From smart to good cities: shifting the focus from technology to quality of life

People now use a number of terms to classify cities. The commonly used 'smart city' is preferred by tech companies. But their idea of 'smart' focuses on big data collection and narrow technological monitoring. Alternative terms include liveable, healthy, sustainable, adapting, carbon-neutral, and inclusive. Each one has its own limitations. **Chetan Choudhury** *writes that the essence is simple: a city should be good to live in.*

It would not be an exaggeration to claim that in the world's current context, most people, if not all, want to live in a city. The comfort of urban life, the glamour, the job opportunities, the greater earning potential, education, healthcare, and other such benefits increase the charm of city life, thus drawing multitudes from rural settings into cities each day.

But with such constant influx of people, this so-called charm starts getting depreciated in the form of pollution, traffic jams, garbage, poverty, joblessness, crime, distance from nature, and so on. This keeps the idea of an 'ideal' city as a distant dream. Moreover, with as many preferences and viewpoints as there are people, can there be an ideal city that holistically caters to them all? If so, what is an ideal city?

Smart or good? Liveable or resilient?

We are at a stage where general public dialogue about the principles of better cities is critical. There should be a sense of urgency in moving beyond high-level concepts. But everybody has a different view of the ideal. For instance, the most commonly heard term is 'smart city', which is more a fixation of tech companies. Their idea of 'smart' focuses primarily on big data collection and narrow technological monitoring. McKinsey talks about 'smart growth', which contradicts the fact that some of the large cities like Chicago, Toronto and others are now shrinking in size. The Mercer Group champions the 'quality of living' concept while *The Economist* talks about 'liveable cities'. The World Health Organization speaks of a 'healthy city' while the concept of resilient city is backed by The Rockefeller Foundation. But governments tend to push the responsibility of resilience to the community for saving resources. The classification does not end here: there are sustainable cities, adapting cities, carbon-neutral cities, inclusive cities and so on, each one having its own limitations. But somewhere through the clutter emerges the essence behind all of this – a city should be 'good' to live in. After all, one may argue, of what use is a smart city if it is not a good city.

The principles for better cities

While pondering over the meaning of a good city, I am inspired by the four key principles enabling better cities, laid out by the ECOCITY World Summit. 'Better' simply extends the idea of good after putting it in the current context of the existing cities.

Ecology: cities should have a deep and integrated relationship with nature. This principle aims at enhanced focus on renewable energy, cleaner waterways, increased green cover, dedicated non-motorised vehicle lanes, priority to public over personal transport, green composting-driven waste management, and community food gardens in urban premises, among others.

Economy: cities should be based on an economy organised around social needs. This principle aims at the following: Shift the focus from global to local or regional economy, to economics-for-local-living, create distance from consuming products that are not produced regionally, bring workplaces closer to residential communities.

Politics: cities should have an enhanced emphasis on engaged and negotiated civic involvement. This principle addresses the following: democratically engage the community in every aspect of city development; adapt land-acquisition laws towards being more socially just and being sensitive to ecology and culture; constructively engage and reconcile with indigenous people, with non-profit government functions, civic, communication, education and other services being as subsidised as possible.

<u>Culture: cities should actively develop ongoing processes for dealing with the uncomfortable intersections of identity and difference</u>. This principle talks about an active and free ground floor for cultural performances, exchanges and interactions in residential and commercial facilities; a push for gender equality in all aspects of life; and museums and cultural centres highlighting development and keeping society connected with its roots, thus closing the gap between development and cultural traditions.

Such principles affirm that design and planning for a good city should respect the socio-ecological balance both locally and globally; respond creatively and reduce exploitation of our finite planet; and focus more on purposeful change instead of shallow directives, and on practical alterations that lead to redesigning systems that transform cities into ecocities.

Greater coherence with nature emerges as a leading theme in any such thinking around good cities. In fact, citizens can be gently guided towards redesigning our cities to increase such coherence over time. The key objective would be to slowdown and reverse the process of climate change, so a new way of living can be established where flourishing cities could go hand in hand with improving the biosphere.

By 2030, 60% of the world's population – a whopping 5 billion people – would be living in cities. Obviously, the scale of the impending transformation that cities are facing is unprecedented. Hence, they need ethical and sensitive innovation that does not sacrifice nature in exchange for short-term benefits. A good city would not be good only to humans but to the entire planet, endeavouring for sustainable, healthy, compassionate, and happy living.

It is time to shift the focus from pure technology to a more fundamental focus on improving the quality of life. A smart city should not be just about the number of cool technologies, sensors, and apps. It should be about how smartly it enhances its citizens' quality of life. Progressive governments can help catalyse this process by putting people at the centre of policy design so that they can understand needs and expectations of citizens before solving them.

When we no longer see the smartness of a city, and we just sense it – it is at this point that a smart city becomes a good city.

- *This blog post first appeared at LSE Business Review.*
- *Featured image: "" (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) by minusbaby*

Please read our comments policy before commenting

Note: The post gives the views of its authors, not the position USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: **https://bit.ly/3wRjoT8**

About the author

Chetan Choudhury
Chetan Choudhury is an advisor on innovation, citizen service delivery and govtech in the United Arab Emirates government. He was previously a strategy consultant with KPMG and Deloitte in the US, Canada, and the UAE.