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Dignity, benefits, participation for all laborers

During 2008, each issue of NewsNotes will focus on one dimension of U.S. foreign policy and the U.S. elections around the theme “Loving our neighbor in a shrinking world.” This month we take a closer look at the impact of U.S. policy on workers.

Pope Leo the XIII wrote Rerum Novarum (On the Condition of Labor) in response to the terrible exploitation and poverty of European and North American workers at the end of the 19th century. The encyclical sought to address the signs of the time in 1891: the decline of public morality; workers exploited by greedy employers; public authorities not protecting the rights of the poor; and the overall destitution of the masses and wealth of a few.

Sound familiar? Despite significant strides in workplace safety and labor protections in the past 100 years, when we look around the world, we still find many of the same situations seen by Pope Leo XIII. The gap between the rich and the poor has grown in the U.S. and in countries all around the world. In recent weeks we’ve heard more about the global food crisis where more than 100 million people have been driven deeper into poverty by a sharp rise in food prices. This spike in prices is driven by a number of factors – rising gas prices, the conversion of foodstuffs into bio-fuels, droughts and other causes – with the end result of people simply not being able to afford food for themselves and for their families.

When we look at workers in the United States who pick our vegetables, care for children, clean offices and serve our food, repeatedly we come face-to-face with recent immigrants who have come to the U.S. looking for work. The U.S. economy has come to depend on these undocumented people commonly exploited by their employers not only in the U.S. but in other developed countries.

While all three presidential candidates have voted in support of comprehensive immigration reform, they do not spend much time connecting the dots and explaining the “push factors” – the “why” behind people’s decision to migrate. They come because they cannot find work in their home countries, or because their home counties do not guarantee their basic human rights. It is important that the presidential and Congressional candidates begin to outline what they intend to do to help change the way that the U.S. shapes foreign policy so that it supports and promotes the common good to help correct the “push factors” behind people’s decision to immigrate.

In the 14 years after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), signed by Mexico, Canada and the U.S., no economist or politician would deny that jobs were lost in each country, yet still the administration continues to negotiate and Congress continues to approve trade agreements cut from the same cloth. While few candidates in this election year have talked about the impact that U.S. economic decisions have had on neighboring countries, all the candidates have made promises to the workers of the United States who’ve lost their jobs over the past four years.

Candidates have promised to review free trade agreements; to renegotiate NAFTA (an agreement that has resulted in job loss especially in Ohio and Pennsylvania); and to forge ahead with making free trade agreements even freer while increasing skills training and education programs so that workers’ children will get better jobs in the future.

As U.S. citizens listen to candidates and contemplate for whom they will vote, it is important to keep in mind some basic principles from Catholic social tradition:

- God has gifted all with equal dignity.
- National wealth originates from the labor of workers.
- People have the right to the fruits of labor but should use them to benefit all.
- The economy exists for the person, not the person for the economy.
- The moral measure of any economy is how the impoverished and the vulnerable are faring.
- All people have the right to productive work, to just wages, to benefits, to decent working conditions and to organize and join unions or other associations.
Zimbabwe: Elections and painful aftermath

The following article by Marie Dennis, director of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns, is based on her recent visit to Zimbabwe, where she served as an election observer.

On even a short stay in Zimbabwe, one becomes intensely aware of the desperation of daily life: long lines of people waiting for bread … “volunteers” filling potholes with stones in exchange for “voluntary” donations from passers-by … valueless 10 million Zimdollar notes. People talk about staying awake all night on payday trying to figure out which few items must be purchased before the value of their paycheck disappears into the black hole of inflation.

The day-by-day situation for almost everyone in the country – except for a small elite – is dreadful. Life expectancy for women has plummeted to 34 years and for men to 37 years. The economy has completely collapsed, with inflation reaching astronomical levels (over 2,000 percent per year and expected to reach 6,000 percent within a few months). A vibrant black market exists in both currency and goods. (The government prints money as needed, then sends runners out on the street to sell it for foreign exchange on the black market.) The shelves of most food stores are practically empty and prices are rising on an almost hourly basis. Electricity is sporadic; many neighborhoods have no water service; fuel is expensive and difficult to obtain; roads and infrastructure are deteriorating. Unemployment has reached 80 percent and infant mortality 81 of 1,000. People are amazingly creative and resilient, but many are hungry – even starving.

When I arrived in Harare on Wednesday, March 26, the atmosphere was calm and focused on the presidential, parliamentary and local elections to be held just a few days later. The campaign had been peaceful so far, although most people assumed that manipulation was already underway and rumors were circulating about what had been done to rig the elections. Some said that officials had printed duplicates of every numbered ballot; that 600,000 postal votes had been printed for about 50,000 eligible people; that nine million regular ballots had been printed for only 5.9 registered voters; that many dead people’s names were still on the voter rolls.

Both Morgan Tsvangirai (candidate of the Movement for Democratic Change, MDC) and Simba Makoni (independent candidate formerly from the ZANU-PF ruling party) were campaigning vigorously, although fear was clearly present that those who publicly supported either one would be punished later if Robert Mugabe were to be re-elected, which was considered highly unlikely if the elections were free and fair.

The election process was managed by the Zimbabwe Election Commission (ZEC). Observer missions from SADC (the Southern Africa Development Community), the Pan African Parliament, every candidate, Zimbabwe’s civil society and the ecumenical community were present across the country.

The voting process itself went very well and quickly. We were told there were large groups of people voting in the early morning but by late morning the lines had thinned in most places. Police were in evidence at all the polling places – in large numbers at times and inside the polls (as allowed by a recently passed law). Many people were turned away because their names were not on the rolls. Some found their names at other polling places. Toward the end of the day we began to hear about busloads of voters being brought to polling places after dark and concerns began to rise about stuffed ballot boxes. A few serious incidents were verified.

Votes were counted at the polling stations and results posted outside the same stations immediately. Problems were expected in the rural areas where the lack of electricity would make late counting difficult but observers followed the process to the end in most locations. By the end of the day word was circulating about a major victory for the opposition.

All day Sunday, the day after the elections, there was a great deal of anxiety because there was no official word from the ZEC about results, despite the fact the MDC had begun to report a huge victory. Rumors continued to circulate, as well as some confirmed reports of rigging. White farmers near the airport had been told that they would lose their farms if they allowed opposition campaigning on their farms. Nevertheless, there appeared to be significant support for the opposition at polling places on the farms. Other people were promised beer if they voted for ZANU-PF and yet others were assured a small piece of land if they would vote for ZANU-PF.

The Zimbabwe Election Support Network (ZESN), an independent, non-governmental organi-
zation, had 8,000 observers in the field. Despite the lack of tolerance, lack of equal access to state media, etc., prior to the election, they affirmed that the voting process and vote counting had taken place without major problems. On Sunday they urged the ZEC to proceed with the announcement of results in a timely, transparent and accountable manner.

