INSIGHT

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Jim Hagemann Snabe says creative solutions to the problems of resource overuse and inefficiency will make cities better places to live – and information technology can help

Today, more people are living in cities than in villages. The United Nations estimates that about 52 per cent of the global population of 7 billion live in towns and cities. By 2030, this will swell to almost 5 billion, or about 60 per cent of the estimated global population of 8 billion, with urban growth concentrated in Africa and Asia. The fastest population growth will continue to take place in countries that are currently the least developed.

While news reports have focused on megacities, most of the actual growth will occur in mid-sized cities in Asia and Africa, which have few resources to respond to the magnitude of the change. The Asian Development Bank estimates that within five years, there will be more than 900 large cities in Asia, many with more than one million inhabitants, and nearly 20 with more than 10 million.

How will we manage our finite resources under these circumstances? Today, between 20 and 30 per cent of the world's food is wasted along the chain from farm to table. And water shortages – clean drinking water is one of the most precious resources – are expected to worsen in the next two decades.

The powerful technology used by global business – information technology – has worked near-miracles in Asia. It has been a major factor in raising hundreds of millions of Asians from poverty into the middle class and has helped create the conditions for the increasing number of Asia's super-cities.

Now it's time for the creators and users of IT to apply its world-changing capabilities to solving the manifold challenges of those super-cities and their people, from the richest to the poorest. It's not just because helping improve their quality of life is the right thing to do, but because responsible action by the IT community will create vast new markets, generate more opportunity and more business, and make the new middle class less eager to upset their increasingly comfortable lives by rising up against their governments.

It is no longer enough for a city to be able to handle large flows of people and goods. It also has to be efficient in its use of resources that are becoming increasingly scarce, including clean air, clean water, open space and fresh food.

In Mumbai, for example, the cost of one cubic metre of clean water in an affluent neighbourhood is 3 US cents, while in a nearby shanty town, the same water costs US$1.12. Why the disparity? Affluent neighbourhoods are blessed with solid infrastructure monitored by sophisticated technology and managed by well-trained experts. Shanty towns, by contrast, receive their water through terribly inefficient means. Technology – in combination with infrastructure – could change that.

The UN has noted that water availability is expected to decrease over the next several decades, while its consumption for agriculture is expected to increase by 19 per cent by 2050 to meet the rising demand for food.

The McKinsey Global Institute has estimated that, with average economic growth, global demand for fresh water will grow from 4.5 trillion cubic meters annually to 6.9 trillion in 2030. Fresh water is already scarce and we don't have any new source. We badly need improvements in efficiency. In every part of the world, planners are under heavy pressure to improve our use of resources, and IT can help.

For instance, wireless sensors placed

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along water pipelines and linked to computers can detect leaks and breakages – as well as any pilferage. Smart metering through IT can improve efficiency in water usage and reduce wastage.

IT could also help farmers grow more food with the water they have. A company in California's water-parched Central Valley has developed an inexpensive process that gathers data from widely dispersed weather reporting stations and then wirelessly transmits watering instructions to computerised controllers installed on customers' irrigation systems. The 16,500 subscribers to the data feed save more than 44.5 million litres of water and US$75 million per year, according to the company. Customers for the technology, which could easily be adapted for Asia, include nearly 100 US cities and towns.

In the industrialised West, more food is wasted by careless consumers than by inefficiencies in production and transportation to market. In Asia, by contrast, consumers waste little food once they get their hands on it, but much of it spoils because of inefficient production methods and poor logistics on the way to market. By making sure perishables are tracked properly and all attendant conditions (like air conditioning) are met to reduce spoilage, IT can help greatly.

The heavy traffic that clogs the streets of every megacity has been shown to have a tremendous negative impact on productivity, as well as on air quality and energy consumption. Congestion pricing can improve this situation, but so can the increasingly sophisticated IT systems that control the timing of traffic lights and the time between buses and trains on the same routes. Carpooling in cities can help as well. (For instance, SAP has developed a solution that uses software and mobile smartphones to co-ordinate sharing of rides.)

Carbon emission monitoring through IT of factories in urban areas can reduce greenhouse gas emissions and improve air quality, aiding sustainability goals. Smart grids and smart metering of electricity can improve efficiency. Better recycling of materials like used electronics and batteries through IT-enabled programmes are better for the environment.

At its heart, IT has always been about efficiency. Today, the latest generation of software is putting that efficiency to work to make modern megacities more productive, liveable and sustainable.

With comprehensive planning, we have the power to build sustainable cities that are bigger, cleaner, more efficient and more dynamic than ever before. Information technology has a central role to play in enabling us to address the challenges.

