

GLOBAL NETWORK FOR JUSTICE

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Loyola University, Campus Box 907, New Orleans, LA 70118, USA

gcnfj@loyno.edu - www.globalnetwork4justice.org

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The Road to Johannesburg: Why It's Important to Participate in United Nations Conferences

By Sister Jane Remson, O.Carm.

"Extreme poverty is an affront to human dignity and human rights. It undermines universal values of equality and freedom. Solidarity with the poor is a cardinal tenet of all the world's great religions." - Kofi Annan

Some 30,000 people journeyed to Istanbul to seek solutions to urban problems at the Habitat II Conference. Nearly 50,000 went to Beijing to set new standards for the advancement of women. And some 47,000 converged on Rio de Janeiro to find a better balance between environmental protection and economic development at the Earth Summit.

To some, the series of large-scale United Nations (UN) conferences held in the 1990s may have seemed like an extravagant talkfest. But most of the world's leaders and policy-makers viewed these events as a worthwhile investment - and even a watershed - in shaping our global future.

Global conferences have made a long-term impact by:

- ◆ Mobilizing national and local governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

- ◆ Establishing international standards and guidelines for national policy.
- ◆ Serving as a forum where new proposals can be debated and consensus sought.
- ◆ Setting in motion a process whereby governments make commitments and report back regularly to the UN.

By involving Presidents, Prime Ministers and other heads of State - as pioneered at the 1990 World Summit for Children - these conferences have put difficult long-term problems like poverty and environmental degradation at the top of the global agenda. These problems otherwise would not have the political urgency to grab front-page headlines and command the attention of world leaders. The participation of thousands of NGOs, citizens, academics and



I-r Sister Jane Remson, O.Carm. and
Sister Helen Ojario, O.Carm.

businesspeople, in both the official and unofficial meetings, has turned these conferences into true “global forums.”

Recognizing the valuable role that these major meetings play, the UN decided to hold several conferences on key socio-economic issues. These conferences included the Millennium Summit in 2000, Financing for Development in 2001 and the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002.



Friends of the Earth International hold a peaceful demonstration at the Convention Center in Bali

In 2001, Sister Helen Ojario, O.Carm. and I attended the preparatory meetings (called PrepComs) for the Financing for Development Conference (named the Monterrey Consensus) that was held in Monterrey, Mexico. This was an education for us because the PrepCom provided us with a firsthand experience of the inner working of a UN Conference. We witnessed the extensive debates and negotiations that take place before consensus is reached on the content and language of the final document that will be signed by participating nations. Despite the overwhelming evidence that it is detrimental to the poor, the Monterrey Consensus maintained that *trade and direct foreign investment as the engine of growth to*

overcome poverty. What we learned from the PrepComs and outcomes of Monterrey proved invaluable as we prepared to attend PrepCom4 in Bali, Indonesia for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg.

The road to Johannesburg took us to Bali, Indonesia for the final PrepCom before the World Summit. Sister Helen and I were members of a four member team from Loyola University New Orleans. The team was made-up of Richard McCarthy, our team leader and director of the ECONomics Institute at Loyola University New Orleans Twomey Center and Henry Harrison, agent Louisiana State University Agricultural Cooperative Extension. We were guests of the Ford Foundation, who had assembled fifty or so NGOs to participate in the “Peoples Forum” that took place along side the governmental PrepCom. We joined the Sustainable Agriculture Caucus. One goal of the caucus was to search for ways to expand a project of the UNs Food & Agriculture Organization (FAO) known as Sustainable Agriculture & Rural Development (SARD). One of the criteria for SARD is that it “reduces the vulnerability of the agricultural sector to adverse natural and socio-economic factors and other risks, and strengthens self-reliance.” Examining an outcome of the Monterrey Consensus, *trade and direct foreign investment as the engine of growth to overcome poverty*, we quickly realized that the type of economic model one chooses to use could be a detriment or a blessing in “strengthening self-reliance” as a means of reducing poverty. After speaking with colleagues from Sri Lanka, South

