

**INSIGHTS ON
METROPOLITAN
GOVERNANCE.**
VOL. 2

Beyond the status quo

Three innovative
approaches to
metropolitan
governance



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About Metropolis

Metropolis supports cities and large metropolitan areas to find innovative and sustainable answers to current and future urban challenges. Bringing together over 160 member cities and 700 million inhabitants worldwide, Metropolis serves as a global hub where metropolises can connect, share experiences and mobilise on issues related to economic development, social cohesion, sustainability, gender equality and quality of life.

**Metropolitan
governance
allows
governments
to deliver
common goods
at the most
appropriate
scale**

For almost four decades, Metropolis has been at the forefront of understanding and navigating the evolving landscape of metropolitan areas. This paper is a result of Metropolis' collaboration with its members and aims to raise awareness around the opportunities of metropolisation. By empowering governments to take bold steps, Metropolis envisions collectively pioneering the future of urban development aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, fostering resilient and sustainable communities in a world marked by inequality, uncertainty and digital transformation.

This paper is the second of a series of publications reflecting on metropolitan governance and its adequacy as relevant framework to think about the current and future challenges of life in large cities and metropolitan areas across the world. After outlining, in the first volume of the series, different metropolitan governance models, this second report focuses on presenting three innovative approaches to metropolitan governance that call to move beyond the status quo of rigid, fragmented administrative models. By integrating these approaches as complementary tools, they can help urban leaders implement transformative policies aimed at improving quality of life.



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How metropolises can tackle today's wicked problems

Global cities face challenges of unprecedented complexity. From climate change to public health crises, the issues confronting metropolitan areas today are not only interconnected but also deeply rooted in social, political, and technological systems (Head, 2008). These “wicked problems” demand a radical rethinking of governance approaches, rather than quick fixes (Mazzucato and Dibb, 2019). **Traditional governance structures, with their rigid hierarchies and slow-moving bureaucracies, were designed for a bygone era—a world with less interconnectedness and interdependencies. Those structures are simply not fit for purpose in this rapidly changing world.**

Institutions—municipal and metropolitan governments—are at the heart of metropolitan governance, shaping how cities navigate crises and seize opportunities. Yet, these institutions must transform to address the “wicked problems” of our time—problems so intricate and interconnected that they defy simple solutions. **Effective governance in the modern age requires integrating approaches that bring diverse voices to the table, encourage innovation, and adapt to challenges as they unfold.**

This publication examines three innovative governance approaches—mission-oriented, adaptive, and distributed governance—that are transforming the way cities operate. Mission-oriented governance aligns stakeholders

around ambitious, measurable goals, such as achieving climate neutrality (Mazzucato, 2018). Adaptive governance prioritizes flexibility, allowing cities to experiment, learn, and refine strategies in response to shifting realities (Brunner and Lynch, 2017). Distributed governance decentralises decision-making, fostering inclusivity and ensuring that solutions reflect local realities (Dark Matter Labs, 2024a). Together, these approaches offer a roadmap for addressing today's urban challenges.

These governance approaches are not standalone solutions but complementary tools for urban transformation. Adaptive governance provides the flexibility required to respond to emerging challenges, distributed governance ensures the mobilisation of diverse perspectives and resources, and mission-oriented governance provides a strategic focus. For instance, addressing the housing af-

fordability crisis requires experimentation on a wide-range of policies such as zoning reforms (adaptive), active engagement with community groups and developers (distributed), and clear targets, such as reducing housing costs by 20% within five years (mission-oriented). By integrating these approaches, metropolitan areas can move beyond fragmented efforts, creating a cohesive strategy for systemic change that reflects community interests.

Building governance systems that are dynamic, inclusive, and strategically focused is not a luxury—it's a necessity



The success of these approaches relies on effective coordination. Metropolitan governments must act as facilitators, ensuring that resources are allocated efficiently and initiatives are aligned. Breaking down bureaucratic silos and cultivating a culture of trust and collaboration within institutions, as well as civil society and other stakeholders, are critical to avoid inefficiency and fragmentation. Without proper coordination mechanisms, even the most innovative strategies risk falling short.

While there is limited understanding of the specific factors—such as design, funding, and policy—that drive successful urban missions, this paper demonstrates how these governance approaches are already making a difference through real-world examples. **Metropolises that adopt these governance approaches not only are responding to immediate challenges,**

but also preparing for future uncertainties. The benefits of these approaches go beyond solving specific problems—they empower subnational governments to invest in people and institutions. By prioritizing collaboration, flexibility, and clear objectives, metropolises can better meet the evolving needs of their communities and be better equipped to manage risks and adapt to the unexpected.

Cities are not isolated entities—they are interconnected ecosystems where decisions in one area ripple across multiple systems and scales. **Building governance systems that are dynamic, inclusive, and strategically focused is not a luxury—it's a necessity.** This publication offers a roadmap for metropolitan areas to tackle the challenges of today while laying the foundation for a better future.

Table 1. Three innovative governance approaches to address the housing crisis

Approach	Key characteristics	Specific actions to tackle the housing crisis
Mission-oriented governance	Goal-oriented, strategic, and focused on impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Setting a clear target, such as reducing housing costs by 20% within 5 years.
Adaptive governance	Flexible, iterative, and responsive to changing conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Experimenting with zoning reforms and financial incentives. Learning from pilot projects and adapting strategies accordingly.
Distributed governance	Collaborative, participatory, and inclusive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engaging community groups, developers, and policy-makers in co-design workshops.

