



UIA Fourth Call for Proposals: Policy trends from the proposals under the topic of Digital Transition



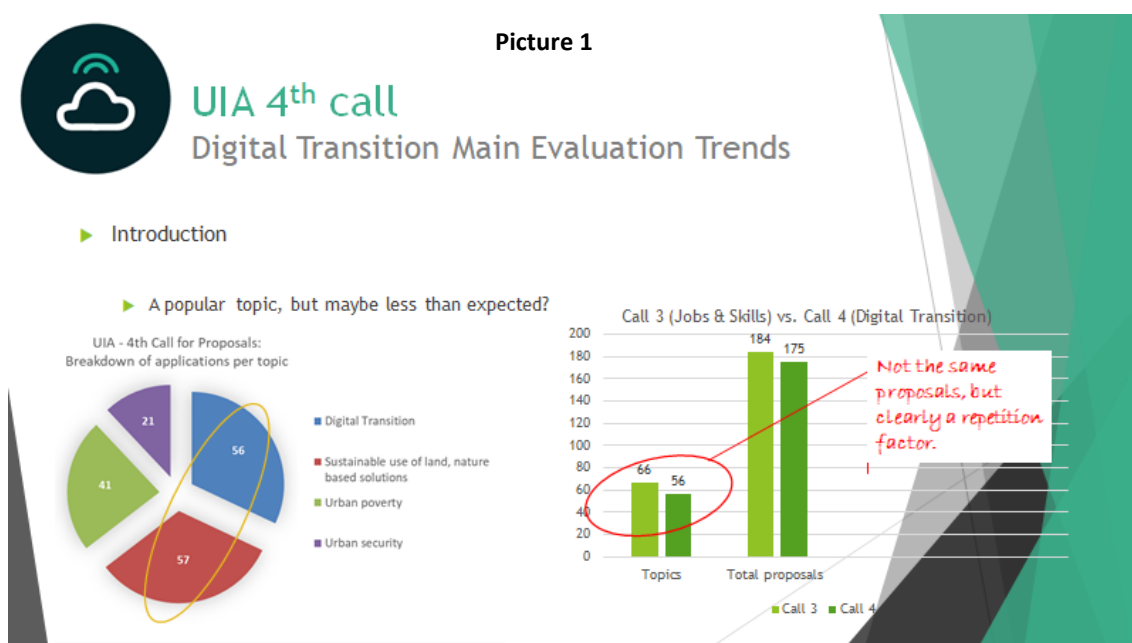
Author: Eurico Neves (Topic Coordinator)

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Introduction

The topic of “Digital Transition” has been introduced for the first time in the Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) Initiative as one of the 4 topics of the 4th call for proposals. While the topic is new to the Initiative, it must be said that digital transition aspects had already been addressed by several proposals presented under other topics in previous calls (especially Jobs & Skills), as it is to be expected given its transversal and enabling character.

A total of 56 proposals for this topic have been received (with 53 being considered eligible) under the 4th call, representing a bit less than one third of the total number of proposals received for the 4 open topics (175). While the number of received proposals is very relevant, especially in view of the expected number of funded proposals (about 20 in total for the 4 topics) and allows a good selection, it is possibly behind expectations given the acknowledge importance of the topic for EU cities in the present time. It is in fact similar to the number of proposals received for the topic of Sustainable Use of Land (57) and slightly below the number of proposals received for the topic of Jobs and Skills in the previous call (see picture 1).



The total number of proposals received in the 4th call continues the declination trend since first call (378 proposals for 4 topics) and accentuated in call 2 (206 proposals for 3 topics) and 3 (184 for 4 topics). This reduction can be considered as normal, as cities become more aware of the high demanding levels of the Initiative and the difficulties of having a project approved, that increase the complexity of developing a competitive proposal. But on the other side, a leverage effect could also be expected from one call to the next, with the approved projects and their results serving as motivation for others to apply. Until now this effect is not visible, which could justify a greater emphasis on communication and promotion of results so far from the side of the Initiative.

