

# The evolution of the utility

 By [Nicci Botha](#)

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The focus of the third and final keynote session at the African Utility Week was on bridging the gap between the lack of Africa's utility infrastructure and the fully-integrated smart cities of the future for the continent to live up to its projected rate of economic growth.



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## **This is now**

"In contrast to smart cities, I want to take you back to stark reality," said Dr Carlos Lopes, executive secretary: United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, Ethiopia.

The truth is only 30% of Africans have access to electricity.

He used the example of a farmer in Burkina Faso, who is forced to dispose of the fresh milk he is taking to market because of unreliable infrastructure.

"This makes getting perishable goods to market an expensive endeavour. And it is not limited to perishables, getting non-perishables to consumers is also costly due to a lack of infrastructure. There are high expectations of development in Africa, but its infrastructure deficit is holding it back. And this is why Africa loses one percentage point per year in growth."

"Government's policy failures are responsible for lack of growth. Having a policy is one thing, but getting them to the people is another," Dr Lopes said.

Massive investment is pivotal to the future of Africa, so closing the infrastructure gap is critical. There are also many negative perceptions about doing business in Africa, but these are changing.

Furthermore the drive for industrialisation has made huge gains and there's a positive trend on a regional cooperation level. Energy tops the list and there needs to be a 60% investment in infrastructure by 2020.

"Infrastructure is the cornerstone of any development, but it shouldn't be left up to government. Policies need to be put in place that allows private investors to step in," said Dr Lopes.

## The future

Speaking on the role of ICT and smart utilisation in utility modernisation, Nirvesh Sooful, CEO: African Ideas, said that traditionally migration to urban areas was a chance for people to improve their quality of life. But in the case of Africa, this is not necessarily true as the cities don't have the infrastructure to support the influx.

"Cities are the microcosm of the major challenges and opportunities facing the planet, where all man-made systems come together and interact with each other," he said.

Broadband and effective connected ICT has a critical role to play for municipalities and utilities to work better.

Sooful spoke about the Internet of Things - namely the smart sensor networks used for traffic, security and utilities that gather information at a rate that far outstrips the internet as we know it now. It will be virtually impossible for human beings to manage it all.

He also explained that technology had already considerably improved the administrative functions of utilities such as more efficient billing, but the real beauty of integrated systems lay in service delivery. In other words, using real-time data to respond to emergencies quicker, detect water leakages before they become a problem and synchronising robots to ease the flow of traffic at peak times.

It's important to remember that citizens are also connected and platforms are already being built outside of government to collect information.

"For instance, there's a clean air app that people can use to measure the air pollution in their environment. We can't ignore this," Sooful said.

The concept of big data and how you analyse it is the new oil. It is a commodity to trade. But it also has issues that need to be resolved such as privacy, rights and ethics, he explained.

Africa still has a long way to go as far as infrastructure development is concerned, but by taking the technology that's available and adapting it to the continent's needs, Africa can fulfil its economic destiny.

African Utility Week was held at the CTICC in Cape Town, 12-14 May 2015. For more info, go to [www.african-utility-week.com](http://www.african-utility-week.com).

## ABOUT NICCI BOTHA

Nicci Botha has been wordsmithing for more than 20 years, covering just about every subject under the sun and then some. She's strung together words on sustainable development, maritime matters, mining, marketing, medical, lifestyle... and that elixir of life - chocolate. Nicci has worked for local and international media houses including Primedia, Caxton, Lloyd's and Reuters. Her new passion is digital media.

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