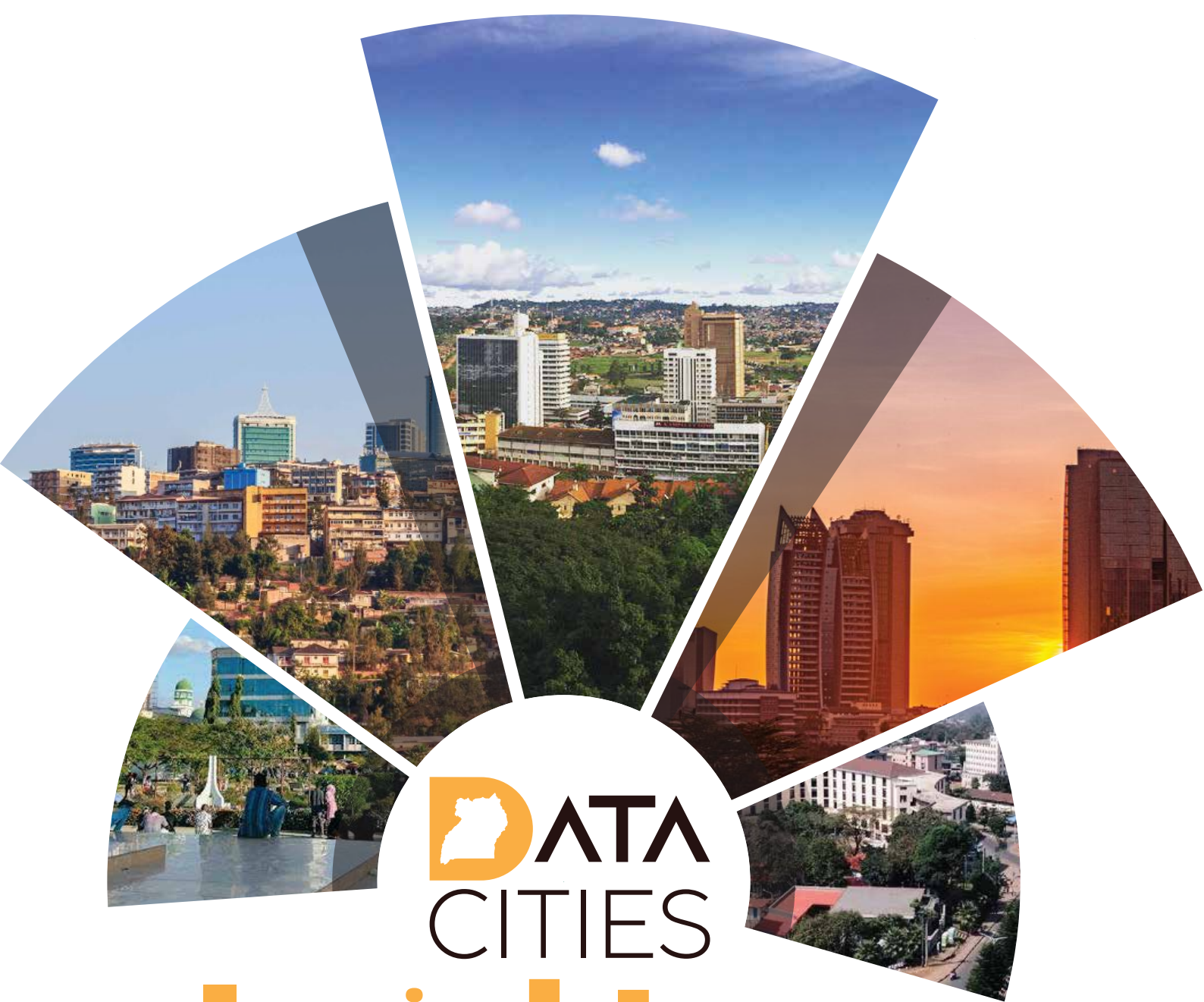




DATA
CITIES

Insights
from the
DataCities
Consortium at the
Global Data Festival
2026

*How Data Reveals the Hidden Value, Hidden Risks,
and Hidden Opportunities in East Africa's Emerging Cities*

DataCities Consortium (Sunbird AI, UN Global Pulse, ToroDev) Global Data Festival & Kenya Expo and Conference 2026

As cities grow rapidly, many struggle to make informed decisions due to limited access to reliable and actionable data. Across emerging urban centres, city leaders make daily decisions about taxation, waste management, infrastructure, tourism, and service delivery without access to the evidence needed to see the full picture. As a result, cities often end up solving the wrong problems, investing in the wrong priorities, or overlooking opportunities hiding in plain sight. Without timely, actionable evidence, city authorities are forced into "blind governance", making critical choices about budgets, city planning, and service delivery based on guesswork and institutional memory.

