

10 Key Takeaways from the GovTech 4 Impact World Congress 2026

What three days in Madrid revealed about the state of digital government and where it needs to go next.



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1,000+

Registered
Participants

57

Countries
Represented

99

Speakers

3

days

The third edition of the **GovTech 4 Impact World Congress** closed in Madrid on **7 May 2026**, bringing together more than **1,000 registered participants** from **57 countries** across three days of keynotes, panel sessions, fireside chats, and working forums led by **99 speakers**.

From the moment **Ori Lahav**, *CEO of Kenes Group*, opened the Congress with a challenge to every person in the room:

"Take one thing home, one idea, one decision you will make differently."

It was clear that G4I 2026 was designed for practical action.

Every session was anchored in real-world implementation, and the conversations that continued in the corridors, at the networking reception, and over coffee proved just as consequential as those that happened on stage.

This year's edition was also a Congress of firsts. Together, these moments marked that G4I has moved well beyond a forum for discussion and into a platform for coordinated action.

A CONGRESS OF FIRSTS

- 01** The official launch of the WEF GovTech Compass — ten principles for responsible, citizen-centred digitalisation.
- 02** The inaugural GovTech4All Awards ceremony on the Main Stage.
- 03** The first-ever Mayors Leadership Forum — which produced a GovTech Manifesto signed by city leaders from across Europe and the United States.

Here are the ten ideas that cut across sessions, speakers, and conversations — the themes that defined what digital government looks and feels like in 2026.

01/10

The real barriers to digital transformation are not technological — they are institutional

This was perhaps the most consistently repeated message across the entire Congress, and it came from voices as different as **Laura Gilbert**, *Senior Director of AI at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*, **Carlos Santiso**, *Senior Advisor on Digital Government and Artificial Intelligence with the Directorate of Public Governance of the OECD*, and **Valeriya Ionan**, *Independent Strategic Advisor to the Minister of Defence of Ukraine and the Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine (voluntary, non-executive)*.

Laura Gilbert, drawing on her experience building the UK government's AI incubator, was blunt about **where transformation actually stalls**. The problem is rarely the model or the tool. **It is the inability to define the underlying service failure before reaching for a technological solution**. She described how governments fall into the trap of announcing an AI initiative - an "AI pharmacist," for example, before clearly articulating what harm they are trying to prevent or what citizen need they are trying to meet. The result is innovation theatre: **technically impressive, operationally meaningless**.

Carlos Santiso framed the same challenge from a systemic perspective, arguing that **the most persistent failures in GovTech stem from decisions made around design, procurement, implementation, and oversight, not from the technology itself**. His opening in the Expert Committee Plenary set the tone for the whole Congress: **digital transformation is a governance challenge first and a technology challenge second**.

Fernando de Pablo, *Digital Office Director of the City of Madrid and a member of the G4I Expert Committee*, reinforced this from the perspective of public administration. In his view, **technology should never be the goal**. It is a tool for improving society and its success should be measured not by technical sophistication, but by **whether it produces tangible public value for the people it is supposed to serve**.

02/10

AI is only as good as the data and processes beneath it

Three of the Congress's most substantive sessions — the opening Expert Committee Plenary, the AI in Action panel, and the AI in Public Services session, all arrived at the same conclusion from different directions: **AI cannot fix broken systems. It can only accelerate what already exists, for better or worse**.

Ana Rita Pereira, *Public Sector Verticals Leader for Europe, Middle East & Africa at Microsoft*, offered one of the Congress's most memorable formulations:

Governments do not scale with AI — they scale with data.

Her argument was that the shift **from e-government to digital government to what she called "frontier government"** requires more than deploying large language models on top of existing workflows. It requires re-architecting the underlying operating model. If the data is fragmented, siloed, or low quality, AI simply amplifies those problems at speed.

