Greetings,

I bring you greetings from Africa Faith & Justice Network (AFJN), your older sister organization in Washington, I bring you a good will message from AFJN Board Chair Fr. Chris Promis, CSSp, from AFJN Board Members and from AFJN Staff and consultants!

This year, AFJN marks thirty years of justice ministry to our African sisters and brothers. Our 30th Anniversary conference took place from March 1-3, 2013. We lined up distinguished speakers for the occasion, including the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace President Cardinal Turkson as plenary speaker but as you know, the renunciation of the office of the Bishop of Rome by Benedict XVI and the events leading up to the Conclave interfered with his coming. However, Cardinal Turkson sent his talk and Fr. Richard Baawobr, Superior General of the Missionaries of Africa (MAfr) did an excellent job summarizing the Cardinal’s talk in addition to his own talk on justice ministry by the Missionaries of Africa.

Over the past thirty years, AFJN has succeeded in influencing major policy changes in Washington, policies that affect Africa. As a matter of process, we first analyze United States’ policy toward Africa and bring elements of the policy we see as having negative consequences for Africa to the attention of the United States Congress and/or the State Department. We have carried out most of these in partnership with other NGOs who have interest in Africa such as the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS), ActionAid, Jubilee USA, and Catholic affiliated NGOs in the Washington metropolitan area. AFJN has accomplished this with a small staff (currently four). We also accept university students as interns during the course of the year; we average two per semester. We see this undertaking as important investment – we train future advocates for Africa.

In the course of preparing for our celebration of thirty years of justice ministry, we examined the issues that AFJN has engaged over the years. After a close analysis of the issues, we came to a conclusion that the major perennial problem confronting Africa, though economic and development in nature, is indeed the problem of governance. Our analysis of the issues – the extractive industries, unfair trade, land grabs, capital flight, corporate tax evasions, or the endemic conflicts that plague African communities – can be traced to the problem of governance. So I state the central thesis: “The economic and development problem of Africa is a problem of governance.”
Africa So Rich-So Poor: The Challenge of Governance

The continent of Africa is perhaps the richest piece of land on earth, given its natural resources – rich fertile land, minerals and its bio-diversity. One then wonders: why do the people living in the world’s richest land continue to be the poorest? A close examination reveals that the problem has to do mainly with governance: the common good, resource distribution, citizens’ participation, transparency & accountability and economic justice. To address the economic problems, first you must tackle the systemic problems inherent in governance in Africa. In effect, the economic challenges or the problem of poverty and development in Africa are symptomatic of something outside the strictly economic sphere.

A narrow focus on the economy misses the causes of poverty and underdevelopment. Over the years, many programs such as the structural adjustment programs (SAP), privatization, and trade liberalization that have the economy as their primary focus have not only failed to alleviate the problems but have worsened the fortunes of many African countries, making most Africans poorer today than they were twenty or thirty years ago.

Governance

An essential element of good governance is upholding the common good. Leaders must seek the good for all their citizens in formulating policies and applying laws. Both laws and leaders must be transparent and accountable and enable robust civil society participation in the governing process. They must uphold the principles of subsidiarity, that is, they must not arrogate to themselves the functions of a lower body.

It is said that "all politics are local" but this is not the case in Africa. Politics in modern Africa are so centralized in the hands of a few, and a vast majority of citizens are very alienated from their governments and have no political voice. It is rare in countries where citizens have a voice and participate in governance to see their leaders act with impunity. AFJN is undertaking, in partnership with the church in Africa, a project of sustained education of local African communities in Catholic Social Teaching on their rights and responsibilities as citizens, specifically on their rights to participate in governance as citizens. We believe that if we want to see transformation and development in Africa, we have to empower people at the grassroots level.

