I am very happy to welcome you to our Annual Bank Conference on Land and Poverty. The conference is now in its 17th year. It started as a small activity around the Policy Research Report that Klaus Deininger wrote on Land, and I am so glad that it has become such a tremendous event over the years. I have been telling Klaus he now needs to write another Policy Research Report to synthesize all that we have learned over the past 17 years; I am sure it will be a great read.

Your attendance this week signals the great importance of land in the world today. It is such an important asset that affects economic efficiency. It can drive the empowerment of women, help eliminate extreme poverty, and boost inclusive growth.

It also has far-reaching implications for governance, the development and resilience of our towns and cities, and the megacities of the future. It is also essential to meeting the dangerous challenge of climate change.

Dealing with these wide range of issues effectively, requires collaboration across many stakeholders; and I am very happy that this conference intends to do exactly that. So I look forward to your active engagement this week, sharing your experiences, and developing new perspectives on how we can together harness the enormous development and environmental potential of land.

We in the Development Economics Group strongly believe in the power of research in advising our country clients and partners on making smart, evidence-based policy choices that shape the development agenda. Research and data are indispensable for sound policy, to provide an objective and unbiased description of what is happening, how it is affected by the regulatory framework, and whether interventions have the desired impact. This in turn creates demand for high quality operational engagement by the Bank.

Let me give you an example of how this happens: In Rwanda, our analysis of a pilot program of land regularization showed that joint ownership rights by women, who were not legally married (which made up 35% of the population) were ignored so they lost out big time in the process. Having research findings available in real time allowed regulations to be changed and we were able to achieve highly positive gender outcomes in the national roll out.

More recently, analysis of land registry data showed gaps and gender-bias in registration of subsequent transactions which the Government is now addressing through awareness campaigns, decentralization of services, and use of smartphone-based record access in a way that other African countries now trying to emulate.

Another important area is data: With the advances made in terms of remote sensing, connectivity, and computing power that are all on display this week in the innovation fair, the land sector provides enormous opportunities to improve research and policy advice by using administrative, remotely sensed, and crowd-sourced data to complement and enrich more traditional household- or firm-level survey data.

Examples such as monitoring land prices, assessing tax gaps, and monitoring use and productivity of land concessions show how this can provide insights, improve transparency, and inform our operational engagement in real time.
Finally, land is also an important issue on the global agenda, not only in meeting the SDGs but also because it plays an important role in meeting global climate change commitments made during the recent COP 21. For the World Bank, it is crucial to our meeting our twin goals of reducing extreme poverty and promoting shared prosperity. But, without an evidence-based policy dialogue at country level, processes of target setting and monitoring may not mean much.

It is for this reason that I am happy to see the enormous number of countries from where we have presentations over the next few days. 101 countries are represented at the conference. I am even more delighted by the strong participation by young researchers, especially women, who make up more than 30% of all presenters.

Let me conclude by re-iterating that we in Research are delighted to be able to support this effort and look forward to a stimulating exchange over the coming days. Thank you.