Mission-oriented governance: A transformative approach for metropolises

These complex, interconnected problems cannot be solved with outdated governance structures or siloed decision-making. **Instead, metropolises can turn to mission-oriented governance—an approach that unites diverse stakeholders around bold, time-bound objectives to tackle pressing societal issues.** Unlike traditional governance, which can often prioritize process over outcomes, mission-oriented governance focuses on measurable results, promoting collaboration, innovation, and systemic change.

This governance approach is grounded in the work of experts such as Mazzucato and Dibb (2019), who

have emphasised its potential to redefine how governments—at all scales—address critical challenges. For example, a metropolitan government targeting a 55% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030 might use a mission-oriented approach to coordinate initiatives like optimizing last-mile logistics, expanding public transport networks, and promoting sustainable behaviours among residents. **By framing these policies as part of a larger mission, governments can break down bureaucratic silos and align efforts across sectors, creating momentum for transformative change.**

Mission-oriented governance is underpinned by four key principles that can guide metropolises in designing and implementing effective strategies. These principles—creating purpose, balancing short- and long-term goals, building coalitions, and embracing innovation—offer a comprehensive roadmap for urban leaders looking to drive systemic impact (Mazzucato, 2018).

Table 2. Principles for implementing mission-oriented governance in metropolitan areas

1. Creating purpose	2. Balancing goals	3. Building coalitions	4. Embracing innovation
The ‘what’ and ‘why’ of missions	The ‘when’	The ‘who’ and ‘with whom’	The ‘how’
Defining an ambitious, inspirational, yet realistic goal that unifies stakeholders	Integrating immediate actions with long-term strategies, ensuring adaptability while maintaining accountability	Establishing partnerships among public, private, and community actors to align resources for addressing shared societal challenges	Encouraging experimentation, rapid learning, and prototyping to remain flexible and responsive to evolving needs

Source: Adapted from the European Commission: Directorate-General for Research and Innovation and Mazzucato, M. (2018) Mission-oriented research & innovation in the European Union – A problem-solving approach to fuel innovation-led growth.

Principle 1. Creating purpose

At the heart of mission-oriented governance lies the ability to define a clear, inspirational purpose that mobilizes stakeholders and resources. This purpose must be ambitious enough to inspire, yet realistic enough to ensure progress is measurable and achievable (Mazzucato, 2018). **Establishing a shared vision between governments and communities is essential for building trust and fostering collective action, especially in an era of growing public disillusionment with institutions** (Noveck, 2015).

A clear example of the importance of creating a vision comes from Colombia. In Bogotá, unpaid care work, primarily undertaken by women, accounts for a staggering 13% of the city's GDP (Metropolis and The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2022). Yet, this labour remains largely invisible, perpetuating gender inequalities and time poverty—particularly for women from low-income households. Recognising this, Bogotá has implemented to date 23 **Care Blocks**, which integrate essential services like laundromats, childcare, and care for people with disabilities, alongside educational and leisure activities for caregivers. These Care Blocks address both the practical and emotional needs of caregivers and care-receivers, ensuring proximity, flexibility, and simultaneity. Bogotá's Care System has impacted the lives of over +660,000 women and their families, with over almost 38,000 women having graduated from educational opportunities (Bogotá's Women's Department, 2024). The city's approach is part of a global movement, reflected in similar projects like Iztapalapa's Utopias in Mexico and Freetown's first Care Block in Sierra Leone, set to launch in 2025. **These initiatives highlight how a shared purpose, rooted in equity, can transform societal systems, creating more inclusive communities.**

Urban challenges do not stop at municipal borders, and neither should their solutions (Metropolis, 2024). Governance must transcend traditional jurisdictional limits, aligning local, regional, and national policies into a unified territorial vision. This does not require creating new bureaucratic layers but fostering mutual respect and equitable collaboration among municipalities (Metropolis, 2024). **Success depends on recognizing that the well-being of the metropolis is inseparably tied to the prosperity of all its parts, and particularly, its communities.**

The **Barcelona Metropolitan Housing initiative** in Spain exemplifies this integrated vision. By strategically distributing affordable rental units across the metropolitan area, it tackles housing inequalities and promotes a more balanced urban development. With the ambitious goal of delivering 4500 affordable units over six years, the initiative embodies the principles of mission-oriented governance (Habitatge Metròpolis Barcelona, 2025). By uniting public and private stakeholders, it ensures both financial feasibility and public oversight. While this represents a significant step forward, much remains to be done to resolve the broader housing crisis in Barcelona and its surrounding municipalities.

To tackle today's challenges and tomorrow's uncertainties, metropolises need bold leadership and a clear vision that unites diverse stakeholders. Whether it is forging a metropolitan project that aligns local governments around a metropolitan government or launching a mission-driven initiative that rallies cross-municipal support, a shared purpose fuelled by mission-oriented governance can guide investments, drive collaboration, and deliver lasting impact. From Bogotá's care blocks to Barcelona's housing reforms, these examples show how aligning vision with action can transform metropolises for the better.

