

IV WORLD CONGRESS ON RURAL LIFE

Introduction to Working Group session on “Economic Justice, Poverty and Rural Life”

Prepared By

Mr. Hippolyt Pul

Promoting Economic Justice Through the Lenses of Catholic Social Teaching

Economic justice demands that the goods of the earth must be managed and used for the benefit of all, not only in the current generation, but for the future ones as well. Hence, economic justice must be founded on the principle of the common good which affirms that “God destined the earth and all it contains for the use of all men and all peoples so that all created things would be shared fairly by all mankind under the guidance of justice tempered by charity” (Gaudium et Spes, 69). But the affirmation of the common good also enjoins us to make preferential options for the poor in ways that do not demean their human dignity, but rather upholds and defends them. Consequently, the poor should not be the objectives of our pitiful righteousness, but the centre of every action that creates opportunities for them to live out their lives to the full through active participation in economic and political life of their communities.

Opting for the poor is founded in the need to stand in solidarity with all human kind, especially those in need. In the context of economic life, this solidarity calls on us to be circumspect in the pursuit of economic wealth in ways that ensure that “...the progress of some will no longer be an obstacle to the development of others, nor a pretext for their enslavement” (CSDC 175). Instead, we must strive to conduct economic activities in ways that “...permit people not to lose sight of the origin or purpose of these goods, [on the contrary, it should be done in ways that] bring about a world of fairness and solidarity, in which the creation of wealth can take on a positive function” (CSDC 174).

In an increasingly globalized world, solidarity demands that our concerns for economic justice transcend national boundaries to demand the same standards of justice for others in less developed conditions as we would wish for ourselves. For, globalization has brought with it the increased interconnectivity of the economic lives of nations and peoples, thanks to the migration of capital and productive process from the developed world into the less developed parts. Accompanying this is the scramble for access to, and control over raw materials and other inputs, particularly oil. For Africa, which holds some of the largest reserves of raw materials, this new scramble is viewed by many as the repeat of the struggle for economic hegemony; it brings to full cycle the battle to partition and control the continent’s resources, not for the benefit of its people, but the economic superpowers that manage to lay claims to portions of the continent’s resources. In the process, as we say in Africa, when two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.

Beyond the resource war, economic globalization is often justified on the grounds of liberal market policies that seek to maximize efficiency and cost-effectiveness of production through the migration of capital and labour across continents.

But if “economics is supposed to be in the service of man” (*Populorum Progressio*, #26), then the principle of subsidiarity in the social teachings of the church enjoins us to temper the search for economic efficiencies for external capital with the need to create opportunities for active and profitable local participation in economic activities. This implies that market liberalization cannot be unbridled. On the contrary, the search for efficiency in the deployment of foreign capital must create space for effective and equitable participation of local industries and workers in the economic development process. Consequently, any policies, programs, or processes that marginalize or even displace local businesses and productive efforts risks creating conditions that perpetuate poverty and undignified livelihoods of the local people. That would be counter to the principles of economic justice.

The concept of economic justice must also be related to its import for peace in the world. Structural violence, embedded in unjust and inequitable economic structures, rules, and practices, be it at the local, national, or global levels, is the most debilitating and dehumanizing form of violence. When perpetrated through unjust economic systems, it runs the risk of provoking the economically marginalized to resort to violence as a means of seeking justice. We see this daily around the world. In the context of Africa, the most impoverished part of our global village that is also home to some of the world’s most violent and protracted conflicts, the linkage between unjust economic structures, nationally and globally, and the violent conflicts cannot be denied anymore. It is common knowledge that Africa is bleeding from the plunder of its natural resources in the mineral, forest, fishing, oil, and gas industries; a plunder that is, unfortunately, closely associated with the incidence and sustenance of some of the most violent of conflicts in the most resource rich countries of the continent. In recent times, the phenomenon of land grabbing under which rich multinationals are expropriating large tracks of fertile land from the local communities with the connivance of local governments, is adding to the list of economic injustices that poor rural people have to endure.

The caution that "Development is the new name for peace" (*Populorum Progressio*) has to be heeded. But peace for all is possible only when the fruits of development are equitably shared for the benefit of all and in service of the common good. As John II warns, “To ignore this demand could encourage the temptation among the victims of injustice to respond with violence [for] “Peoples excluded from the fair distribution of the goods originally destined for all could ask themselves: why not respond with violence to those who first treat us with violence?” (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, No. 10).

The caveat, therefore, is that global economic and trade policies and programs cannot be applied in a blanket fashion across all contexts. They must take cognizance of local realities and create the conditions and capacities for local economic actors to participate fairly and equitably in the economic process. But history tells us that change does not happen on its own volition, it has to be induced, catalysed, and sustained; it has to have a promoter and agents. Whose job is it to make change for greater economic justice and peace happen?

Questions for the Panel discussions

1. How should the principles of economic justice articulated in the social teachings of the church inform the economic decisions and choices that we make individually and collectively?
2. How do we, as people of faith, the salt of the earth, influence the policies and programs of our respective countries to ensure that the economic choices that our governments and home corporations make in their dealings with other countries do not unduly create conditions that degrade or downgrade the dignity of others within and outside of our communities?
3. How should the church and its faithful respond to the growing threat to rural livelihoods in agrarian communities around the world as manifested in the growing land grab and corporatization of agricultural production?
4. The exploitation of natural resources have not only created and perpetuated conditions for violent conflicts in many parts of the developing world; it has also engendered irreparable environmental degradation that puts current and future rural livelihoods at risk. How might the church play a proactive role in supporting the defence of the environment and rural poor against the powers of the state and corporations?

References

Ioannes Paulus PP. II (1987), *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, Vatican, accessed on 6/19/2012 from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis_en.html

SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 69: AAS 58 (1966), 1090. Quoted by Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, Page 97.

Paul VI (1967) *Populorum Progressio*, *The Vatican*, accessed on 6/19/2012 from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum_en.html