

## **Together, Against Poverty and Social Exclusion**

Some years ago I visited the village of Bar Koech in Northern Uganda. I was brought there by local diocesan Caritas Pader with whom we were working, supporting their efforts to resettle displaced people following the end of the twenty year civil war.

Having looked around the village of about 600 people a meeting was held under the shadow of some trees. We asked what were their main concerns. Their reply was simply “we have no food”. “And why not”? we asked. “Because the rains have not come”. They had planted twice and each time the seeds had died in the parched soil.

They had a dilemma now. They could borrow money and buy more seed and risk a third planting, but if it were to fail they would lose everything and be in debt. Or they could go to the World Food Programme for food aid which would meet the needs of the coming months. Either option was decidedly unpalatable – risk living in debt or suffer the indignity of queuing up for food – an admission of failure, of having let the family down.

I asked why they thought the rains had failed. “It is a punishment from God for all the terrible things that had happened in the war.” Another added “the weapons have destroyed the clouds”. They were totally unaware of climate change. I was not about to inform them.

For the reality is that a European citizen produces almost exactly one hundred times the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of an Ugandan citizen. We know that climate change has had a disastrous effect on rural communities in Africa. If they knew the reality they might have got very angry with me!

The women had another problem. Many of them are widows, their husbands having been killed in the war. On returning home to their village they found their small farms occupied by their dead husband's family. Women are not allowed to own land in this culture, despite the national law allowing it. As so often happens, it is the women who are most excluded. Caritas is working to mediate in many of the individual cases to have at least some of the land returned to the women and their children.

Later I asked about the government's role in the region. Caritas told me that there is little interest. Bar Koech in a poor arid region in the north east of the country. The government is more concerned with the wealthy regions; they get little assistance.

How many more stories of this kind can we tell in Caritas? Thousands I would suggest. Poor people with no control over their own lives, their livelihoods destroyed, neglected by their government, women marginalised, children with no hope of an education or a future.

No amount of small projects can solve the problems of Bar Koech. The root causes of their problems go back to decisions made far from their village - in the capital Kampala, in the boardrooms of multinational companies, in discussions at the UN, the OECD or the EU, or on the trading floors of commodity markets in distant cities. Their voice will not be heard. Surely this is the ultimate social exclusion, where citizens cannot have any influence on the decisions that govern their lives.

What we see is a failure of politics. The failure of those who have real power in the world to change a system that allows the rich nations to arrange the world order to the benefit of the wealthy and the powerful and

to the detriment of the poor. Blessed John Paul, writing in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* said: We “must denounce the existence of economic, financial and social mechanisms... (that) accentuate the situation of wealth for some and poverty for the rest” (SRS 16)

The problem of ending world poverty and social exclusion is not due to a lack of resources – there is more than enough to go around – rather it is a lack of political will to change those structures of which John Paul spoke.

In Rio de Janeiro last year, world leaders met to discuss sustainable development and the impact of climate change. The result of their deliberations, after one week’s discussions, was to agree to implement the agreement they made in Rio twenty years earlier. The developing countries left Rio depressed!

In the year 2000 the world leaders made a solemn declaration to halve the numbers of people living in poverty and hunger by the year 2015. They devised the eight Millennium Development Goals which set out how they would achieve these objectives. Targets were set in relation to poverty, food, health, education, provision of clean water, sustainable development, HIV/Aids and many more. These targets were contained in millennium development goals 1 to 7.

MDG 8 set out what the wealthy countries would do to reform the economic structures that govern development and would allow for the governments of the poorest countries to implement their programmes. These commitments included increasing development aid and ending tied aid, finding new and innovative ways of funding development, resolving the debt problem, changing international trading regulations to benefit the

poorest countries, and to developing local capacity and systems in countries so that they could develop their economies. Without these important changes the other goals could not be met.

Almost inevitably the changes did not happen. After a short time of increasing development aid has fallen again below previous levels. No new innovative flows of funding were created. The trade negotiations are on hold after twelve years. Subsidies for agricultural produce in the wealthy countries continue to distort the markets in favor of the rich against the poor. As a result progress on the other goals has been far from satisfactory.

Does it matter? The problem is that to most of us gathered here in this room it doesn't affect our lives. For the people of Bar Koech, however, it matters hugely, as it does for the 2 billion people who continue to live in poverty today. For them this failure is a matter of life and death, of being healthy or hungry, of having an education and hope for the future or to live in a sense of despair. And this has happened because nobody is accountable. Nobody loses their job or goes to prison. Contrast that with how those that caused the banking collapse in the USA in 2008 were treated.

Pope Benedict XVI summed up this contrast when he said: "the world has witnessed the vast resources that governments can draw upon to rescue financial institutions deemed too big to fail....Surely the integral human development of the world's poorest peoples is no less important; here is an enterprise that is truly too big to fail!"

