What if…smart cities initiatives focused on social equity?

Cities are growing, but the quality of life is not keeping up

Over the last decade, the top 1% have become a topic of much fascination and concern, with much study occurring into how concentrated wealth is in developed countries. To the extent that "severe income inequality" was the top global risk in the World Economic Forums 2012 survey. For many countries, income inequality was falling through the 20th century, then in the mid-70's it began to rise and continues to today.

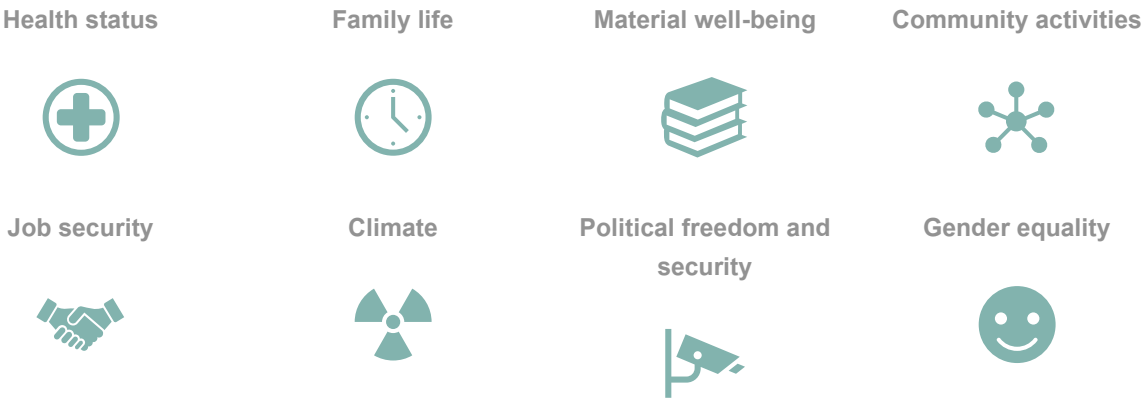
Income inequality is only the start of the problem though, those in the lower income brackets will also suffer social inequity. A study by the OECD – called How's Life? – hones in on the differences income inequality has created in those countries. Canada signed up to the Sustainable Development Goals in 2013, but Macleans found that Canada's performance against many of these goals is barely improving and, in some cases, is actually getting worse. 500,000 don't have access to clean water, 3 million are living in poverty, while food insecurity has increased from 7.1% to 7.8%.

At the same time, the mass migration to cities continues. According to the United Nations Populations Division, two-thirds of the world's population is expected to live in cities by 2050. Increases in city populations will make their limited resources even more difficult for the less well-off to access, potentially increasing the levels of social inequality.

Smarter cities initiatives are a popular topic. Often touted as a magical solution to common problems experienced living in cities. Smart traffic lights that will reduce congestion, sensing streetlights that will notify city staff when a bulb is out or online services to reduce queuing. All good ideas for making cities smarter, but each in their own way probably contributing a little to increased social inequity.

However, smart technologies do have the opportunity to increase social equity. It requires that to be the starting objective.

The Economist defined the factors that determine quality of life and can be used as a guide to improving society's well-being are:



Cities that inspect these factors and objectives to improve aspects of the quality of life of their residents will develop a much different smart city strategy than those that are commonly created.

Autonomous vehicles have been a big story in recent years. As they become prevalent on city streets, it's easy to imagine a decline in the use of public transportation, over time, revenues fall, making sustaining and upgrading existing public transportation infrastructure impossible. It has the potential to see transit services reduced, negatively impacting portions of the population who rely on public transportation to purchase their groceries, commute to their workplace and school.

If a city started with climate goals and job security goals, it might come up with a very different strategy. What about offering free transit and implementing smart signally technology to ensure transit was the fastest form of travel around the city? Estonia's capital, Tallinn has already done this.

What about hunger or food security? What might a smart city strategy look like to address those issues? The City of Guelph intends to develop a circular food economy that can both help with food insecurity and reduce waste. They have set three goals, that by 2025 they will:

- Increase access to affordable, nutritious food by 50%
- Create 50 new circular businesses and collaborations
- Increase circular economic revenues by 50% by recognizing the value of "waste"

As cities become smarter, the dangers of increasing inequality could rise unless city leaders take proactive steps towards bridging the potential equity gap. It is possible to employ solutions that help everyone by ensuring that the needs of all community members are addressed. This requires a great amount of public engagement and understanding of one's population demographic, but it has to start with clear societal goals.