

MUNICIPAL *times.*

ALIGNING LEADERSHIP IN TANGIER



On the fourth day of the UCLG Annual Retreat, the focus shifted decisively toward June — when Tangier will host the UCLG World Congress and World Summit of Local and Regional Leaders, the movement's defining political moment of the cycle.

After two days of debate on local multilateralism, democracy and the pressures facing global governance, the question became more concrete: what will the municipal movement deliver there?

The Congress, to be held from 22 to 25 June, is more than a periodic gathering. It is intended as a political milestone — a moment to consolidate how local and regional governments operate within a multilateral system facing fragmentation, and to clarify their role in shaping what comes after 2030.

Opening the session, UCLG Secretary General **Emilia Saiz** stressed that Tangier must not be a showcase. “We are in Congress year. We want you here, active and participating.” The programme, she noted, has been

shaped through a two-year structured dialogue under the Local Social Covenant, linking UCLG Policy Councils and organised civil society around housing, public services, climate justice and finance. “The programme of the Congress is going to answer the letters that we have been exchanging... to the topics that we have at heart” — a reference to the formal written exchanges between political leaders and civil society that have defined the Congress agenda.

Those exchanges are not procedural. They reflect a broader shift that began with the “Cities Listening” process and Town Halls, placing civil society at the table in shaping priorities. Tangier is expected to formalise that mechanism, embedding it into the political outcome of the Congress.

The global context framed the urgency. In a video message, United Nations Deputy Secretary-General **Amina Mohammed** described a system facing “profound disruption.” Inequalities are deepening, climate shocks intensifying and trust in institutions remains fragile. Yet

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she pointed directly to local and regional governments as part of the response. “Recognition must translate into meaningful institutional space within the United Nations system commensurate with your responsibilities.” The benchmark, she added, is delivery: “The future of our global system will be judged by delivery — and delivery begins locally.”

The debate in Barcelona built on the themes explored earlier in the Retreat: fragmentation, democratic erosion and the need for coherence. Mandated by the Pact for the Future, the local and regional governments constituency is seeking to consolidate its place within global governance — from the reform of the High-Level Political Forum to the UN80 milestone and the shaping of the post-2030 agenda. The objective is not symbolic recognition, but greater influence on how international decisions are shaped.

That positioning rests on three tracks: strengthening the technical architecture of local and regional government participation in global processes; advancing the political prioritisation of local democracy, territorial cohesion and public services in negotiations; and ensuring a consistent presence across international arenas — from the United Nations to economic and regional platforms.

Agustí Fernández de Losada, Secretary for External Action and the EU of the Government of Catalonia, argued that the crisis of multilateralism should also be read as an opening. Local governments are already advancing solutions on climate, inequality and digital transformation. The challenge, he suggested, is ensuring those solutions are connected to financing and regulatory frameworks. Without that link, innovation risks remaining visible but limited.



Viviana Repetto, Secretary General of Montevideo, spoke from municipal experience. Alignment between local ambition and national frameworks remains uneven. When levels of government are politically misaligned, she warned, citizens can become “hostages of the situation.” Moving “from discourse to action” requires not only political will but structural support.

The strategy is not limited to institutional reform. The Cities Countdown to 2030, highlighted during the session, aims to transform local initiatives into scalable missions aligned with global transitions. Rather than promoting isolated best practices, it seeks to demonstrate that cities are already shaping systemic change — and that these experiences should inform the post-2030 framework.

Throughout the exchanges, one theme persisted: coherence. As the movement expands its engagement across global and plurilateral spaces, it faces the risk of fragmentation internally. The Congress in Tangier is being framed as the moment to align leadership, consolidate shared priorities and clarify how local and regional governments intend to act as full partners in renewing multilateralism.

If the earlier days of the Retreat examined the changing terrain of global cooperation, this session asked a different question: how will the municipal movement position itself within it? The answer will be tested in Tangier — not in declarations, but in whether dialogue, innovation and political ambition translate into durable commitments.



THE LETTERS SHAPING THE AGENDA

In the lead-up to the 2026 World Congress in Tangier, a series of political Letters has emerged as a central pillar of how local and regional governments intend to define their priorities for the next decade.

Developed under the framework of the Local Social Covenant — a structured dialogue between UCLG Policy Councils and the UCLG Town Hall representing organised civil society — eight thematic Letters have been published. Rather than technical papers, they set out public, traceable political positions on the issues that cities and territories consider essential to advancing rights-based, people-centred governance.

