



Cities Magnets of Hope

The Executive Director's message on the occasion of World Habitat Day

Every year on the first Monday in October we use World Habitat Day to reflect on the state of the world's growing cities and our planet's rapid and irreversible urbanisation. We worry not only whether we can manage this growth, but how we can do it positively in a way that makes cities inclusive, welcoming places for all.

As populations increase and more and more people migrate, cities lure us to their bright lights. Like moths to a flame, we also worry about getting burnt. How many more people will end up in the developing world's growing slums? Will there be jobs, shelter, water, electricity, health services, for all? Will we be able to cater for their basic needs even if we cannot do the impossible and meet the aspirations of all?

Rapid and irreversible. Those are the trends today of the greatest rates of migration and urbanisation the world has known.

According to the latest UN research, international migrants numbered 191 million in 2005: 115 million lived in developed countries, and 75 million in developing countries. Half of these people on the move, it is noted, are women.

As we reflect on the theme of World Habitat Day 2006, *Cities, magnets of hope*, I wish to draw your attention to some new facts about the urban world in which we live. These have just been published in our latest *State of the World's Cities 2006/7* report: Some



time during the course of next year, demographers watching urban trends will mark it as the moment when the world entered a new urban millennium with the majority of people living in towns and cities for the first time in history.

The year 2007 will also see the number of slum dwellers in the world reach the 1 billion mark – when on average one in every three city residents will be living in inadequate housing with none, or few basic services.

It is still unclear how this will influence government policies and actions, particularly in relation to Millennium Development Goal 7, Targets 10 on water and sanitation, and 11 aimed at improving the lives of slum dwellers.

But it is important to understand that the growth of cities is not just a phenomenon of migration from rural to urban areas. It also entails international migration – people seeking a better life in other countries both in the north and in the south. Whether they are fleeing conflict, disasters or simply seeking a better life somewhere else, the number of people on the move today is greater than ever before.

It is very difficult to stop the flow of people into cities and towns. Urbanisation is one of the most powerful, irreversible forces in the world. It is estimated that 93 percent of the future urban population growth will occur in the cities of Asia and Africa, and to a lesser extent, Latin America and the Caribbean.

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Migration too is one of the great irreversible forces, and one likely to grow. Frequently discussions on how to manage it are steeped in controversy and rancour. This is in part because policy making and coordination at the international, national and municipal level is lacking.

Some countries complain about the brain drain, but there is also the fact that the remittances immigrants send home could be far larger in financial terms than gross overseas development aid or foreign direct investment. Thus, it is a question of striking a balance.

Cities make countries rich. Countries that are highly urbanised have higher incomes, more stable economies, stronger institutions. They are better able to withstand the volatility of the global economy than those with less urbanised populations. Urban-based economic activities account for up to 55 percent of Gross National Product (GNP) in low-income countries, 73

percent in middle-income countries and 85 percent in high income countries.

And major contributors here are the migrants who helped build many of the world's greatest cities, the people who had the courage to pack up and move. We need to look at ways of making our cities inclusive places able to provide for all.

Instead of building fortresses, we need to build more bridges.



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