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Statement by
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Cities come in many sizes and, "like cats, reveal themselves [better] at night" (Rupert Brooke). The uneven spatial distribution of the world's population is clearest when the Earth is viewed from space at night. Imagine, if you will, the map of the night lights. Floating on dark seas, the continental masses show their illuminated contours. The northern hemisphere shines bright. Sparkling clusters of light cover Europe and Northern America, stretching from southern Canada all the way to Panama. In South America, lights along the northern and western coastal areas, from the Guyanas to Peru, form a crescent around the dark mass of the Amazon forest and reemerge south of it, covering the eastern seabord of Brazil and the coastal areas of the Southern cone. In Asia, shining dots fill the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent and Asia's eastern seabord. In Africa and Australia, dark masses occupy the centre of each continent and lights cluster along their seaboards.

The largest cities shine bright but the biggest dots of light are few compared to the thousands of tiny specks scattered over the land. The lights confirm the cold facts: there are just 49 large urban agglomerations with populations surpassing 5 million, 19 of which are megacities with more than 10 million inhabitants. These agglomerations are special. Each has more inhabitants than any one of 118 countries on Earth. Each generates a significant share of its country's GDP. Each encompasses a number of distinct urban centres that are functionally linked but usually fall under different jurisdictions, posing challenges for the management of the agglomeration as a whole.

Cities with populations ranging from half a million to 5 million inhabitants are more numerous, numbering about 800. These are the middle-sized cities, many of which are the largest cities in their respective countries.

Small cities, with populations ranging from just 2,500 inhabitants to half a million, are too numerous to count. Their numbers are in the tens of thousands. Small cities are crucial because they are home to about half of the world urban population. Furthermore, most new cities first appear in this category, since localities on the way to becoming urban cover a limited area and have small numbers of inhabitants.

In the map of the night lights, the darker areas of the planet are not necessarily uninhabited. Rural areas, where half of humanity lives today, often lack electricity. In Africa, 92 per cent of the rural population lives without electricity and in Asia, 55 per cent does. And the vast majority of rural dwellers—88 per cent —live in Africa or Asia.

Today, out of every 12 people on Earth, 6 live in rural areas, 3 in small cities, 2 in medium-sized cities and 1 in large urban agglomerations. Between 2005 and 2025, out of every 10 additional persons added to the world population, 5 will be added to small cities, 3 to medium-sized cities and 2 to the large urban agglomerations. Rural areas will get no additional inhabitants. In future, most cities will gain population and new cities will continue to emerge in rural areas.

Understanding the complexity of population distribution and its dynamics is important because place of residence is a key determinant of people's well being. Evidence shows that rural populations have poorer access to key services than inhabitants of small cities and these, in turn, are less well served than inhabitants of larger cities. Consequently, levels of nutrition, health or education are worse in rural areas than in small cities, and poorer in small than in larger cities.

Poverty is largely concentrated in rural areas, although it has dropped since the early 1990s, particularly in Eastern Asia. However, in highly urbanized Latin America, poverty is mainly an urban phenomenon and, whereas rural poverty in the region has decreased, urban poverty has risen. Moreover, in Africa and Asia, where poverty is mostly rural, the number of urban poor in each of these regions surpasses that in Latin America.

Poverty is likely to be more common in smaller than in larger cities. Certainly, in developing countries, the authorities of smaller cities often cannot raise locally all the revenue needed to improve local services. Therefore, strategies to reduce poverty, improve education and achieve better health must ensure that local authorities are assisted in securing the means and capacity to provide their populations with basic services.

Measures that facilitate service delivery to the poor, whether in rural or in urban areas, should be given priority. The interactions of rural populations with cities can be leveraged to promote synergies and increase access to services. Authorities must recognize that internal mobility and migration are necessary for synergy to exist. Rural-urban social networks are part of the survival strategies of the poorer inhabitants of many countries and rural-urban migrants contribute to the reduction of poverty in rural areas.

In sum, cities are complex systems shaped by the intense competition for space. Within the urban hierarchy, access to services tends to improve with city size, particularly in developing countries. Disparities in access, both across the settlement hierarchy and within cities, are at the root of detrimental population outcomes.

For decades, the growth of cities has been blamed for a multitude of problems. But students of urbanization stress that cities are indeed points of light, being centres of innovation, commerce, finance, technology, culture and general economic prosperity. They also stress the intricate exchanges and networks that interlink cities with the countryside, making their development interdependent. Since urbanization is unavoidable and will increase, we need to approach it as Churchill's optimist: seeing an opportunity in every difficulty. After all, what is the rise of the city if not a sign of society on the march? Prompt and sustained action based on solidarity will make the march worthwhile for all.