The Significance of Geographic Inclusivity for the Venture Builder (VB)

Geographic Inclusivity is one of the key strategic objectives of the Venture Builder (VB) as envisioned by the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), in partnership with the Technological Higher Education Network South Africa (THENSA). For the VB to form a successful portfolio of deep tech start-ups that have the potential to make a significant impact in their respective fields, it needs to tap into parts of South Africa that have traditionally been overlooked or ignored.

What is Geographic Inclusivity

Geographic inclusivity is of paramount importance for the VB, as it not only fosters innovation but also addresses historical disparities perpetuated by systems like apartheid spatial planning. Embracing a geographically inclusive approach allows for the equitable distribution of opportunities and resources to technopreneurs in previously marginalised areas. South Africa's legacy of apartheid spatial planning has left a lasting impact throughout the country, concentrating economic activity, technological innovation and higher education institutions in urban centres, while isolating more remote areas. By targeting these spatial barriers, the VB can tap into untapped talent pools and stimulate economic growth in neglected regions. It can also increase access to funding, mentorship, and collaboration opportunities, which will enable technopreneurs from diverse backgrounds to thrive.

By actively engaging with higher education institutions, the VB can bridge the educational divide, nurturing local talent and helping them contribute to the global deep tech landscape. Collaborative partnerships can lead to the establishment of innovation hubs that serve as catalysts for technological advancement and technopreneurship. This approach not only democratises access to education, but also ensures that deep tech solutions are developed with a broader spectrum of perspectives, benefiting society as a whole. In essence, geographic inclusivity is not just about levelling the playing field; it's about harnessing the full potential of a nation's intellectual capital to drive capacity development, transformation and technological innovation.

The success of this initiative depends not only on its innovative ideas and robust strategies, but on the ability of its stakeholders and participants to foster geographic inclusivity. Geographic inclusivity refers to the practice of embracing talent, ideas, and opportunities from diverse regions and locations. In a country like South Africa, where the legacy of apartheid spatial planning has resulted in the uneven geographic distribution of resources, infrastructure and opportunities, it is a feature that will facilitate in making the National System of Innovation (NSI) more inclusive.

Grassroots Innovations

For Ms Xolile Ngubane, Acting Director for Technology Station in Chemicals at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), geographic inclusivity has the "intention and practice of ensuring that all intended stakeholders, participants and beneficiaries are accommodated irrespective of their geographic location". One of the primary benefits of geographic inclusivity is that it will encourage access to a diverse and extensive talent pool which Ngubane believes is crucial. "I have witnessed that not all innovations and ideas emanate from urban areas," she said. "There is space for grassroots innovation and [accessing] such can benefit the VB".

By ensuring the VB is inclusive of technopreneurs, stakeholders, innovators, and experts from different regions, it can tap into a wealth of knowledge, skills, and perspectives which have yet to be leveraged in South Africa. This spirit of equal opportunity is central to the design phase of the VB, which has been welcomed by the founding HEI stakeholders in the project like Professor Nokuthula Sibiya, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Innovation and Engagements at MUT.

"[Our institution] is in the process of setting up an Entrepreneurship Centre and Innovation Hubs so as the DVC, I am responsible for driving these projects", Professor Sibiya said. For the VB to ensure that it becomes a force for change in the NSI, it must "embrace diversity so as to ensure equity irrespective of where a person comes from", she added. In addition, Professor Sibiya also stressed the viability of the VB due "being equitable across all HEIs including those that have limited resources".

Diverse Talent Pool

This diverse regional talent pool will bring fresh ideas and diverse approaches to problem-solving, enhancing the creativity and adaptability of the spinoffs that will emanate from the VB. This is what drew Ms Martha Ikome, Acting Senior Manager for Technology Transfer Office at the Vaal University of Technology (VUT). "To me, geographical inclusion refers to the way borders and territories define, facilitate participation and membership in identifiable groups", she said. "I believe that a successful [VB] is one that has no bias and discrimination and works to ensure that there is inclusivity, especially in the deep tech space, irrespective of their gender, ability, race and religion", she said.

Ms Ikome mentioned that "the participatory approach of the VB was the main attraction for [her] joining the initiative". In addition, she added that the location of her institution "poses a serious impediment to the success of commercialising intellectual property (IP)", rendering geographic inclusivity a personal matter for her. "[VUT] is situated in a highly disadvantaged area which means we do not receive enough support to be able to uplift our community", Ms Ikome said. She also believes that "the VB can assist by having a physical presence at [her] institution where [they can advertise] the technopreneurs through all the VB's networks".

Expanding Networks

In addition, geographic inclusivity allows the VB to expand its network exponentially. As collaboration with various technopreneurs and stakeholders from different regions occurs, the network becomes

more dynamic and robust, creating a virtuous cycle of collaboration, idea-sharing, and support. For Ms Makole Magoro, Technology Transfer Coordinator at the University of Venda, geographic inclusivity will give a chance for all universities, " to be included in the VB despite the setting of either urban or rural". Like Ms Ikome, her university's location played a major part in her desire to get involved in the VB and see its success. "An institution like the University of Venda usually falls behind because of where we are located. We miss out on many activities. I think [the VB] will help my institution keep up with other institutions and also achieve our goals when it comes to commercialisation," Ms Magoro said.

This expanded network can lead to valuable partnerships, strategic alliances, and access to new markets. Geographic inclusivity can facilitate this process from the outset. By building ventures with an inter-provincial perspective and leveraging diverse talent and insights, the VB will create deep tech ventures that are well-positioned for expansion and scalability. This can lead to faster growth and a broader reach for the ventures they nurture.

Geographic inclusivity is not just a trendy buzzword; it is a strategic objective that will allow the VB to facilitate change in some of the most marginalised communities in South Africa and tackle the socio-economic challenges that continue to get in the way of technology innovation. It is also a reminder that access to a diverse talent pool, expertise, as well as cultural and market insights can be found in all areas of the country, emphasising the importance of tackling our own bias and assumptions as we complete the design phase. Dr Richard F Chidzonga, Head of Department in Electrical Engineering at MUT, put it best when he said that geographic inclusivity ought to "give real meaning to inclusivity and growth impetus" for technopreneurs, stakeholders, innovators, and experts.