Key questions to chart the future at the metropolitan scale

- 1 How can your metropolitan area create a shared vision that spans municipal boundaries and promotes true collaboration across jurisdictions?
- 2 What strategies can your metropolitan area adopt to overcome institutional barriers—such as conflicting mandates, competing interests, and limited information sharing—and cultivate a culture of trust and cooperation?
- 3 How can a shared metropolitan vision be effectively translated into actionable, measurable goals that drive policy decisions, resource distribution, and performance evaluation?
- 4 What sustainable and equitable financing models can your metropolitan area implement to support shared priorities and meet long-term financial needs?
- 5 How can peer learning networks and city collaborations be enhanced to drive innovation and shared progress in your metropolitan area?

Principle 2. Balancing short and long-term goals

One of the key challenges of mission-oriented governance is balancing immediate actions with ambitious, long-term objectives. **Many urban challenges, such as addressing gender-based violence and improving service accessibility, require sustained efforts that often extend beyond the tenure of political leaders.** Setting clear, measurable, and time-bound targets is essential for maintaining focus and accountability over time (Mazzucato, Kattel, and Ryan-Collins, 2020).

For example, the **European Union's Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities Programme** illustrates this principle in action. As part of the Horizon Europe initiative, the programme aims to achieve 100 climate-neutral cities by 2030. Cities such as Milan (Italy), Bucharest (Romania) and Lisbon (Portugal) have adopted Climate City Contracts, which outline actionable frameworks for reducing emissions. These contracts bring together city governments, industry leaders, and communities, boosting collaboration on initiatives ranging from green infrastructure to low-carbon mobility systems. (NetZeroCities, 2024). The measurable targets embedded in these contracts provide a clear roadmap for progress, ensuring that ambitious goals translate into tangible results.

In mission-oriented governance, accountability is not about imposing strict rules. Instead, it relies on softer mechanisms—norms, incentives, and collaboration—to drive progress (Mission-Oriented Innovation Network, 2023). **City and metropolitan governments must set well-defined milestones and evaluation processes to ensure progress is being made** (OECD, 2024b). The inclusion of intermediate targets helps cities track their efforts and make necessary adjustments, ensuring that long-term missions remain on course.

Ultimately, tackling complex urban challenges requires a shift in governance practices towards transparency, trust, and shared responsibility. Balancing the short and the long term is no small feat, but when metropolises embed transparency into their processes, they empower communities to play an active role in shaping their futures.

Tackling complex urban challenges requires a shift in governance practices towards transparency, trust, and shared responsibility

Key questions to measure success

1

What frameworks are currently used to evaluate the success of your metropolis' policies, and how can your institution incorporate adaptive and mission-oriented principles?

2

Do interventions in your metropolis achieve their intended outcomes?

3

Are there indicators that measure the inclusivity, collaboration, and long-term impact of governance efforts? If not, how can they be developed?

4

How does your metropolis track the externalities—both positive and negative—of its governance initiatives, and how can this input inform future actions?

Principle 3. Building coalitions

No single institution can tackle complex urban challenges alone. Mission-oriented governance depends on the strength of coalitions across public institutions, private entities, and communities. These partnerships, anchored in a shared vision, are critical for pooling resources, expertise, and perspectives to address challenges effectively (Mazzucato, Kattel, and Ryan-Collins, 2020).

The Milan Urban Food Policy Pact offers a powerful example of how partnerships can drive mission-oriented initiatives. By connecting 280 cities worldwide, the Pact has advanced food security, sustainable agriculture, and waste reduction (Milan Urban Food Policy

Pact, 2015). Localized solutions, such as community-led urban gardens and partnerships with farmer networks, demonstrate the importance of tailoring initiatives to specific contexts. These collaborative efforts illustrate that partnerships are not simply supportive; they are integral to the success of mission-oriented governance.

Robust evaluation mechanisms are vital for maintaining the effectiveness of these coalitions. Governments must systematically assess the inclusivity, collaboration, and outcomes of their initiatives, ensuring that partnerships deliver on their intended goals (*see examples in Chapter 3*). Moreover, existing partnerships should be evaluated for their capacity to support mission-oriented efforts, and to build new collaborations where gaps exist (Mazzucato, Kattel, and Ryan-Collins, 2020). **Without such collaboration, the transformative potential of mission-oriented policies risks being diminished.**

Governments must systematically assess the inclusivity, collaboration, and outcomes of their initiatives



Principle 4. Embracing new approaches

Mission-oriented governance thrives on innovation, requiring metropolises to create environments where experimentation and adaptation are not only possible but encouraged (Mazzucato, 2024). **Municipal and metropolitan institutions must establish processes that enable rapid learning, allowing them to refine policies and approaches based on real-world outcomes.**

Innovation ensures that governance remains dynamic and capable of addressing evolving challenges. Promoting these innovative governance models requires a strategic approach to managing risks and designing incentives (Mazzucato, Kattel, and Ryan-Collins, 2020). Innovation inherently involves uncertainty and potentially delayed returns, necessitating mechanisms to share risks and rewards effectively. Within the public sector, incentives are needed to encourage innovation in governance processes, projects, and structures. **Governments, often risk-averse by nature, must cultivate an environment where measured risk-taking is supported** (Mazzucato, Kattel, and Ryan-Collins, 2020). This shift can lead to significant advancements, enabling city and metropolitan governments to experiment with new approaches to address societal challenges. The emphasis on fostering innovation highlights the need for leadership that is both bold and strategic, ensuring that governance systems remain forward-looking and responsive to changing urban dynamics.