Africa, Egypt, Brazil, The Philippines and Indonesia, we became aware that a global economic model with its emphasis on trade and foreign investment frightened farmers and other indigenous workers. They were fearful because they viewed a global economic model as unpredictable with change occurring almost daily, and as such, felt they could not compete with larger global corporations that could adjust to rapid change in investment strategies and greater or lesser demand for products. We realized that a local economic model that focuses on community and sustainability would provide for the demands of SARD, and give security and stability to local farmers, fishers and other entrepreneurs. We shared our local economic model that has a history of success in urban areas and rural areas, in developed countries as well as developing countries. The model consists of four essential components; 1) a point of entry or “crack” in the larger economy, and identifying a niche that no one is filling, 2) public policy, 3) technical assistance and 4) leadership development.



Sister Helen (c) shops at the market in Baropac Nuevo, Iloilo, Philippines

Bali gave us a touch of reality in global relationships. The tension that exists between de-

veloped countries and developing countries is evident in the content and language of the Bali documents. Developed countries are focused on trade and investments, that is, market-driven policies that favor the interest of the private sector and business as the path to rapid development, which they believe, will eventually reduce poverty. On the other hand, developing countries are focused on more pressing social concerns that will have an immediate effect on reducing poverty, such as, clean water, food, education and health care. Lacking adequate infrastructures and workers with the necessary technical skills, a major concern of the developing countries is trade and trade barriers that will affect their ability to compete in the global marketplace.

While poverty has often been cited as one of the factors that adversely affect sustainable development, there are case studies that demonstrate that the reverse is also true. Poverty has increased due to the lack of sustainable development. There is a need to critically appraise poverty reduction programs in order to conform to sustainable development objectives. The debt burden is an example. Until now, financing for development is heavily dependent on external borrowing, both to multilateral institutions and bilateral countries. When the financial crisis hit Indonesia and the Rupiah was depreciated against foreign currency, debt servicing became a major problem for Indonesia. This put a major constraint on development. The public and private sector debt of US\$137.6 million is more than Indonesia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which means that funding for development had

to be compromised. There is a risk that part of the debt may have to be repaid by intensifying unsustainable exploitation of natural resources or ignoring environmental standards in production processes.

From Bali, Sister Helen and I traveled to Manila, Philippines. There we met at the Titus Brandsma Center with Father Bernard Roosendel, O.Carm. Father Roosendel had assembled members of the Carmelite Order, religious and lay leaders and others interested in social justice for an afternoon of sharing and discussion. The gathering was given the theme, *Justice and Peace Work in a Global Village* and it provided Sister Helen and me with an opportunity to share what we observed and learned from Bali. After we presented an overview of the Bali PrepCom and a preview of the agenda for the World Summit in Johannesburg, Sister Helen and I spent the remaining time sharing the same local economic model that we shared with colleagues in Bali. In discussing our model, we discovered that many of those present were also using the same model or some part of the same model in development programs they were engaged in. We were enriched by the quality of the discussion and came away with a broader insight regarding the essential components of our model.

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The road to Johannesburg continues to unwind. Along the way our team has made many discoveries, especially discoveries that lead to constructive ways to help make our world a better and more inclusive place for all. For me two constructive ways stand out; first, is the economic model that we shared, and second, is the SARD initiative that has the potential to eliminate hunger and eradicate poverty not only in Africa, Asia, Central and South America, but worldwide.

World Summit on Sustainable Development - Johannesburg, South Africa

Sustainable development calls for improving the quality of life for all of the world's people without increasing the use of our natural resources beyond the earth's carrying capacity.

Throughout the world, people require jobs, food, education, energy, health care, water and sanitation. While addressing these needs, the world community must also ensure that the rich fabric of cultural and social diversity, and the rights of workers, are respected, and that all members of society are empowered to play a role in determining their futures.

While sustainable development may require different actions in every region of the world, the efforts to build a truly sustainable way of life require the integration of action in three key areas:

- Economic Growth and Equity
- Conserving Natural Resources and the Environment
- Social Development