

# INCA Policy Guidelines

## *Co-designed guidelines for ethical and democratic urban alternatives to Big Tech*

Work Package 7 - Open Innovation Labs

## Introduction

The INCA project (INcrease Corporate political responsibility and Accountability), funded by **Horizon Europe**, examines the impact of **GAFAM** (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft) on European democracies and institutions.

**Work Package 7** of the INCA project, dedicated to Open Innovation Labs, has one overarching objective: **to promote citizen participation and support democratic institutions by developing policies and collaboratively designing alternatives for a fairer and more accountable platform economy.**

To achieve this goal, the Open Innovation Labs Work Package focuses on three main objectives:

- **Awareness:** fostering effective and widespread awareness among citizens of the influence of major technology companies on democratic values and on their policies regarding privacy and personal data.
- **Participation:** engaging citizens and stakeholders in identifying key challenges and possible alternatives.
- **Empowerment:** establishing **Urban Open Labs (OIL – Open Innovation Labs)** to co-design guidelines that propose urban-level alternatives to large technology companies.

Building on these open and participatory urban labs held in Barcelona, Bologna, and Bucharest, a set of guidelines has been developed, which are presented here in a concise format.

## Guidelines for Replicability in Other Urban Contexts

This section presents the **policy guidelines co-designed within the OILs**, aiming to promote ethical and democratic alternatives to the dominance of Big Tech at the urban level. The primary contribution of the INCA project does not lie in providing entirely new solutions, but rather in offering a **replicable participatory methodology**. Distinctively, this approach engages a broad range of actors across while providing a structured process for cities to surface their own urban ecosystems. It positions cities as both contributors of knowledge, resources, and engagement, and as beneficiaries of new insights, partnerships, and policy learning. This approach helps cities identify their unique ecosystems and potential to challenge Big Tech monopolies through collective engagement and the empowerment of local actors.

These guidelines should not be seen as a universal solution, but as a **flexible framework** that can be adapted to specific local contexts, resources, and institutional capacities. They are conceived as complementary tools to be balanced and adjusted according to contextual characteristics.

### 1. Enhance Participatory Processes

Participation is the foundation of fair and resilient digital governance. To build it, cities should move beyond simple consultation and adopt structured, iterative, and inclusive engagement with key local stakeholders. The INCA project has shown that effective participation requires a **structured, iterative, and inclusive approach**, adapted to local contexts, but grounded in a shared framework of awareness, engagement, and empowerment. According to this, a city should follow some key steps:

- **Stakeholder mapping:** Before initiating any process, cities should adopt a structured methodology for stakeholder mapping and engagement. This approach should ensure balanced representation of a heterogeneous group of key actors (quadruple/quintuple helix: Research and Academia, Private Sector, Associations and Intermediary Bodies, Citizens, Local Authorities) and, crucially, marginalized groups. Stakeholder identification should build on previous experiences and projects and be tailored to the local context, considering both individual motivation factors and broader contextual conditions. This mapping should be regularly reviewed and updated through adaptive approaches, incorporating recommendations from already engaged participants.
- **Operationalizing engagement:** Cities should establish Open Innovation Labs (OILs) as structured spaces for collaboration. These OILs should bring together

the diverse groups forming the local innovation ecosystem, with the aim of raising awareness and empowering participants. Engagement activities should employ a variety of structured dialogue tools—such as interviews, focus groups, collaborative mapping platforms, and co-design workshops— to gather needs and create solutions collaboratively.

- **Mutual learning:** Cities should encourage continuous knowledge exchange among local teams and across different cities to learn from each other's experiences.

## 2. Prioritize Algorithmic Accountability and Data Governance

The growing role of digital platforms in public services and urban governance raises critical questions about transparency, fairness, and control over digital infrastructures. While achieving full algorithmic transparency in large proprietary platforms may remain ambitious, municipalities and local institutions can take concrete steps **to promote accountability, ethical practices, and citizen empowerment** in their digital interactions.