Albert Tort, *Secretary of Telecommunications and Digital Transformation of the Generalitat of Catalonia*, described his government's approach to AI as **deliberately unglamorous**. Rather than chasing headline use cases, **Catalonia has focused on procedural simplification and process re-engineering first** — recognizing that AI is only one part of the solution, and often not the most important part. His concept of "silent AI" (technology so well integrated that citizens and public servants no longer think of it as something separate) was one of the most practically useful ideas of the Congress.

Rafael Fassio, *State Attorney and Lead Counsel for Science, Technology, and Innovation for the State of São Paulo*, added a cautionary case study from Hospital das Clínicas, one of the largest health complexes in the Southern Hemisphere. When São Paulo attempted to build a data lake for AI-supported research, they discovered the hospital had more than 60 different systems collecting and processing patient data. The AI ambition had to pause while the underlying architecture was resolved. **His conclusion: if data is still being collected on paper, sophisticated AI aspirations are premature.**

03/10

Procurement is a strategic policy instrument — not an administrative procedure

Procurement reform was one of the most recurring and arguably most underappreciated themes of G4I 2026. It surfaced in the opening Expert Committee discussion, in the GovTech Compass launch session, in the Beyond Legacy panel, and in the GovTech4All municipality pilots, and each time, it was framed **not as a bureaucratic process but as a political and strategic instrument that shapes markets**, determines which innovations get adopted, and decides who can participate.

Idoia Ortiz de Artiñano, CEO of GOBE Studio and a panellist at the GovTech Compass launch, offered the sharpest formulation:

"If you are not procuring outcomes, you are procuring problems."

Her argument was that governments often write tenders around static feature lists rather than desired results, locking themselves into rigid contracts that cannot adapt as technology evolves. **She also challenged the assumption that outsourcing is a substitute for thinking.** Without internal capability to define, evaluate, and learn from what is being built, procurement becomes an abdication of strategic responsibility rather than an exercise of it.

Miguel Porrúa, Digital Government Principal Specialist, Inter-American Development Bank, USA and member of the Expert Committee, consistently pushed the discussion toward execution, towards the gap between knowing what to do and making it institutionally possible. **Marina Manzoni**, EU Policy Officer at the European Commission and moderator of the AI in Public Services session, described the risk management logic that should precede any procurement: **governments must understand what they actually need**, what risks they are taking on, whether a solution is technically feasible, and whether citizens will accept it — before a contract is signed, not after.

Tiago Carneiro, Senior Digital Development Specialist at the World Bank, added a data-driven warning: an analysis of approximately six million procurement notices worldwide showed that **actual government procurement of generative AI remains limited** despite widespread claims of piloting. More concerning, he warned of the "freemium" trap - vendors offering low-cost or free entry points that become deeply embedded in workflows, making future switching costly and difficult. Unlike private firms, **public administrations often lack the flexibility to renegotiate once locked in.**

04/10

Trust is not a communications exercise — it is a design requirement

If there was a single word that appeared more often than any other across the three days of G4I 2026, it was trust. But the most useful contribution the Congress made was to strip that word of its vagueness and turn it into something operational.

Audrey Tang, Right Livelihood Award Winner and Taiwan's first Digital Minister, opened the Congress with a session that reframed trust as a systems design challenge. In conversation with **Laura Gilbert**, she argued that the biggest "bug" in democracy today is low bandwidth. Traditional electoral systems gather public input only intermittently, and therefore cannot process complex, rapidly evolving policy questions. Taiwan's response, which she described in detail, was to move toward what she called "plurality": **designing digital systems that surface areas of agreement across divided publics rather than amplifying conflict.** Her account of Taiwan's response to deepfake financial scam advertisements, using structured democratic engagement with hundreds of thousands of citizens to generate policy proposals that achieved high public support and were enacted rapidly, was one of the most practically instructive case studies of the Congress.

Christine Bellamy, Interim Director General at the UK Government Digital Service, brought the trust question into the present tense of service delivery. Her central argument was unambiguous: **trust begins with whether services actually work, end to end.** A beautiful digital front door that leads to a six-week wait for a decision does not build trust — it destroys it. She described GDS's approach of measuring trust as a core performance indicator alongside uptime and cyber incidents, reflecting a recognition that trust is not a vague aspiration but a measurable service outcome.

