

# Lessons from Timbuktu

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Society today might think of science parks, technology centres, business incubators and knowledge precincts as being entirely modern phenomena, representative of the great advances of human endeavour sparked into the life by the Industrial Revolution of the 19th Century and the Information Revolution of the late 20th to the present day. However, imagine mediaeval Timbuktu in what was known to Western explorers as deepest, darkest Africa and you may well see the seeds of a knowledge city that truly pioneered much of what we consider modern centuries ago.

Umar Benna of the College of Architecture and Planning at the University of Dammam, in Al-Khoba, Saudi Arabia, argues in the journal *AJESD* that it is the efficient and effective use of [urban spaces](#) that are key to creating what he calls "a holistic knowledge city" and that Africa as it develops must learn to avoid the traps and the trappings of the conventional science parks and their ilk found in the West. He argues that, "Africa's scientific and literary accomplishments were far ahead of most of the other continents during medieval times and may have some lessons for contemporary societies."

His research suggests that there are many benefits to taking an alternative approach to the "quick fix" global approach to hooking up information and communications technology (ICT) and building parochial science parks albeit often with links to local and international academia and commercial partners. He points to Timbuktu's gradual development approach which led to an accumulation of knowledge and extraordinary achievements.

During the 14th-16th centuries, the city of Timbuktu in the West African nation of Mali, grew from what was essentially a small watering place on the southern edge of the Sahara Desert into a place known throughout the world as a seat of great learning, scholarship and trade. Learning and commerce in salt, gold, ivory and slaves were finely balanced in Timbuktu. The latter two "commodities" being rather unfortunately placed in the modern ethos of seeing the city as a role model for growth. Nevertheless, knowledge and economic development reinforced each other allowing creativity to flourish building on talent, tolerance and technology; the three T's that are according to researchers prerequisites.

Indeed, argues Benna, Timbuktu attracted gifted scholars and students from the Western Sudan, Muslim states in Africa and the wider Islamic world and at the same time exported its scholars and students to these places – the talent. Its communities were socially, racial, ethnically and economically diverse – and tolerant. Finally, there was agricultural innovation and an intellectual entrepreneurial culture – technology.

"It was a complex system consisting of people, relationships, values, processes, tools and built environment. Pooling these factors together to produce an enlightened learning community – not just a strong university but also an active community of practice – is an important lesson for Africa," says Benna. If there were three T's driving creativity then they were founded on markets, mosques, and mobility, the three M's. The lessons of Timbuktu's growth reveal how a knowledge city can grow to fulfil the needs of its diverse inhabitants, bottom-up innovation rather than grand "top-down" designs work well, collaboration increases social cohesion and finally branding and open access, two trendy phrases in the modern world, were critical to Timbuktu's fame and ongoing growth in Mediaeval times. All of these lessons, Benna asserts, "could prove invaluable for the emerging African countries that seek to use the knowledge cit as a tool to guide their future development."

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