The Letters cover a broad range of subjects shaping local responsibilities. Among them are commitments toward adequate housing for all, ending hunger and securing food systems, preventing conflict, universal health, climate justice, cultural rights for sustainable development, access to local finance, and the “new essentials” — expanding the understanding of essential services beyond traditional infrastructure to include connectivity, care and social infrastructure.

The process has been intentionally iterative and visible. By publishing the correspondence, UCLG has created a transparent record of where political positions converge and where negotiation remains necessary as the Congress approaches. The Climate Justice Letter underscores the frontline role of local governments in responding to climate impacts and calls for mitigation and adaptation strategies grounded in equity and human rights. The Public Health Letter frames health as a universal right, arguing that robust and inclusive local systems are indispensable to addressing inequality and environmental risk.

Letters on Finance and Cultural Rights add further political weight. The finance Letter stresses that without long-term, locally adaptive and public-oriented resources, local commitments — from housing to climate action and care systems — cannot be sustained. The cultural rights Letter positions access to knowledge, creativity and community spaces not as peripheral amenities, but as democratic infrastructures.

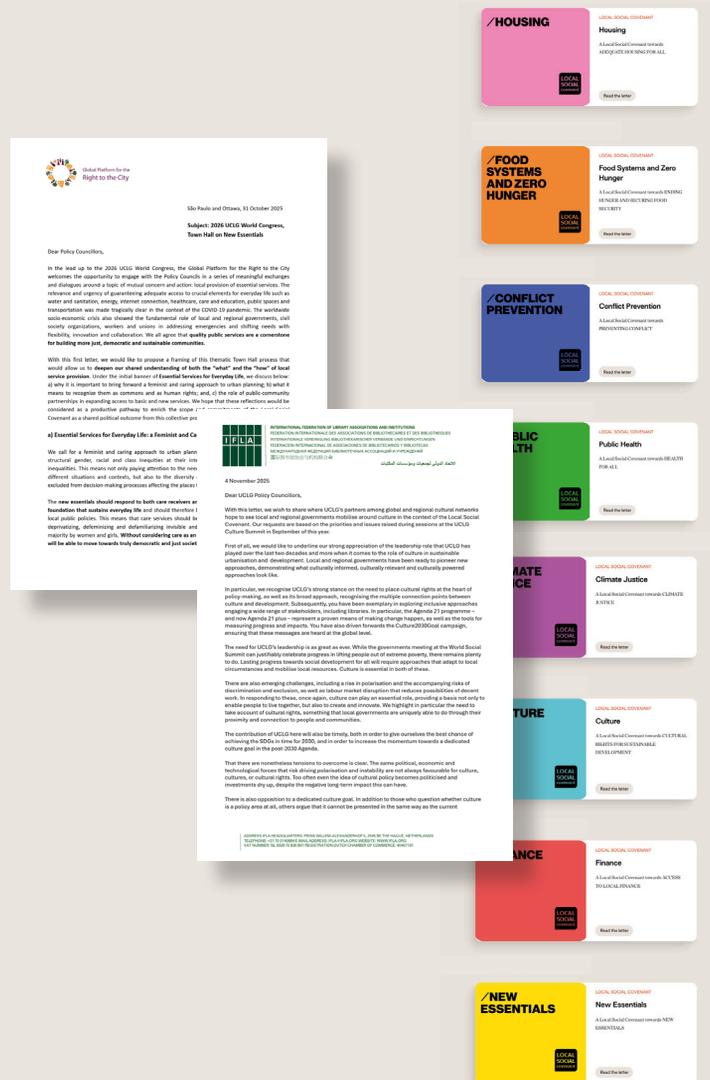
Taken together, the Letters map the terrain on which the Congress will define its mandate. They link everyday governance challenges with global debates on inequality, sustainability and democratic inclusion.

Their publication also reflects a shift in how policy priorities are co-created. Rather than confining civil society to reactive consultation, the Local Social Covenant invites partners into a sustained correspondence that builds collective political commitments. For UCLG leaders, this approach signals a desire to move beyond technical cooperation toward more accountable, co-owned agenda-setting.

Beyond their thematic scope, the Letters also function as an instrument of collective leverage. By articulating shared priorities ahead of the Congress, they equip local and regional governments with a common political baseline for negotiations with national authorities, multilateral institutions and international partners.

As Tangier approaches, the question is no longer whether dialogue has taken place, but how to turn these positions into shared commitments.

The full set of Letters is publicly available at: uclg.org/localsocialcovenant/



THE NEW ESSENTIALS AS COMMONS



If Tangier is meant to clarify how the municipal movement positions itself globally, it will also need to answer a more concrete question: what exactly are local governments prepared to guarantee?

Beyond institutional debates on multilateral reform, a more grounded shift is underway — a redefinition of what cities consider essential.

Water, sanitation and energy remain fundamental. But recent crises, from the pandemic to accelerating climate impacts, have permanently altered the baseline. “When we talk about essentials, we’re talking about things that are much more than just basic services,” said **Lorena Zárate**, Co-Director of the Global Platform for the Right to the City. Internet access became indispensable for education and livelihoods. Care systems determined who could participate in economic and public life. Public space proved critical for social cohesion.

Zárate pushed the argument further. If services are essential, they must be treated as commons. “They should not be privatised, they should not be commodified.” The question, she suggested, is not only provision, but governance — who controls essential systems, and in whose interest.

The concept of care surfaced repeatedly as a thread linking housing, health, mobility and climate action. UCLG Secretary General **Emilia Saiz** framed care as a lens through which policy priorities must be reassessed, rather than as a sector in its own right. Decisions about transport, urban design or youth participation, she argued, should be evaluated according to whether they sustain dignity and reciprocity.

Kelsey Paul Shantz of Peace in Our Cities articulated the principle in relational terms: “To embody care practice in our communities and in our worlds, it takes caring individuals and caring communities and caring cities and caring societies globally.” In this framing, care becomes a governance model.

The debate also expanded into culture. **Stephen Wyber**, Director of External Affairs at the International Federation of Library Associations

and Institutions, argued that access to information and creativity is not secondary to development goals. “[People] have always benefited from the possibility to be creative, to be empowered, to be informed.” In a fragmented political climate, he suggested, libraries and cultural institutions function as democratic infrastructure.

For several participants, redefining essentials also requires confronting inequalities embedded in housing systems. **Alexandre Frediani** of the International Institute for Environment and Development described the shift of housing toward the centre of the municipal agenda as significant. “The position of the housing agenda today is significantly different from where it has ever been,” he said, while warning that political commitment remains uneven.

Voices from the Pacific reinforced that urgency. **Mekhelesi Singata** cautioned that climate change and gentrification are pushing communities away from their territories. “Gentrification needs to be stopped... people are being pushed away,” she said, calling for indigenous knowledge and community governance to be central in urban development.

Expanding the definition of essentials carries structural consequences. It challenges how budgets are structured, how public-private partnerships are negotiated and how accountability is enforced. It also reopens the question of who defines priorities.

The discussion in Barcelona did not produce a fixed list. Instead, it marked a shift in approach: essential services are no longer defined solely by infrastructure, but by their capacity to sustain rights, participation and collective wellbeing.

As preparations continue toward June, the Congress will not only address how local governments engage globally, but also what they are prepared to guarantee locally — and under what principles.



THREADING THE PATH

The closing session of the Retreat was less about conclusions than about alignment. After days of debate on plurilateralism, democratic erosion, public services and the road to Tangier, political leaders turned to a central question: how does UCLG remain a space of convergence in a fragmented world without diluting its values?

William Cobbett, UCLG Ubuntu Advisor, challenged local governments to move beyond narratives of exclusion. “A renewed local multilateralism cannot be built on the premise of being left out,” he argued. It must be assertive, accountable and value-based. Universal service provision, in his view, lies at the heart of that positioning.

Expanding the definition of essential services is important, he maintained, but ambition alone is insufficient. Financing remains the structural test. “The dominant call to lower taxes and reduce the public sector is regressive. Public finance should be defended as a positive duty that benefits the majority.” Advocacy for public services must therefore be matched by clarity about how they are funded.

UCLG Secretary General **Emilia Saiz** approached the issue from another angle. Before debating instruments, she suggested, local governments must clarify what kind of public services they are prepared to defend. Only then can financing models be addressed coherently. She also challenged the



language of “free” services, reminding participants that they are collectively paid for — an expression of solidarity rather than charity.

Rocío Lombera, Head of International Affairs of Mexico City, illustrated how this principle translates into practice. Investment in publicly managed service complexes, she noted, demonstrates that universal and accessible provision is achievable when fiscal arrangements capture value for public use and redirect it toward infrastructure.