She also raised one of the most forward-looking concerns of the Congress: **as AI agents increasingly mediate citizens' interactions with public services** - through WhatsApp, commercial assistants, or third-party platforms, **governments risk losing the visible accountability that trust depends on**. Her warning to governments: if you do not define your place in this ecosystem, the ecosystem will define it for you.

Carlos Santiso gave the trust deficit concrete shape: **only around 40% of respondents trust governments to regulate technology in the public interest, and fewer than 54% trust governments to use data for its intended purpose**. He argued that transparency is a prerequisite for accountability, but also noted how rarely it is operationalized. Only a minority of countries have enforceable transparency standards for public-sector AI, and even fewer maintain functioning public registries of algorithms used by government.

05/10

Local Governments are where digital transformation either works or it doesn't

Local government emerged across the entire Congress as the decisive implementation environment for GovTech — not as a supporting actor, but as the primary stage where services either reach people or they don't.

The breadth of city-level innovation on display at G4I 2026 was striking. Madrid presented eight live initiatives across its Digital Capital strategy: an AI-powered building **permit platform** designed to reduce approval times from over two years to six months; a digital **participation platform**, Decide Madrid, with **over 500,000 registered users and €325 million in participatory investment commitments**; a loneliness **detection program**, Paloma, using AI to screen and support over-75s living alone; **an employment platform** redesigned around individual citizen pathways; **a city-scale traffic simulator adapting signals** to pedestrian flow in real time; and a **Strategic City Simulator** drawing on 192 indicators across 37 public data sources to support long-term urban planning.

Beyond Madrid, Córdoba in Argentina, represented by **Ignacio Gei**, *Secretary of Smart City and Digital Transformation*, presented one of the most operationally detailed case studies of the Congress: **a complete platform-based legacy transformation** that replaced approximately **40 disconnected systems**, reduced average service resolution times **from 20 days to 4 days**, moved **70% of citizen requests online**, and generated estimated savings of **over \$5 million in the first year**.

Carlos Santiso reinforced the structural argument: the most meaningful innovation in government happens at city level, where institutions interact directly with residents. **Jonas Onland**, *Chief Vision Officer at Serendipity Tech and member of the G4I Expert Committee*, put it plainly:

"GovTech really needs to bring these worlds together [the public and the private sector]. And that's what the event is all about."

The inaugural **Mayors Leadership Forum**, chaired by **Rian Van Dam**, *Mayor of Hollands Kroon*, and bringing together city leaders from **nine cities** including **Poznań (Poland), Bristol (UK), Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Granada (Spain), Mount Vernon (New York, USA), Kranj (Slovenia), Düsseldorf (Germany), Las Rozas de Madrid (Spain), Slatina (Romania), and Madrid City Council**, produced **the GovTech Manifesto**. This is a shared framework positioning cities and regions as active market shapers in the global GovTech ecosystem rather than passive technology buyers.

06/10

Crisis accelerates what comfort never could

Valeriya Ionan's keynote, titled "*Innovating Under Pressure: From Digital State to Agentic State*" — was one of the most quietly extraordinary sessions of the Congress. Presenting from the perspective of **a country under active military conflict**, she described how the pressure of war had not just sustained Ukraine's digital transformation agenda — it had fundamentally accelerated it.

She traced Ukraine's trajectory **from 102nd place in the UN E-Government Development Index in 2018 to 5th globally today**, and described the Diia ecosystem — a super app now serving 24 million users with more than 80 services — as **a platform that had to reinvent itself in real time under wartime conditions**. When missile attacks forced citizens into shelters, Diia embedded TV and radio broadcasts. When millions were displaced, it launched a digital IDP registration and financial support service within weeks. When the government needed to finance the war effort, it enabled citizens to buy war bonds directly through the app.

