

Catch-22

The present world population is 6.9 billion (US Census Bureau). Since the dawn of civilization, when humankind exchanged hunting for permanent settlement, those who could not keep up with the demands of their fellows and lived a marginal life on the edge of starvation have accounted for 20% of the population: historical fact. Unfortunately, this ratio has never changed and is still valid today: over one billion people live in slums.

One billion... that's the total population of the planet two centuries back. Within 125 years the number has doubled. If you are now aged fifty, the Earth in the year of your birth had three billion inhabitants, and four billion by the time you reached the age of getting interested in the opposite sex. In tandem with increasing world population, the role of cadastres has also changed. In feudal times, say up to American Independence, land was seen as a source of food production, fuel and minerals; a source of wealth, thus, and cadastres accordingly existed for the benefit of the royal treasury. Land remained in the hands of a family to the end of time. Then the steam engine was invented, enabling production on an industrial scale. Craftsmanship became obsolete. Rural people migrated en masse to the city, inducing transfer of land rights from family to industry, from farmer to city dweller. Cadastre got an additional task: securing title. The area of inhabitable land does not grow along with population. Land is thus becoming scarcer by the year. In the meanwhile, 30% of the world's land area became subject to communist rule; the state gaining ownership of all territory. Centrally-planned economies allowed cadastres to become neglected or abandoned. Then communist regimes collapsed and the market was reinvented. Cadastres got a new assignment: supporting the market economy. Within this framework Hernando De Soto uncovered the fact that many in developing countries had been put aside, their land never having been formally registered meant they possessed land but no title, and hence no access to credit. So they are not as poor as people in developed countries think they are. They seem poor because their main asset, land, is not recognised security for loan. 'Cadastres are the starting point for people to escape the poverty trap,' as De Soto states in this month's interview.

In recent years we have all experienced how the free market not only brings glory, but also has its dark side. Today cadastres are expected not only to support the market economy, but also sustainable development, good governance and, above all, contribute to eradicating poverty. In this paradigm cadastres not only support landowners and tax collectors but society as a whole, including the landless and the have-nots. However, according to Prof. McLaughlin in GIM's September interview, the well functioning of cadastres is hindered by 'corruption, poor institutional development, opaque legal systems, weak enforcement mechanisms and lack of transparency'.

Catch-22! Where to from here?