Government-to-Government Foreign Aid

Foreign Aid mostly has a negative impact on African communities. In general, foreign aid comes with strings attached and with the interest of the aid donor. Corporations which carry out the foreign aid contracts make hundreds of millions of dollars, dodge taxes, and expatriate money made within African countries abroad. Foreign aid encourages corruption, entrenches “strong men” in African countries, and creates dependency. The implementation of foreign aid lacks transparency, adequate feasibility studies of the viability of the project or its relevance for the people prior to its implementation. Local communities are generally not consulted to understand their real needs. Corrupt political elite are often in cahoots with foreign collaborators to siphon the money out of the country in various ways including price inflations of contracts, and phony projects. With the flow of foreign aid comes the struggle for control of the money and often lead to war and instability of the communities.
Government Affiliated NGOs

Government-sponsored NGOs and those affiliated with multinational corporations are often undetected contributors to the problems besetting many African communities. These NGOs are generally well funded. They go into communities with their own development agendas and without proper local consultation; they want to help, but lack a well grounded study of the needs of the communities. They often initiate programs that are not sustainable or relevant to the needs of the communities. These uninformed starts create intermittent, unreliable employment and raise false hopes in the communities. Foreign NGO workers can live a life of luxury in a poor area, contributing to inflation and raising the cost of living for locals. They contribute to the corruption of local communities and to destabilizing local culture. These assessments of government and multinational corporations’ affiliated NGOs may seem harsh, but the facts on the ground testify corroborate our assessments. Here are some examples:

NGOs and Local Communities

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for example, the presence of multinational NGOs have driven up the rent for office space and housing in Goma and Bukavu. Still in the DRC an NGO undertook an independent project at Nkokwe Primary school in North Kivu to build a toilet for the students to “improve sanitation.” The toilet they built required running water to clean, but there was no plumbing. Can you see the big report this NGO submitted, claiming to have improved the lives of these primary school kids?

In early 2012 AFJN staff members Bahati and Melaura visited eastern DRC on fact finding mission. They called a meeting with community leaders of Mukera, a town with a gold mine, with the aim of discussing the Dodd-Frank conflict mineral law. The goal was to educate them about the law, to talk about ways forward, and empower the community to stand up for their rights. As a matter of cultural practice, the party which calls community leaders to a meeting provides refreshment. Unbeknown to Bahati, a Congolese citizen himself who is well acquainted with the culture of the community, multinational NGOs have developed the habit of paying community leaders summoned for meetings “lost wages.” This erodes the local cultural practices. Upon arrival for the meeting called by AFJN staff, much to their surprise the community leaders demanded payment for a meeting that was called to empower them to improve their lives.

The glut of NGO funds serves to destroy local cultures elsewhere as well. On April 3, 2013, a female doctor from Somalia who runs many clinics for local communities across Somalia reported during her presentation on “African Voices Expressed Through Leadership and Courage” at the State Department in Washington DC that she had physicians providing medical care for about $1,500 per month. Later, NGOs arrived and set up their own clinic and offered jobs for $3,000 per month--and she lost her community doctors. On March 29, 2013, Malawian president Joyce Banda, in her comments on “Consolidating Democratic Gains, Promoting African Prosperity” at the US Institute of Peace in Washington DC made similar observations about multinational NGOs which set up projects without proper consultation and feasibility study and disrupting local cultures. The story goes on.
Currency Devaluation and Privatization

A hallmark of the implementation of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) is the devaluation of the local currency and privatization. Within Africa, the immediate consequence of SAP, which were initiated in the 1980’s, was a spiraling inflation on basic items including food. Since then, SAP has contributed to the widening gap between the haves (mostly those with political connections) and the have-nots (those without political connections) and between the people and their governments. In many countries, the program was imposed by the political elite without consulting the people and often to the benefit of the elite and their external collaborators and a further disadvantage to the population. Through privatization, the haves literally buy the government in some countries and diminish the state’s capacity to provide fundamental public services to its citizens and equally, weaken the citizens’ access and interaction with the government.

Trade Liberalization

Africa’s participation in the current global market is mostly that of producing primary commodities and extracting and exporting raw materials. The value of raw materials (crude oil, minerals, and other primary products) is tied to speculation by the stock markets. As an exporter of primary products, Africa's economy is very unstable at the international market. This makes Africa’s economy subject to the interests of its trading partners and dependent on the “national interest” of their partner countries, a reason Africa’s political elite continue to implement programs to please external political powers and multinational corporations, to the detriment of their citizens. A systemic change is needed to reverse the situation. This can be achieved by engaging citizens in shaping their future and how they want to relate to other political entities and multinational corporations.

