

Asia govts face tough balance between welfare, 'smart city'

initiatives



By Kevin Kwang | November 22, 2012 -- 10:52 GMT (18:52 SGT)

Summary: There is a higher concern among governments with "putting food on the table" for citizenry, but opening up more public data for developers can help accelerate the "smart city" transition for growth.

SINGAPORE--Governments in Asia need to open up more public data that are more "impactful" so local developers can use the information to create innovations that will accelerate the move toward "smarter cities" and better meet people's needs. One industry watcher thinks this is unlikely to happen though.

Sean O'Brien, global vice president for urban matters and public security at SAP, noted cities, rather than countries, will be the global growth engines for the foreseeable future. For these cities to be smarter, clean and green, governments have a pivotal role in supporting and fostering developments in these areas, he noted.

At a briefing held here Thursday to introduce SAP's Urban Matters initiative, O'Brien said the software giant's aim was to help cities run better, enable governments and business to transform and innovate with tech, and improve the lives of citizens.

In Asia, specifically emerging cities such as India's Mumbai and Auckland in New Zealand, the executive said officials there are engaging SAP for advice and tools to streamline public sector operations. These include boosting efficiency in call centers, improve the reporting and notification systems for disaster and emergency, and ensuring the tax and revenue processes are effective.

"They are basically enlisting our services to help them clean house," he said.

Balancing social welfare with IT

That said, while IT tools are being made available by industry vendors, governments in Asia will always have to struggle with spending their limited budgets to improving their IT systems or using it to "put food on the table" for citizens.

Teo Chin Seng, executive director of Singapore Management University's (SMU) iCity Lab, said in the same session Thursday that for Asian governments, social duties and welfare needs were top-of-mind concerns and will continue to be so for the next 10 years. This

mindset might differ with other markets in the West, where tech implementations are considered beneficial and there is less of a tension in embarking on such initiatives, he added.

SMU's iCity Lab is a joint initiative between the local university and Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), in which the latter pumped in S\$6 million to lay the foundation for the research and development of cloud-based IT offerings for intelligent cities in Asia and other regions.

Mobile computing is one area Asian governments can and are currently looking to capitalize on to develop their cities. O'Brien said this was especially pertinent in the region because of the high uptake of mobile devices, but whatever services must be delivered to end-users regardless of the mobile device they use and not be limited to just smartphones.

Open up public data

The opening up of publicly-held data will also spur innovations in the mobile space, as local developers can use the information to create services which will benefit other citizens, he pointed out.

For instance, using mobile devices to canvass people's opinions on certain policies and amending these legislations based on the feedback can help improve governance, the executive said.

His view was endorsed by Neelie Kroes, vice president of the European Commission. She said in October that she's a "big fan" of opening up public data, and doing so will get citizens involved in society and political life, increase the transparency of public administration, and improve public decision-making.

"In my opinion, data should be open and available by default and exceptions should be justified--not the other way around. Access to public data also has an important and growing economic significance. Open data can be fuel for innovation, growth and job creation. The overall economic impact across the whole European Union could be tens of billions of euros per year," Kroes stated in her blog.

Teo agreed opening up public data has its benefits, but reckoned data made available by governments in Asia currently are "utility data" which will not transform cities to be smarter. Location data made available by Singapore's Land Transport Authority and used by service providers such as Gothere.sg is an example of utility data, he explained.

"Impactful data" such as traffic data that can match car details taken on surveillance cameras to the car owners, can allow insurance companies to offer tailored, pay-as-you-drive insurance models, but are unlikely to be released by governments here as these are "sovereign".

"Even research institutes like iCity Lab have to jump through many hurdles to get the necessary information [from public sector agencies]," said Teo, highlighting how tightly governments guard their data troves.



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