But beyond the platform itself, her description of Ukraine's innovation model was perhaps the more significant lesson. In 2022, Ukraine had seven drone manufacturers. Through rapid regulatory reform — changing more than 30 resolutions in four months — and the creation of the Brave1 defence-tech cluster as a matchmaker between state needs and private-sector capability, that number grew to approximately 600 producers by 2026. The innovation cycle in Ukraine, she said, is three to six months. Products are tested in real conditions, iterated continuously, and judged on immediate relevance.

The takeaway for governments operating in far less extreme circumstances was clear: **urgency, leadership, and a clear public mission can compress years of transformation into months**. The conditions do not need to be extreme — but the intent does.

07/10

Digital identity is foundational public infrastructure — not a niche policy topic

The session on digital identity — bringing together **Pramod Varma**, *Co-Founder & Chief Architect, Networks For Humanity; Co-Creator, FINTERNET & BECKN; Co-Chair of CDPI, India*; **Jana Krimpe**, *Founder and CEO of B.EST Solutions and TOP100 Influencer in Digital Identity worldwide*; **Désirée Houghi**, *Co-CEO of Procivis and Head of Corporate Development at Orell Füssli Ltd*; **Alexander Iosad**, *Director of the Government Innovation Policy team, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change; United Kingdom*; and **Alex Wong**, *Senior Advisor, Strategic Engagement and Initiatives; Office of the Secretary-General; International Telecommunication Union (ITU), Switzerland* — made clear that digital identity has moved far beyond a specialist policy domain.

Pramod Varma reframed the entire conversation with a single insight: **identity is not meaningful because it is issued — it is meaningful because it is usable**. India's Aadhaar programme was never primarily about identity as an administrative concept. It was about inclusion: giving hundreds of millions of people a way to prove who they are across contexts, so they could open bank accounts, receive welfare, access services, and participate in the formal economy. The system was designed with radical minimalism — collecting only what was necessary, keeping costs to approximately one dollar per person — and linked immediately to a high-value use case, which drove adoption at scale.

Désirée Houghi described the EU's eIDAS 2.0 framework and the coming rollout of EU digital identity wallets as a paradigm shift away from identity controlled by large technology platforms toward a user-centric model in which citizens hold their own credentials and disclose only the minimum necessary for any given transaction. Her age-verification example illustrated the principle:

Jana Krimpe brought the implementation realities from Estonia and African contexts, where she has worked extensively. Her most forceful point was on sustainability and vendor dependency: **many externally funded digital identity programmes in lower-income countries are left without the budget, internal competency, or ownership to maintain them once initial financing ends.** Her proposed remedy — open-source infrastructure, strong local private-sector capability, in-country technical competence, and public-private models designed for political resilience — is as relevant in Europe as it is in Africa.

Alexander Jossad connected digital identity directly to the emerging reality of agentic AI: **governments will increasingly need robust ways to verify** whether an AI agent is acting legitimately on behalf of a real individual and with valid consent. In that sense, digital identity may become not just a citizen convenience mechanism but a foundational requirement for governing AI-mediated public services.

08/10

Scaling from pilot to production is where most GovTech initiatives fail

The gap between a successful pilot and a sustainable production service was one of the most practically discussed challenges of the Congress — and one of the most honest.

Jaume Miralles, *Director General for Artificial Intelligence, Efficiency and Data in Public Administration of the Government of Catalonia (DGIA)*, was direct: **many organisations run too many pilots without enough filtering of purpose**, sometimes duplicating the same idea across units.

For any pilot to have a realistic chance of scaling, it needs a defined business purpose, a responsible owner, a committed budget, and a path to production that includes integration, maintenance, change management, and operational accountability — from the very beginning, not as an afterthought.

If production takes one or two years after a successful pilot, the solution may already be obsolete.

Kelly Ommundsen, *Head of Digital Inclusion, GovTech, & Regulatory Innovation; Member of the Executive Committee World Economic Forum and moderator of the GovTech Compass launch session*, framed the challenge in terms of the conditions required for scaling: **interoperability, modular architecture, replicable solutions, clear governance, and committed resources.** Without those foundations, even technically excellent pilots remain stranded at proof-of-concept stage — impressive to present at conferences, but invisible to citizens.

