

# Bogota shows Jo'burg how citizens can make a difference

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**L**IKE Johannesburg, Bogota in Colombia is a large, flat, high-altitude, industrial heart of a country with the scars of its violent history. In the mid-1990s, two-thirds of "Bogotanos" believed the city had no future. Now, two-thirds believe the future is filled with hope. What happened to turn this around?

Recently, the University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science hosted Antanas Mockus, the two-term mayor of Bogota through the mid-90s and early 2000s. A quiet, intellectual mathematician and philosopher, he helped change the face of the violent capital of Colombia through educative invention. He was brought to SA by the Human Sciences Research Council to engage with the public, state and private sector on his citizen-centred approach to combating crime and violence.

Under Mockus's leadership, Bogota experienced significant improvements: 7 000 community safety groups were created, the murder rate fell 70%, traffic deaths dropped more than 50%, water was provided to all homes (up from 79% in 1993). He asked people to pay a voluntary extra 10% in taxes and more than 60 000 families did so. Through an amusing advertising campaign, water use dropped 40%.

Mockus demonstrates the ability for low-cost societal innovation to have a high impact in changing social reality at the city level. His social interventions are borne out of theories of social regulation by citizens themselves. Whereas we tend to focus on the fear of legal sanction (legal norms) to regulate our citizens, Mockus looked at a broader range of forces. In particular, he took steps to increase the pressure of moral and social norms.

Our moral norms include the pressure we feel through the fear of guilt and positive

reinforcement through the desire to align our values with our behaviour and those of our fellow citizens. Social norms can force people to regulate themselves through fear of social rejection, the importance it places on the value of our reputation, and the resultant societal trust that is invested in us. The effect can be extremely powerful and at the same time easy to implement. Mockus painted a large star on the road at the site of each traffic-related death. Motorists would slow down when they saw these stars and pedestrians would look twice before crossing the road.

Other ideas included handing out 350 000 thumbs-up and thumbs-down cards to the public, who were encouraged to use the cards to indicate their support or disapproval of their fellow citizens' actions. After an initial period of widespread flashing of the thumbs-down cards, behaviour matured to the point at which the acknowledgement of positive behaviour was more common than rebukes.

In addition to police officers, Mockus put mimes on the streets. They mimicked and embarrassed rule-breakers in a gentle and humorous way. People feared embarrassment, the social norm, more than the law, the legal norm.

The focus on citizens for their own self-regulation and policing has been hailed globally as groundbreaking and the results speak for themselves. What is most heartening in SA's context is that widespread behavioural change was achieved in a relatively short time. Change is possible.

Mockus was elected outside the formal party-political system. Can SA's cities produce mayors of this quality from party ranks? If so, then those active in political parties need to be constructing power in a way that allows innovation to rise to the top. If not, then the ordinary public needs to find creative ways to lead our cities from the "middle".

Mockus's thinking teaches an important

lesson: that the responsibility for change and societal advancement sits with the citizens. The state's backing of something as simple as citizen role models makes for a powerful combination that has the potential to dwarf the effects of legal regulation on behaviour.

As Mockus put it: "Good citizens are not born. They are nurtured and grown, and every citizen should be seen as a potential trainer of other citizens."

South Africans are deeply frustrated by the lack of desired change in our immediate environment. Despite this anger, we remain apathetic about engaging in the public realm and sceptical about what can be done. Unless we believe that these battles can be won, they won't be. Mockus shows us that changes in social trends and the safety on our streets can happen, and it can happen quickly.

■ *Prangley is from the Gordon Institute of Business Science.*