Digitalization of local government public services
The local and regional levels of government are on the frontline of the introduction of new digital technologies and processes in public services: although central governments play a leading role in the decision to launch and roll out digitalization programmes and initiatives, most public services are delivered at municipal, local, or regional government level.

This is where digitalized public services and administrations interact and communicate the most with citizens and users, and where the largest numbers of public service workers are involved or affected by public service digitalization. Local governments are key for development, as they are the institution that is close to the people. Local government is one of the realistic agencies in transforming lives.

Local governments in some parts of the world operate in extremely challenging environments which is why public perception of the entity can sometimes be damming.

Mayors and local governments are physically accessible for citizens, it is also easy to control or influence government at local level.

If we ask people around the world about the things that matter the most to them, most of the responses will be probably linked to public services: access, affordability, and how, decisions are taken on the way those services are provided. The way public services are delivered, passes necessarily by a close collaboration with the private sector, the communities and most importantly, the final user- the citizen.
This is where the question of local governance comes along, as governments cannot do it alone; and cities are a social construct that needs to sum up efforts from all sectors of society.

This is also a very specific aspect of public services, that users are also citizens, citizens who vote and are also tax-payers who fund public services. This is why good functioning of public services is key in any political arena. Cities are possibly some of the most innovative entities within the public sector. In UNDP, we believe that innovation needs to happen 360 degrees, and innovation in the way local governments deliver public services is a very important issue for UNDP at Headquarters and our 171 country offices.

Innovation happens in cities, and we would be surprised to know how much innovation happens in cities around the world. In my experience, it is even happening more in developing contexts, when many times, the lack of regulation, or the late arrival of infrastructures has allowed cities to be more innovative than in the global north.

While central and local governments struggle to get hold of the adequate resources to build, maintain and operate the infrastructures needed to provide such vital services, the introduction of new digital technologies in public utilities can open the door to new far-reaching forms of outsourcing and privatization (e.g. leasing of water pumps or of distribution networks/grids instead of direct public ownership) and enhances dependency on external private suppliers.

Not all innovations are digital innovations. Sometimes innovation is going back to doing things as we used to do in the past.

The nature-based solutions are a clear example. Cities are reintroducing nature to fight climate change and excessive heating, but also the use of more traditional materials in architecture, where wood, for example, has proven more sustainable, cheaper, and safer than modern construction materials.

On the side of opportunities digitalizing public services, the first thing that comes to mind is effectiveness, as digital technology has demonstrated again and again how we save time and are able to do more things since we have digital technologies in our pockets, such the mobile phones. The same applies to public services.
Technology, which is defined as “the application of scientific knowledge for practical purposes” allows public service delivery to be much more efficient. Digitalization of citizens’ complaints is a good example: opening the possibility for citizens to report a problem with a pothole in a street, with a malfunctioning street light, is quicker and can be processed in a chain of command, allowing follow-up, and assigning responsibilities to specific municipal staff.

The most important opportunity is accessibility. Some years ago, there was a big debate about how the poorest could be excluded from digital services. This is still a problem for people with disability, the elderly, and those without access to education. However, on the other side, the arrival of digital and mobile technologies has generally resulted in an incredible expansion of access for a big segment of the population. Cities are physical places, and the cost and time of transport may be a huge problem in some of the developing megacities. For example, a low-income citizen that needed to visit the municipality physically to obtain a service could save time and money and have access to knowledge and opportunities if those services and public information are also a service that could be accessed digitally.
We have seen how poor people **invest in mobile phones** because it has become an instrument of access that also saves money in many daily life operations. In the second place, naturally are the challenges of digital transformation. Technology moves far too quickly for the public sector. It is difficult for many local governments to keep up with the times.

More and more cities have started to have the figure of “Chief Digital Officers”, but this is still a lux that many cities cannot yet afford. Remuneration is also a problem. Salaries in the public sector are much lower than in the private, so it is difficult to retain highly qualified people, and personnel commitment is mostly the reason for many people still not working for the public sector, which is losing the prestige that it once had.

In the third and final place, there is the **role of the technology providers**, the private sector that needs to work with municipalities to develop those digital products. Procurement rules are outdated in most countries. To purchase highly technological products, municipalities need to use the same law and regulations they use to buy tables for the local school. Procurement processes to establish PPPs are very slow, and by the time the process is concluded, the technology has become obsolete and it is difficult to foresee how to include a total change of technology when we do not know when the next “Zoom” will happen.

Despite all these, digitalization is happening quickly in municipalities around the world. An example that we all saw happened during COVID when cities had to adapt fast to the needs of the pandemic emergency. COVID created incredible suffering for people and communities, but it has also probably done a lot for the digitalization of municipal services as many public institutions had to leapfrog and how quickly they advanced in digitalizing many services in record time.

Finally, allow us to conclude with a reference to **trust in the role of the public sector**. We cannot govern without the trust of citizens. It is the basis of the social contract. Moreover, available data on the status of that trust is reaching troublesome figures, both in the global North and the global South, where it was already very low.

Digitalizing services can probably contribute to increasing the amount of trust we have in our public institutions, and cities are the best places to rebuild that trust between people and government. However, services need to work and it is many times difficult for a Mayor to manage expectations. Innovating is also a risk, and failure can contribute to winning or losing an election. Innovating in the public sector has never been easy.
People trust companies such as Amazon more than their local institutions, but it is also true that Amazon delivers and there is a possibility to get a quick refund if a service is not delivered.

We know that the challenges of our local governments are not that easily solved, but we see how many are already up to the challenge!