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## Smart cities in the global south: a path to prosperity or irrelevant luxury?

Tags: Infrastructure, Trade, Cities, Urban, Economic Development

The key questions for policy makers and implementers on smart cities



Leo Johnson, PwC, presents opening provocation at the roundtable

Do 'smart cities' bear relevance in the burgeoning cities of the global south? Basic infrastructure and service provision shortfalls faced by many southern cities present a challenging context for 'smart' solutions; and certainly contrasting to those of many existing 'smart cities.'

Yet the growth of Asian and African cities is already being shaped in a fundamental way by global megatrends in technology. The impacts of these megatrends are diverse and far-reaching. On the one hand, digital technologies have accelerated growth, expanded opportunities, and improved service delivery. However, their aggregate impact has fallen short and is unevenly distributed.

Within the multitude of opportunities and risks resulting from these megatrends, can 'smart cities' present a meaningful way to make growth in the cities of the global south sustainable, equitable, and inclusive?

In March, the ICED facility convened a roundtable on behalf of DFID to explore this critical question. Experts from across the public and private sector sought to identify opportunities and barriers to 'smart cities' in the global south, and the role donors and other stakeholders could play.

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Roundtable participants described what smart cities need to be in the global south

Discussion opened with an exploration of what smart cities might mean in the global south. While there was coalescence around a number of key concepts, particularly inclusivity and a requirement to be 'needs' driven, a number of key questions emerged for actors in this space to consider.

**What is the economic case for smart cities?** It will be increasingly important to identify the economic impact of smart cities and align 'smart' solutions as an enabler for these impacts (rather than technology being the starting point). This includes evidencing the economic risks of ignoring 'smarter' options and locking cities into outdated modalities of planning, infrastructure, and service delivery. Taking a needs driven approach to 'smartness' will be crucial in the global south, where immediate needs are vastly different to those cities where many 'smart' solutions have traditionally originated.

**What are the required pre-conditions and 'enabling environments' for 'smart' approaches?** Participants noted that 'smart' solutions have the most impact where there are suitable governance and finance conditions. In order for 'smart' cities to be relevant and effective in the global south, the approach needs to encompass equivalent efforts to improve governance, establish suitable business models, and grow local capabilities.

**What does 'smart' look like at different scales, geographies, and sectors?** The impact of 'smart' solutions have to be assessed depending on a number of context specific determinants across scale and sector. What does 'smart' look like across different urban populations, GDP scenarios, and in the context of different regional and national economies?

**Who are the key stakeholders in driving smart solutions?** Different actors have different roles to play for smart solutions to be effective. Enabled governments, private sector innovation, civil society participation, and academic research will all underpin the effectiveness of 'smart' solutions in the global south. How can each be aligned, and what opportunities for involvement are there across different scales?

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More needs to be done to better understand the role of 'smart cities' in the global south, and the role of donors in this space. While the answer will always be defined to a large extent by context, sweeping global megatrends in digital technology will be critical in shaping cities in the coming decades.

By beginning to answer these questions, a narrative around 'smart cities' more relevant to the global south can emerge, presenting an important opportunity for donors to guide cities towards more sustainable, equitable and inclusive economic growth.

*ICED and DFID will be sharing more detailed findings from the roundtable in a summary paper, due for publication in June 2017.*