At the Global Data Festival 2026, the DataCities Consortium (*Sunbird AI, UN Global Pulse, and ToroDev*) shared lessons from Urban Data use cases implemented in Jinja and Fort Portal Cities. The session brought together city officials from both cities, who shared first-hand experiences and reflections on how data-driven approaches have influenced decision-making, strengthened urban governance, and improved service delivery.

Through practical data systems in tourism, revenue optimization, and waste management, DataCities is demonstrating how data and AI can strengthen urban governance and improve service delivery. This insight report synthesises key lessons and implementation experiences from Jinja and Fort Portal Cities and highlights their implications for policymakers, city leaders, and development partners seeking to advance data-informed urban development.

Key Insights at Glance

When cities use data, they become visible to themselves, they make better decisions. And that visibility creates measurable returns. As DataCities, we call this the *Urban Data Intelligence Dividend*.

The discussion and experiences revealed simple but powerful insights:

Key Results



Revenue

25%
Increase



Waste

Over
87,000
kgs tracked



Tourism

Marathon evidence
informed national
strategy

In Fort Portal city, geospatial intelligence and revenue digitisation revealed properties that were unregistered, undervalued, or entirely absent from city records. The result? A 25% increase in local revenue (scaling from UGX 1.7bn to UGX 2.14bn) without raising taxes but by strengthening data systems.

Jinja city was able to track over 87,000 kg of waste, exposing the structural disruptions in landfills and uncovering the opportunities for green jobs and revenue.

The cities are also using data to transform tourism from an aspiration into a measurable economic development strategy. For example, the use of data systems during the Fort Portal City Marathon exposed a reality that had long been overlooked: local events are not merely community activities, they are economic engines. By capturing visitor and spending data during the 2025 marathon, Fort Portal gained visibility into the event's impact on tourism, hospitality, transport, and local economy. The evidence not only transformed planning for the 2026 marathon but also provided the compelling case for its inclusion in Uganda's national Ministry of Tourism MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions) promotion strategy.

Voices from the Cities

As Cities, our core mandate is service delivery. Data has helped us replace assumptions with evidence and make better decisions for our communities. It also helps us prioritise where services are needed most, ensuring that all communities are reached more fairly.

Representative, Fort Portal City



The data helped us identify properties that were outside the tax system and improve revenue collection without increasing taxes. Most of our revenue growth now comes from property tax, a dataset we had previously not fully captured because the data was not clean and usable.

Representative, Fort Portal City



Waste data helped us see value where we previously saw garbage. It showed that plastics, metals, and organic waste can be managed differently, which has opened opportunities for businesses, revenue, and green jobs.

Representative, Jinja City



When we brought real data to the table, decision-makers listened and increased support for young people with disabilities. Everything can be achieved when we use data.

Representative, Jinja City



Policy Recommendations

National Governments

Establish urban data governance frameworks to guide city-level data use and sharing.

Invest in digital and geospatial infrastructure to enable evidence-based urban planning.

Support structured capacity development for city data and AI systems.

Development Partners

Prioritize long-term investment in city data ecosystems over short-term pilots.

Support co-designed innovation partnerships between cities, universities, and technology actors.

City Governments

Institutionalize data-driven planning, budgeting, and service delivery.

Digitize core urban systems, including property, tourism, and service records. The priorities can vary per city.

Establish dedicated city data units to coordinate analytics and decision support.

Lessons for Scaling and Implementation

The experiences from Fort Portal and Jinja also highlight the importance of peer learning among cities. Sharing practical experiences across cities demonstrates that data use cases not only improve local decision-making but also generate transferable lessons that can support wider urban transformation across emerging cities in the region.

Political and technical leadership commitment is essential for successful implementation and sustainability.

Citizen engagement strengthens ownership and improves service outcomes.

A use-case approach enables practical learning and faster implementation.

Early wins with high-return use cases (e.g., revenue) build trust and momentum for scaling.

Data transformation should be viewed as a joint learning process between cities and implementing partners.

Data, technology, and innovation must be complemented by attention to behavioral and social factors, including incentives and barriers to adoption.

Strategic oversight and a shared vision are critical for coordination and alignment.

About DataCities

DataCities is a collaborative initiative supporting data-informed urban governance in Fort Portal and Jinja Cities in Uganda. It works with city authorities, universities, private sector actors, NGOs, and national stakeholders to co-design and implement practical data systems and AI-enabled use cases for urban planning and management.

The initiative focuses on three priority areas:



Tourism



**Waste
management**



**Revenue
optimization**

It emphasizes long-term co-design, local ownership, and practical applications that strengthen decision-making rather than standalone technological solutions.

The initiative is possible through funding support from the Hewlett Foundation.