Despite increasing recognition of the need for innovation, regional disparities remain a challenge in the adoption of innovation strategies. Data from Metropolis' Metro Futures¹ platform

shows that **over 90% of cities in North America and Europe have published innovation strategies, while Africa (17%) and Eurasia and the Middle East (38%) face significant challenges.** These differences highlight the need for targeted capacity-building and knowledge-sharing efforts to ensure that all regions can benefit from innovative governance frameworks. Bridging these gaps is crucial for promoting global equity in urban development and ensuring no region is left behind.

This principle requires strong political will, adequate funding, and the active participation of diverse stakeholders. Institutions must also develop mechanisms to communicate transparently about both successes and failures, ensuring that lessons are integrated into future efforts. **For mayors and metropolitan leaders, fostering a culture of innovation means prioritizing flexibility and responsiveness over rigid adherence to pre-established plans.**

Mission-oriented governance offers a bold and forward-thinking approach for metropolitan areas grappling with pressing challenges. By prioritizing ambitious long-term goals, fostering collaboration, and driving innovation, it empowers cities to tackle immediate needs while laying the foundation for sustainable, inclusive futures. Whether responding to natural disasters or addressing housing affordability, this approach offers the tools for lasting, systemic change. **Ultimately, mission-oriented governance reshapes urban leadership, shifting the focus from short-term fixes to transformative societal progress.**

1. Metropolis' Metro Futures (metrofutures.org) is the first open database combining cities' visions with their progress. Metro Futures maps +1500 local documents and strategies, and indicators, across cities worldwide, tracking advancements in urban resilience, innovation, governance and inclusion.

Key questions for implementing mission-oriented governance

1

What societal challenges in your metropolis could be framed as mission-driven initiatives, and how can existing or new partnerships support cross-sector collaboration to address these challenges effectively?

2

Which departments or agencies should lead mission-oriented policies in your metropolis, and what key resources, structures, roles, and accountability mechanisms are necessary for their successful implementation?

3

What strategies are needed to maintain momentum and sustain the legitimacy of mission-oriented initiatives in the face of shifting political landscapes, while ensuring alignment with a unified, long-term vision for urban development?

Adaptive governance: Navigating metropolitan challenges in real time

The successful implementation of mission-oriented policies requires a degree of flexibility to adapt strategies as circumstances evolve. As outlined by Mazzucato and Dibb (2019), this adaptability is fundamental to the long-term relevance and effectiveness of such initiatives. **Adaptive governance complements mission-oriented policies by creating mechanisms for real-time learning and course correction.**

Adaptive governance offers a dynamic and iterative approach to policy-making, particularly well-suited to address the complex and evolving challenges faced by metropolitan areas. Adaptive governance focuses on creating systems with embedded feedback loops, enabling policies to be adjusted in response to observed outcomes and shifting conditions (Brunner and

Lynch, 2017). In practice, adaptive governance might involve the use of real-time environmental data to manage urban flooding or the continuous monitoring of new housing models to test their accessibility and impact (Metropolis, 2022c). **This implies a transition for urban and metropolitan institutions away from static frameworks towards more flexible strategies that embrace uncertainty, foster innovation, and prioritize iterative learning by doing.**

The effective implementation of adaptive governance rests on four core components: systems thinking, continuous learning, data integration, and foresight. Together, these elements provide a comprehensive framework for addressing the complexities of modern metropolitan governance.

Key questions to implement adaptive governance

1

How can your metropolis incorporate feedback loops that allow for real-time evaluation and refinement of policies to respond quickly to changing conditions?

3

How can your metropolis' budget be made more flexible to support experimentation and to allow a rapid response to unforeseen challenges? Is participatory budgeting a core component of your city or metropolitan budget process?

2

What data systems and analytical tools are currently in place to support adaptive governance in your metropolis?

4

What training and professional development opportunities are required to equip officials and policy-makers with the skills needed to effectively lead in a rapidly changing governance environment?

Key components of adaptive governance



Recognising interconnected systems

At its core, adaptive governance requires understanding the interdependencies of metropolitan systems. Infrastructure, services, social dynamics, and ecological systems are interconnected, and effective governance must account for these relationships. Policies that address one area in isolation risk unintended consequences in others. **Adaptive governance seeks to map these interconnections, identify vulnerabilities, and leverage opportunities for systemic improvements.**

Singapore's **Smart Nation Initiative** exemplifies how data integration can support this process. The initiative coordinates transport, housing, and public services through real-time data systems, to enable more agile responses to urban challenges (Government of Singapore, 2021). Research by the OECD (2019) underscores the benefits of such systems, demonstrating that integrated data can reduce inefficiencies and enhance decision-making. These tools, including Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and urban simulation models, empower policy-makers to see the bigger picture, making governance more strategic and less reactive.

However, **flexibility must be balanced with strategic vision.** As the COVID-19 pandemic revealed, crises can drive innovation and local collaboration, but they can also strain governance systems, centralize power, and exacerbate inequalities (Emergency Governance Initiative, 2024). **Adaptive governance must therefore align short-term responses with broader goals, ensuring that immediate actions do not compromise long-term equity or sustainability.**

Implementing flexibility and continuous learning

Adaptive governance relies on mechanisms for regular evaluation and policy refinement to remain effective. While flexibility is a defining feature, it must be balanced with stability to maintain public trust and coherence. Regular reviews and iterative decision-making enable city and metropolitan governments to adapt to new information without losing sight of their overarching goals.