From the Asia Pacific region, **Bernadia Irawati Tjandradewi**, Secretary General of UCLG ASPAC, underlined the importance of transparency. In many contexts, subnational governments manage the majority of public service expenditure. Trust depends on clear mandates and visible spending, particularly as climate pressures intensify and expectations around service efficiency rise.

Writer **Pedro Bravo** added a strategic layer to the discussion, suggesting that cities need not choose between defending universal principles and engaging in flexible alliances. In an uncertain global environment, they may have to operate in parallel arenas — provided their core values remain intact.

Throughout the exchange, ambition and capacity were weighed carefully. Over recent years, local governments have broadened commitments around care, climate and equality. The challenge now is to align that ambition with sustainable financing and political cohesion.

As the Retreat concluded, attention returned to the Congress in June. The week clarified priorities; the task ahead is to translate them into durable commitments. Connecting the dots now means linking values, finance and governance into a coherent strategy — one capable of sustaining the municipal movement’s influence in an increasingly fragmented global order.

NO SERVICES WITHOUT WORKERS

Public services are often discussed in terms of infrastructure, financing and delivery targets. This session shifted the focus to the people who make those services possible. Bringing together local government leaders and trade union representatives, participants examined how dignified treatment of public service workers, grounded in human rights, is inseparable from democracy, effective governance and the localisation of the SDGs.



The discussion formed part of the growing collaboration between UCLG and Public Services International (PSI), which represents public service workers globally. The objective is to establish structured, continuous social dialogue between political leadership and the workforce responsible for health and care, emergency response, water and sanitation, waste management, education, transport, housing and other essential sectors.

Daria Cibrario, Senior Policy Officer at Public Services International, welcomed the recognition that improving public services requires direct dialogue with those who deliver them. “The men and women who provide these services are central to local government responsibility,” she said, describing engagement with workers as “a matter of democracy, but also of effectiveness.” A common space for open and good-faith dialogue, she added, still needs to be fully institutionalised.

Ravi Ranjan, Deputy Director General of the All India Institute of Local Self Government, described the proposed global framework agreement between UCLG and PSI as a significant milestone, aimed at preserving complementary missions through “continuous and structured dialogue, regular exchange and joint advocacy and training opportunities.”

Recognition itself became part of the debate. **Sandra van Niekerk**, representing Public Services International, noted that this was the first Retreat session dedicated specifically to public service workers. “They are an essential constituency,” she observed, pointing out that frontline staff are often the daily interface between institutions and residents.

Annie Geron, President of PSLINK and Asia Pacific Vice President of PSI, framed the issue more broadly. Free trade unions, she argued, are a proxy for democracy itself. “Workers are bedrocks of democracy. They are voters and citizens.” At a time when labour rights face pressure in many contexts, she maintained that trade unions remain central to reducing inequality and defending social protection systems.

Climate vulnerability added urgency. **Steve Joseph**, President of the Dominica Public Service Union and member of the PSI Executive Board, recalled the devastation of the 2017 climate crisis, which caused losses equivalent to 226 per cent of GDP. “Public services are essential to the response to the climate crisis,” he said, recounting carrying his mother-in-law through floodwaters. Decent working conditions and climate safety for workers, he stressed, are inseparable from disaster preparedness.

Financing emerged as a structural concern. **Philippe Malaisé**, National Secretary of CFDT Interco, argued that high-quality services depend not only on infrastructure investment but on adequate and autonomous local financing for staffing and working conditions. “We need decent work conditions and the right for workers to express themselves and organise,” he said, calling for strengthened local revenue systems, public banking mechanisms and remunicipalisation where necessary.





Concrete experiences illustrated what is at stake. **Rebeca Céspedes**, National Secretary for Gender and Equality of ANEP and representative of the Municipality of Goicoechea, described how trade unions mobilised against the privatisation of waste collection, ultimately returning the service to public control. “Citizens are our reason for being,” she said. “We want to give them the best services they deserve.” **Nadia Koubia**, representing the Municipality of Al Hoceima, similarly emphasised waste management as a public health priority that cannot be reduced to profitability, highlighting remunicipalisation, gender equality and recognition of informal workers as necessary steps.

Throughout the exchanges, one message remained consistent: dignified working conditions are not separate from service quality but integral to it. Public service workers are not merely implementers of policy, but rights holders and democratic actors in their own right.

On 23 June, the International Day of Public Service, UCLG and PSI leadership are expected to formalise their mechanism for structured dialogue. As preparations continue toward the Congress, the test will not only be the ambition of local commitments, but whether those who deliver them are fully recognised as political partners.