Local governments and public institutions should:

- **Choose alternatives:** Actively seek open-source and community-governed tools rather than proprietary services. For example, municipalities can adopt open-source platforms like Nextcloud for data management to reduce dependence on major tech companies.
- **Ensure accountability:** Implement practical measures to ensure algorithmic accountability, including adding accountability clauses in digital service contracts, creating a code of conduct for platform governance, and organizing local assemblies to co-design municipal digital tools.
- **Use regulation to level the playing field:** Leverage public regulation to reduce data asymmetries and ensure local institutions and workers maintain control. Cities should apply core data principles in all digital interactions, such as data minimization, quality assurance, and user control.
- **Invest locally:** Invest in local servers and internal IT capabilities to build resilience and local control over digital infrastructure.
- **Empower citizens:** Engage and educate citizens. Public seminars and workshops can improve digital literacy, raise awareness of platform rights, and provide guidance on the safe use of municipal digital tools, contributing to a more participatory and responsible digital ecosystem.

### 3. Build Public Sector Digital Capacity

As digital platforms increasingly underpin public services, it is **essential for public institutions to develop and strengthen internal capabilities**. Enhancing public sector digital capacity allows (local) governments to reduce reliance on external proprietary providers and deliver services efficiently, securely, and equitably.

Public administrations should:

- Invest in **developing internal digital skills**.
- **Improve public IT infrastructure**, adopting open-source tools to reduce dependence on private and proprietary technologies and promote greater transparency and control over public services.
- Support targeted **digital literacy training programs for staff**.

### 4. Foster Local Platform Cooperatives

**Platform cooperatives** have emerged **as credible and tangible alternatives** to the dominant profit-oriented Big Tech models. These cooperatives counter the extractive logic of most digital platforms by organizing and distributing work more equitably. The cooperative model is not limited to food delivery or mobility but can be applied across many sectors. However, to compete and succeed, **these cooperatives need a supportive environment and assistance** with digital infrastructure, as they often lack the technical and financial resources to build or maintain their systems.

Public administrations can play a crucial role:

- **Develop favorable legal and regulatory frameworks** that formally recognize platform cooperatives.
- **Offer financial incentives** (e.g., targeted funding, tax breaks).
- **Prioritize cooperative platforms in public procurement processes**.
- **Invest in shared digital infrastructure** that cooperatives can collectively access to reduce reliance on private providers.
- **Facilitate incubation, training, and mentoring programs** to promote innovation and resilience within cooperative platforms.

Similarly, labor unions and worker associations should:

- Recognize **platform cooperatives as a strategic response** to precarity in the platform economy.

- **Provide organizational, educational, and legal support** to workers willing to transition to cooperative ownership.
- **Promote alliances** between cooperatives and unions, strengthening collective bargaining power in digital contexts.

Where alternatives already exist, civil society plays a crucial role. Citizens can:

- Demand more effective **tools to raise awareness and visibility** of cooperative alternatives.
- Request more **information and proper training** to better guide **consumer demand toward these platforms**.

## 5. Secure Protections and Urban Infrastructure for Platform Workers

Platform work is now a significant part of the urban economy, affecting goods delivery and public space usage. Policymakers and stakeholders must **recognize platform workers as vital urban actors** whose rights and needs should be integrated into city planning.

Local governments should institutionalize protections for these workers by:

- **Applying fair labor standards:** This includes ensuring fair contracts, decent wages, and access to social protections. A key example is the “*Carta dei diritti fondamentali dei lavoratori digitali nel contesto urbano*” (Charter of Fundamental Rights of Digital Workers), signed in Bologna in 2018.
- **Promoting local collective bargaining:** Allowing workers to negotiate fairer conditions with digital platforms.

Cities should also address the **spatial and infrastructural needs** of these workers by creating **micro-hubs and dedicated facilities** with rest areas and charging stations. This would reduce unsafe use of public space and ensure safer and more dignified conditions for riders and other platform workers.

## 6. Create and maintain Ethical Civic Tech Platforms

Digital platforms increasingly mediate civic participation, from local consultations to public information and local news. As these platforms become integral to democratic life, it is essential to **explore alternatives that counter the extractive and exclusive logic of existing platforms**, embody democratic values, and strengthen the relationship between citizens and institutions.

Public administrations should:

- Co-design and manage **publicly owned digital platforms for civic engagement**, e.g., participatory budgeting and local news.
- Allow citizens to actively shape how these tools operate.
- **Ensure ethical data management practices**, protecting privacy and guaranteeing transparency and inclusive access.
- **Establish democratic moderation systems** to ensure fair and open dialogue.