Jim Hagemann Snabe is the co-CEO of SAP, the world's leading provider of business software

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No limits

Louisa Mitchell says Hong Kong's Paralympic success should inspire a push for equal opportunities for all – in sports and beyond

Hong Kong's Paralympians disembarked from the plane from London last week brandishing a haul of 12 medals, looking every inch the sporting heroes and calling for more resources to support their 2016 efforts in Rio.

They embodied the message of Paralympians all over the world – do not pity or patronise us, we are professional athletes who need funding, resources and positive energy in order to excel.

The 2012 Paralympics was a milestone event in eradicating any doubt about what people with a whole range of challenges can achieve when furnished with the right resources, technology and attitudes. There were some outstanding sporting moments. Yu Chui-yee's 15-13 gold medal victory in the individual fencing, coming back from being 9-12 down, was one such moment. So Wa-wai being pipped at the post and taking silver in the 200 metres was another.

Sport traditionally transcends boundaries that other disciplines do not. However, it is not just in sport that people with disabilities want, and have the right, to excel.

Recently, at a seminar on employment opportunities for young people with disabilities, a successful chief executive of a Hong Kong company who uses a wheelchair recounted how, when he started a new job many years ago, his boss said to him pityingly: "What can I do to help you?", to which he retorted, "I don't need your help. I work for you. What can I do to help you?"

Many people with disabilities do not want to be part of a pitied or victimised minority. They want the right to equal opportunities in education, employment, sport and anything else. This rights-based approach to disability was institutionalised in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006.

This week, a delegation of representatives from non-governmental organisations and disabled people's organisations in Hong Kong has gone to Geneva for the eighth session of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It includes China/Hong Kong's hearing with regard to implementation of the convention.

The delegation's advance submission on how Hong Kong is faring and initial comments on the session have highlighted the need for comprehensive policies, services and investment in people with disabilities in order to improve equality of education and employment opportunities. The delegation has also emphasised the need for advocacy and public education and proposed ways to promote the rights of people with disabilities.

This is what the 2012 Paralympics set out to achieve – to promote the rights of people with disabilities. Sebastian Coe, convenor of the Games, believes it did just that, saying: "The Paralympians have lifted the cloud of limitation."

Now Hong Kong must do the same by acting on the recommendations of the UN committee this week. In order to remain a world-class city, one that continues to field sporting heroes, but which also remains competitive in business, education and all other aspects of life, Hong Kong must make itself a leader in Asia in embracing diversity.

Louisa Mitchell is a research fellow (social policy) at Civic Exchange

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Pan-democrats must reflect honestly on their electoral losses – and look ahead

Albert Cheng says the Democratic Party, in particular, should accept blame for its 2010 backroom deal on political reform, and not point fingers

Following the Legislative Council election, I wrote a commentary evaluating the outcome, calling it a manipulated affair.

From the results of the so-called super seats in the district council functional constituency, I detected the hand of the central government and suggested that Lau Kong-wah, vice-president of the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong, was "sacrificed" to make way for the Democratic Party's Albert Ho Chun-yan. I said it was a way of rewarding the Democrats for their "ice-breaking" talks with the central government's liaison office two years ago to resolve their differences over the political reform package.

No doubt Beijing would have regarded it as a fair trade-off, especially after Ho gave up his seat in New Territories West, making it easier for the DAB to get three members elected there. One unpopular Lau for three seats in Legco is definitely a good deal, while it also means Beijing has better prospects of good future relations with the Democratic Party.

Of course, some people disagreed with my analysis. Most disappointing was the reaction of Ho and his party, which has pledged to boycott DBC Radio, which I founded. They accused me of smearing the reputation of Ho and his party because I was at war with the liaison office. Acting chairwoman Emily Lau Wai-hing demanded that I apologise and retract what I said. I invited key members of the party – including Lau – to come on my radio talk show to discuss the

issue; I have so far received no reply.

The Democratic Party is all about facilitating communication and giving a voice to the voiceless. Yet, their actions go against the fundamental principle of their party. It shows party veterans are out of touch.

It's obvious that the Democrats sold out the people

> ## To win voters' trust, the Civic Party must have the courage to stand by its principles

of Hong Kong by accepting a modified model of democratic reform. They are now pointing an accusatory finger at me because I am not afraid to expose the party's ugly underbelly.

It's no big deal that the party reached a compromise deal with the central government over Hong Kong's democratic reform. But conducting backroom politics is totally different. They did that, so they shouldn't blame others for criticising their conduct. And the Democrats have only themselves to blame

for their unimpressive performance at the election.

By contrast, the Civic Party did fairly well in the election – winning one seat in each of the five geographical constituencies and the legal functional constituency seat. They did far better than the Democratic Party. Judging from the way it's going, I wouldn't be surprised if the Civic Party one day replaced the Democratic Party as the leader of the pan-democratic camp.

However, the Civic Party might have deployed the wrong election strategy by placing two names each on the Hong Kong Island and New Territories West tickets. As a result, they not only lost two voices in Legco, they also hurt the democratic cause by weakening the power of the pan-democrats in the legislature.

Yet, party chief Alan Leong Kah-kit refused to accept that they had used the wrong tactics and claimed it wouldn't have been feasible to run one name on each ticket. How ridiculous.

I am certain that its two political stars, Audrey Eu Yuet-mee and Tanya Chan, would have won if the party had deployed that strategy. What they did was utterly disappointing to their supporters. In any election, the ultimate goal is to win as many seats as possible, and not be content with a limited outcome.

This was not the first time

they have disappointed their supporters. On the issue of the proposed bridge to Macau and Zhuhai, and on the controversy over residency for foreign domestic helpers, they initially stood on the side of public justice, but subsequently backed down under mounting pressure.

With the Democratic Party seemingly surrendering to the central government, the Civic Party has become Hong Kong's last hope in realising full democracy.

Here's my advice, for what it's worth. To win voters' trust and support, the party must have the courage to own up to its mistakes and stand by its principles and beliefs, no matter how unpopular they are. With it, there is at least a glimmer of hope; it must not let the people and Hong Kong down.

People Power legislator Wong Yuk-man was spot on when commenting on the impending universal suffrage for Hong Kong. For the pan-democrats to unite over this issue, he said, they must first agree on two key demands – the 2017 chief executive election must not be a filtered form of universal suffrage, and the Legco election in 2016 must see all functional seats abolished.

Wong has certainly given all pan-democrats some food for thought.

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Reason and understanding must prevail in time of strife

Bernard Chan says violence against Japanese targets can't be justified

No one should underestimate the strength of feeling among many Chinese people over Japan and the Diaoyu Islands. Japan took the islands around the end of the 19th century when the country was expanding aggressively, winning wars against China and Russia and occupying Korea and Taiwan.

Half a century later, Japan was expanding further, taking parts of mainland China and eventually much of Southeast Asia. Even today in Hong Kong, the "three years and eight months" of Japanese occupation is part of the city's collective memory. We all grew up hearing stories of Japanese atrocities. Tragically, some Japanese politicians and activists still deny that these horrifying events took place.

In Europe, most people accept Germany as a productive country which makes a positive contribution to the region. Japan does as well, yet many Asians still see the country as marked by the past.

Politicians and others might sometimes be tempted to exploit anti-Japanese feeling for their own purposes, but the fact is that they can do it because those feelings are so real and powerful.

The violence that broke out in dozens of mainland cities in the past week cannot be justified in any way. I would not be surprised if some of the people burning and looting had other frustrations or motives. But those who were genuinely angry at Japan seemed to be a clear majority. The vandalism was not

just dangerous and illegal, but totally illogical.

Being involved in the insurance industry, I would point out that even if you could justify burning a Japanese restaurant or a Toyota-brand vehicle, you are still hurting innocent parties. For example, the Japanese restaurant is probably insured by a Chinese insurer or reinsurer, who will pay a claim, and who will then raise premiums for the restaurant.

In a world that has undergone globalisation, what is Japanese about a Toyota on the mainland? It was made in China by Chinese workers, as were many or even most of the components. If the car factory closes down because of threats of violence, who do the rioters hurt more – Chinese or Japanese? The answer is both, as the shareholders are probably mostly Japanese.

But their loss will be relatively minor. A shut-down factory will hit the economy of a whole Chinese neighbourhood or city. And who is the car's owner, watching her vehicle burn? A fellow Chinese.

Calls for boycotts of Japanese goods are similarly misguided. Even if the goods are actually made in Japan, a boycott hurts the distributors and vendors in China, whose employees are Chinese, who have families to support.

And it damages the suppliers of the Japanese company, many of which will probably be located in China. Open up any gizmo made by Sony or Toshiba and you will find components

made by companies based in Taiwan, Korea, the United States, Germany and other places.

If they were not manufactured in those places, they were probably made in China by Chinese people. If you don't hurt Chinese people, you still hurt the Koreans or Germans – why?

Of course, even if you can find a way of hurting the Japanese and no one else, it is still wrong to do it. A Japanese resident of Hong Kong or on the mainland is not to blame for this situation, and we would hate to think that the many Chinese living in Japan might be threatened.

The fact is that globalisation makes it impossible to isolate people and places. Many Chinese and Hong Kong companies – including mine – have Japanese business partners.

And this is not just about trade and manufacturing: Japanese and Chinese people work, study and live together, and marry and have families.

This is a year of political change. Politicians in Japan, the US and China all need to be seen to protect their own country's interests. The result is a competition of rhetoric and gestures, not only between domestic factions contending for power but between governments, with the press and the public joining in. It is in all our interests that things calm down before long.

Bernard Chan is a member of the Executive Council