

Transforming Mogadishu in an Age of Smart-city and Interconnectivity

by Mohamed Mukhtar Ibrahim



Being a member of the panel that discussed “Transforming Mogadishu in an Age of Smart-city and Interconnectivity” at the Mogadishu Tech Summit, I met young people who show an extraordinary zeal and commitment to make the city a better place. From restaurateurs switching over to point-of-sale systems to entrepreneurs learning online bookkeeping skills and educators teaching using online courses, the rate at which Somalis are using technology to run their organizations more efficiently is gathering momentum.

Well, what is a smart city? Your guess is just as good as mine; the concept smart city means different things to different people: To solution providers, a smart city is smart parking, smart lighting or smart payment. City officials may say it’s about conducting city business online like searching records or applying for permits. City residents may tell you it’s the ease of getting around, or about crime reduction. The truth is all of them are right. They may not necessarily think of their city as a smart city, but they sure know it is a place they want to live in, work in and be part of. A smart city is a city built on technology but focused on outcomes.

Mogadishu, just like many other cities in the world, has been exposed to global opportunities, enabling citizens to expand and grow their businesses in ways never before possible. While the Dhaweeye, the Uber version of Mogadishu, matches a customer with a nearby driver and take the customer wherever they want to go, the Electronic Virtual Cash (EVC) enables people to transfer and receive mobile money. However, it has been a long time coming for the city which has a rich history spanning over 1000 years. Yaqut al-Hamawi who lived between 1179 and 1229 described Mogadishu as “the richest and most powerful city in the region and a strong Islamic centre across the Indian Ocean.” On the other hand, Ahmed Jama who studied the development of Mogadishu from AD 1000 to 1850 denoted Mogadishu as “one of the main coastal ports prominent in early trade.

Despite its rich history, Mogadishu has suffered significantly in the last 30 years. If Mogadishu is to reclaim its lost glory and become a smart city, security threats must be minimized and infrastructure must be improved. Electricity, which is like a rare gem in Somalia, must be made affordable as currently the cost per kilowatt in the Somali capital can cost as much as \$1. The dilapidated roads need to be upgraded into all weather roads to enhance accessibility by motorists and improve mobility. The heaps of rubbish and litter everywhere must be eliminated by having a waste disposal system that can change the city’s landscape. Mogadishu’s desire to become a smart city cannot be realised without addressing the major environmental problems that the city currently faces. This can be achieved by tapping into the most important element in the city’s success, human capital.

The Centre for Globalization and Strategy from Barcelona’s IESE Business School ranks the performance of 165 cities across 80 countries based on nine fundamental categories that are the necessary dimensions of a healthy modern city in the 21st century. They include: human capital, social cohesion, the economy, governance, environment, mobility and transportation, urban planning, international outreach, and technology.” Transforming Mogadishu into a smart city is a process that can be equated to building a house; the final product is as a result of keen layer after layer construction. While bricks define layers of a house, the ecosystem of a smart city is comprised of multiple “capability layers”. The notable similarity in both is the need to have integration and coordination among the ingredients

that hold up the layers. It is a fallacy to expect Mogadishu to become a smart city overnight; this is not magic, it is a process. Purposive effort is required to develop a new set of engagement models, rules, financing sources and partners.

There can never be an opportune time for us to begin the journey of transforming Mogadishu into a smart city, the time is now. These past decades have been tough. And there will no doubt be difficult months ahead. But the storms of the past are receding, the skies are brightening, and the horizon is beckoning once more.

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