Really smart cities ignore Smart City rankings

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SEPTEMBER'S publication of the IMD Smart City Index 2020 led to the usual flurry of news reports with cities variously preening or wringing their hands at the results, such as Dhaka, Helsinki, and Budapest, to name just a few. For those cities that slipped down or, worse still, did not appear at all, we would like to offer some consolation.

The IMD Smart City Index is one of many. In research carried out at UNU-EGOV, we identified more than 25 such indices developed by different organisations with different purposes in mind. Some are developed by researchers trying to measure very specific aspects of smart cities, while some are developed by companies for commercial ends, and others are created by global organisations with developmental goals in mind. The indices gauge a wide range of indicators and consolidate the measures using different methods. What this means is that if your city performs poorly on one index, you may well perform better on another. There is no absolute truth when it comes to smartness.

Indices depend on underlying models of smart cities. These models typically identify a few dimensions of smart cities, such as transport, economy, and infrastructure, and then develop sets of indicators to measure how smartly the city operates in each of those dimensions. For example, the IMD Smart City Index considers five dimensions: health and safety, mobility, activities, opportunities, and governance. Which dimensions are considered important and how they are measured determine how cities get ranked, but the model that any particular index uses may not reflect the most important dimensions of city functioning or actual progress in your city.

In fact, it is highly unlikely that any index uses a model that is relevant to your city. The models in use are particularly problematic for cities in developing, low-income contexts. For example, such cities may be most concerned about providing adequate housing or reducing inequalities in service provision. If an index is based on a model that was developed for a developed, high-income context, where something like housing is taken for granted, the chances are that the index will ignore this issue. This means that a city may be making great strides in improving in the dimensions that matter locally, but such efforts will not be reflected in the latest ranking index.

So, while the results of such rankings receive a lot of attention in the press, they have little relevance for how a city should approach becoming smarter. Being a smart city is not about how your city ranks on a smart city index; it is about how well your city is using smart technologies to address the problems that matter and improve its way of functioning. Striving to meet the requirements set by an external standard simply means giving away your city's autonomy.

A news report on Bangladesh's Dhaka city failure in the IMD Smart City ranking makes the point that Dhaka is a very densely populated city where the basic amenities are not adequate. Indeed, one spokesman is quoted as saying that providing services for all at low cost is more important than becoming smart. This comment illustrates the danger that smart city rankings pose by creating a narrow definition of what it means to be smart. The narrow view of smart cities is that they are attractive, modern, high-tech spaces filled with shiny new buildings and slick transportation systems. And this leads many cities to conclude that becoming smart is either not for them or beyond their reach, or even not relevant given the more basic challenges that they must address first. But that view also means that cities which have the most challenging problems and most need the power of smart technologies to address them, do not even try to become smarter. They see smart as something to be tackled after they have gotten to the stage of functioning.

Another way to view smart cities is to see how smart technologies can be used to improve any aspect of the functioning of a city in many innovative and unusual ways. What this means is that any city can—and should—be working towards being

An example of a contextually smart solution is Kabadiwalla Connect, a set of mobile apps that have been developed in India to address urban waste.

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smarter, especially those that face the difficult challenges of providing basic services and infrastructure to growing populations with constrained resources. There are very smart solutions being developed and deployed in such cities, the majority of which would not show up in many of the international rankings.
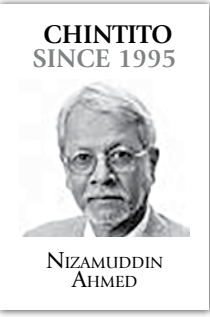
An example of a contextually smart solution is Kabadiwalla Connect, a set of mobile apps that have been developed in India to address urban waste. The goal is to improve the conditions for informal recyclers and to educate people about the need for recycling. Traditional smart waste management solutions focus on the routing of trucks to collect rubbish, automated waste sorting and detecting how full bins are. That approach is fair for small, neat towns in the developed world. In the large, messy cities of the developing world, city waste collection services are usually inadequate; for instance, there are not even enough trucks to go around. Under these conditions, informal recyclers or "pickers" have emerged; these are people who collect, sort and deliver recyclables to collection points. By using technology to support their micro-businesses, it is possible to improve city recycling rates, decrease uncollected waste, and provide a better income for the people.

Work-horse information systems that automate government administration can also be smart. In many cities, poor service delivery results from employees being paid late or not being paid at all. Often, problems arise in manual systems where money must pass through many hands, some of which are dishonest. In Nigeria, the implementation of integrated personnel and payroll systems for government employees resulted in cost savings as "ghost workers" were identified and removed from the payroll, and bank transaction costs were reduced. It also removed payment delays and decreased corruption as more employees received direct payment into their bank accounts, eliminating opportunities for money to go missing. Implementing such information systems can be difficult, but they have the potential for significant improvements in government services.

These kinds of solutions are not sexy. Indeed, they are far from the image of a modern, high-tech city. But they are smart. Implementing such systems can solve real problems in cities, positively affecting the experience of city living for many people. In the process, they build knowledge and skills within the local government, which can be used to develop the next smart solution. When smart cities are understood only as sexy applications of high-tech, money can get diverted into showcase projects that benefit only a small group of the city's residents—which is not very smart.

A really smart city needs to be looking for ways to deal with real problems, determined by their internal planning and monitoring of the state of the city while looking at how smart technology can effectively help. Technology offers many ways to understand city problems better, reduce costs, tailor services to individuals, speed up processes, and improve communication between city stakeholders. Harnessing these capabilities of technology in innovative ways is what it means to be a smart city. Whatever the rankings may say.

