CALL FOR SMART CITIZENS TO TRANSFORM DYSFUNCTIONAL URBAN ENVIRONMENTS

Is South Africa, or indeed the entire continent, ready for its first so-called smart city? South African President Cyril Ramaphosa certainly thinks so, using his State of the Nation Address on 20 June to refer to his "dream of a South Africa where the first entirely new city built in the democratic era rises, with skyscrapers, schools, universities, hospitals and factories … The city we build must demonstrate democratic spatial planning; it must also be a smart city and illustrate that we are in the Fourth Industrial Revolution."

However, President Ramaphosa's remarks sparked a debate about smart cities in an African context. "We do not need a new city. We need our existing cities to work," argues Paragon Group Director Henning Rasmuss, who was a key speaker at the Bigen Smart City Conference in Pretoria. The conference focused on issues such as harnessing smart urbanism to drive transformation of cities, bridging the digital divide in sustainable development in the information age, and how best to realise urban mobility.

"We need to fix sewerage flowing into rivers and poisoning the drinking water, unfortunately because drinking water provision is failing for many. We need to fix housing and transport in the cities we have. Fix safety and security. Fix hospitals and the training of medical staff, and fix schools and educator training. Fix the scourge of corrupt officials. We have broken cities and demi-cities that blight our landscape. A shiny new city is the last thing we need," Rasmuss points out.

According to the IoT Agenda website, a smart city aims to optimise city functions, and drive economic growth, while improving the quality of life for its citizens using smart technology and data analysis. Importantly, the value derived from a smart city is what its citizens opt to do, and not the technology itself.

Here the main factors are a technology-based infrastructure, environmental initiatives, a high-functioning public transportation system, a confident sense of urban planning, and people to live and work within the city and utilise its resources. The backbone of a smart city is the strong relationship between government and the private sector.

Rasmuss highlights that, with the power generation constraints faced by the country, a smart city as envisioned by President Ramaphosa is impractical at present. "It is important for the people of this country to have a good life. If this happens to be in a smart city, so be it. But before we talk about a shiny new smart city, we need to be collectively smart about our political and management decision-making, and then our lives will already be a lot better. A smart city is built on the foundation of an already-working city. Many of our cities are only just working."

Here Paragon Group stands to play a vital role in driving the smart-city debate. "We can engage with our clients and with end users and our wider project community in order to make better-quality decisions. We can try to expand our mandates and the reach of our projects, in a setting where government is the weakest partner in its own initiatives. We can engage in debate and understand the high and lofty ambitions of the smart city and the technology behind it," Rasmuss argues.

"Then we can try to tune this ambition into an appropriate agenda for inclusion in our projects. Everything needs to be done at the correct grain or level of detail. We are working at a very rough or coarse grain here. Most importantly, each and every person in each not-so-smart South African city, and each and every team member in the Paragon Group, can become responsible smart citizens."

Linked to the concept of the smart city is master-planning. "Long-term thinking underlies master-planning. As a collective, and as a nation, we suffer immensely from a lack of long-term thinking. Masterplanning is a headspace, and we are very far from the edge of that headspace. It is, of course, important. But we need to get into a better headspace. Integrated, coordinated planning is also important. But it does not get practiced easily in South Africa. Just look at the chaos of our cities," Rasmuss concludes.