Similarly, the Colombian **How Are Cities Doing Network** exemplifies the potential of adaptive governance in practice. Operating across 41 municipalities, the network employs Quality of Life Reports and Citizen Perception Surveys to evaluate public services and gather residents' feedback. This dual approach strengthens the connection between government and community, advancing an informed dialogue and aligning policies with public priorities. By ensuring that governance reflects both data and community needs, **How Are Cities Doing Network** illustrates how these strategies can deliver results that are both effective and inclusive.

City networks, such as Metropolis, play a critical role in building the capacity of city and metropolitan governments to address urban challenges (Fernández and Zapata, 2022). These networks facilitate mutual learning, and encourage the exchange of practical solutions, enabling cities to adapt effectively to changing circumstances. Their policy documents offer actionable guidance to local administrations, while their good practices platforms enhance both impact and credibility of local efforts. **Metropolis' Solutions Labs** exemplify this approach. This programme unites cities in policy exchanges, enabling them to draw on collective experiences to tackle shared metropolitan challenges, such as addressing women's time poverty or managing water scarcity (Metropolis, 2024). These sessions create a space for candid learning, and building curiosity-driven collaboration. Ultimately, networks like Metropolis give urban leaders the tools to make informed decisions and take unified action.

Harnessing data for governance

Robust data systems are a key element of adaptive governance as they allow city and metropolitan governments to monitor trends, anticipate challenges, make evidence-based decisions, and carry out timely interventions. Implementing adaptive governance requires robust data systems and institutional capacity—both of which are limited in resource-constrained cities. Moreover, ensuring inclusivity in data management—by incorporating data on gender, age, disability, and vulnerable groups—is crucial for generating truly inclusive insights and guiding equitable policy-making.

Reliable, real-time data is critical for monitoring urban systems, assessing policy impacts, and informing responsive measures. For example, **Goyang's Smart Waste Management system** (South Korea) uses IoT (Internet of Things), machine learning, and advanced sensors, to optimize waste collection by providing real-time data on bin fill levels, vehicle locations, and collection efficiency. This data-driven approach enables flexible routes and schedules, minimizing unnecessary collections and reducing operational costs (WEGO, 2023). However, the hefty price tag of such sophisticated systems can be a major hurdle for many cities, especially those struggling to provide basic services.

Many metropolises lack the infrastructure to collect, process, use, and share such data effectively

Effective data systems ensure that governance remains responsive to local needs while aligning with broader metropolitan objectives

Many metropolises lack the infrastructure to collect, process, use, and share such data effectively (Metropolis, 2022a). Additionally, adaptive governance requires trained individuals who can design and manage iterative policy processes. In some cases, the limited financial resources available to pay for these specialized

roles can make it difficult to attract top talent. One potential solution is for cities to invest in capacity-building efforts, such as training programs and partnerships with research institutions, while also leveraging cost-effective digital tools like open-source urban analytics software to strengthen their data capabilities (Metropolis, 2022a).

The **London Plan** (United Kingdom) exemplifies the strategic use of data in governance. Through its Annual Monitoring Report and Planning London DataHub, the city tracks key performance indicators and integrates real-time data into planning updates (London Government, 2023). London's robust data collection capabilities enable the city to effectively monitor trends and provide a solid foundation for informed policy-making, which directly benefits residents. For instance, utility companies can use the DataHub to better plan their services, reducing disruptions during new developments. Additionally, the DataHub simplifies the planning application process, saving taxpayers

an estimated £750,000 annually by automating data entry (User Centric Cities, 2025). This initiative underscores the vital role of long-term, systematic data collection and integration in enhancing urban planning, leading to more efficient services and improved outcomes for residents.

The manner in which data is processed and used is what allows it to drive real-world transformation. **Beyond its technical functions, the availability of data also enhances communication between governments and communities.** It can serve broad purposes, such as raising public awareness, fostering communication between governments and residents, and strengthening community ties (Metropolis, 2022a). Effective data systems ensure that governance remains responsive to local needs while aligning with broader metropolitan objectives, creating a governance approach that is both cohesive and adaptable.

Anticipating future risks and opportunities

Adaptive governance extends beyond responding to current challenges; it also entails anticipating future risks and opportunities. **Anticipatory methodologies can equip cities to identify risks and mitigate potential crises through tools like scenario planning, big data analytics, and participatory foresight exercises** (Dark Matter Labs, 2024a).

Key questions for subnational governments to develop future-oriented thinking

1

What limitations are hindering progress in your metropolis, and how can your government overcome these obstacles?

3

What is your city's long-term vision? What would success look like, and what strategies are being implemented to turn this vision into reality?

2

What global trends are shaping the future of your metropolis, and how are these shifts influencing policy decisions in your metropolis?

4

What potential disruptions—whether technological, social, or environmental—could fundamentally challenge the status quo in your metropolis, and how is your government preparing for these changes?

As an example, the **Joburg 2040 Growth and Development Strategy** (South Africa) showcases anticipatory governance by addressing future risks and opportunities through foresight and adaptability. First developed in 2011 and reviewed every five years, the strategy emphasizes resilience, sustainability, and liveability. It aligns global frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with local planning efforts and incorporates input from over 35 000 people gathered through surveys and interviews (City of Johannesburg, 2019). By integrating foresight scenarios with local data, the strategy evolves to address emerging challenges, ensuring Johannesburg's policies remain forward-thinking and responsive to social, environmental, and economic needs.

