



CEMR reply
to the public consultation by the European Commission on the formulation
of a set of principles to promote and uphold EU values in the digital space

2 September 2021

1. Local and regional governments are at the forefront of the digital transition and represent a key player to facilitate the spreading of digital solutions for citizens, both as facilitators for local businesses and as providers of public services.
2. European initiatives to support digital transition should never come at the expense of local and regional governments and create unnecessary economic and administrative burdens.
3. It is essential to support the digitalisation of local and regional public administrations with appropriate funding opportunities, legislative measures, and policy tools: we need strategic thinking and actual coordination across Member States.

EU 2030 digital compass

- European societies are going through a period of profound societal, economic and technological changes. These changes are reflected in the way our public administrations evolve.
- CEMR fully agrees with the four priorities highlighted by the European Commission in its recent communication “2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade”: *Digitally skilled population and highly skilled digital professionals; Secure and performant sustainable digital infrastructures; Digital transformation of businesses; and last, but essential for us, Digitalisation of public services.*
- Local and regional governments (LRGs) strive to meet the growing demands and expectations of citizens and businesses as users of their services, while they must also remain attractive workplaces for qualified people.
- A high level of information security and respect for privacy are also increasingly important themes for building trust between LRGs, citizens and businesses.

LRGs as service providers

- Several indicators, e.g. DESI (Digital Economy and Society Index), can be used to assess the level of digitization of a community, for example connectivity indicators, such as fixed and mobile broadband; the human capital and digital skills of the population; internet use;

integration of digital technologies by private companies; or the provision of digital public services.

- These indicators represent important comparative learning tools that can support the inclusive development of LRGs less advanced in the digital transition.
- Local authorities, as users and providers of digital services, feel the need to make the necessary adjustments to the organization of their internal processes and their external communication in order to prepare for new innovations, such as artificial intelligence, and put it to good use in the local environment.
- This can enable LRGs to identify local solutions to global challenges: providing better access and better use of information and communication technologies, fostering digital innovation and developing new skills are all crucial measures to help achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.
- Local authorities can create and support innovation laboratories, start-ups and incubators to stimulate economic growth and job creation.
- The questions these laboratories seek to answer are often complex but rarely unique, so collaboration with other regions of Europe is extremely needed to improve efficiency and efficiency in the use of resources.

Smart cities

- The concept of smart cities offers enormous opportunities for a “triple gain” if it allows citizens to be more involved – the innovation must also be social: improving the quality of life of citizens; increasing the competitiveness of our economies; and paving the way for a sustainable low-carbon economy.
- When innovation occurs at the local or regional level, it helps create and maintain jobs and contributes to the economic development of the entire community.
- Often, these benefits extend even beyond community boundaries – in particular, by introducing technology-based services and improving the quality of citizens’ life in several areas, such as transport and mobility, energy, health care or education. It will require investment from the private sector even in more remote areas to also connect rural or suburban areas to the broadband

E-Government & skills

- CEMR supports e-government measures which strengthen local democracy through new forms of participation and information as well as flexibility, efficiency and accessibility of services to citizens.
- Local authorities often develop ICT solutions that could be useful to other LRGs, even in different countries. The coordination and effective dissemination of information is valuable to avoid “reinventing the wheel”: the creation and repetition of similar solutions and initiatives already existing at the local level should be avoided. This is where national associations or European networks have a key role to play, to facilitate this exchange of experience and expertise.
- The digitization of local public administration can help reduce bureaucratic burdens and bring more interoperability, equality and coordination between public sectors, across levels and territories. It can also help to put in place greener and more transparent public administration procedures. However it will also put pressure on local finances. The Recovery and Resilience Facility represents a great opportunity to invest in our territories.

- The transition to e-government requires investments and changes in procedures. LRGs need local public officials who have the knowledge and technical skills to adapt well to the digitisation of services.
- It is thus fundamental to pursue initiatives to integrate the necessary digital skills already at school age, both for teachers and for pupils, and to enable the participation of all citizens.
- This can be done in particular through specific EU initiatives to provide financial support and/or share best practices in the field of digitisation within local and regional authorities – for example through the new Digital Europe Program.

Striving for social inclusion

- The main objective of local and regional governments remains to consult and engage citizens and local businesses in order to identify their needs. This process helps best meet their diverse exigencies, especially in our rapidly changing society, and how technology can allow LRGs delivering improved public services.
- To this purpose, CEMR supports the implementation of user-centred principles for the design and delivery of digital public services. The accessibility, security, availability and usability of services must be guaranteed so that they can be used by all in a non-discriminatory manner.
- The notion of "intersectionality" is therefore essential to understand how several factors of discrimination can add up and contribute to the empowerment of the most disadvantaged citizens. Digital services must take into account the economic and social barriers that may prevent or hinder access to services by certain groups of citizens.

Once-only principle & online platforms

- In addition, it is essential for LRGs to limit the administrative burden, while ensuring higher civic engagement and protection of personal data and privacy. The advantages of the “once-only principle” are obvious, but it is necessary to align all efforts in this regard with data protection rules: to this regard, CEMR members are concerned about some aspects of the recent proposal for a Data Governance Act.
- Another dimension of digital transition that is confronting the role of local and regional authorities is the fast development of shared economy-based platforms that offer services in taxi transport, home exchange, home rental, shared mobility, meal delivery, etc., with a considerable impact on local economy and societies.
- But municipalities can also set up their own platforms to provide services or collaborate with existing ones to implement their policy, for instance favouring those that respect more the rights of workers.
- It is thus very timely the European Commission proposal for a Digital Services Act, but unfortunately it remains a reactive measure to regulate the existing market. Europe would need to develop alternative solutions, platforms that are fully conceived in the respect of European principles and rights, platforms that guarantee transparent services based on trust and consent.

Interoperability

- Finally, the challenges of interoperability and cooperation between levels of government (vertically) and different sectors (horizontally) are one of the biggest obstacles to effective e-government. Open and international standards play an important role in enabling fair competition and interoperability of services.

- For instance, CEMR recognizes the importance of the Single Digital Gateway initiative (Regulation 2018/1724/EU): it is essential that this portal takes into account the existing public portals at all administrative levels in order to avoid interoperability issues.
- Ensuring a transparent transfer of data between different systems in accordance with the once-only principle will greatly increase the quality and efficiency of the service.

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