On the same day the Christian Alliance said they were disturbed by the silence of the ZEC; they appealed for the prompt release of results, and urged patience and vigilance on the part of the population, as well as unwavering prayer.

The SADC observer delegation also held a press conference on Sunday evening. They expressed concern about pre-election problems, including the lack of impartiality of the official press; intimidation of soldiers by senior officers; irregularities in the printing of voting papers; problems with postal voting process, etc. Overall, the SADC mission affirmed the spirit of cooperation evident during the elections; agreed that, although the presence of police in the voting stations was irregular, they did not interfere with the elections in any way; urged all political parties to accept the final results; concluded that the elections were in general free, peaceful and credible.

On Monday the ZEC began to very slowly announce and broadcast the vote count in specific contests, but over a month later the results of the presidential election have still not been announced; yet the ruling party is calling for a run-off.

Obviously, the power struggle behind the scenes has been intense. Despite the evident MDC victory that seemed substantial enough to avoid a run-off, Mugabe and/or others in power have been unwilling to leave without a fight. Violence against and intimidation of opposition members and supporters has increased. Many have been seriously injured; some have been killed. Rumors and questions have continued to circulate: Would Mugabe ever willingly leave office? Would he leave the country? What guarantees would he need in terms of avoiding prosecution or keeping his massive ill-gotten wealth? Would the army generals accept Tsvangirai as president? Would they stage a coup? Would the many others whose corruption has bankrupted Zimbabwe be allowed to keep their bounty? What role is SADC playing behind the scenes? South Africa? How can the non-African international community play a helpful role in this painful and dangerous process? All these questions are yet to be answered.

But beyond the elections, the challenge for Zimbabwe is even more massive. How will this beautiful country, which is so rich in human talent and natural resources, recover from the devastation it has experienced in the past decade? What steps will be taken to bring inflation under control and to resurrect the economy? How will the basic national systems and infrastructure (health care, education, transportation, water, electricity, communications) be rebuilt? Who will guide the process and to whose benefit? Will the Zimbabwean diaspora return to help? What role will the international community play, especially South Africa, SADC, the African Union, the UN and international financial institutions, but China, India, Brazil, Europe and the U.S. as well?

Representing Maryknoll communities of faith headquartered in the United States, the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns will be paying particular attention to the last question. The U.S. should provide financial and technical support as requested by Zimbabwe. The U.S. could make a major contribution by supporting an energetic response to Zimbabwe’s overwhelming HIV/AIDS epidemic and should even now honor its commitment made at Lancaster House almost 30 years ago to pay white farmers for their losses during land reform, helping to settle a gaping wound in Zimbabwe’s body politic. But the U.S. (and the international financial institutions) must keep a relationship with Zimbabwe that is non-coercive, giving the new Zimbabwean government and the people of Zimbabwe the space to shape their own future, especially in terms of economic, political, social and military policies. Time will tell what happens next.
Tanzania: Critical research on gold mining

Following intense scrutiny over suspect investment contracts by the government and investment companies, a consortium of activist organizations and religious communities (including the Christian Council of Tanzania, the National Council of Muslims in Tanzania, and the Tanzania Episcopal Conference) launched in Dar es Salaam a report entitled “A Golden Opportunity? How Tanzania is failing to benefit from Gold Mining.” The report was written by Tundu Lissu, a lawyer and longtime environmental activist from Tanzania, and Mark Curtis, an independent author and journalist affiliated with a number of academic institutions in Europe. The following article on that report is based on a Pambazuka News (#353) report by Salmi Maoulidi, an activist and executive director of the Sahiba Sisters Foundation in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

According to a recent article in the Financial Post, more than $45 billion in new mining investment is expected in Africa over the next five years. Canadian companies alone now have mining assets in Africa worth more than $12 billion – five years ago they had less than $1 billion invested on the continent. Despite a turbulent political environment, Africa is quickly earning a reputation as the place where mines can get permitted and built with breathtaking speed. This is no surprise with today’s high metal prices and the fact that the continent holds very high percentages of the world’s known reserves of gold, cobalt, diamonds, platinum, coltan and on and on.

The research is part of a year-long initiative by activists and religious leaders to add moral weight to the mining tragedy that looms in Tanzania. Various human rights violations have been recorded including killings and displacements – most resulting from conflicts over mining rights between small miners and large scale multinational miners.

The report makes grim reading about the governance and practice of mining companies in Tanzania. Mining is the fastest growing sector in the Tanzanian economy but the growth of the sector is not comparable to its contribution to the GDP, which is at just about three percent. Part of the problem is found in tax laws that are overly favorable to mining companies rather than to the people of Tanzania.

The situation is attributed by the report to the World Bank financed sectoral reform project begun in the mid nineties which became the basis of laws that inform the tax and mining regimes in the country. The royalty paid to the government for gold is set at only three percent. Tanzania possess around 45 million ounces of gold which at the current gold prices means the country is worth US$39 billion, yet it is categorized as one of the poorest countries in the world. In the last five years Tanzania exported gold worth more than US$2.5 billion but the government has only received an average of $21.7 million in royalties and taxes on the exports, while mining companies record handsome profits on their websites and in company audits presented to shareholders.

Two main companies were scrutinized on the basis of activist work done by the Lawyers Environmental Action Team headed by Tundu Lissu - Barrick Gold, a Canadian Company operating mines in Bulyanhulu, North Mara and Tulakawa, and AngloGold Ashanti, a South African company with British links which operates mines in Geita, the largest gold deposit in the country. The researchers estimate that mining companies have earned about $2.5 billion from exports, but Tanzania only records about $100 million from gold earnings. The researchers estimate that Tanzanian is losing more than $400 billion from tax concessions and tax evasion (non-payment of corporate tax and waivers on income tax on expatriate workers).

Impunity reigns in part because there is no parliamentary scrutiny over mining contracts and the government does not have the capacity to adequately monitor the sector. For example, there are wide discrepancies between statistics published by the companies and those issued by the government pertaining to the sector, suggesting discrepancies in record keeping. In some instances researchers have found under reporting of earnings to local governments. Rarely is there an indication of actual or possible environmental damage from mining operations.

The Bomani Commission, created to investigate the mining sector, [was] expected to publish its findings by the end of March. [It was created] to scrutinize the [suspicious activity in regards] to the Buzwagi Mine where Barrick Gold plans to open another mine in the midst of a review process of the mining sector. This [activity] triggered an uproar from civil society organizations and opposition parties and created the impetus that ultimately saw the former Prime Minister Edward Lowassa resign and his cabinet be dissolved.
Sudan: Long road to peace

“I think there is a lot of good going on. But everyone needs to take a deep breath and take a long term view ... rectifying ... trying ...taking small steps.” From the perspective of a missioner working in southern Sudan the situation there is extremely challenging but not without hope as good people strive to establish a semblance of stability and a dignified life following the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) which brought to an end a devastating 21-year civil war which left two million Sudanese dead and another four million displaced in southern Sudan and around Khartoum in the north.

