

URBANIZATION IS NOT THE PROBLEM

Critics warn of poverty and pollution in sprawling mega-cities. But cities are engines of innovation, and we must envision a new harmony between urban and rural areas.

 by Hans van Ginkel



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The cities in the less developed regions are facing a task of gigantic proportions. United Nations population projections indicate that from 2000 to 2050 their population will grow from about 2 billion people to 5 billion. This dash towards urbanization is inevitable.

Successful development generally begins with agriculture, but industry, trade, transport and education are essential, and all are centered in urban areas. No longer is urbanization just a matter of people coming to the cities. There is a growing integration between the urban and the rural. Increasingly, urban regions will consist of vast webs of interconnected people, functions and activities in different densities, of mixed landscapes, a spectrum from more rural to more urban. They are networked worldwide and smart, interacting with their hinterlands and beyond, in complex and kaleidoscopic patterns. These urban regions are the engines of economic growth and innovation. They have become true agents of change.

However, in too many cases big cities are also places of great poverty. Critics worry that in cities too many of the Earth's resources are being used, that skies and surface water are polluted, and solid waste is everywhere. Questions must be raised, however, whether the resources needed to feed and house people in cities will be much different from resources

for the same number of people living in rural areas.

Urbanization is not the root problem, but rather the total number of people, their living standards and expectations of life, as well as energy and resource inefficiencies. To provide ten billion people with adequate and safe food, drinking water, shelter and more is a major challenge – a challenge for all science and technology, worldwide.



Image: NASA

Research has already shown that urbanization is the best solution for sustainability. The need for long-distance transport diminishes with higher densities. Wastewater treatment and solid-waste management will be easier and cheaper. This all helps to reduce the ecological footprint. However, the relation with locally available resources must also be considered. There is a logical limit to the size and density of urban agglomerations. In particular this is clear with regard to the availability of clean air and water and land suitable for construction.

We should try to address these issues by giving more space to the urban people, by bringing the rural to urban and the urban to the rural. We can no longer just make development plans for cities, without at the same time considering the surrounding rural areas. This requires not only knowledge of a region and its issues and goals, but also a capacity to look over the fences of different disciplines and territorial entities. It also requires a proactive approach and a capacity to pre-invest and to look beyond short-term self-interest. ■