Empowerment Project

For this reason AFJN has embarked on what we term our democracy and empowerment project. Basically, the aim is to develop and promote effective and sustained grassroots education, based on Catholic Social Teaching (the Common Good, The Dignity of the Human Person, Role of Government and Subsidiarity, Global Solidarity, Just Distribution of the Earth’s Resources, Stewardship of Creation, Economic Justice, Promotion of Peace and Disarmament) and on the rights and responsibilities of citizens as a way to foster awareness of the elements of good governance. We believe, as Roger Bacon puts it, that “knowledge is power” and that when people know their rights and responsibilities, they are more likely to fulfill them. I believe that if we want to see transformation and development in Africa, we have to empower the peoples of Africa at the grassroots to their social, political and economic environment.

Linking African Church Leaders and Local Communities

To this end, we made a presentation of the project at the Forum of the Symposium of the Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) in November 2012 in Dar-es-Salaam and are working with regional offices of Justice, Peace, development and good governance. While we plan to implement this project at the grassroots level, we feel a need to connect with African Church leaders and involve them, especially as we hope to target parish communities. AFJN is also in partnership with the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies at The Catholic University of America in Washington, which is in the process of producing a manual for
training trainers and community organizers. We are aware that other training manuals already exist and hope to incorporate what we find in the one we are producing.

**Why We Think This Is Important**

As indicated earlier, we believe that a true transformation and development in Africa will come about when we empower the peoples of Africa at the grassroots to their social, political and economic environment and encourage them to be their own advocates.

1. Anchoring this project in religious communities is crucial. The Church is a social and political actor with a vast network of members and institutions equipped to educate, conscientize and mobilize the public. Besides, the church has a history of leading oppressed peoples to freedom.

2. The governance apparatus in a typical African country has never taken root, never matured or had a life of its own beyond the whims and caprices of its political leaders. The stability of governing institutions requires the participation of its citizens.

3. Until most recently in countries like South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, Malawi and Botswana who have held successful participatory elections, the fortunes of many countries seemed tied to the personality of its leaders. Five African leaders have ruled their countries for upward of twenty-seven years and have utilized the advantage of the presidency to suppress their opponents: Uganda (27), Cameroon (29), Zimbabwe (31), Angola (32), and Equatorial Guinea (32) plus others no longer in office such as Mubarak, Mobutu, and Kaddafi.

**Promoting Strong Institutions**

Once an institution is maintained through many decades and over many generations without a major interruption, it takes on a life of its own. It acquires a “sacred” status. The likelihood that the institution will persist regardless of the personnel or the challenges it faces becomes high. The Church with its roughly two thousand year old history is the prime example. European and US political institutions continue to weather the economic and political storms regardless of their leaders (Italy for example). Once firmly established, an institution outlives current turbulence. It is this ability of the Church – to outlive current/fashionable turbulence – that made the Italian Communist analyst Antonio Gramsci develop a strong admiration for the Catholic Church, despite his critique of the same. African countries haven't had the chance to develop and sustain strong governing institutions over time and across generations.

They were never firmly established to outlive political turbulence. These countries are a hodge-podge of ethnic communities merged together for colonial economic reasons and they lack a national spirit. Following decolonization, they were subjected to coups and counter coups, to war and instabilities, some were engineered from outside by “big powers” and/or former colonizers. Where there seems to be relative governmental stability, it is linked to individual strong men rather than strong institutions. These strong men often have links with strong countries or multinational corporations interested in the African leader’s willingness to serve their interests.
Conclusion

We reiterate the basic premise of this presentation: the economic and development problem of Africa is a problem of governance. To tackle this, we must address the anchor of the fundamental problem. We must work together to empower the peoples of Africa so they can send a strong message to their leaders that “the king is king, thanks to the people” and hold their leaders accountable. During his visit to Accra in 2009, President Barack Obama noted that “Africa does not need strong men; it needs strong institutions.” We agree wholeheartedly. Africa needs strong civil societies. We must therefore be persistence in reminding Washington, Brussels and others with interest in Africa, that their policies towards Africa must be transparent, must not continue to shore up strong men who serve their interest but must put the needs of the peoples of African first and above any financial interest.

Support Africa Faith and Justice Network (AFJN) today
Become a Member or Just Support our Work

AFJN’s justice ministry of education and advocacy for US just relations with Africa is made possible by generous support of faith communities and concerned people like you. The need for AFJN’s ministry is even more important than before. We need your support to build our capacity to deal with injustices facing our brothers and sisters in Africa. Together and in solidarity we can contribute to bring about the much needed social, economic and political transformation on the African continent.

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