The question of work in the formal economy is not yet on the table for most southern Sudanese, who still lack health care facilities, schools, clean water and basic infrastructure and are just beginning to see their economy come to life as refugees return from neighboring countries. A building boom in Khartoum and the Central Triangle area and other signs of some economic prosperity in northern Sudan have not been followed by a sharing of wealth with Darfur or the Nubian people in the far north or with the Eastern (non-Arab) tribes along the Ethiopian border. Rather, wealth tends to stay with Arabized and Islamist groups, where the power is and has been since independence.

Church leaders in Sudan fear that renewed fighting could break out if the CPA is not properly implemented, according to Bishop Rudolph Deng Majak, chairperson of the Sudan Catholic Bishops’ Conference. Deng cited recent clashes in the oil-rich Abyei region, which lies on the north-south border, as signaling the danger of a renewed conflict. (Ecumenical News International)

The border between the north and the south may well be the flash point for a new war. Much of the oil wealth is in this area (approximately 75 percent of Sudan’s proven oil reserves are in the south). While more of the oil money is appearing in the south, there is little transparency in terms of how much the oil is bringing to Sudan and what percentage is actually going to the south.

Many would say that much of the international community has turned elsewhere and put southern Sudan on the back burner -- that renewed pressure must be put back on the government of Sudan in Khartoum or it will not do anything to move peace processes forward in Darfur or to resolve problems with Chad or with the CPA.

A recent article published by Enough! (http://www.enoughproject.org) described “sky-rocketing political tensions, large-scale recent killings, and a rapid military build-up by all sides [that] have caused some Abyei experts to see a resumption of conflict as a realistic possibility once Misseriya herders and their livestock migrate north of Abyei in mid-to-late May … . The Misseriya are the Arab neighbors of the African Ngok Dinka of Abyei who, by longstanding agreement, migrate with their animals for water and pasture into Ngok territory at certain times of the year. Since mobilizing the Popular Defense Forces — a militia similar in composition and purpose to Darfur’s notorious Janjaweed — violence has intensified in and around Abyei, with reports of the Sudanese military backing Misseriya militias and Sudan Peoples Liberation Army elements supporting the Ngok Dinka …”

The article notes the “very low level of U.S. concern over non-implementation of the Abyei Protocol …[which], in recognition of Abyei’s uniqueness within the Sudan context, provides for a temporary administrative status within the North and South, a local governance mechanism to provide services to residents until 2011, a share of oil revenues to support those services to survivors and returnees, a security arrangement, and a referendum in 2011 to determine whether Abyei will be part of the North or the South…. ” The Protocol’s provisions have thus far not been implemented, leaving the territory “without government, without services, without boundaries, without security, and without a clear future.”

Another article in the Horn of Africa Bulletin (http://www.life-peace.org) describes the rejection by people in southern Sudan of the expectation that southern Sudan would collapse into chaos if it secedes – that ethnic conflict would overtake the country and the “challenges for a land-locked war-ravaged new state to build up its infrastructure from zero would be insurmountable. … Few people worry about what will happen to the north after the south has seceded. After all [they say] it is a long-established country with a functioning infrastructure. Its national revenue will be reduced somewhat when the south secedes with most of the oil, but some of the oil is in the north … and the pipeline will raise
however, the article continues, “there is a major war in Darfur. the people of the Nuba Mountains, southern Blue Nile and Abyei do not want to be part of the north. There are tensions even amongst the non-Nuba people of Kordofan.

There is a fragile peace deal on the eastern front, and the Nubian (not to be confused with Nuba) people of the far north are beginning to complain about marginalization. The country is governed by an unrepresentative Islamist regime that is deeply unpopular and survives largely due to its security organs. It has long been recognized that Sudan is controlled by a small ... elite, and that this ‘center-periphery’ dynamic is one of the ...root causes of all the conflicts in Sudan. People on the margins do not receive their fair share of power, development and resources, and are often treated as second (or third) class citizens. The oil revenue has turned Khartoum into a thriving modern city, but the rest of northern Sudan has not benefited at all.”

There is no doubt that solutions to the huge problems in the Horn of Africa will not come easily. At a minimum, the international community should continue accompanying the post-conflict process in Sudan, supporting those forces committed to the common good.

Kenya: Slow steps toward healing, reconciliation

In the aftermath of the violence that erupted in Kenya following elections on December 27 and the power-sharing agreement between Raila Odinga and Mwai Kibaki, tremendous challenges remain for the people of Kenya and for the world.

Despite valiant efforts on the part of local communities, religious groups and humanitarian agencies, more than 170,000 Kenyans are still displaced, living in extremely difficult circumstances with little security and profound uncertainty about the future. From the enormous urban settlements that were devastated by the violence to towns and villages in the Rift Valley and elsewhere, deep scars remain, presenting a challenge to the government of Kenya now forming, to other countries in the region and to the international community.

Of particular concern is the historical land issue, especially in the Rift Valley Province, which will have to be addressed as those still in camps for internally displaced persons prepare to return to their legally-owned but intensely-disputed lands. According to Maryknoll missioner Fr. Frank Breen, the facts that large land-holdings make up half of arable land, and that intratribal transfer of land is further impoverishing the poor, indicate that the land question in Kenya is fundamentally structural in nature, and not primarily ethnic. The work of resettlement, reconciliation and repair is huge and will take the collective efforts of people of good will and friends of Kenya from around the world.

A missioner working in Kibera writes, “Our schools are up and running and none of our buildings were burned, but almost! Now, I am concentrating on healing for the teachers, pupils and parents through seminars and small group meetings. Actually, I am encouraged with the responses we are receiving from various people and organizations which has been a big help in replacing uniforms, textbooks, and being able to provide medical and food to the most desperate. I have observed for many years that out of chaos comes humanitarian efforts. Kibera is still tense, but beginning to rebuild.”

At the same time, the political situation is extremely complex and difficult. A recent article by Antony Otieno Ong’ayo, a researcher at the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam, published in Pambazuka News (see http://www.pambazuka.org), looked closely at Kenya’s recent political compromise. He began with a reminder about Kenya’s Bomas constitutional review process, during which one side opposed the devolution of power from the presidency to the people, while the other claimed that such a devolution of power is essential given Kenya’s history of “authoritarianism and dictatorship” during which previous presidents abused their tremendous powers and politicized ethnicity: They failed to address high levels of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, health care, educational needs and infrastructure, especially roads, and used this power to detain opponents and allocate resources to their own regions in a skewed manner.