Big chunks of rubbish float at the top

CHINTITO
SINCE 1995

NIZAMUDDIN
AHMED

US president-elect Joe Biden's meticulous selection of office-bearers for various portfolios should make one realise the importance of competence. Contenders are rife with relevant education. Those lacking in institutional training make the field with vast work experience. And all are reputed as cogs in a working team. Yet, each nominee is open to public scrutiny and criticism, and at the butt of political rivalry. Furthermore, the multi-party Senate will have a final voice in several of the key positions, meaning national interest comes first. That's a lot different from Donald Trump's America First.

A self-inflicted ill-fated country, Bangladesh included, may allow circumstances to go beyond its control; by choice, would you believe? Some persons therein may reach the pinnacle of an office without having adequate aptitude, pertinent education, or meaningful work experience. How the *dozokh* do they manage that? Well, they have favour-mongering *dulabhais* at the right places, often for an exact price.

Some appointing authorities are tickled when their profile is blown out of proportion. Several heads of institutions are gullible to the extent that they can be preyed upon by the underqualified manipulators. And, yes, some are indeed conniving relatives, within and outside wedlock. The phrase "more than brother" could have its origin in these halls of injustice.

By all means a politician should head a ministry to safeguard national interest, but he must groom himself for the responsibility. Some indeed do. The problem lies with the bureaucrats, who are supposed to steady the various ministries. If both are depending on "general" general knowledge, then we the people could be in trouble.

Fortified in his acquired citadel, today's financial expert is tomorrow's authority on fisheries, and the day after tomorrow, a transformed connoisseur of music and movies. No, he will not be manning the cultural ministry. That is for the one who knows not the difference between prose and poetry.

Why should anybody accept any position? Reasons of being thrust to power in the absence of a suitable candidate, or "I am my uncle's nephew", are not acceptable.

The first question any respectable person should ask is, "Can I deliver?" Donald could not "Make America Great Again" in the line of his partisan thinking due to contradictory philosophies of selective inclusion and exclusion. More often than not, all that a country needs is unity on its central themes instead of discord.

I have given this matter some thought, and may I cajole you to do likewise, since anybody could be appointed to anywhere. If I were to be offered a ministerial position, I would have to refuse the portfolio of "health" because checking my blood sugar does not make me an authority on diabetes. Although I have visited 50 countries, I would hardly be able to manage Biman's fleet and so I would have to pass "civil aviation" too. Although the ongoing pandemic has afforded me time to enrich our roof garden, "agriculture" is still not my vegetable soup.

We have seen larger-than-life "specialists". During the reign of one long-disserving despot, design competitions were staged to select the consultant for different government buildings. Architectural works were then few and far between. Almost the entire fraternity of architects thereby sweated to produce schemes, drawings and 3D cardboard models. As a rule, they were victims of state-sponsored scams.

Reportedly, the day before the design proposals were submitted and the make-believe competition got under way, the firm that was able to create an unholy rapport, would clandestinely show the model to the "chief executive". During the actual evaluation, since it was an important project, the "boss" would be invited to shed his opinion. After a hint of drama, he would single out the model he had earlier seen from amongst 30 others as the "winner".

What took weeks to conceive, develop, and render was decided in half a minute. The laboured evaluation of the jurists was ridiculed. The hard work of the architects was futile. Professionalism took a backseat. But, above all, the country was being fed to the dogs. A dictator cares naught for the values that make a great nation. It took a mass movement to remove him and his cohorts. The head that wears the crown by force is a man disrespected.

Such misdemeanour trickles down. Last week the Health Directorate conducted a written examination among 24,000 candidates to select Medical Technologists. Held after 12 years, many of the examinees were aided by mobile calls, the Internet, and copying. Proxy was common (jagonews24.com, December 12, 2020).

There are no further crosschecks. Never wonder again why SSC dropouts run our hospitals, how diagnostic laboratories are hostage to fraudsters, how a businessman can conduct radiography, why radiotherapy can run alongside a mobile outlet, how physiotherapy can be executed by a dental technician. Ouch!

Yet, we are not alone in shunning professional excellence. British virologist Dr David Matthews, who has studied coronaviruses for 30 years, lamented that he was not contacted by the government when the pandemic began. He was part of the only UK team working on human coronaviruses when Covid-19 first surfaced in China (Sky News).

By definition, a professional engages in works that call for intellectual effort, rather than mere mechanical dexterity. Penned perhaps by an architect, an engineer, a medical doctor or a lawyer, by that count, Leonardo Messi would be an amateur. Diego Maradona too was an artist without any proven talent with paint and brush.

It is the service provided with integrity and the attitude that defines a professional. Thereby, a degree-*dharee* may turn out to be the most non-professional entity that there ever was. Isn't that more often than not?

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Fuss
7 Pouch
11 Overrun
12 Lotion additive
13 Name
15 Stylishly quaint
16 Young ones
18 Dogsled command
21 Farm sight
22 Flyer's woe
24 Hoopla
25 June honoree
26 Seventh Greek letter
27 Gad about
29 Hive group
30 Canada flag feature
31 Hardens
32 Gads about
34 Stepping down
40 Steel ingredient
41 One of the Nixons
42 Firecracker sound
43 Unwavering

DOWN
1 Bridge action
2 Binary digit
3 DVRs connect to them
4 Bob, for one
5 Borders
6 Budget item
7 Didn't participate in
8 Boxing great
9 Pigeon sound
10 Boxer Norton
14 Ready for war
16 Kind of wave or basin
17 Unaccompanied
19 Winter weather
20 Despises
21 Shop tool
22 Pickle buy
23 Argon or ethane
25 Clear, as a windshield
28 Bold
29 Closest bud
31 Stylish
33 Hill insects
34 History span
36 Abel, to Adam
37 Glacier Makeup
38 Derrick output
39 Opposing vote

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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BEETLE BAILEY
BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES
BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT