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Smart cities and smart rural areas: Digitisation is not the first priority

What constitutes the “smart” element of a space or a place? We argue that “smart” does not equal digitisation. But if “smart” is not necessarily associated with digital solutions, what does it mean then?

At present, a large number of proposals for the sustainable and competitive future development of regions and locations seem to revolve around the “smart city” and “smart rural area” concepts. This reflection essentially refers to the application of digital solutions and the more efficient processing of data to improve economic, environmental and social development processes. In contrast, Mesopartner is promoting smart approaches that do not equate “smart” with “digital” only. The key criteria for spatial and economic development processes do not essentially lie in the technologies that are applied, but in the institutional structures and knowledge networks





created, where digital approaches become a means to an end (among others). We present three hypotheses that reflect our work and discussions on the topic.

1. Smart spaces are those that seek and find solutions to new challenges.
2. Smart cities and smart rural areas should not be considered separately but should complement each other through spatial approaches.
3. Truly smart spaces are those that experiment, allow diversity of ideas, and learn from and with each other. Here the terms “local ecosystem” or “innovation system” are often the buzzwords used.

Smart spaces are those that seek and find solutions to new challenges

Jane Jacobs was an urban planning expert who devoted herself to the question of understanding the development of places and cities. *“Dynamic places constantly reinvent*

themselves” is one of her arguments. Moreover, she argues that every city was once small, but unlike places that remain small, growing places differ by developing new solutions for burgeoning problems. Jacobs had a very holistic understanding of development that included economic, social and environmental aspects. She emphasised the endogenous potentials that need to be strengthened in a location.

Our work experience confirms that strengthening endogenous development potentials essentially depends on past development experiences, institutional structures, values and norms associated with them in the development process. This includes the self-image of individuals and groups that influence organisations, policies and the socio-cultural system and behaviours. Moreover, local development is influenced by national and supra-regional structures. Weak structures at national level are often reflected at the local level through



the weak performance of the education system, the decentralised political and planning structures, the promotion of creative thinking, the knowledge and innovation-oriented organisations and networks. This reflects the complex and systemic interdependence between local and national structures and their actors. However, the local level still remains the place where local actors can make a significant difference to their own reality by networking with each other and trying to do things differently. The different dynamics of spaces and places in a country ultimately depend on the extent to which they are able to collectively develop uniquely creative approaches to problem solutions.

Smart cities and smart rural areas should not be viewed separately but together

Rural and urban areas differ in their critical size, their internal development dynamics and their possible development approaches. Rural and urban areas show different combinations of development potentials and challenges. Development is context specific. The discussion on “smart cities” is very dominant, and always emphasises the future concentration of large parts of the world population in cities. However, the need to promote creative development in rural areas remains an important task for opening up development potentials and finding new solutions for rural areas.



This will also help to overcome populist tendencies that are predominantly rooted in rural areas (see Article 7, *Responding to the geography of discontent*). Initial approaches to smart rural areas are piloted, which refers to the opportunities that digitisation provides for the attractiveness of “living and working in the countryside”. Against this drive for digitisation, the need to strengthen innovative networks, educational approaches and explorative experiments in rural areas is receding into the background. At the same time, the opportunity to produce creative synergies between urban areas and their surrounding rural areas is overlooked. We have two views on this:

- Smart development approaches in urban and rural areas need to focus on learning from each other. Bringing urban experiences and creative solutions into rural areas (e.g. setting up innovation labs, co-working spaces, new business models, etc.) and rural concepts into the city (green spaces, recreation areas, urban gardening, etc.) enables the implementation of new creative and sustainable development initiatives and the strengthening of more “colourful” learning networks.
- Urban smart approaches often do not include the rural hinterland. Whether digital or not, spatial thinking that includes the city and its surroundings in the development strategy can also contribute towards reducing the urbanisation trend. “Smart” urban-rural concepts could offer the opportunity to better integrate different quality of life potentials and development approaches as well as to learn from each other faster and more effectively.



Truly smart spaces are not primarily based on digitisation, but on diverse and innovative structures

Mesopartner has been supporting actors who are keen on strengthening innovative structures and systems in local and regional areas. As we have been primarily working in developing countries, we have noticed the importance of considering evolutionary and complexity-sensitive endogenous development processes. The development discourse on “smart cities” and “smart rural areas” essentially emerged from the search for digital solutions and technologies for the development of metropolises. The search for solutions was driven by large companies such as IBM or by already innovative cities. In these metropolises,

the digital strategy is based on essential innovation structures. Leading “smart cities” such as Singapore, Amsterdam or London are also positioned among the first 10 innovative cities in international rankings. They have managed to establish a highly interactive innovation system. Very innovative rural areas also tend to base their development on qualified people, and access to good qualification and innovative network arrangements. The digital aspect must therefore be seen as one element in a set of approaches implemented by those cities and spaces rather than as the sole driver of “smartness”. The digital aspect is more an add-on to an intensive network of local knowledge transfer, general curiosity and a systemic relationship between people and organisations.



Many cities and rural areas in developing and industrialised countries lack institutional preconditions for innovative and creative structures. This not only refers to formal organisations such as R&D institutions or training and educational institutions, but also to informal learning and creativity networks. Development and funding approaches of donors need to be adapted more strongly to the absorption capacity and the technological capabilities of a space, its local actors and its meso organisations (see Article 10, *Identifying the meso organisations that strengthen technological capability*).

In conclusion, local development processes and the shaping of creative and innovative structures crucially depend on endogenous development conditions and efforts.

“Smart” does not mean “digital”, but the ability to pursue own development efforts, build learning relationships, and support creative organisations and their relationships with each other. Mesopartner wishes to contribute to the “smart” development discussion by strengthening the relevance of systemic and institutional considerations in our work.

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References

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