Moreover, he writes, “ethnic tensions that have plagued the country for decades ... [are] a sign that the much touted unity was a coerced unification or...
a unity/peace that was forced, first by the colonial state and later by the three post-colonial regimes. These regimes did not take into account ... institutional and constitutional arrangements that would pull every group towards [the center]..., but instead, adopted a system which broadly kept them under one (‘roof’) territory, at the same time keeping them apart as much as possible.” The economic and political marginalization of certain regions in Kenya demonstrates that the system was and is not appropriate for a country with such a wide range of diversities.

Since independence, an elite minority has monopolized state power and resources, thinking primarily about short-term benefits and how to secure advantageous positions in the “grand coalition.” This rush to create positions, without asking how institutions themselves could serve the common good, exacerbated tensions around access to and use of state power.

Now, Otieno Ong’ayo asks, what will be different? Both opponents and proponents of centralized power are silent – “not questioning the implications of this new arrangement for ‘national unity.’”

While “Kenya cannot be described as a deeply divided polity or [as having] experienced conflicts of a highly intense nature,” enormous powers in the presidency have been used to monopolize access to available resources. Violence and exclusion have been used to safeguard special interests. Thus, while power-sharing agreements would usually entail the creation of a broad-based coalition of significant groups in a political system, in Kenya the power-sharing, according to Otieno Ong’ayo, is not between ethnic minority groups, but between different parts of an elite minority. Most “minority groups” that are politically and economically marginalized and who would have qualified for participation in a power-sharing arrangement were not part of the deal signed in Nairobi nor are they represented in any way. Too often, political parties are disconnected from the citizens they claim to represent and tend to use or whip up ethnic feelings for political expediency.

“[W]hat does the current power sharing deal mean for the ordinary Kenyan whose life has been disrupted or cut short by the police bullet, gang machete, or tribal fire? What are the long-term implications of this re-negotiation for governance in Kenya? What precedent would it set in the context of contested election results in the future? From a political and constitutional law perspective, many important questions have not been asked while there is a rush to return to ‘normal’ life. High hopes have been placed on the deal between Raila and Kibaki, but not much is asked [about] whether it is the medicine Kenya needs for the many constitutional and institutional defects and deficiencies ... that have plagued the country for decades” or what role Kenyan citizens will have in a state restructuring of this magnitude.

For additional information, see Fr. Frank Breen’s article on Kenya’s situation at www.maryknollogc.org.

Iraq: Refugees long to live, unable to work

Reports estimate that one in five Iraqis has been displaced. Over two million are internally displaced, having fled sectarian violence and ethnic cleansing; another two million or more have escaped to surrounding countries such as Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, and Turkey. “Ali,” a 40-year-old former translator for the U.S., described his painful choice: “Fleeing my bleeding country was the only way to save my small family: a wife, an eight-year old son, and a four-year old daughter all traumatized by constant threats of kidnapping and killing.” For these displaced Iraqis, desperation, uncertainty, fear, and the gradual depletion of any extra resources they may have had before the occupation mark their new life in exile.

No community has been untouched by families forced to pack up and leave quickly due to direct threats to one or more members. Over one million Iraqis have fled to Syria alone, and Jordan has absorbed roughly three-quarters of a million people into its fragile social systems.

At an April forum on the humanitarian crisis...
of Iraqi refugees, Jordan’s ambassador to the U.S., Prince Zeid Ra’ad Zeid al-Hussein, expressed his desire to help his Iraqi neighbors. Al-Hussein’s father was an Iraqi refugee, and he acknowledged the significance of Jordan’s hospitality, but he also conveyed the critical need Jordan faced in providing adequate services for the hundreds of thousands who had come seeking protection. Jordan has already served as host to a large population of Palestinian refugees for decades. As the numbers of Iraqis increase, al-Hussein estimates the cost to Jordan’s economy at $1.6 billion a year. International support must expand if Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and other countries are to continue bearing the brunt of the hosting responsibilities.

Iraqi refugees live in urban areas, which presents remarkably different challenges from the refugee experience of a tent city, where refugees are easily identified by service workers, and assistance can be efficiently distributed to the group. Because Iraqis are not seen as refugees but as guests in their neighboring countries, they are unable to gain work visas to earn a livelihood. Without regular income, the burden to pay for rent, health coverage, groceries, and school supplies compounds families’ existing trauma and stress.

Former Maryknoll lay missioner Cathy Breen has seen the financial burden up close. Cathy spent significant months in Amman, Jordan in recent years, sponsored by Voices for Creative Nonviolence, with her latest trip concluding at the end of 2007. While in Amman, Cathy rented an apartment in a complex inhabited primarily by Iraqi families, seeing first-hand their daily struggles to provide basic necessities.

Cathy remembers one family she met in Jordan: “I see the smiling face of a 10-year-old Iraqi boy in Amman before me. Not in school, he is working in a carpenter’s shop for one Jordanian dinar a day (approximately $1.40). The father faces immediate deportation back to Iraq should he be caught working. Once this family owned a home and two cars in Baghdad, but they had to flee because of sectarian violence. He is Sunni and his wife is Shi’a. Their money has run out and they have been reduced to a beggarly status.”

A UN survey from October 2007 of some of the more than one million Iraqis in Syria found that only 24 percent of Iraqi families were supported by salaries or wages. Most families relied on remittances from relatives elsewhere, and out of those who did have savings, one third projected the resources would run out within three months. School-aged refugees showed an increase in dropout rates, with the numbers more than doubling in a six-month period of 2007. Of the dropouts, 19 percent of the children were reportedly working.

Iraqis equipped with resources and education who fled the violence in their home country have temporarily settled in fragile residences. These countries of first asylum offer no ability to work, no chance to engage in civic responsibility, limited opportunity to invest in children and education, and strict restrictions on the accessibility to health care.

Most Iraqis who consider returning to Iraq do so because the cost of living as urban refugees is unsustainable. A report by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) found that only 14 percent of Iraqi refugees return because of improved security conditions. About 70 percent say they left Syria (the country specified in the study) because of increased visa regulations and because they were unable to work and could no longer afford to stay in Syria.

The U.S. should budget more to help address the Iraqi humanitarian crisis. There are avenues by which the surrounding countries can receive financial assistance to care for the refugees who have sought shelter; the U.S. could invest more in non-governmental agencies and in U.S. programs for development and diplomacy; the UNHCR and International Organization for Migration issue appeals to the global community to fund their programs, and the U.S. could step up its contributions, especially given the lead role the U.S. has played in creating the instability found in Iraq.
Workers in China who earn the national minimum wage take home 575 yuan (about $82) per month. This is less than half of the cost of living in the more economically developed areas such as Beijing. Meanwhile, a 3-to-1 wage disparity between urban and rural areas has given rise to 120 million migrant workers in China. In fact, since rural residents effectively have no social security or welfare benefits, CLB estimates the urban-rural wage gap is probably six-fold.

Differences in pay are closely related to skill levels. In 2006 the average monthly wage in primary industries was 786 yuan (about $112) – one-quarter of the average in financial services and one-fifth of that in the computer industry.