The experience of implementing the MDGS has shown us that we cannot overcome poverty and social exclusion without changing the basic structures that cause this poverty and exclusion in the first place.

Other issues have emerged which compound the problems further. The phenomenon of land grabbing is now affecting some of the poorest communities in the world. Major agribusiness are investing heavily in land to provide for growing markets in the wealthy countries. While the farmers of Northern Uganda struggle to survive, all over the country you can see millions of hectares of African Palm plantations, sometimes as far as the eye can see.

Due to EU regulations on carbon emissions we now have targets to replace carbon based fuels with bio fuels and African palm makes excellent bio fuel. In Latin America there is a similar evolution to feed the North American market. The result is deals done behind closed doors between companies and governments, resulting in small holders being driven from their lands as large plantations are established.

The community of La Confiansa in Northern Honduras is one such community affected by land grabbing. There sixty families have been driven from their lands by a private militia organized by the local landowner who is now producing African palm for the American market. When I visited that community two years ago they were living in plastic and cardboard shacks on the edge of the lands that they used to farm. One of their young men had been murdered by the militia because of his attempts to work for justice for his community. The community were afraid to do anything else about their plight. Through the local Caritas office we are

now working with them to see if we can challenge the court orders that saw their land handed over to the landowner.

Due to our obligations to comply with international agreements, land previously used to grow food for the poor now produces fuel for our cars. Once more the poorest, like the community of La Confiensa pay the price!

The title of this event today is “Together, against Poverty and Social Exclusion.” It will indeed require a major effort by peoples and their political representatives to turn this situation around.

In Caritas we have long recognised that, as Paul VI said, the “peoples themselves have the prime responsibility to work for their own development” (PP 77). Throughout the world people are organising themselves into associations to advocate strongly for the right to participate and to be heard, to be served by their governments and not cast aside. However, where democracy is weak, where parliaments are dominated by government and treated as a rubber stamp, such movements are regarded as a threat.

In the past five years over sixty countries have introduced legislation to limit the activities and the funding of civil society organisations. Such legislation controls funding, makes it illegal to criticise government ministers, controls the press and curtails academic freedom. Equally parliament is sidelined. Governments do deals with multinational companies, they grant licences to exploit natural resources and nothing is disclosed about the details of these arrangements. These companies do not pay taxes and much needed revenue is denied to the citizens of these countries. It is estimated that

€160 billion is being lost to developing countries each year, more than all development aid. Again, nobody is accountable.

The Church has a key role to play in these circumstances and does so in many countries. Where social structures are weak often the Church is the only structure that can bring people together, that can listen to their cries for help, and can articulate these in a way that challenges the authorities. Caritas is central to this effort

And another important institution is parliament. If governments are to be held to account, being accountable to parliament is their first constitutional responsibility. Increasingly it is recognised that parliament and civil society, rather than being opposed to each other, are on the same side in this quest for strengthened democratic structures. In this way we can really work to protect the basic human rights of all citizens. Excellent work has been done by European civil society, be it through Caritas Europa, CIDSE, Concord and many others with the European Parliament in Brussels and Strasbourg in this regard.

The Association of Western European Parliamentarians for Africa continues to promote this kind of collaboration throughout the African continent. Promoting amongst parliamentarians awareness of their authority and responsibility as elected representatives.

To conclude, to overcome poverty and to enable people to participate fully in all that concerns their lives, we need to reform those structures that cause the marginalisation and alienation in the first place. We need to reform those international structures that cause the marginalisation and alienation in the first place. We need to ensure that every persons dignity,

which derives from being created in the image and likeness of God, is respected and guaranteed, and that the human rights that underpin that dignity are protected and exercised. And we must put those rights at the heart of all our development efforts. As John Paul II said: “..a type of development which does not respect human rights – personal and social, economic and political,..would not be worthy of mankind” (SRS 33)

Finally we need to ensure that the gift of creation is protected from the ravages of climate change and developed for the common good and for future generations. We need leaders of vision and courage who call upon all of us, the citizens of the world, to ensure that this happens.

Are we without hope in facing such a challenge. No!. Pope Francis has said “I find hope in the poor Jesus. Jesus who made himself poor for us... poverty calls us to sow hope”

Jesus brings all of this together in one fateful moment when he describes the last judgement in Matthew’s Gospel. Then we will be faced with

The plight of those that are hungry and thirsty.

Because of climate change brought about by our overdevelopment of resources.

With the fate of strangers that came to our lands.

Forced out of their homes by economic hardship and oppression

By the prisoners whom society somehow failed

and who indeed perhaps failed society themselves:

and we will be asked one simple question:

In relation to the least of these whose side were you on?

Did we by our actions sow hope?

That is the challenge Pope Francis has given us.

Thank you.