

Taking a step back: How we can truly realise our future smart cities

By [Sithole Mbanga](#)

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Most people enjoy a bit of science fiction, a little make-believe about what could be possible in an imagined future where scientific or technological advances and major social or environmental changes occur. It makes sense then that our beliefs, and hopes, for the idea of South African smart cities exist. A construct that has been around for almost three decades - the first smart city came to be in Amsterdam in 1994, after it created the concept of a virtual digital city - a smart city suggests greater, better things that make our cities more efficient and provide a better quality of life for those who inhabit it.



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So much are our aspirations pinned on developing smart cities within the next 10 to 20 years, it has been highlighted in our president's Sona address for three years in a row now, with Lanseria being envisioned as "the first new city to be built in a democratic South Africa".

This interest from the presidency on how smart cities can aid many of the country's social, economic, and sustainability issues – not to mention the vision of high-speed rail, glossy new buildings and fast technology - is encouraging. But the primary challenge is turning idealisation into actuality, and it's here where we need to take a closer look at what a smart city in the South African context is.



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Fiction vs reality

Firstly, a smart city in the local context does not only refer to its technological advancements or digitisation, although that of course is key to being 'smart'. It refers to being better at delivering basic services to our people, and making cities more inclusive. Both of those points seem simplistic in concept but in reality are far from being fully realised. Providing an ample amount of affordable energy is a case in point.

Secondly, even if a city is smart in design, such as Cornubia City in Durban, it may look impressive on paper and have smart elements, but it needs to be holistically smart where the built environment works better for everyone who makes use of it. It also needs to be more inclusive, and not only focus on the inner-city, or CBD as it used to be known, and suburbia. Townships and rural spaces also make up the bare bones of a smart city and need to be included in its early design and integration.

Then there is that issue of who'll pay for this mass development across the country, turning once vacant greenlands into burgeoning metropolises (which in itself is an ecological challenge as there is an environmental contest to consider for any new build). Right now, there is no fiscus to speak of to enable this ideation. Government certainly cannot pay for it on its own, as such the private sector needs to be engaged and brought on board.



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Look after what we have already

Further, we need to balance out what will happen to our existing cities when these smart cities come online, quite literally. Managing 'crime & grime' has been a central theme for local governments for years, with or without smart cities on the cards. Consider the inner-city of Johannesburg in 1994 when there was a huge capital flight of businesses to newly established suburbs such as Sandton. Several assets and buildings were left unattended by city authorities and their building owners. It has taken decades to regenerate the inner city of Johannesburg, even though this is isolated to areas such as Braamfontein, Newtown and Maboneng.

This needs to be a learning; once we build a new smart city, we leave another part of the old city to decay, and it becomes a zero sum game. When conceptualising and then building smart cities, there should be no detriment to what already exists. If you look at Cape Town's CBD, 20 years ago it did not look like it does now. There was a commitment between the public and private sectors to not let the city turn to crime and grime. It took 25 years to make Cape Town look like it does today – the V&A Waterfront for instance is no accident – although, thanks to the rage of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is once again teetering on the brink of having derelict streets and empty office blocks. Hopefully this will be relatively short-lived and the Mother City will regain her global, cosmopolitan character.



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Local governance is essential to enabling smarter cities

One must also not forget that it is city governments that are driving smart city projects and interventions; implementation happens at the local level, despite the interest from the presidency. Thus, the concept of smart governance is central to enabling smart cities, and innovation combined with digital technologies to improve government service delivery and societal inclusion is key.



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Managing the dynamics of smart cities also requires new models of governance, as well as strong coordination by government to support cooperation among citizens, private organisations, non-governmental organisations and other government entities. Further, the idea of smart governance is the ability of government to make better decisions through the combination of ICT-based tools and collaborative governance for the purpose of achieving developmental mandates.

If we are to fully realise our future smart city aspirations, we first need to focus on what we have by addressing systemic issues of service delivery and inequality. We cannot build an Elysium when our existing cities are falling apart around us. We first need to fix the rot, then re-focus our vision, employing the best the fourth industrial revolution has to offer, while shifting our thinking towards a human-centric approach to unlock opportunities for all South Africans, not only those who can afford it.

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