Migrant workers typically suffer wage discrimination in the urban areas where they have moved. For example, the cost of living has skyrocketed in the past few years in areas such as the Pearl River Delta, which includes Hong Kong and Macau. The National Bureau of Statistics offers this bleak scenario: “The average monthly wage of migrant workers [in the Pearl River Delta] is only 600-700 yuan. Based on the local cost of living, such an income is only enough to buy four bowls of noodles a day.”

The Ministry of Labour and Social Security has set the standard work week at 40 hours and says overtime pay should not be less than 150 percent of the normal wage. In addition, employees are entitled to paid annual vacation, home leave, marriage or funeral leave, and maternity leave.

The Labour Ministry also tries to strengthen the protection offered workers by the minimum wage. It says that, when determining the monthly minimum wage, provincial governments should take into account the cost of basic necessities for employees and their dependents, as well as the local consumer price index. It recommends that the minimum wage be set at 40 to 60 percent of the average monthly wage.

In reality, however, the minimum wage in many provinces falls below the 40 percent threshold. In major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, the minimum wage in 2006 was reportedly around 20 percent of the average monthly wage.

The Guangdong Labour and Social Security Bureau says many employers also deduct costs for accommodation and meals from employees’ wages, even though such deductions are prohibited. In some cases more than 300 yuan was deducted from a wage of less than 700 yuan.

In other cases, employers make even the minimum wage contingent upon employees fulfilling unfair requirements, such as taking no time off. Workers paid on a piece-rate basis must often work day and night to earn wages that still might be less than the minimum wage.

In Dongguan many migrants found it necessary to work 12-14 hours a day, seven days a week, with only one day off each month. Working 84-98 hours a week, overtime accounted for 30-50 percent of their monthly pay.

CLB says employers frequently withhold or delay payment of wages, especially to construction workers. It also says factory managers often delay payment to retain workers who might otherwise leave. The Labor Ministry estimates that total wages in arrears across China from 2005 to mid-2007 reached 66 billion yuan (about $9.4 billion).

Workers are increasingly taking their grievances to court, but it carries risks. Lawsuits over labor disputes have more than quadrupled in China since 1995, with many successes. In Ningbo in Zhejiang province and Zhongshan in Guangdong, workers have won more than 90 percent of the labor disputes handled by the courts.

However, the battle is far from over. Workers and their attorneys alike have been attacked by thugs hired by employers after legal action had begun. The CLB says most employers refuse to carry out the verdicts of the courts or arbitration committees. Even in successful cases, workers seldom receive more than their owed wages.
China: Workers fight for pay, benefits, unions

Hong Kong-based China Labour Bulletin (CLB) defends and promotes workers’ rights in China. Working with labor groups and law firms, its work includes trying to negotiate or arbitrate differences between workers and management. Examples of issues are illustrated below; the entire articles can be found at the CLB website, www.china-labour.org.hk.

Workers get less pay for higher output

Workers were paid by the piece, but the factory manager reduced the piece rate during times of higher work volume so that, even as the workers produced more and worked longer hours, they earned less. A typical workday was 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. There was no health insurance, pension or workers compensation, and days off were rare. When a worker complained, the boss retaliated against her by refusing to pay her back wages.

Bosses control the union

After a state-owned steel plant was privatized, the workers elected their union leaders. However, the bosses at the plant refused to accept the election results and told the workers to vote again. “So everybody voted the way they were expected to,” said one worker. “In an enterprise union you cannot escape the influence of the employer, can you? … That’s the way it is in this kind of company.”

Retired teachers battle for benefits

Although they officially enjoy the same status as other civil servants, some teachers in China must still fight for the retirement benefits owed them. Enforcement of the law is uneven, and some unfortunate retirees have languished for a dozen years while demanding their rights from an unresponsive government. A few teachers win their cases in court, but as one of them asks, “Where’s the victory? There are a hundred others just in our county whose cases have not been resolved.”

Migrant workers win in court

China’s 120 million migrant workers suffer routine exploitation and discrimination in the workplace. They work long hours for low pay, and all too frequently they are cheated out of their wages. They work under hazardous conditions, and if they are injured or contract a work-related illness, employers try to pay them only token compensation. However, more and more workers are going to court seeking compensation for injury or non-payment of wages, and many are winning.

UN: Benedict XVI addresses ecology, human rights

The following article was written by Maryknoll Father John Brinkman, who’s based in Japan.

After the April 26-27, 2007 Pontifical Council on Justice and Peace Conference on Climate Change, an article in the September 22 The Independent stated: “The Pope is expected to use his first address to the United Nations to deliver a powerful warning over climate change in a move to adopt protection of the environment as a ‘moral’ cause for the Catholic Church and its billion-strong following.” This report raised considerable expectations.

The purpose of this writing is not to assuage the disappointment of concerned environmentalists but to affirm the profound compatibility of human rights as presented in the UN address by His Holiness with enhanced concern for the environment. To discern the role of the human as defined in the context of human rights and their protection may be the most cogent way to advance another avenue for earth-human harmony best administered by the United Nations. Indeed, the United Nations Human Rights Council at its recent meeting in Geneva requested that the UN Commission on Human Rights make a study on the linkages between human rights and climate change. This work is now in progress.

In his April 18 address to the 62nd session of the UN General Assembly on the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, human rights and their protection were primary and foremost in the Pontiff’s presentation. This address offended no one and challenged everyone.

At a time when the centers of power and the places of conflict-resolution are shifting away from the West and its thought traditions, the Holy Father’s message was an appeal to universal values and
to the principle of protection “present implicitly at the origin of the United Nations and now increasingly characteristic of its activity.” Most strikingly, this principle that governs the action of nation-states to the governed when applied to human rights correctly rooted in the universal order of things would supersede an unwarranted appeal to sovereignty in this inter-governmental agency. Indeed, Pope Benedict was quick to point out that the origin of such an agency emerged at a time when reason and transcendence were abandoned and the objective foundation of true values threatened.

“The founding of the United Nations, as we know, coincided with the profound upheavals that humanity experienced when reference to the meaning of transcendence and natural reason was abandoned, and in consequence, freedom and human dignity were grossly violated. When this happens, it threatens the objective foundation of the values inspiring and governing the international order and it undermines the cogent and inviolable principle formulated and consolidated by the United Nations. When faced with new and insistent challenges, it is a mistake to fall back on a pragmatic approach, limited to determining ‘common ground,’ minimal in content and weak in its effect.”

No one argues more clearly against the fatal distortion of relativism that would subject objective and true values to particular interests and narrow concerns promoted by the few over the many. Such shifting sands of national self interests would impose on the most vulnerable the negative effects of globalization and reduce the role of the United Nations to striking a mere balance between competing goods. The relative stands over-against truths grounded in the universal order of things. It is here that the place and the role of the human are best defined within the compass of rights that are “the fruit of a commonly held sense of justice built primarily upon solidarity among members of society, and hence valid at all times and for all peoples.” Such earnestly sought solidarity would well resonate with the task to recognize the earth as a common inheritance and to find in ecological resolution, a collective destiny.

