

AI must work for local and regional authorities, not the other way round

Drafted by Annika Vaikla (Estonia, ILDG) and Truls Gihlemon (Norway, ECR), the report on “Strengthening the capacities of local and regional authorities in the use of AI” provides an overview of its current use and future prospects for local and regional authorities. It also stresses that AI must respect Europe’s fundamental values and must never attempt to replace or surpass human beings.

“Whether we like it or not, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is already very much present in town halls and local and regional public services”: the members of the Congress agreed on this statement, illustrated by numerous practical examples: ranging from road traffic management and safety to the preparation of price estimates and processing of building permits, all areas that bear witness to this reality. This unprecedented transformation raises ethical questions and very practical challenges, especially since AI requires complex and costly human and technical investments even before it goes live, which many small local authorities are unable to afford.

Like Soeren Schumacher (Germany, SOC/G/PD), many elected representatives want the issue to be dealt with at intermunicipal level, in order to pool resources and establish common frameworks, particularly to prevent potential abuses of AI. He also called for a ‘European AI’ that is in line with European values, particularly in terms of human rights, rather than simply importing American or Chinese AI systems designed according to those countries’ own standards. Training local government staff in AI therefore appears to be a matter of urgency, in particular in rural areas, which are often less well-equipped: “Criminals know more about AI than we do,” warned Eke Folkerts (Netherlands, EPP/CCE).

“Copilot doesn’t stand for election!”

Many local elected representatives are, however, well aware of the limitations of AI: “We shouldn’t place too much trust in it, as it doesn’t have empathy,” said Kevin Bentley (United Kingdom, ECR), considering it unthinkable to entrust AI with decisions such as the allocation of housing, which inherently requires human and individualised judgement. In political terms, Andrew Boff (United Kingdom, ECR) summed it up, with his characteristic turn of phrase, “it’s not Copilot standing for election, but you!” – thereby reminding everyone that if things went wrong, it is not the tool but the elected representative who will be held responsible. Leonardo Lotto (Italy, ILDG), for his part, emphasised the links between public services and AI, stressing the need to safeguard institutions, which must not be replaced by this technology. He also raised the issue of personal data storage, which he said should “be kept in local clouds” rather than in large data centres far away from citizens.

Younger generations are not necessarily enthusiastic about AI

The rest of the debate showed that far from being unreservedly enthusiastic about AI, the youth delegates are also capable of taking a critical view and highlighting its potentially harmful

effects. Admittedly, AI offers many young people opportunities to set up businesses and make a start in life, as explained by the Ukrainian youth delegate, Viktoriia Kravets, who said that Ukraine had become a real ‘powerhouse’ of innovation. Others took a much more nuanced, even concerned, view: “some young people are afraid that their future will literally be wiped out by AI,” noted the Turkish delegate, Irem Bilir.

The youth delegates highlighted the global imbalances that AI could exacerbate: whilst some regions will benefit, others risk suffering the consequences without reaping the rewards. “Not enough is said about the enormous impact of AI and data centres on water resources and energy consumption,” complained Thorhildur Kristinardottir (Iceland), while the delegate from Luxembourg, Esther Adelakun, highlighted the difficult conditions faced by mine workers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Chile, tasked with extracting the rare metals and minerals needed for AI from the ground. Several delegates worried that AI would standardise speech, and perhaps one day even thought. The Icelandic youth delegate was also concerned about its consequences for critical thinking and, more broadly, its impact in cognitive and interpersonal terms. “I’ve had enough of hearing nothing but speeches written by AI,” exclaimed the Dutch delegate, Isabella Laning, in conclusion, hoping that “efficiency will not completely replace sensitivity.”