

A knowledge and innovation hub

Region	Sub-Saharan Africa
Award Scheme	Shanghai Manual
Themes	Innovation Local Economic Development Regeneration
Sustainable Development Goals	Goal 4 - Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all Goal 5 - Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls Goal 8 - Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all Goal 9 - Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation Goal 11 - Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

Summary

Sèmè City in Benin is a flagship national initiative designed to transform the country's economy through education, innovation and entrepreneurship. Launched in 2017 under the Presidency and managed by the Sèmè City Development Agency, it represents Benin's strategic response to persistent youth unemployment, limited industrialization and low competitiveness. Conceived as "La Cité Internationale de l'Innovation et du Savoir", the project integrates academic institutions, research centres and start-ups within a purpose-built innovation ecosystem to position Benin as a regional knowledge hub. The initiative's multi-site development includes higher education facilities, maker spaces and community centres offering training in digital literacy, environmental management and creative industries. Through its Learn to Launch mechanism, Sèmè City links education with applied innovation, supporting entrepreneurs to turn ideas into viable ventures. Strategic partnerships with international organizations such as UNICEF, the World Bank and the Tony Elumelu Foundation ensure access to funding, mentorship and global expertise. To date, Sèmè City has engaged more than 650 students, 1,000 entrepreneurs and 115 researchers, incubating projects that address local challenges from tax administration to sustainable tourism. Embedding inclusivity and gender equality as core principles, the initiative promotes equitable participation in innovation, advancing Benin's vision of sustainable, human-centred and innovation-driven urban development.

Background and Objective

Located in West Africa, Benin's economy has long relied on agriculture, with limited industrial diversification and high youth unemployment hindering modernization. To address these structural challenges and transition toward a knowledge-based economy, the government launched the Programme d'Actions du Gouvernement in 2016, prioritizing human capital, innovation and sustainable urban development. Within this framework, Sèmè City; officially launched in 2017 under the Presidency and implemented by the Sèmè City Development Agency (ADSC) emerged as a flagship initiative to establish a regional hub for education, research and entrepreneurship. Designed as "La Cité Internationale de

l’Innovation et du Savoir”, the project seeks to equip Africa’s youth with 21st-century skills, foster entrepreneurship, and create over 100,000 jobs, positioning Benin as a regional centre of innovation-led growth. Sèmè City aims to create a model ecosystem for education, innovation and entrepreneurship, driving the structural transformation of Benin’s economy. Its objectives include developing a skilled workforce capable of responding to emerging market needs, supporting startups and research-based enterprises, and fostering a collaborative environment between academia, private sector and government. The project also seeks to enhance social inclusion, promote gender equality, and catalyse sustainable urban growth through eco-friendly infrastructure, while positioning Benin as a regional reference for innovation-driven and knowledge-based development.

Actions and Implementation

Sèmè City’s implementation follows a phased, spatially integrated strategy combining education, entrepreneurship and sustainability. Its four operational hubs include: Sèmè One, a higher education and innovation centre with laboratories and incubators; Sèmè Two, a youth-oriented digital maker space built from recycled containers; Sèmè Three, a community centre offering training in environmental management and media; and Sèmè Four, the Epitech learning campus focusing on digital technologies. The forthcoming Sèmè Campus in Ouidah integrates eco-city design with renewable energy systems and sustainable mobility. The project’s Learn to Launch mechanism builds an entrepreneurial ecosystem linking education with applied innovation, while partnerships with organizations such as UNICEF, the World Bank and the Tony Elumelu Foundation support inclusive entrepreneurship and social innovation.

Outcomes and Impacts

Sèmè City has built an active community of over 650 students, 1,000 entrepreneurs and 115 researchers, creating a thriving ecosystem that blends education, innovation and enterprise. The initiative has enabled the incubation of technology solutions in sectors such as tax administration, tourism and environmental management, with several prototypes financed for implementation. It has also contributed to human capital development, fostering youth employability and reducing gender disparities through targeted programmes. Sèmè City’s activities have positioned Benin as a growing regional hub for innovation, entrepreneurship and sustainable urban transformation, offering a replicable model for other African cities seeking inclusive and knowledge-driven growth.

Sustainability and Scalability

Sèmè City’s sustainability is grounded in its integrated governance model combining public leadership with private and international partnerships. Eco-design principles embedded in the forthcoming campus ensure resource efficiency and resilience. Financial sustainability is supported through partnerships with

development banks and innovation funds. Its scalable framework, linking education, innovation and industry allows replication across cities in Africa and beyond. By coupling local entrepreneurship with global cooperation, Sèmè City provides a durable foundation for inclusive urban and economic development.

Gender and Social Inclusivity

Inclusivity is central to Sèmè City's mission. The project actively promotes women's participation, aiming for 40 per cent of all jobs and self-employment opportunities to be filled by women by 2030. Through partnerships with the Tony Elumelu Foundation and others, the city provides mentorship, training and seed funding to female entrepreneurs and marginalized youth. Educational hubs are open to all community members regardless of background, enabling equitable access to learning and innovation. This approach embeds social equity into the city's development framework, fostering empowerment and community resilience.

Innovative Initiative

Sèmè City's innovation lies in its fusion of smart city design with human-centred development. Rather than focusing solely on technology, it integrates digital tools, creativity and inclusivity to build an education-driven innovation ecosystem. Its Learn to Launch model aligns academic learning with entrepreneurial practice, ensuring that innovation directly responds to local socio-economic challenges. This hybrid approach connects physical urban design with social empowerment, positioning Sèmè City as a living laboratory for sustainable, people-centred innovation in Africa.

Resources devoted to delivery

The initiative is financed through national public investment, international partnerships and development assistance. Key partners include the World Bank, UNICEF, the West African Development Bank and private institutions such as Epitech. Resources are directed toward campus construction, digital infrastructure, and programme delivery for youth and entrepreneurs. Dedicated funds, innovation challenges and training programmes ensure continuous ecosystem growth, while governance under ADSC ensures accountability and coordination between government, academia and industry stakeholders.

Conclusion

Sèmè City exemplifies how education, innovation and entrepreneurship can jointly drive sustainable urban and economic transformation. By prioritizing human capital development and inclusivity, the initiative has established a model for Africa's knowledge-based future. Its ecosystem approach demonstrates that investing in youth, creativity and local entrepreneurship can unlock new pathways for national

competitiveness and resilience. As a replicable urban innovation platform, Sèmè City contributes directly to the New Urban Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals, inspiring similar knowledge cities across the continent.