The great importance of a belief in a recognized universal human nature would be confirmed by ecological reference. What audience would not recognize its universally shared humanity in the refined statements of environmentalists who cogently link human rights and ecology? “In a special manner humans have not only a need for but a right of access to the natural world to provide not only the physical need of humans but also the wonder needed by human intelligence, the beauty needed by human imagination and the intimacy needed by human emotions for personal fulfillment.” When we diminish the natural world, we not only denigrate merely an external reality but we diminish our inner capacities to respond at their root.

In the Eastern Church, St. John of Kronstadt informs us that, “If I do not feel a sense of joy in God’s creation, if I forget to offer the world back to God with thankfulness, I have advanced very little upon the Way. I have not yet learned to be fully human. For it is only through thanksgiving that I can become myself.” Such a vision stands in contrast to all those forces that would view creation as an aggregate of objects to be consumed rather than the divine revelation within which the human finds its proper place and true presence.

Finally, in one of his references to the environment in his UN address, His Holiness refers to the “order of creation.”

“Notwithstanding the enormous benefits that humanity can gain [from scientific research and technological advances], some instances of this represent a clear violation of the order of creation, to the point where not only is the sacred character of life contradicted, but the human person and the family are robbed of their natural identity. Likewise, international action to preserve the environment and to protect various forms of life on earth must not only guarantee a rational use of technology and science, but must also rediscover the authentic image of creation.”

In this, His Holiness shares with the world community an insight specific to Catholic thought, a belief that there is an order to the universe and this order constitutes the noblest perfection in every entity in the cosmos. For our specific faith tradition, creation is in constant reference to God. There is much in our thought tradition that would remind us of the sacred quality of phenomenal reality and mandate environmental concern and global collaboration to rediscover the authentic image of creation.
Work: New approaches, new jobs

The global climate change crisis has ignited a new level of awareness regarding human dependence on the natural world. This is contrary to the expectation of the last century and a half, in which scientific and technological advances seemed to promise a world of unlimited progress and the gradual equalization of access to goods and services, at least for societies that participate in western oriented economies. The ever more apparent limited nature of Earth’s resources and capacity for regeneration is presently catapulting humanity into a serious revision of limitless growth as a guiding principle underlying the search for a full life. As an alternative, the value of sufficiency is finding its way into the climate change discourse of faith based groups and civil society concerned about the environment. (See Global climate change: The most critical challenge in the 21st century, at www.maryknollogc.org)

Meanwhile, there is deep concern about livelihood for the current and near future periods because jobs connected with industries that are not sustainable are being phased out; economic pressures on big business cause jobs that workers have counted on to be outsourced; and livelihood simply disappears as environmental, demographic and climate change factors erode resources.

While it would be incorrect to advocate that technology alone can resolve these dilemmas, technologies supported by a sustainable mentality that values sufficiency do hold promise for the future. This is illustrated by the case of a family man, Leon, who was influenced in his livelihood decisions by the Maryknoll Ecological Sanctuary in Baguio, Philippines, where the values of the local indigenous culture inspire teaching about ecology, climate change and an integrated understanding of the Earth.

Leon is an indigenous farmer who holds a degree in civil engineering. His quest is to adequately provide for his family while preserving the values of his primary culture, which honors living in harmony with the natural world. Raising pigs for ceremonial occasions is important to this culture; this, in turn, provides a livelihood for those who, like Leon, raise and sell the pigs. Becoming increasingly aware of the ecological considerations demanded by the present time, Leon was motivated to revise his approach to pig-raising, in order to integrate traditional knowledge with new insights. Therefore, he carefully examined the number of animals he could properly raise on his small piece of land; how to deal with waste; and the best way to prepare feed.

After detailed planning, he reorganized, particularly emphasizing the preparation of organic feed for the animals. Gradually, he increased the number of pigs to the maximum indicated by the space available for their proper maintenance. Interestingly, the organic feed resulted in an excellent quality final product, which translated into very good sales.

Not only has this project been successful financially and ecologically, but Leon has been able to provide work for his neighbors and teach others the process of preparing organic feed.

Also, on the global level, the issues of livelihood and sustainability are moving into center focus. This was demonstrated at the UN Climate Change Conference last December. Achim Steiner, Under-Secretary General and Executive Director of the UN Environment Program (UNEP), in a press release, referred to promising research provided by the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the International Trade Unions Confederation (ITUC). Following are some of the data from this research regarding new and, although not perfect, promising job opportunities stemming from the need to live sustainably on the Earth:

- In solar heating, China is the global leader. With combined sales revenues of about $2.5 billion in 2005, more than 1,000 Chinese manufacturers employed more than 150,000 people. Future estimates of installed capacity mean employment could grow substantially in this area.
- In the U.S. alone, the environmental industry in 2005 generated more than 5.3 million jobs, ten times the number in the U.S. pharmaceutical industry.
- By the year 2020, Germany will have more jobs in the field of environmental technologies than in its entire automotive industry.
- The Indian city of Delhi is introducing new eco-friendly compressed natural gas buses that will create an additional 18,000 new jobs

Commenting further, Steiner said, “New research reveals that these jobs are not for just the middle classes, the so-called ‘green collar’ jobs - but also for workers in construction, sustainable forestry and agriculture to engineering and transportation.”

There is a caution: Not all new technologies meet the promise proffered in the beginning. A case
Maryknoll celebrates the presentation of the 2008 Goldman Award for Excellence in Protecting the Environment to Jesus Leon Santos and the Center for Integral Campesino Development of the Mixteca (CEDICAM). Lay missioner Phil Dahl-Breldine has worked closely with CEDICAM for several years; the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns has hosted Jesus and others from CEDICAM during their occasional visits to the U.S. Following is Jesus’ acceptance speech, translated from the original Spanish, given at the Goldman prize ceremony.

In the name of the indigenous and campesino people of Oaxaca, Mexico and especially those of us from the Mixteca Alta, [we] thank all the Goldman Prize staff and, in particular, the Goldman family for recognizing our struggle to rebuild our natural environment and the culture of our people.

Twenty-five years ago we in the Mixteca Alta saw that we were living in a severe ecological crisis which was causing poverty, malnutrition and migration. Today we must recognize that all of us, the inhabitants of the planet, live in a similar crisis. Because of what we recognized in these past 25 years, we have engaged in a struggle to rebuild one of the planet’s most eroded landscapes. In the times of our ancient ancestors our region had a natural splendor, a science and culture that is reflected in ancient codices, the only written history of the Americans, which recounts 1,000 years of indigenous history.

