



Publication: Financial Mail - Inside
Title: WHY WE REALLY DO NEED SMART CITIES
Publish date: 22 Sep 2022
Page: 67

Reach: 12673
AVE: R 82302.42
Author: Penelope Gregoriou

**COLLECTIVE
INSIGHT**

Penelope Gregoriou



WHY WE REALLY DO NEED SMART CITIES

Beyond their economic and social possibilities, smart cities are an opportunity to overcome the brutal apartheid legacies of spatial planning and economic exclusion

When I first heard that there were plans to build SA's first smart city, I rolled my eyes for a good two minutes. In the face of inadequate basic service delivery for most of the population, why are we prioritising a city with hi-tech devices and a faster internet connection?

Admittedly, this was a naive and ignorant perception. I underestimated the potential and creativity that smart cities have to offer. Beyond the economic and social possibilities they may bring, the ambition for these new cities is an opportunity to overcome the structural legacies of apartheid such as spatial planning and economic exclusion.

The master plan of one of the cities, from the department of public works & infrastructure, states that it aims "to be inclusive of the broadly defined SA socioeconomic spectrum". Though this is an ideal that would be assumed to be automatically inherent in a democratic SA, we don't have to look far to see that this is not the case.

While the drive for better service delivery in our existing communities should not lose momentum, there is a symbolic meaning of a fresh start that a new city creates.

What are smart cities and how can they help?

But what are smart cities? Deloitte says a city can be defined as "smart" when investments in human and social capital and traditional transport and modern (ICT) communication infrastructure fuel sustainable economic development and a high quality of life, with wise management of natural resources.

Ultimately, it is a city that balances the political, social, cultural, economic, technological and environmental spheres through agile governance, strong social cohesion and economic development. Its fundamental objective is to improve the quality of life and wellbeing of its citizens.

At face value, this sounds like what any society aims to do. But the difference is in the means of how the goal is achieved. What makes smart cities relevant is how they bring together three of the major trends taking place globally in contemporary society: mass migration to big cities and their continuous growth; the digital revolution; and the growing power of data and information.

Smart cities could, in fact, help rectify the social, economic and environmental issues of the urbanisation process. This is especially important for Africa, where the Organisation for Economic Co-operation & Development has forecast that the total population of Africa's cities will grow by 950-million over the next 30 years.

Technology could improve issues in urban transit, housing, water supply, construction and security, among others. New innovations that lend themselves to the smart city model in other emerging countries such as Kenya, Nigeria and Ghana provide a suitable case study for how they are addressing urban challenges. Additionally, Africa is being referred to as the "next big market" by multinational IT companies because of its rapidly growing economies.

While most technologies might seem incompatible with the pressing local needs of the Global South today, it's not unreasonable to assume that the next generation of innovative and more inclusive services and products will come from it. Understandably, technology is limited and weak political, infrastructural and social institutions can't be fixed with an app.

However, beyond improved physical infrastructure there are social infrastructure benefits to smart city models that can be leveraged, such as more collaborative ecosystems, co-habitation and social cohesion.

Public-private-civic partnerships

What is the role of the private sector in a public initiative such as smart cities? A significant one. It is an ambitious project and one that is capital intensive. The deployment of capital and resources is critical to the successful rollout of smart cities and what they can accomplish. Considering the limitations and shortcomings of the state, the resources, insights and skill-sets that businesses have can be mobilised to fill the gaps.

And it wouldn't be a completely altruistic exercise, either. The move towards this "smart vision" presents a variety of benefits that can ultimately benefit business and its bottom line. According to a study conducted in 135 cities by ESI ThoughtLab, a thought leadership and economic research firm, the successful implementation of smart technologies and mobility systems can lead to economic competitiveness, increased productivity and better public services.

These benefits, coupled with the prospects of a more economically and socially mobile citizenry, can support innovation and the creation of a more financially inclusive society.

The social, political and economic state of SA today is a far cry from the future hoped for 28 years ago. But smart cities are an opportunity to start from a blank canvas that is devoid of the painful history that still taints the present. They could lead to a new way of life for a shared, sustainable future. **x**