FIRST MEETING ADVANCES UCLG–PSI FRAMEWORK

The first technical meeting of the UCLG–PSI Technical Group took place during the Annual Retreat, formally launching joint work toward a Global Framework Agreement on Social Dialogue and Cooperation.

Representatives from Public Services International (PSI), including members of its Secretariat and regional structures, met with UCLG leadership and the World Secretariat to review the draft agreement line by line. The exchange focused on clarifying language, aligning objectives and ensuring that the framework reflects shared principles grounded in equality and care.

The meeting helped define key elements of the text, identify areas requiring further refinement and establish next steps for continued collaboration. Further meetings of the Technical Group are expected in the lead-up to June, when UCLG and PSI leadership are set to consolidate the process during the Congress



THE CITIES COUNTDOWN TO 2030

Cities are not short of projects. What is often missing is a way to translate local experimentation into systemic influence — particularly as conversations begin to take shape around what will follow the current global development framework.

That is the ambition behind the *Cities Countdown to 2030*, showcased during the Retreat as an instrument designed to connect local transitions with multilateral debates.

Jon Aguirre described the initiative as “a tool for hope... a tool to connect cities in the age of fragmentation.” Rather than highlighting isolated best practices, the Countdown seeks to frame local experiences as territorial missions capable of informing global agendas.

Throughout the session, concrete examples illustrated that shift.

Konya highlighted efforts to strengthen food security by supporting farmers, reducing food waste and expanding access to safe and healthy food. “SDGs are not only global goals,” a representative noted. “They are concrete actions led by cities every day.”

Ramallah presented initiatives to create inclusive public spaces responding to displacement and refugee realities. Barcelona outlined its climate strategy integrating mitigation, adaptation and climate justice. Mexico City’s Utopias



programme was cited as an example of social infrastructure designed to reduce inequality through community facilities. Montevideo’s long-standing housing cooperatives demonstrated that non-speculative models can operate at scale.

Individually, such cases are familiar within municipal networks. Collectively, they represent a portfolio of territorial transitions capable of shaping broader global conversations.

The challenge is scaling. Innovation at city level often depends on temporary funding, political alignment or individual leadership. To influence future global frameworks, these experiences must be systematised, financed and politically defended.

Rocío Lombera, Head of International Affairs of Mexico City, stressed that local knowledge must not remain internal to networks. “How do we build, share, and disseminate this accumulated knowledge... through all the tools available to city networks?” she asked. Visibility alone, she suggested, is insufficient. What is required is narrative coherence capable of demonstrating that democratic local governance delivers results.

Agostina Blengino, representing the Union of Ibero-American Capital Cities, highlighted digital accessibility, protection of cultural heritage and public markets as areas where local policy connects directly with everyday life, reinforcing the idea that territorial innovation is not abstract, but tangible.

The broader implication of the Cities Countdown is strategic. As debates evolve around global governance reform and the future of development frameworks, local and regional governments are seeking to participate not only as implementers, but as evidence-based actors capable of demonstrating systemic transitions on the ground.

The Countdown is designed to make that capacity visible — and politically relevant.

SEE YOU IN TANGIER

The invitation of the day came from the host city itself. The representative of Tangier framed the 2026 Congress not only as a gathering, but as a responsibility. The ambition, he noted, is to create “a broad collective platform” where cities and regions take centre stage — through high-level political exchanges, scientific dialogue and spaces open to civil society.

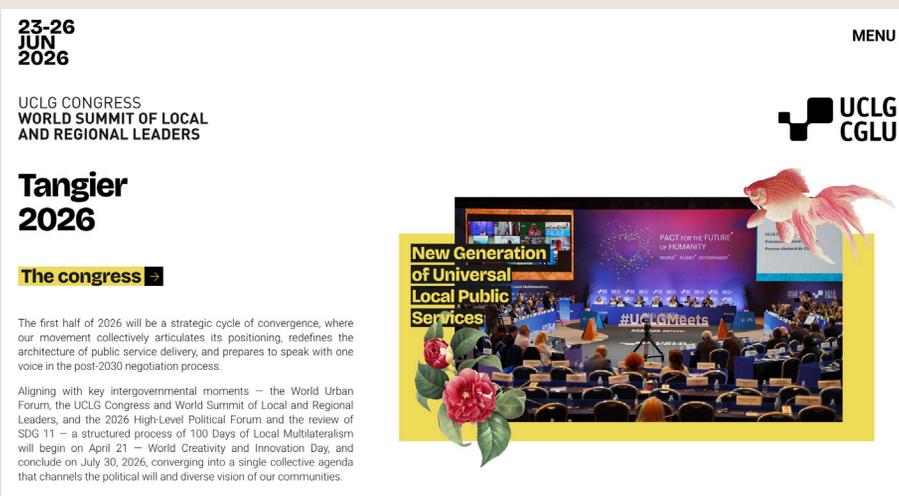
The commitment extends beyond programme design. Through its “Green Congress” initiative, Tangier aims to reduce the environmental footprint of the event within a framework grounded in social justice, advancing toward carbon neutrality while ensuring that the Congress leaves a tangible legacy for the city.