Ensuring adaptable governance in metropolises demands the integration of foresight methodologies, despite their frequent misinterpretation. By incorporating future-oriented tools like scenario planning and horizon scanning, cities can proactively address the dynamic challenges they face. Foresight practices equip institutions with the ability to imagine new possibilities, anticipate upcoming changes and effectively

adjust their policies accordingly. This iterative approach ensures that governance remains both relevant and effective by evolving in tandem with the evolving needs of the metropolis. **To effectively implement foresight, city and metropolitan governments must prioritize the allocation of financial resources and the development of specialised teams dedicated to mainstreaming foresight practices across all departments and institutions.**

Adaptive governance is a way to rethink how metropolises operate. It is an approach that moves beyond static, top-down approaches, advocating for systems that evolve through continuous learning. **This approach recognizes the inherent uncertainties in urban governance and empowers metropolitan institutions to experiment and refine solutions in real time.** Crucially, adaptive governance also acknowledges the interconnected nature of metropolitan challenges, emphasizing the need for integrated strategies that span across sectors and jurisdictions.

Foresight practices emphasize the importance of feedback loops, enabling cities to learn from past experiences



Distributed governance: collaboration for inclusive solutions

The concept of mission-oriented governance intersects strongly with the principles of distributed governance, creating a base where collective action and shared responsibility drive urban transformation. In a mission-oriented approach, challenges are re-framed as opportunities, encouraging a broad coalition of actors to work together toward common goals. This collaborative focus is central to both mission-oriented governance and distributed governance, as both seek to inspire collective ownership and engagement across various stakeholders.

The success of distributed governance hinges on equity being at the heart of its implementation

In cities, distributed governance decentralizes decision-making, shifting power from local governments to a broader array of stakeholders, including academia, private enterprises, NGOs, and civil society groups (Dark Matter Labs, 2024a). Unlike traditional governance models, which often rely on rigid hierarchies, distributed governance creates a setting for collaboration. By building coalitions around a compelling vision, cities can overcome inertia, bridge divides, and create synergies between diverse actors. **The underlying principle is simple: no single entity has the expertise or resources to solve the multifaceted challenges of modern metropolitan life.**

The role of local communities in distributed governance

Distributed governance requires actively engaging local communities in decision-making processes through digital platforms, public consultations, and other mechanisms. This inclusive approach fosters innovation and ensures that solutions reflect the needs and aspirations of diverse communities (Dark Matter Labs, 2024b). **Beyond improving outcomes, the active engagement of local communities promotes trust and accountability, transforming governance into a shared endeavour between local institutions and people alike.**

However, the success of distributed governance hinges on equity being at the heart of its implementation, ensuring women and youth, persons with disabilities and systemically discriminated-against communities are enabled to actively participate. **While decentralization brings decision-making closer to communities, it can only achieve its full potential if historically marginalized groups are substantively involved in shaping urban futures.** This requires moving beyond tokenistic participation to cultivate a culture of meaningful engagement, where diverse perspectives are actively sought and valued. Ensuring the active involvement of a broad spectrum of society calls for simple and thoughtful adjustments to public processes, such as translating public communications into multiple languages, offering childcare services during public consultation processes and flexible hours and

Key questions to promote inclusive governance

1

What steps can be taken in your metropolis to ensure that innovation benefits all segments of the population, rather than exacerbating existing inequalities?

2

What tools and approaches are most effective for cultivating genuine community engagement?

3

How can your institutions identify and leverage a community's resources in development planning, ensuring greater acceptance and effective implementation?

4

What capabilities are required in your institution to implement distributed governance?

accessible locations to account for diverse schedules and needs. Ultimately, **distributed governance redefines governance as a collaborative enterprise**. This shift not only has the potential to rectify historical injustices but also ensures that policy outcomes are more sustainable, just and legitimate.

The **City of Montreal's** (Canada) 2018 **public consultation on systemic racism**, launched by a citizen-led petition, proved that distributed governance can amplify diverse voices. Over 15 months, the city engaged over 7000 participants—including residents, academics, and community organizations—actively breaking down barriers to participation (OIDP, 2020). Childcare was provided for caregivers, multilingual materials ensured migrant voices were heard, and citizen-led discussion kits promoted accessibility and flexibility. The final report, published in 2020, revealed systemic issues like racial profiling, employment inequities, and territorial disparities, while outlining 38 recommendations for change (OIDP, 2020). Montreal demonstrated that inclusive governance advances equity and accountability by tailoring the process to different communities' needs.

In Buenos Aires (Argentina), the **Participatory Slum Upgrading Process** exemplifies the power of community engagement in addressing complex urban challenges. This initiative engaged 9000 families through +400 participatory meetings, achieving over 70% attendance. At the heart of this effort, the Villa 20 participatory process redefined informal housing upgrades by adopting a resident-led

approach. This shift was formalized through the re-urbanization bill (Law 5,705), which guaranteed legal recognition of community input. A multi-level engagement strategy fostered micro-consensuses and enabled formal voting on block-level projects, addressing critical housing, socio-economic, and urban integration needs. The process empowered residents to directly shape development plans, leading to significant outcomes: the relocation of 200 families, improved connectivity through four new streets, the demolition of 350 houses, and the approval of 25 block-level projects. These efforts aligned governance with community priorities, demonstrating the essential role of participatory planning in urban transformation (Participedia, 2024). The Participatory Slum Upgrading Process underscores the vital importance of embedding community participation as a foundation for effective urban planning.

