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Check Against Delivery

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Introduction

Good morning. Last year, for the first time ever in world history, the balance of global population tipped from predominantly rural to predominantly urban. Poverty, however, remains concentrated in rural areas. Three out of every four poor people in developing countries live in rural areas.

Rural areas remain linked with urban areas through the continual back-and-forth flow of ideas, people, goods and services (including both community and ecosystem services). Despite this link, people in rural areas are often disproportionately deprived of attention, resources and a voice in decision-making.

We care about the sustainability of lifestyles and livelihoods in rural areas – the need to create and maintain viable economic opportunities, vibrant social structures, and equitable participation in governance. We also need healthy and productive rural people as good stewards of the great outdoors – and all the natural resources it holds – for both rural and urban people and places.

In short, we need to bring rural areas into the development mainstream without destroying the features that make rural areas special, attractive and distinct from urban areas while encouraging good stewardship of natural resources and preserving the integrity of rural communities.

Challenge

Our strategic challenge, therefore, is to reduce the disparities in the quality of life and access to services between urban and rural areas.

To overcome the discouraging conditions that propel rural-to-urban migration, we need to diversify the rural economy and better match the number of job seekers and job openings. To do this, we need to

- improve education and skill training – especially of youth;
- invest in basic infrastructure – transportation, financing, communications and information; and

- offer creative incentives to attract rural-based enterprises that add value to local products and services.

To improve quality of rural life we need to:

- increase access to essential services; and
- pioneer new models of internet-based and mobile services delivery.

Examples of Rural Development Approaches

I would like to give you several short examples from the United States and other countries of how we are working to promote rural development.

The first example concerns rural electrification in the United States, where electric cooperatives have proven to be an effective way to provide essential utility services to rural areas. Today, there is almost no difference between urban and rural areas in the access to electricity.

Second, our 4-H Programs (based on head, heart, hands and health) and other youth programs offer practical learning experiences and training opportunities for rural youth. These programs help develop citizenship, leadership and life skills that promote positive youth development and encourage youth to stay in their home communities.

The USDA's National Rural e-Commerce Extension Initiative assists rural areas by providing electronic extension services - business information, educational resources and self-training. The delivery of these outreach programs is a successful and cost-effective way to reach this large and diverse audience.

Overseas examples include the use of mobile telephone banking technologies. USAID has helped develop an innovative service that turns a person's cellular telephone into an electronic wallet in the Philippines. Telecom subscribers can perform standard banking transaction with their phones. This is an exciting demonstration of how relatively low-cost technology eliminates geographic distances and empowers rural populations.

Additionally, USAID has supported 123 projects in 72 countries that use tourism as a component for achieving sustainable development objectives. Examples include establishing communal land conservancies in Namibia, protecting coral reefs along the Red Sea coast in Egypt, and reducing energy and water use in hotels in Jamaica. Sustainable tourism development requires extensive stakeholder participation in planning from the outset and multimedia campaigns to achieve lasting results.

Conclusion

To conclude, there is an urgent and continuing need for economic diversification and development in rural areas. Where agriculture is significant, this requires increasing productivity *inside* agriculture and creating new jobs and income opportunities *outside* agriculture.

Rural development requires a comprehensive and strategic approach that systematically reduces – or removes – the disparities in services and opportunities between cities and countrysides.

Each opportunity for rural development must be tailored for the particular context, time, scale and need. It should align with the local culture and enhance local capacities. It should ensure community involvement for ownership and understanding – and success.

Lastly, rural development will not be sustainable if it comes at an unacceptable cost. It must not damage the environment, destroy social relations, or increase tensions and the potential for conflict. Indeed, it should “do no harm.”

Our goal is to empower the energies and aspirations of rural people to face a viable future -- right where they are.