From Knowledge Management to Knowledge Cities

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Published as “Du Knowledge Management aux Villes de la Connaissance”. Qualitique – La Culture Managériale Du XXIème Siécle. France, December 2007. ISSN: 0767-9432

Few aspects of today’s World may characterize better the dawn of the new millenium than the emergence of knowledge societies. The evolutionary significance of both, the definite urbanization of the World’s population and the experience upgrade in post-industrial cities is only beginning to be realized. Paraphrasing Françoise Choay, the 21st Century Society is Post-industrial, the Knowledge City its horizon.

On the one hand, this is being identified as the Century of Cities. While massive emigration of rural populations into towns started with the Industrial Revolution, this is still an ongoing process even if quite brief from a historical perspective. The couple of centuries since, account for about 0.5% of human existence on Earth. Yet, as recently as the 1980’s, total urban population worldwide was less than 30%. Just now, the World’s population living in cities is overcoming the 50% mark and is expected to become 75% by 2025 (a percentage already reached by most industrialized countries). Hence, the definite urbanization of mankind is happening right now, after 40,000 years of the appearance of our species. This is indeed the Century of Cities: The urbanization of human experience is a reality of the new millenium.

On the other hand, the 21st Century has also been identified as Century of Knowledge or Century of Learning. After WW II, over 50% of GDP in an increasing number of industrialized countries shifted consistently from material-based to knowledge-based. In the global arena, The UN, the EU, the OECD, and the World Bank have all stressed the critical importance of the Knowledge Economy as a turn-of-century reality. Taichi Sakaiya and Peter Drucker foresaw the advent of the Knowledge Economy as the grounds for the foundation of the Knowledge Society. According to Sakaiya “…we are entering a new phase of civilization in which the value attached to knowledge is the driving force”. We have entered The Century of Knowledge.

These two emerging conditions of human civilization -cities and knowledge- provide the initial conditions for the new millenium: The Century of Knowledge Cities. Global urbanization and the advent of the Knowledge Society, constitute each an unprecedented and complex reality. These has exposed the limits of conventional approaches to urban development and social value creation. Both, integrated in the Knowledge City, constitute

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one of the most complex phenomena ever faced by mankind and a critical one for its future evolution.

Conceptual and empirical studies on Knowledge Cities constitute an emerging, pre-paradigmatic and multidisciplinary field. It is emerging insofar as a child of the new century, but also a fast growing one. The substantial amount of resources available now on this subject, as well as the existence of most elements of an institutionalized discipline (specialized journals, professional communities and networks, dedicated conferences) testify to that. The Knowledge Cities Clearinghouse (www.knowledgecities.com) compiles lists of i) glossaries, ii) KBD initiatives, iii) associations and international organizations, iv) urban KBD value dimensions, v) rankings, vi) special editions, vii) bibliography, and viii) electronic references, related to Knowledge Cities (KCs) and Knowledge Based Development (KBD).

But, what is so special about KCs? What is so distinctive that requires a dedicated community and a new discipline? Too often, the concept of KC is reduced to a constituent element, notably technopoles and innovation clusters, generally focused on regional GDP growth. Yet, none of these concepts requires the idea of KC, since they all have existed independently and have evolved on their own accord. None of them aims primarily at a community’s intangible capital. In consequence, no urban development project, however strategic, justifies the use of the KC label if it aims primarily at economic development or can be described in terms of available technoeconomic development frameworks. This is in consistency with the very concept of Knowledge Based Development as opposed to traditional economic growth theory and the now unacceptable dychotomy between economic welfare and overall social value.

The concepts of KBD and KC follow the realization that conventional Economic Analysis and Economic Growth Theory fail to account for most of the distinctive value dimensions of knowledge-based production and overall social worth. It is the deliberate attempt by social agents to understand and manage such universe of value what characterizes KBD and KCs. Nevertheless, the novelty of the field implies a transition between the received, segmented approaches to KCs in terms of some of its constituent elements (notably Knowledge Infrastructure and Human Capital) and the emerging, systemic approach in terms of social value systems and holistic urban strategies.

A positive sign of the move towards redesigning urban experience based on an integration of human and social capitals with material and financial ones along sustainability lines, was the recent Knowledge Cities Summit, held within the context of the Global Knowledge Based Development Week, in Monterrey, Mexico October 15-21 (see http://globalkbdweek.mty.itesm.mx/). This week, which also included the First MAKCi (Most Admired Knowledge City Awards), conveyed 200 participants from around the world, sharing models, experiences and perspectives on this exciting novel topic. Thus, the evolution from organizational-level Knowledge Management to social-level Knowledge Based Development and Knowledge Cities seems a natural process in the emergence of collective knowledge and value conscience.


N. Longworth, Making Lifelong Learning Work: Learning Cities for a Learning Century, London: Kogan Page, 1999 (pp. 29-).