In these years we have worked with our people to plant more than three million native trees which are transforming dry arroyos into springs of water and into lush forests that are giving new hope and life to our peoples. We have been able to protect thousands of acres of eroded mountainsides with contour ditches using an ancient technique of the indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica. Today this technology is contributing to conserve our soils and recharge aquifers with millions of liters of rainwater that once washed down the mountainside carrying with it our soils and the sustenance of our lives.

We recognize that we, the indigenous peoples, have been the creators and guardians of a biological and genetic richness, as that found in our native seeds of corn, beans, tomatoes, for instance, that has enriched the food culture of the entire world. We realize that we must, in our time, take up once again this important role for the good of the human family. But we also need to say that as we take up this responsibility again, we face significant economic and political challenges.

The commercial opening promoted by free trade agreements has brought us low prices for our produce, the disappearance of government assistance for rural areas as well as insupportable rises in the cost of agricultural production, which has led us to rural poverty, provoked migration, and threatens to cause the disappearance of the indigenous and campesino communities. In addition, the introduction of genetically modified seeds and other measures to take control of the sources of agricultural seeds, of agricultural germ plasm, and of world food and agricultural markets threaten the rich genetic diversity that we, the indigenous peoples, care for as a heritage of the human family.

We of CEDICAM hope that this respect for the Mother Earth that we are recovering among our indigenous communities can serve as an example for all the inhabitants of the planet in this time of environmental crisis. We also hope that the struggle of the Mixtec people, carried out with sweat and conviction, can give us all the confidence that this Mother Earth has the capacity to regenerate herself and continue to give life to her inhabitants today and to future generations.

Go to the Goldman Prize website to see more information about Jesus, the work of CEDICAM (a five-minute video is posted), and the other 2008 winners: http://www.goldmanprize.org/
Microcredit: Neither cure-all nor enemy

Microcredit, also known as microfinance, is a relatively new method of combating global poverty. Muhammad Yunus, its creator, has been lauded the world over by NGOs and multilateral agencies alike. In 2006, Yunus was the co-recipient (along with the Grameen Bank, which he founded and still directs) of the Nobel Peace Prize. While some programs have helped people escape from extreme poverty, a number of critiques of microcredit have evolved with the concept. The following article, by Maryknoll Global Concerns Office intern Ariel Ressler, examines microfinance’s accomplishments and limitations.

Microfinance has brought many positive innovations to the field of international economic development. Microfinance institutions (MFIs) make credit available to impoverished people (generally women) whose lack of collateral makes them too much of a risk to qualify for a loan at a conventional bank. Borrowers usually use their small (“micro”) loans of less than $100 to fund their own small businesses, and the concept of group liability has made the rates of repayment generally very high (often upwards of 90 percent). Most microcredit programs aim to empower women, who tend to have less economic power than men in developing countries. When successful, microfinance helps people avoid exploitative factory jobs. The great innovation of the microfinance movement is the way it has shown the public that the poor have the skills and the ability to become successful independent entrepreneurs.

In spite of the high praise, microcredit programs are increasingly criticized. The concept is indeed ingenious, but microfinance does not always deliver what it promises. Although repayment rates are high, a recent study reports that clients sometimes end up borrowing from family members to meet their loan payments. Because of market downturns or needing the loan money just to meet basic needs, families sometimes become mired in debt instead of climbing out of poverty. Additionally, empowering women is not as easily accomplished as MFIs would wish; they cannot guarantee that the loan money will not just pass into the hands of a male relative, leaving the woman still liable for the loan payment. Another criticism is that, in practice, microcredit ends up passing over the poorest in favor of the still very poor $2 a day earners. While helping the “poorest of the poor” is of course a worthy goal, people who are struggling daily to feed their families are probably still better served through aid rather than a loan.

One of microfinance’s assets, its potential to be sustainable as a business instead of continually reliant on donors’ generosity, has also raised ethical issues as microcredit becomes more profitable. MFIs, especially for-profit MFIs, have received criticism for making money on loans to poor people. When the Citibank-funded Mexican microlender, Compartamos, decided to go public in 2007, the ethics of passing profits made from the interest charged to poor borrowers on to the richer investors became a more central issue in the debate. Microcredit is in high demand, and gaining access to more capital is always a challenge for microlenders, but many in the microfinance scene are disturbed by the entrance of Citibank and other big banks into the market. Cathy Rowan, a former Maryknoll lay missioner who has followed the issue for years, highlights the way the profit motive obscures the social purpose of microcredit. “Banks see folks [microcredit borrowers] as an untapped market, but the bottom-line question is ‘Who benefits?’” she says, referring to the involvement of for-profit moneylenders. High interest rates also spark another ethical debate in the microcredit scene. Although significantly lower than the loan shark alternatives, microfinance interest rates (because the loans are more risky) are higher than those of conventional banks in the U.S. It is often a tricky balance between earning high enough returns to maintain the MFI as a sustainable and growing business and keeping the loan payments affordable enough that they actually achieve their goal of helping people out of poverty.

Perhaps the most compelling critique of microcredit is that it places the responsibility for fighting poverty on the poor themselves, and does not encourage challenging the structures that caused that poverty. Dollars & Sense, an economic justice magazine, explains the popularity of microcredit as an outgrowth of the current pervasive neoliberalism among policy-makers, who see poverty as an individual problem, and not a structural one. Microfinance is attractive to many non-poor people precisely because it does not change the economic structures of globalization that cause poverty and benefit the non-poor.

Microcredit offers many innovative ways of diminishing global poverty. With the right methods
Solidarity economy: Economics with new values

The past 25 years have seen tremendous growth in the global economy, yet most of that expansion has been usurped by owners of capital with little gain for the workers. Millions of people have been relegated to permanent underemployment, while those lucky enough to maintain their jobs have seen their productivity increase while salaries remain stagnant. As Pope John Paul II wrote in “On Human Work”: “Workers not only want fair pay, they also want to share in the responsibility and creativity of the very work process. They want to feel that they are working for themselves -- an awareness that is smothered in a bureaucratic system where they only feel themselves to be ‘cogs’ in a huge machine moved from above.” People looking for a new way of work are creating a system called the solidarity economy.

The old story says that the economy must be market-driven by competition regulated by the invisible hand of supply-and-demand. Competition should rule all or most aspects of life. That which is not occupied by the competitive market is occupied by the state, which serves to create and manage the framework in which the market functions, and which provides goods and services that the market cannot or will not. The state also acts as the savior in times of market collapse. In this story, workers are but one of many inputs in the production of goods and services. Capital is most important, what drives the economy. People without money, no matter how creative or hard-working, are considered unproductive or underdeveloped.

The new story, the experience of the solidarity economy, says that work is more than a way to produce goods and services. As the U.S. bishops wrote in “Economic Justice for All”: “All work has a threefold moral significance. First, it is a principal way that people exercise the distinctive human capacity for self-expression and self-realization. Second, it is the ordinary way for human beings to fulfill their material needs. Finally, work enables people to contribute to the well-being of the larger community. Work is not only for one’s self. It is for one’s family, for the nation, and indeed for the benefit of the entire human family.”