Yet the message was not limited to logistics or sustainability targets. The invitation was also experiential. Tangier intends to offer an accessible and human urban encounter — one that reflects the everyday reality of municipal governance and the diversity of the communities it represents.

As the Retreat concluded in Barcelona, the horizon shifted south. The debates of the week have a date and a place. The work continues — in Tangier.



CONGRESS DIGITAL PLATFORM *goes live*



Preparations for the 2026 UCLG Congress and World Summit of Local and Regional Leaders advanced on the fourth morning of the Retreat with the unveiling of two complementary online platforms.

The first website, developed by UCLG, presents the overall architecture of the Congress and its four Tracks. The Statutory Track will focus on governance and decision-making. The Assembly will convene political leadership. The Town Hall will serve as a structured space for dialogue with civil society. Local4Action will showcase transformative initiatives and territorial experiences.

The site clarifies how debates, processes and outcomes will be organised, offering participants a structured overview of the Congress framework.

In parallel, the Tangier organising team is preparing a second website dedicated to practical information, including logistics and registration, to support participants in planning their attendance.

More information is available at: <https://tanger2026.uclg.org/the-congress/>

What's on Today?

27 FEBRUARY 2026

OUTREACH STRATEGY FOR AN INCLUSIVE MOVEMENT

The final day of the UCLG Annual Retreat will focus on a single session dedicated to strengthening UCLG's advocacy and engagement strategy in an increasingly fragmented global context. The discussion will examine how the organisation can reinforce its role as the global voice of local and regional governments while expanding outreach, credibility and trust. Participants are expected to reflect on how a broader and more inclusive engagement strategy can help renew multilateralism from the local level.

A MOMENT OF GRATITUDE

Inspired by the intervention of the delegate from New Zealand, participants paused to acknowledge those who walked before them.

Gratitude was expressed to elders and ancestors who paved the path — a reminder that municipal leadership does not begin with the present generation, but builds upon the struggles, wisdom and commitments of those who came before. The call was simple: to act justly, mercifully and humbly in honour of that legacy.

The Retreat also extended its best wishes to Sara Hoeflich, UCLG's Assistant Secretary General, who was unable to join the gathering, and expressed appreciation to the members of the UCLG Secretariat whose work behind the scenes made the week possible.

TRENDING NOW!

WEAVING THE FOURTH SPHERE

Let's be realistic: social media — especially X — is going through a period of conflict and tension. With this new name redefining what used to be Twitter, it is fair to ask what space remains for democracy on platforms financed by big capital and often amplifying anti-democratic discourse.

This is not a rhetorical question. It is the starting point for a broader reflection on the role of the public sphere in times of hyperconnectivity and polarisation.

On the fourth day of the @uclg_org Retreat, @Lorena_Zarate reminded us that digital rights are part of the “new essentials” of a generation of public services that must evolve from “well-being for the people” to “well-being with the people.” That shift means recognising that technology is not neutral — and that it must therefore be governed with criteria rooted in rights and guarantees.

We have concrete examples of what that looks like. Libraries, defended by @IFLA as critical infrastructures for freedom of expression. The demand for spatial justice articulated by Montevideo. Different contexts, different tools — but the same logic: guaranteeing rights in order to sustain democracy in everyday life. And for many of us, nothing is more everyday than the Internet.

Whatever the algorithm may suggest, networks remain an open space — but only if we choose to treat them as such. We cannot simply withdraw from this symbolic and political terrain. As Rocío Lombera put it in her afternoon remarks, perhaps we are facing a “fourth sphere to be woven”: a socio-technological space where the digital and the public intersect, and where democratic governance must find new instruments.

If we do not shape it deliberately, others will. Over the past four days, we have debated the kind of communities we want to build. The digital environment is not exempt from that conversation.

#UCLGMeets

CREDITS

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