The cases of Montreal and Buenos Aires demonstrate the significant social, economic, and environmental benefits of distributed governance. These cities successfully engaged stakeholders through diverse formats, including in-person meetings, online surveys, and focus groups. This inclusive approach encouraged participation from various groups, fostering unexpected connections and collaborative opportunities. **Yet these successes also highlight the challenges of operationalizing such models, particularly in ensuring that participation extends beyond symbolic gestures to genuine dialogue and collaboration across generations and socioeconomic divides.**



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Barriers to effective distributed governance

Despite its promise, distributed governance faces significant challenges. **Coordinating diverse stakeholders can be complex, with competing and conflicting interests inevitable. Without robust mechanisms for alignment, efforts risk fragmentation and increasing community tensions.** Establishing shared goals, transparent communication and feedback loops, building trust with communities, and clear accountability frameworks are essential for ensuring coherence and efficiency towards collective goals.

Firstly, breaking down organisational silos is critical to the success of distributed governance. Many urban challenges, such as climate adaptation or housing affordability, span multiple sectors, requiring coordinated action to ensure policies work together.

Freetown's first **Climate Adaptation Plan** exemplifies the power of distributed governance. The plan builds upon the "Transform Freetown Agenda", which engaged 15,000 residents, including vulnerable communities in informal settlements. Freetown is ensuring a whole-of-government approach by breaking down internal silos through a dedicated council committee, promoting partnerships with technical experts and external partners, and involving the Mayor's Delivery Unit (City of Freetown, 2022). This ambitious plan aims to slash greenhouse gas emissions by 44% by 2050 while creating climate-resilient infrastructure, improving sanitation, and developing sustainable transport (City of Freetown, 2022). Freetown's commitment to net-zero

emissions showcases leadership by uniting diverse stakeholders across sectors for a more sustainable and livable future.

Similarly, Medellín's **Integral Urban Project** in Colombia mobilized a wide range of stakeholders, including residents, NGOs, and businesses, to revitalize under-resourced neighbourhoods. By involving the community directly, the project not only improved public spaces but also strengthened trust in local authorities (Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2021). These examples highlight how collaboration enhances both the legitimacy and effectiveness of governance outcomes, ensuring that policies are informed by diverse perspectives and grounded in local realities.

Secondly, digital technologies are transforming governance, creating new opportunities for engagement and collaboration. Data analytics and digital platforms allow governments to monitor urban systems in real-time, make informed decisions, and facilitate public input on policies. Platforms aggregating data on transportation, energy use, and public health empower residents to engage directly with critical urban challenges. Initiatives like digital consultations further enhance public engagement by broadening the scope and inclusivity of participation, making governance more dynamic and accessible (UNESCO, 2015). These advancements underscore the potential of digital tools to create governance systems that are more transparent, responsive, and participatory. However, **it is crucial to prioritize human-centred digital technologies that focus on the needs and experiences of the public, rather than simply adopting the latest technologies.**

According to data from the Metro Futures platform, the establishment of open data portals often precedes the development of formal digitalization or technology strategy. The data suggests a prioritization of immediate data accessibility over broader strategic frameworks. **With 61 cities reporting open data portals compared to 52 with defined strategies, this trend underscores a commitment to empowering residents by facilitating access to usable data, enabling community engagement and fostering transparency.** Open data sources are essential, as they promote transparency, empower residents, drive innovation, and support the creation of better policies and services. This is especially crucial at the metropolitan level, where city governments may still face challenges in sharing data both with other municipalities and with residents.

Yet, digital inequities still pose a critical barrier. While online platforms expand participation, they often exclude populations without access to technology or digital literacy. With girls and women, older persons and persons with disabilities less likely to have access to new technologies, the widening digital divide threatens to leave these groups—and their rights—further behind (UN Women, 2020). Addressing these gaps requires targeted investments in infrastructure and education to ensure that all communities can engage meaningfully. **Ethical data practices and equitable access must underpin digital governance to ensure inclusivity** (Metropolis, 2022b). Addressing these disparities is essential to building trust, fostering broad participation, and ensuring that digital platforms empower all inhabitants rather than exacerbating existing inequalities (Dark Matter Labs, 2024b).

The **Waterproofing Data Project** in Brazil illustrates how participatory governance can be enriched through digital innovation. This initiative addresses gaps in local data on flood impacts, the project combines community-generated information with urban analytics to inform disaster preparedness. Over 400 citizen-scientists, trained as “Pollinators”, have reported rainfall and flooding events across more than 20 cities, benefiting over 290 000 residents (Porto de Albuquerque et al., 2023). State partners have since expanded the model to secondary schools in flood-prone regions, aiming to empower millions with knowledge and tools for disaster preparedness. The success of such digital initiatives underscores the potential of technology to enhance resilience and improve governance outcomes.

The success of distributed governance ultimately depends on city and metropolitan governments’ willingness to share decision-making power and their ability to facilitate conversations between diverse stakeholders. It also depends on ensuring that stakeholders find their participation meaningful, influencing outcomes that reflect their unique needs and expectations. Inclusivity must underpin every level of governance, ensuring that all communities in the metropolitan area have a voice in shaping urban futures. While it may seem time-consuming, this approach pays off by helping governments navigate conflict, build trust and drive more efficient, cost-effective implementation. In an age of unprecedented interconnectedness, distributed governance allows metropolises to navigate complexity with resilience and legitimacy.