The GovTech4All Awards, presented for the first time at G4I 2026, were themselves **a direct response to this problem: a platform designed to give visibility to the collaborations that have already moved beyond pilots and are delivering measurable public value in production** — from Portugal's AI-powered national ICU data infrastructure to France's child welfare coordination platform Le Fil and Greece's AI-powered tax accessibility service No One Left Behind.

09/10

Sovereignty is not about owning the entire technology stack — it is about maintaining control

Digital sovereignty was debated across almost every track of the G4I 2026 program — in the AI sessions, the identity session, the Beyond Legacy panel, and the dedicated industry session on digital workplace sovereignty featuring EducaMadrid's **Adolfo Sanz de Diego**, who described how the Community of Madrid has built **a fully sovereign educational digital platform serving approximately 2 million users** from its own hardware, open-source software, and internal civil service team, at a cost of approximately three euros per user per year.

But the most useful reframing of sovereignty came from **Kelly Ommundsen** and **Leanne Cummings**, *Director Products and Services, Government Digital Service, United Kingdom*. Both argued against a binary definition — **the idea that sovereignty means owning the entire stack or nothing at all**. Instead, they described sovereignty as a continuum: a set of deliberate, strategic choices across governance, infrastructure, model selection, and procurement that together preserve a government's ability to protect its systems, adapt its services, and act in the public interest — regardless of where the underlying technology originates.

Leanne Cummings described interoperability as equally central to sovereignty:

Governments that lock themselves into vendor-specific architectures, however powerful, lose the strategic flexibility they need to adapt.

She was candid that the barriers to interoperability are rarely technical. They are cultural, incentive-based, and organisational. Every department optimises for its own metrics, and cross-government integration requires someone to own the problem at a level above the silo.

Carlos Santiso added a data dimension: **sovereignty also means people's sovereignty over their own data** — a model of stewardship, authorisation, and legitimate reuse rather than state ownership for its own sake. In a world where digital identity, health records, welfare decisions, and AI-generated outputs are all converging, the question of who controls what data, for what purpose, and with what accountability is not a technical footnote but a democratic question.

10/10

The future of government will be built collectively — or not at all

The most consistent thread running through the entire Congress, from Ori Lahav's opening address to the GovTech Manifesto signed at the Mayors Leadership Forum, was **a rejection of the idea that any single institution, country, or sector can navigate this moment alone**.

The challenges are too interconnected. Geopolitical instability is disrupting the cross-border collaboration that digital transformation depends on. AI is evolving faster than any single government can track. Citizens are raising harder questions about trust at the same moment that the tools available to answer those questions are more powerful than ever. **And the knowledge needed to respond — about what works, what fails, and why — is scattered across institutions, cities, and experiences that rarely get the chance to talk to each other.**

G4I 2026 was built around the conviction that those conversations are worth having — and that having them in the same room, with the right people, changes things. As Jonas Onland observed, the formal sessions matter, but so do the informal connections:

The corridor conversations, the networking reception, the moments of honest exchange between people who are navigating the same pressures from different corners of the world.

The GovTech Compass — ten principles for responsible, citizen-centred digitalisation, developed by the **World Economic Forum's Global Future Council** and launched at the Congress — is one expression of that collective effort. **The GovTech Manifesto**, produced by the **Mayors Leadership Forum** and signed by city leaders from nine cities, is another. And the **GovTech4All Awards**, recognising the public-private collaborations that are quietly transforming public services across Europe, are a third.

What connects all three is the same belief that has underpinned G4I since its first edition: the answers to the hardest questions in digital government already exist. The work is not to invent them. The work is to connect them.

The fourth edition of the GovTech 4 Impact World Congress will be announced in the coming months. To stay connected and be the first to hear about G4I 2027, visit g4i-congress.com and follow us on social media.

