

VIEWPOINT

MARCOS ATHIAS NETO

# Designed for People: How Cities Can Leverage Technology and Innovation for Inclusive and Sustainable Development



A broad urban innovation toolkit is needed to ensure that no one is left behind, says Marcos Athias Neto, United Nations Assistant Secretary-General, Assistant Administrator and Director of the Bureau for Policy and Programme Support of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

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We are living in challenging and uncertain times. This year, one in four people in developing economies will be poorer than before the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only was 2023 the hottest year on record, but it was also a year of more conflict and displacement than at any point since World War II. Global inequality has risen while efforts to achieve the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are significantly off-track. At the same time, technologies such as Generative AI have raised both hopes and uncertainties over their transformative potential.

Cities, as local and national engines of innovation and economic growth, will be critical in driving sustainable development. Working across more than 120 countries and territories, the UNDP has seen that technology and innovation in cities, when applied with an inclusive and people-centred approach, can amplify the central role that cities play in the lives and livelihoods of billions of people around the world.

However, there are important, persistent, and growing disparities in the accessibility and application of innovation. These disparities demand a wholesale re-evaluation of how we leverage innovation and technology for urban development.

## Paradigm Shift in Urban Innovation and Technology

Often, technology is seen as a discrete solution to complex urban challenges—a panacea to tackle all city challenges. However, cities are increasingly recognising that technology is one tool in the urban development toolkit—one that requires a deeper understanding of the problems that urban residents are facing, and engagement with how technology can play a role in addressing these urban issues.

Central to the consideration of technology is the need to establish a common vision on the path forward, one which ensures that any technology used meets the needs and aspirations of the people it aims to serve. We need to accelerate a paradigm shift that moves beyond being led by technology, and instead focus on where it can have the greatest value.

Such a people-centred perspective requires a broad urban toolkit that includes high-tech, low-tech, or even no-tech solutions, such as nature-based solutions. This reflects the diversity of cities, their populations and priorities.



A rate collector processes a vendor's payment by scanning their QR code.  
Image: UNDP The Gambia

More importantly, this approach emphasises the necessity of involving communities from the outset and along the entire journey, recognising the role of each sector and the need for cross-sector collaboration.

Our UNDP team in The Gambia implemented this holistic approach in order to improve the functioning of the local market and increase city revenue collection. They worked closely with the Banjul City Council, private sector traders, and the city's university—exploring behavioural change interventions and analysing the user journey of different stakeholders. After experimentation and piloting of various digital solutions, they introduced digital registration and QR codes

for vendor stall identification. This was accompanied by hands-on training for all stakeholders involved. As a result, the city's revenue collection has increased by 25%, and the national government is looking to scale this approach to other regions in the country.

### People-Centred Technology and Innovation Put into Practice

A more thoughtful and inclusive application of technology and innovation can have important and exciting multiplier effects.

For example, the Con Vos (meaning 'with you') initiative developed by UNDP in Argentina has shaped a network of local shopkeepers who are actively involved in assisting residents with online administrative procedures, either by guiding them through the process or by handling the procedures on their behalf. As a result, more people in these neighbourhoods are using digital public services. This is saving local residents time and money as they no longer need to travel long distances to government offices. Interestingly, shopkeepers are seeing increased revenue as residents increase their spending when visiting shops for digital support. It has shaped a hyperlocal community-led feedback loop, contributing to reducing the digital divide and fostering digital inclusion.

This grounding of technology and innovation in local contexts and communities is also especially crucial in identifying the challenges that these tools may pose. Digital technologies, in particular, can exacerbate inequality and can also sometimes create new harms or risks. Safeguards that tackle these and related digital issues are essential. Cities, for example, have seen an increase in cyber-attacks ranging from ransomware to data breaches. Recognising this, UNDP is working across cities and countries to map cyber security standards to identify how

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best to enhance policy, regulation, infrastructure, skills and institutional measures to strengthen cyber security protection at the local and national levels.

### Cities as Active Players in Driving the Sustainable Development Goals

Having passed the halfway mark toward the 2030 deadline for achieving the SDGs last year, we need to re-double our efforts to get the global community back on track. About 37% of the SDGs are stagnating or even regressing, and only 10% of targets are heading in the right direction for SDG11: Sustainable Cities and Communities.

Technology and innovation can play an important role here if we apply these tools thoughtfully and inclusively. Research by UNDP and the UN's International Telecommunication Union has highlighted, for example, that digital technologies directly help in achieving 70% of the SDG targets.

We are reimagining and shaping the future of cities. Inaction is not an option. The current situation demands that we adopt a new paradigm of sustainable urban development—one that emphasises the inclusive and people-centred application of technology and innovation. In driving this new way of thinking and working, we can tackle existing urban challenges, engage with new frontiers, and respond to the evolving needs of city residents. With 2.5 billion more people due to live in cities by 2050, this paradigm shift could not be more urgent. 🗨️



Con Vos (With You) Network in Fray  
Image: UNDP Argentina

UNDP is organising a session—*Designed for People: Expert Insights on Building Smarter Cities*, at the World Cities Summit 2024, on 4 June at 9:00 a.m. Visit UNDP's website to find out more about their work on smart cities and urbanisation.