Key questions for subnational governments to explore distributed governance

- 1 What mechanisms are in place in your metropolis to actively engage diverse stakeholders in the decision-making process, and how can these be strengthened?
- 2 How effectively do local governments in your metropolitan area collaborate between one another and with regional and national authorities, and what strategies can enhance these intergovernmental relationships for better governance?
- 3 What opportunities exist in your metropolis to leverage digital platforms for increasing public participation, enhancing transparency, and fostering more inclusive governance?
- 4 How can distributed governance approaches help reduce inequalities in service delivery and ensure more equitable access across different areas of your metropolis?

Conclusion: Meeting today the challenges of tomorrow

The demands on local and metropolitan governments have never been greater. Cities are at the frontlines of the world's most pressing challenges: from climate change and housing crises to social inequalities and economic volatility. Yet, these challenges are not isolated—they are interconnected and complex, defying conventional solutions. **For mayors, the question is**

clear: how can metropolises respond effectively to immediate crises while preparing for an uncertain future? The answer lies in rethinking governance itself.

This report has laid out three transformative governance approaches—mission-oriented, adaptive, and distributed governance—that together provide a framework for tackling the wicked problems of the 21st century. These approaches are not theoretical abstractions; they are practical tools, tested in real-world contexts, that empower metropolises to lead with purpose, agility, and inclusivity. For mayors and metropolitan managers,

embracing these principles is not just an opportunity—it is a necessity.

Mission-oriented governance offers a way to galvanize action around bold, measurable objectives that address societal challenges. This approach ensures focus and alignment by breaking down silos and uniting stakeholders—

from public agencies to private enterprises—around shared goals. **For mayors, mission-oriented governance is a call to articulate a clear vision for their city.** Whether it is reducing emissions, tackling gender-based violence, or improving wellbeing and social inclusion, **the strength of this approach lies in its ability to turn ambitions into action plans.** However, success requires setting intermediate milestones to track progress and maintain momentum.

Beyond city boundaries, **the realization of a truly metropolitan vision within a given area does not inherently necessitate the creation of entirely new governing bodies or an expansion of bureaucratic layers.** Instead, its essence lies in cultivating a profound and shared understanding among all constituent municipalities—the core city and its surrounding communities alike. This shared vision must be founded on a bedrock of mutual respect and equitable treatment, recognizing that the success of the metropolis hinges on the prosperity and well-being of all its integral parts.

The unpredictability of today's challenges—from pandemics to extreme weather—demands governance systems that can evolve in real time. **Adaptive governance provides the tools to respond to shifting conditions by embedding feedback loops, encouraging continuous learning, and refining policies based on outcomes.** This approach moves cities away from rigid, static decision-making and toward dynamic systems that prioritize resilience.

For mayors and metropolitan managers, adopting adaptive governance means fostering a culture of experimentation within city halls. Encouraging innovation, embracing new technologies, and learning from both successes

The question is clear: how can metropolises respond effectively to immediate crises while preparing for an uncertain future? The answer lies in rethinking governance itself



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and failures will ensure that their territories remain responsive to evolving needs. But this approach requires investment—not only in data infrastructure, but also in capacity-building for public servants who must navigate increasingly complex systems.

No institution nor city leader can tackle metropolitan challenges alone. Distributed governance decentralizes decision-making, creating space for local and metropolitan governments, community groups, private enterprises, and residents to co-create solutions. The premise is simple: when diverse voices are included, the outcomes are more legitimate, effective, and reflective of community needs and aspirations.

This approach is a reminder of the power of collaboration. Metropolises can leverage collective expertise to address complex issues by actively involving residents and breaking down silos between departments. Yet, **distributed governance requires robust coordination mechanisms to ensure alignment and avoid fragmentation.** Strong leadership is needed to set the vision, while clear accountability frameworks ensure that all stakeholders remain committed to shared goals.

While these governance models hold immense promise, their implementation faces significant barriers. **Financing gaps are among the most pressing challenges. Many cities, particularly at the metropolitan level, lack the funds to invest in innovative solutions.** For local institutions, this means exploring creative financing mechanisms to turn bold plans into reality. At the same time, outdated regulatory frameworks also pose hurdles. **Enabling legislation that supports multilevel governance is essential to empower mayors and metropolitan managers to act decisively.**

The path forward demands bold leadership, innovative thinking, and a commitment to collaboration. The governance models outlined in this publication—mission-oriented, adaptive, and distributed—offer practical approaches for addressing today’s most urgent challenges while preparing cities for an uncertain future.

These models are not mutually exclusive but complementary. Together, they form a cohesive approach to governance that is dynamic, inclusive, and focused on long-term impact. The real-world examples highlighted in this report demonstrate that success is possible when metropolises embrace bold visions, engage their communities, and remain flexible in the face of change.

The future of metropolitan governance is not about maintaining the status quo. It is about reimagining how cities operate, fostering trust and collaboration, and prioritizing the well-being of all residents. The governance approaches outlined in this paper are the foundation for a future where cities lead, adapt, and prosper in a complex and unpredictable world. Metropolises must embrace these innovative approaches—not as an option, but as an imperative for prosperity and the wellbeing of all.

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