meet people who will not spontaneously go to digital mediation centers, but also to involve communities with more subtle digital difficulties in the creation of municipal action plans themselves. This would ensure our actions be drawn according to their real digital inclusion needs and not just from the assumed ones.

cities throughout Europe. The required engineering can find its place in collaborative projects involving a significant number of cities. Similar to what has been developed in other Europe-funded consortium projects on other topics, projects that include both the formalization of good practices and start-up budgets for their replication in other cities are absolutely essential in the current landscape.

We are today calling for the creation of these city consortia for the dissemination of good practices to combat digital inequalities. This proposal does not address the issue of digital inequalities in its entirety and does not constitute the culmination of the path towards bridging the digital divide. But it is the lightest and most rapidly actionable solution, amplifying existing trends, which can quickly make a visible and measurable difference in the issue of digital inclusion. After three years of sustained efforts, an evaluation of the projects would make it possible to decide on launching other similar projects and what modifications should be made to them.

ANNEX 4: Potential characteristics of a « from best practices to effective dissemination in cities » type of EU-promoted project

We advocate for a program that could include calls for proposal aiming at creating several European consortium-projects to bridge the digital divide in cities and towns of all sizes thanks to the sharing and dissemination of existing practices, turned into usable commons.

Suitable characteristics of one candidate consortium-project:

- 3 topics (3 best practice)
- 3 leading cities (1 leading city per best practice)
- 30 following cities (including 20 cities under 100,000 inhabitants)
- 10 countries minimum
- 3 years: 1 year of development + 2 years on implementation in following cities
- 80% financed by the EU in cities above 100,000 inhabitants, 100% under 100,000 inhabitants.

Potential Digital inclusion themes of a project:

- Best practice to scale up the fight against the digital divide in districts, « going towards » best practices.
- Monitoring the digital divide, a network of cities to measure the facets of Digital Divide and pivot our local policies accordingly.
- Leveraging the fantastic resources of the reserve army of digital helpers among relatives.
- Etc.