

New project launched to tackle urban challenges in Kenya, SA cities

By  Sindy Peters

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Connected Places Catapult's flagship project Urban Links Africa was launched earlier this month in Cape Town. The project's goal, explained the not-for-profit's senior advisor Sir Michael Bear, is to "facilitate sustainable collaboration between UK and African companies and countries to bring together cities and tech ecosystems through equitable partnerships and industry investments".

"Sustainability requires ongoing investment to address the key challenges facing the six cities that we are now focusing on," he said. "And the purpose of this is really to improve the lives of citizens, so we're doing this really to bring *our* best to partner with *your* best for the benefit of citizens."



Roundtable engagement at the launch of Connected Places Catapult's Urban Links Africa project

Also present at the launch were CEO of Connected Places Catapult Nicola Yates OBE, the City of Cape Town's mayoral committee member for corporate services councillor Sharon Cottle, as well as a roundtable of representatives from the public, private and NPO sectors.

Human-centric approach

Yates explained that the UK-based organisation's projects all entail bringing the right people together to accelerate ideas and learning, and to create a sustainable ecosystem for collaborative innovation.

"Although we are predominantly involved in technology acceleration, our first questions and our first conversations are always about the people and the thing that we're trying to address or to solve, or the opportunity that arises.

"We quite often find that people design out innovation by starting with what they think the problem actually is and find that that's *not* the problem, that's probably the *consequence* of the actual problem. So taking the right amount of time to have these conversations with as many people and as many varied interests as possible is absolutely key to the work that we do," she said.



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Stakeholder engagement

Turning to the Urban Links Africa project in particular, Yates emphasised how stakeholder engagement and city confirmation was the starting point and involved conversations with all six participating cities - Nairobi, Mombasa and Kisumu in Kenya, and Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban in South Africa.

The project is very much challenge-led, she said, and about delivering and implementing tech. "It's very much about equitable partnerships around innovation and technology and it's very much about engagement - this is not about cool tech. This is actually about people and the real problems right now and what we can do to make a small contribution in that regard."

Councillor Cottle highlighted the need for public entities to start doing much more with less, and targeting their resources better. She noted that better data-sharing relationships could enable this, allowing the city to facilitate behavioural change in order to combat ongoing urban challenges.



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Urban-based challenges

Cottle highlighted some of the challenges the city is faced with within its informal settlements: "It is difficult to gain accurate and up-to-date data at the level of households. We need faster feedback loops on the condition and forms of infrastructure within informal settlements - this will support quicker response times.

"We need improved assessment and communication of disaster risk caused by fire, floods etc. This will support both the public sector and decision-making around mitigation and the response to these threats."

She concluded her address emphasising that the comparative advantage the city has in tackling urban challenges is through its relationships with local NGOs and the tech community.

"As a city, we have benefited from long-term relationships with these communities and from their on-the-ground experience and insight. That is why I'm particularly excited about this initiative which is focused on the local tech industry, and I have no doubt that it will be the beginning of a truly global innovation network focused on urban challenges."

Funded by the UK Research and Innovation Agency, the Urban Links Africa project began in September 2019 and will run until 2021. For more information on the project, [click here](#).

ABOUT SINDY PETERS

Sindy Peters (@sindy_hullaba_lou) is a group editor at Bizcommunity.com on the Construction & Engineering, Energy & Mining, and Property portals. She can be reached at sindy@bizcommunity.com

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