Operationalizing Urban Data Governance through the Use-Case Approach: Reflections from the Eastern Africa Data Governance Conference 2026

By Kellen Kanyunyuzi, DataCities Program Manager

1. Introduction

The East African policymakers and practitioners in modern digitalization (data and AI) governance agree that innovation and accountability must go hand-in-hand. At the 2026 East Africa Data Governance Conference in Nairobi, Kenya - with a theme: *"Navigating Duality – Innovation and Accountability"*- leaders and practitioners emphasized that data-driven services only succeed when trust and rights are built in from the start. Kenya's Data Protection Commissioner, Ms Immaculate Kassait, while opening the conference, reminded delegates that emerging digital tools should unlock data's value responsibly, not undermining people's rights. This context sets the stage for DataCities' work of co-creating urban data governance solutions that empower city authorities and citizens well-being alike.

The DataCities Consortium partners with Uganda's emerging cities to build practical data systems through the co-creation of data use-cases, beginning in 2023. One of its flagship projects, the "*SafiSiti Waste Data Management"* platform in Jinja City, exemplifies this approach. SafiSiti is a mobile and web platform for managing urban waste data. It was co-designed with city officials, service providers and village health teams (VHTs), through joint co-creation workshops (2023–25) to ensure local urban needs are met. The system collects data at every step from waste generation points to landfill. SafiSiti waste management system enables real-time data collection, supporting efficient planning, monitoring and accountability. By digitizing what was once manual tracking, Jinja's leaders can now plan waste routes, target hotspots and budget accurately. The system is expected to mark a significant step toward smart, data-driven waste management, empowering city authorities, communities, and service providers to make informed decisions together.

2. Ideas we are Currently Reflecting on from the Regional Conference 2026

- **Co-design and local ownership:** Successful systems are co-created with users. The conference repeatedly stressed that data governance is easier to understand when tied to a service delivery practical artifact. DataCities implementation experience shows that if city staff and beneficiaries are involved in building the data tools, the uptake, use and results stick.

- **Strengthen data skills and inclusion:** DataCities is involved in training a number of local leaders - including existing Ministry of Health VHTs in Jinja, service providers and city technical staff, which has contributed to making SafiSiti Waste Management Data platform a steadily adopted tool that is supporting the governance of urban service delivery data. At the conference, data governance experts highlighted the need to raise data literacy across specific jurisdictions, including emerging cities like Jinja and Fort Portal in Uganda. For example, during the conference, a youth-focused session "Haki Yako Mtandaoni" underscored that Kenya's young people who generate data daily online need awareness of their rights. It's important to launch capacity-building programs so that urban citizens in emerging cities may understand how data benefits them - a possible incentive for them to share more.
- **Balance innovation with ethical safeguards:** Use adaptable regulations. East African delegates urged the creation of regulatory sandboxes to pilot new data management technologies safely. In practice for initiatives like our DataCities, this means letting city labs test platforms like SafiSiti under light-touch oversight. Meanwhile, data governance issues like laws/regulations and ethical standards must evolve with how such technological tools are perceived and used on ground by the stakeholders at city level .
- **Multi-stakeholder collaboration:** Connect all sectors. The conference repeatedly emphasized that regulators, local and national governments, tech innovators and civil society must coordinate, not work in silos. For instance, data challenges in Kenyan counties prompted calls for CSOs to help bridge gaps between citizens and officials. Governance structures like City Data Steering Committees with members from government, utilities, community leaders and the private sector should engage in creating awareness on data privacy rights, with emphasis on the contribution of data in urban development, through using joint forums and already existing structures to align on standards and share data.
- **Embed governance in planning:** Data governance should be part of development projects from day one. As delegates said, we need to move beyond compliance frameworks. This means that data governance is not just a post-hoc add-on. Incorporate privacy, security and service goals into every digital system design. It was emphasized that before procuring any city tech or system, for example, develop a data governance plan outlining roles, responsibilities and compliance measures that should be treated as essential as budgeting or staffing.
- **Link data governance to development outcomes:** Highlight tangible benefits. Policymakers at the conference noted that data protection should not be an afterthought. Position data governance as a driver of local, urban and national development: cleaner streets, faster services, or even new

jobs. SafiSiti is framed around the 3R waste framework (reduce, recycle, re-use), aligning data metrics with real impact.

3. Key takeaways out of the Regional Conference

- **Adopt a "Sandbox + Scale" approach:** Encourage cities to pilot citizen-centered data tools in controlled environments.
- **Harmonize data standards regionally:** Support East African Community efforts to unify data privacy and sharing rules. This will make cross-border smart city initiatives; this resonates with PDPC Tanzania's call for harmonization. Policymakers should pursue mutual frameworks so data-driven innovation can scale across borders.
- **Invest in city data skills and infrastructure:** Donors and governments should fund training for city IT staff and local innovators and open data platforms. DataCities' co-design model works best when cities have baseline capacity. Kenya's experiences show that upskilling leads to *"data-driven decision-making"* rather than guesswork.
- **Embed rights in every project:** From the outset, apply privacy-by-design and data minimization. This isn't just about compliance it builds trust. As one conference speaker stressed, every urban data initiative must be "people-centred" and accountable. Practically, require impact assessments and community oversight for new city apps.
- **Leverage communities for data collection:** DataCities trained village health teams to gather SafiSiti data. Similarly, cities can partner with community groups to generate and validate data. This addresses the "ownership" pillar by giving residents a stake in the data ecosystem.
- **Create a regional knowledge network:** Use the conference's call for a "Network Charter" by linking emerging city data projects across E. Africa. Facilitate sharing of best practices (e.g. Uganda's SafiSiti, Rwanda's open GIS, etc.) so that lessons in Jinja help shape Kampala and vice versa.

4. Conclusion

The regional data governance actors need to move from mere policy discussions to practice. Urban data governance frameworks must move beyond theory into actionable discourses, for example, by co-creating ethical city-level data use cases that address real service delivery challenges in public health, economy education/innovative skilling and others. In reference to urban data governance, city ownership of data governance and management initiatives is critical - successful urban data governance depends on strong leadership and ownership from city authorities, not just external partners.

Standardization of data systems is important. Harmonized data collection tools and measurable performance indicators across departments improve consistency, comparability, and decision-making. Moreover, interoperability matters - integrated systems that allow data sharing across sectors (e.g., urban tourism, waste management, revenue mobilisation) are essential for holistic urban planning. Capacity building is a priority - continuous training of technical staff and decision/policy-makers is necessary to strengthen data literacy, appreciation and effective data use. Citizen-centered data governance and management approaches matter a lot - engaging communities in data collection and feedback loops (citizens generated data) enhances accountability and ensures data reflects lived realities. Partnerships drive innovation - collaboration between governments, private sector, and development partners accelerates the development of sustainable data ecosystems.

Lastly, let's always consider data governance as a development enabler - strong governance frameworks should support broader development goals such as smart city modelling, inclusive tourism, improved urban revenue mobilisation, efficient waste and traffic management, and other service delivery aspects in social areas of public health like access to safe and clean water and others.