



SMART IS SEXY

MIGRATION HAS DOMINATED 2015 AND WILL CONTINUE TO DO SO IN 2016. SMART CITIES WILL BE AN IMPORTANT WAY FOR COUNTRIES TO ADAPT, SAYS ALISTAIR MACLENAN

Stories of migration have dominated 2015. Conflicts in Syria, Yemen, many northern African countries and South Sudan have created a movement of people not seen since the Second World War. Pushed to a point of desperation where a perilous journey in an overcrowded and dilapidated vessel provides more hope than staying put, millions of people have been and continue to be on the move.

But war is not the only reason for this. The economic meltdown of 2008 has forced people in the countries that were worst affected (and even in those that have recovered more quickly), to look for work beyond their own borders. Youth unemployment in Greece, Spain and Italy still hovers around 50%. Once again, vast numbers of people need to move to find work and earn money.

And they can move. Closer European Union cooperation has removed many of the historical cross-border travel restrictions – the 26 countries inside the Schengen Area have abolished passport control and now operate just as a single country would.

But it is not simply migration of people between countries that is changing the landscape – more and more people are moving to urban regions within countries. World Bank statistics estimate that North America's degree of urbanisation stands at just over 82%, compared to 73% for Europe and a worldwide average of 53%. It is thought that 30 people a minute move from the countryside to the ever-expanding cities in India and that in less than 10 years, more than 60% of the world's ever-increasing population will live in urban environments.

Given these predictions, I'll confidently make my own and say that 2016 will be the year when the skills and expertise of geographers, geospatial engineers, cartographers, GIS operators, aerial imagers, satellite manufacturers, data providers, drone pilots and spatial entrepreneurs will be at the vanguard of the management of the movement, habitation and survival of the human race.

No pressure then.

The term 'smart city' has been in use for years now. Definitions vary but the words 'sustainable', 'efficient' and 'green' all feature in the ones I have researched (sadly, 'new paradigm', 'leverage' and 'dynamic enabler' also appeared in one excruciating sales version).

It seems to me that a smart city is one where more people can live closer together than was previously possible, without running out of energy, food, water, work and entertainment. There are plenty of places in the so-called 'developed world' where that list currently presents a challenge.

So the location of people will be key to the success of a smart city. But that won't be enough. It will be imperative to know where people are in relation to the things that they need. In the smart city of the future, space will be at a premium and the way it is used will decide the success of the city.

It simply won't be possible to travel inefficiently else 'grinding to a halt' will be a literal description of the town. If you own a car but are not using it, that's wasted space. Why not have a city-wide fleet of cars that are available when you need them? Your mobile device (I guess phone will become an outdated name) will tell you where the nearest one is, what the most time and fuel efficient route to your destination will be, and report it as available for the next person when you've finished with it.

Fledgling services like this exist today but the truly smart city will need its transport services – and every other service – fully integrated into its fabric if it wants to call itself truly smart.

So, geolocation information will be at the heart of decision-making and people must be able to use it to survive. Without access to that vital geoinformation, city inhabitants will find urban living extremely harsh indeed.

Next year will see more migration. It is inevitable. Whether it is between countries or within them, more people are going to be on the move. Those who work in the geospatial industry will have a unique opportunity to shape the success or otherwise of this new mobile global population. Whether it is a Happy New Year for millions of people or not, is up to you.

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