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Bridging the Development Gap Through Smart Cities in ASEAN



Singapore's Electronic Road Pricing (ERP) system was one of its early initiatives which leveraged on information technology to manage road congestion.

Photo Credit: Courtesy of Flickr account of Tomoaki INABA and used under a creative commons license.

Resilience and innovation are the themes for Singapore's chairmanship of ASEAN this year, to achieve the twin goals of regional order amid emerging security challenges, and greater regional economic integration and connectivity.

An initiative proposed by Singapore, which has received support at the recent Foreign Ministers Retreat this month, is the development of an ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN).

We argue that this has potential to contribute to the long-term goal of regional economic integration, bridging development gaps, especially if further cascaded to other cities in future, while avoiding pitfalls in the process of becoming smart cities.

Unequal development as challenge to regional integration

Since 2003, an ASEAN Economic Community has been envisioned to be a single market and production base, within which goods, services and in-

vestments can move freely. Potential benefits include reduced production costs; specialization and greater efficiency among firms; and expanded markets for ASEAN firms, to further regional prosperity and competitiveness.

However, the path towards regional integration is not easy, as some countries may be too underdeveloped to participate and compete in the regional market economy. For instance, out of the 628 million people in ASEAN, between half and two-thirds are estimated to not have access to basic internet services. This prevents companies, especially micro, small and medium enterprises, from reaching markets in more developed countries in the region. Other challenges include natural disasters, traffic jams, and unstable supply of water and energy, which make it tougher to do business in these countries.

Bridging the development gap through smart cities

ASEAN cities, where the urban population is expected to grow by more than 90 million people by 2030, are slowly becoming the centres for the region's development.

Yet, the challenges cities face today, such as environmental degradation, natural disasters, or sufficiency and stable supply of water, can worsen in the future if urban congestion is accompanied by impacts of climate change. These can make a city less ideal for doing business, and thus less competitive in the regional economy.

Singapore's proposal to develop an ASCN, whereby ASEAN countries commit to collaborate towards developing a 'smart and sustainable urban environment' in up to three cities per country, is timely.

A 'smart' city seeks to increase the use of information technology to achieve objectives it sets for itself, whether it be to help reduce production costs/increase productivity of firms, reduce the risk of losses

from natural disasters and health risks, address congestion, or even reduce energy bills. Examples of these smart city applications include improved flood control and disaster recovery through mobile communication services in Tainan, Taiwan, as well as Singapore's own Intelligent Transport System for detecting accidents and providing real time traffic information.

ASCN-designated cities thus have the potential of having better structural conditions, and in turn, becoming more competitive in the regional economy.

Leading the way

Having three new smart cities per ASEAN country is not enough. To be effective, cities involved in this initiative should be the starting point for further transformation across other cities in the ASEAN member countries. These first cities should serve as guideposts for other cities within each country to follow.

Before that, though, it will be important to ensure that the smart technologies to be employed do

not themselves become the causes for disruption or lack of resilience. The challenge in fully automating and networking functions like energy or traffic management, is that this makes the city vulnerable to hacking and cyberattacks. For instance, Ukraine's grid was downed for several hours, while Haifa's (Israel) toll-road disruption lasted eight hours. Similarly, as some argue, it will be important to ensure that cities be as energy efficient as possible in smarting-up, to ensure that they do not end up contributing more to climate change, in the process.

Singapore can lead this digital revolution among ASEAN cities, having had its own Smart Nation initiative since 2014. As ASEAN chair, it can also help facilitate support for other countries, cities and institutions that make up the collaborative ASCN effort, towards addressing the potential pitfalls raised.

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27 March 2018
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5-7 March 2018
Paris, France

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21-22 May 2018
Washington D.C.



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8-11 May 2018
Singapore

4th International Global on Public Health Conference 2018

13-15 June 2018
Colombo, Sri Lanka



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24-25 May 2018
Montreal, Canada

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Krakow, Poland

**Conference on Crimes
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16-19 April 2018
Texas, USA

HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND DISASTER RELIEF



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