In relation to the Digital Transition topic, and while this new topic has attracted a number of first-time proposers to the Initiative, a large number of applications comes from cities who had applied (and in some cases succeeded) in other topics. The fact that the total number of proposals received for this topic and for Jobs and Skills in call 3 are relatively similar and with a lot of common applicants seems to show that there starts to be an established ‘clientele’ for the

Initiative, that is aiming to capitalize on previous experience of proposal development. This trend is in part inevitable and is felt in other more consolidated programmes (as H2020) but should nevertheless be addressed by the Initiative that should strive to encourage a higher number of new applicants. Possible ways to do this are e.g. through the establishment of a network of National Contact Points (NCPs), that can ensure promotion and other tasks (e.g. training on how to prepare competitive proposals) at national level. Most programmes encourage such NCP networks that work mostly with national funding and some support in-kind (e.g. by providing speakers) or in limited funding from the EU programmes.

The call for proposals for this topic kept the 'bottom-up' approach and didn't set any mandatory subtopics or activities but put a clear emphasis on the six Action Clusters of the European Innovation Partnership and/or the Digital Transition Partnership. Several topics and issues were listed, that pointed towards 6 main sub-areas of intervention:

- Citizen centric e-government across sectors, including data access and sharing;
- Smart cities solutions including integrated infrastructures with adoption of digital emerging technologies;
- Integrated planning and regulations for urban services;
- Development of sustainable districts and support of rehabilitation, heritage or new development areas;
- Sustainable urban mobility;
- Business models and business friendly environment, including procurement, finance, skills, promotion of specific sectors, etc.

The 53 evaluated proposals can, with more or less difficulty, be framed into one of these areas. Overall there is a clear distinction between proposals with a more 'open' or horizontal approach (especially those targeting e-government and data sharing, but also infrastructure, mobility and business models) and others with a more 'narrow' focus on a specific issues (typically those dealing with planning and regulations and sustainable districts), being that some proposals in the first group are sometimes difficult to frame in a specific subsector or set of objectives, due to their more open approach.

This also makes it difficult to compare proposals and could lead to some unbalances in the overall evaluation. More 'open' proposals tend to score better in Innovativeness and lower in measurability, and the opposite happens with closer, more focused proposals, that can also depend on smaller partnerships and rely on specific (often proprietary) solutions for handling specific issues, which can also raise transferability concerns.

Overall, this difference of approaches is not necessarily a bad thing, especially with a bottom-up approach, and a good proposal will always stand out from the rest, as it happens in this evaluation, regardless of whether it has an open or focused approach. But a possible way to minimize the unbalances, while keeping the bottom-up approach, would be to clearly list subtopics in the call and ask proposers to indicate in their application to which they are applying. This way it would be easier to compare proposals and better acknowledge the possible differences in approaches across the subtopics.

The challenges

The 53 applications evaluated have a good spread across the subtopics identified above, as shown below in Picture 2.

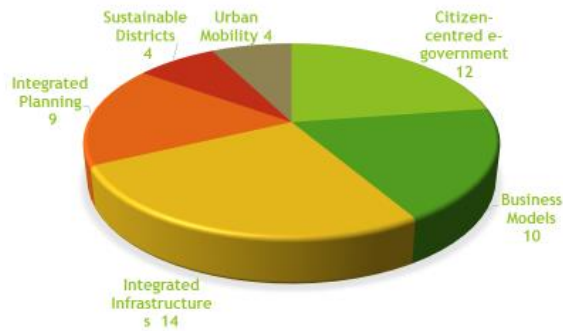


UIA 4th call

Digital Transition Main Evaluation Trends

Picture 2

- The Focus: proposals from all subtopics addressed in the call



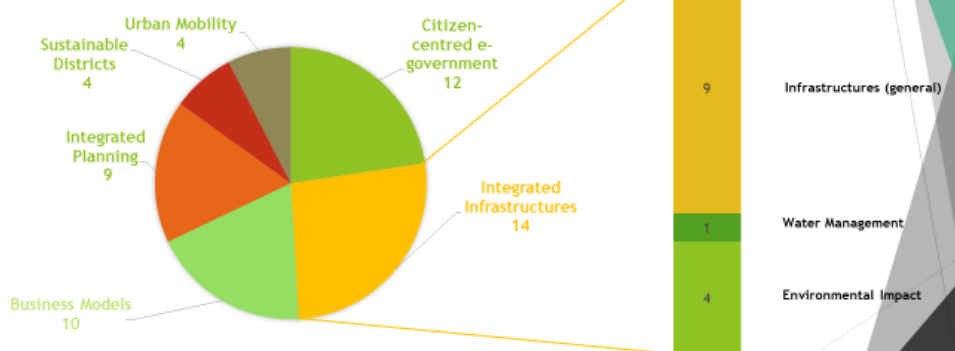
- But not always a clear focus. Maybe to ask proposers to explicitly indicate sub-topic?

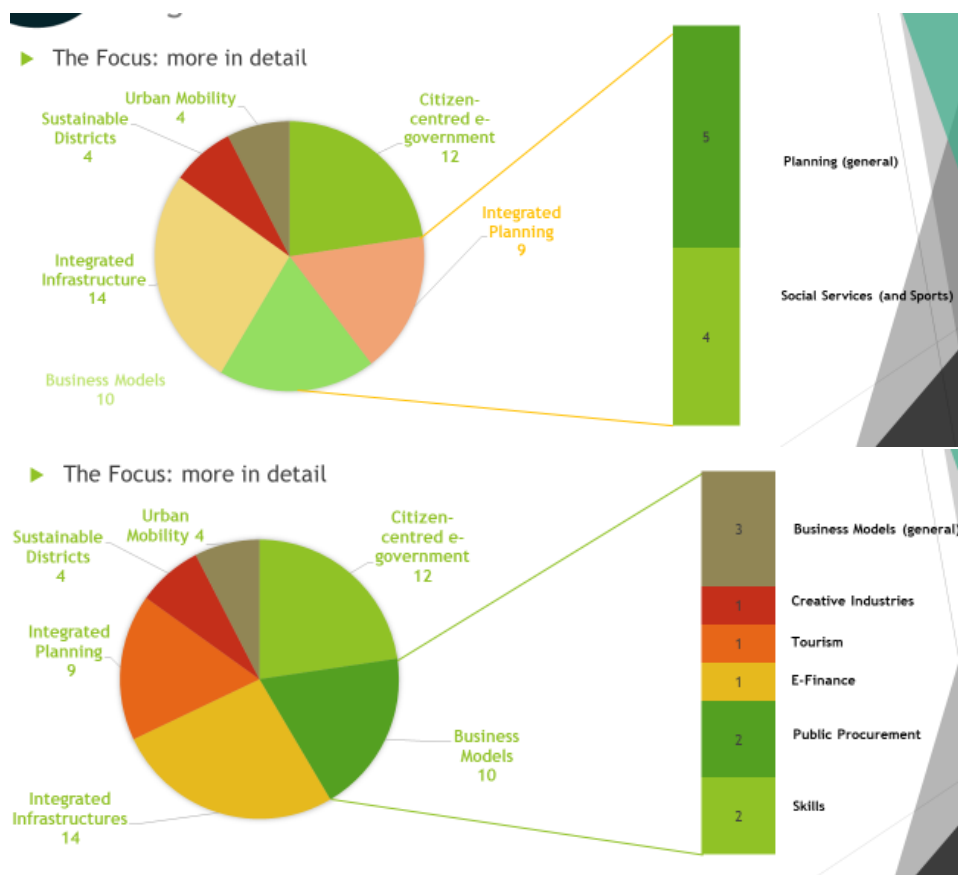
The larger number of proposals falls on Integrated infrastructures (14), Citizen centric e-government (12), Business Models (10) and Integrated Planning (9). The proposals under 'Citizen centered e-government' are open, broad and mostly ambitious approaches of opening and sharing give data to city for better city management, setting up open data integration systems for access by multi-purpose applications. Proposals on Sustainable Districts focus on the use of ICT platforms and tools to improve quality of living and/or facilitate rehabilitation of specific areas, and out of the 4, 3 are in Italy. Proposals on Urban Mobility are either from large cities/metropolitan axis or from smaller towns with a focus on transport methods, such as electric vehicles or user platforms.

Integrated infrastructure, integrated planning and business model proposals all cover a relative wide range of topics and sectors, as shown below in picture 3:

Picture 3

- The Focus: more in detail





The proposed solutions

The proposals in this topic have demonstrated an encouraging level of innovation in the opinion of the evaluators, especially in comparison with other topics in previous calls such as Jobs and Skills, with an average score on Criterion 1 (Innovativeness) of 2,6 (out of 5) and with 10 proposals (18,8%) having been scored 5 in Innovativeness by at least 1 evaluator. Some of the most innovative solutions are highlighted below:

Citizen centric e- government:

The most innovative concepts come a proposal focused on the emission of blockchain tokens as a reward for involving citizens in supporting city hall tasks (with the major innovation coming from the scale of the experiment) and from one that introduces the concept of digital pollution and the need (for the city) to curate data for its citizens in the same way that a museum's curates art, according to certain criteria, for the public to enjoy.

Other addressed concepts, but in a less innovative way, included again the use of blockchain (1 proposal), Artificial Intelligence assistants (2 proposals), data (or big data) platforms/hubs or data-driven policy frameworks (5 proposals) or 'Citizens Relationship Management' tools (also called User Journey, 2 proposals).

Integrated Infrastructure:

The highest ranked proposal in this subtopic addressed it from the perspective of comprehensive single data interface for multiple data sources, with a focus on the participation of public service operators (public transport, energy).

Other issues covered, with different degrees of innovation but never above average in the opinion of evaluators, included user sustainable behaviors in energy consumption (e.g. through tokenization) in 2 proposals, creation of physical spaces or nodes (e.g. for promotion of blockchain adoption) also in 2 proposals, data analytics platforms (4 proposals), modular charging points (1 proposal), optical networks or platforms for smart lighting (2 proposals), water management platforms and green corridors (1 proposal each).

Business Models:

Proposals broadly addressing new, digital-enhanced, business models cover a wide range of issues. The highest ranked proposal is focused on digital public purchase processes and is rather unique in this approach, but one other proposal also covers new procurement processes. Other proposals cover aspects such as enhancement of digital skills (2 proposals), digital literacy (1 proposal), promotion of creative industries (1 proposal), promotion of e-finance (1 proposal), tourism (1 proposal), business model thinking (1 proposal) or promotion of business environment (1 proposal).

Integrated Planning:

There are two proposals from this subtopic amongst the high ranked, of which one in Building Regulation (Building Information Modelling software) and one on automation of social subsidies.

Of the remaining proposals, another 4 also covered automation of social grants and subsidies (in one case extended to sports activities), and 3 urban planning at general.

Urban Mobility:

There was one proposal under this subtopic with a strong score in Innovativeness and addressing data-sharing for increase intelligence in urban mobility in a major metropole. There was one more proposal in a similar topic, but with a greater emphasis on adaptive incentives for sustainable mobility behaviors that was considered as less innovative. The other 2 proposals under this subtopic were both in the area of smart route planners, with one proposing to collect data through a dedicated fleet of shared electric vehicles while the other followed a more open approach based on user data.

Sustainable Districts:

Proposals under this topic looked at Digital Transition as a way to improve quality of live or rehabilitation of special districts. This included a high-ranked proposal with a tech-based regeneration project for a specific quarter, but also proposals based on the development of new digital tools for the mapping, monitoring and preservation of cultural heritage, and on the application of circular economy based on digital tools to a specific district.

Extracted lessons

Finally, and to conclude this document, a few lessons extracted from the coordination of the evaluation of the topic of Digital Transition in the UIA 4th call:

- First of all, on the evaluation process itself. The model with two evaluators and one Topic Coordinator has worked very well, allowing to move fast (with two individual evaluations per proposal) but having the Topic Coordinator intervening whenever there was a disagreement between the two evaluators. Evaluators were generally in line, and

there was only the need for a handful of skype ‘consensus’ between the evaluators and coordinator. All deadlines were met;

- Second, on the nature of projects and partnerships. UIA projects should be city-led projects, and this was the case in the large majority of proposals, but in some (few) proposals the influence from Universities, Research Centres, or companies was nevertheless visible, with these organisations being the ‘main force’ in implementation and sometimes the largest beneficiary. This trend is more visible in more focused or technologically based proposals (similar to H2020 projects) which are more likely in this topic. These situations have been spotted and remarked in the evaluation, but it is nevertheless important for UIA to continue to stress the message that projects should be primarily from cities and aimed at cities (and citizens).
- Finally, on the broadness of the topic. As mentioned before, while the topic is unquestionably relevant, its broadness and inherent complexity can ‘scare off’ a few cities, or tempt them to handover leadership to technical partners, as mentioned above. The quest for innovation (which is one of the main aims of the Initiative) can also push away cities that haven’t yet deployed the basic infrastructure (sensors, networks – which should normally be implemented with national/regional funds) and as such cannot aim for subsequent (and more innovative) layers. These can be prevented, at least in part, by a clearer definition of subtopics (which can have different levels of innovation) and also by the inclusion of more examples in the call text.

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