The solidarity economy aims to create an economy built on values such as shared power, cooperation, worker-ownership autonomy, horizontal communication and decision-making, unity-in-diversity, mutual aid, and local rootedness. It is a patchwork of diverse economies that is centered on life-values instead of profit-values. The term solidarity economy is difficult to define exactly, but it is generally considered to encompass a large array of initiatives such as worker cooperatives, community currencies, libraries (book, seed, tool), housing co-ops, community-supported agriculture (CSA), carpooling/ride-share programs, community land trusts, consumer co-ops, open source programming, community development credit unions, food banks and various types of associations. These organizations work on the basis of cooperation instead of competition, shared decision-making instead of rigid hierarchies, sharing of profits instead of the concentration of the same. They work to sustain themselves through the production of safe and healthy products or services.

In many countries, efforts are being made to organize these various enterprises together for mutual reinforcement. Brazil, Spain, and Argentina, among others, have formed congresses of solidarity organizations to discuss commonalities and strategize together. In Brazil, a mapping of the solidarity economy in 2007 showed a rapid increase in the size and scope of the number of people and activities involved. Published in April 2007, it found almost 15,000 solidarity economy initiatives with over 1.25 million participants, over 44 percent of which are in northeast Brazil, the poorest region of the country, even though the region has a lower population than other regions. The mapping showed that the vast majority of initiatives started after 1980, when what has come to be known as the two lost decades of near zero economic growth for the Brazilian economy began. Many other countries are experiencing rapid growth in their solidarity economy, even in the limitations, as well as its usefulness, must be recognized. Microcredit is one method among many, and it is not a substitute for challenging the economic structures that cause poverty.
UN: UNIFEM appointment process challenged

On April 7, Ines Alberdi of Spain was appointed as the new executive director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). Alberdi is the fourth director of UNIFEM and succeeds No-eleen Heyzer of Singapore, who will head the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. Alberdi comes to the position of director highly qualified as a researcher on women’s issues -- she was also an elected deputy in the Madrid Assembly from 2003 to 2007.

Alberdi’s appointment has sparked criticism from several women’s organizations that had campaigned for a candidate from the developing world, namely feminist activist and scholar Gita Sen. The criticism stems from what has been seen as a lack of transparency and accountability throughout the entire process: “We are deeply disappointed that the voices of women human rights defenders, organizations, and networks from across the world have been clearly ignored.” [Women’s Action for Change, Fiji] Most disturbing is the contrast between the influence of UN donor countries and the low weight given to women’s voices from the global South, the group added.

Strong voices were heard from Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), which said it understood that the interview panel had identified Indian academic Sen as the best candidate, “but because of the UN’s concerns over funding and significant and open political pressure from the government of Spain [the fund’s leading donor at $11.4 million] other names were brought back into consideration.”

Sen is a lecturer at the Indian Institute of Management in Bangalore, an adjunct lecturer at the Center for Population and Development Studies at Harvard University, and a founding member of DAWN, a network of developing world researchers, activists, and policymakers working for gender justice.

A further statement of disappointment came from the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) and the Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL): “We supported the selection of a Southern feminist activist and outstanding scholar with extensive experience on women and development for the post because we believe that such a leader could bring the experiences of women in the developing world to shaping the mission and strategic directions of UNIFEM. ... We are disappointed by the loss of this opportunity and consider the appointment process unnecessarily prolonged and not transparent.”

A statement of concern has been sent to the Secretary General and the Deputy Secretary General in the hope that future appointments will be fair and transparent, and that the process of selection will follow the principles set forth in the UN Charter.

U.S., where now more people are involved in solidarity initiatives than are union members.

The Brazilian government is one of only a few with significant involvement in the solidarity economy. When President Lula took office he appointed a sub-secretary specifically to organize the solidarity economy. Local, state and national structures of exchange and support for solidarity initiatives have been formed. Many are looking for ways to work more closely with other solidarity organizations for inputs and services as well as for sales. They envision creating a parallel economy where solidarity organizations would be self-sufficient with no or little need for the formal economy.

When many ask for an alternative to the current economic model, most look for an overall blueprint of a new system. But members of the solidarity economy are cautious to not restrict alternatives to one model. As Walden Bello of Focus on the Global South said, “We’ve already had two blueprint disasters ... [namely] centralized socialism and corporate capitalism. We need something different.” Instead of starting with a grand theory, the solidarity economy starts with practice. Instead of one overall plan, it tries to connect diverse initiatives in ways that respect differences and autonomy. In many ways, solidarity economics is a process more than a plan. As Paul Goodman wrote, “A free society cannot be the substitution of a ‘new order’ for the old order; it is the extension of spheres of free action until they make up most of social life.” It is in this manner that the solidarity economy continues to grow and build its road by walking.

See the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns’ website for links to resources on solidarity economy, www.maryknollogc.org/economic/index.htm
UN: Report from 2008 CSW session

From Feb. 25 through March 7, the 52nd session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) was held in New York; this year’s theme was “Financing for Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment.” This year’s CSW registered the highest number of NGO participants in several years with over 5,000 women’s rights activists.

Taking advantage of the large, global presence of women in attendance, as well as ministers of women’s affairs, efforts were furthered to pressure governments to take up discussion of the creation of a stronger UN gender equality entity, both through their national or regional statements during the general debate of the Commission, and by supporting inclusion of language on Gender Equality Architecture in the outcome document of the Commission. The strategy to better realize these goals has resulted in a yearly campaign entitled Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR).

The GEAR campaign highlights the under-sourcing of women’s entities in the UN system and the need for a stronger, consolidated, higher status women’s entity, and an effective presence at both national and country levels led by an Under Secretary General: The absence of the above has impeded the advancement of gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Throughout the two weeks of the CSW, several high level meetings took place with heads of delegations, ambassadors and other government representatives to explore ways the UN may be better organized to address the needs of women around the world. Linkage caucuses were held with women’s organizations to explain the broad goals and rationale of the campaign, to encourage more organizations to sign on and work actively for its success. To date, 266 organizations have signed on.

The agreed conclusions from the CSW incorporated several demands of the GEAR campaign. The conclusions noted “under-resourcing in the area of gender equality in the UN system” and stressed “the need for more effective tracking of resources ... spent on enhancing gender equality...” In addition, the conclusions called for strengthening the UN system through more effective gender mainstreaming, and “enhancing its capacity to effectively assist States upon request ... on gender equality and women’s empowerment ... and to make adequate and reliable human and financial resources available.”

It has been noted with sincere appreciation that Canada and countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America took the lead in advocating for stronger institutional mechanisms. It is evident that support for a stronger women’s entity is widespread. Women around the world will continue to advocate for this with their government representatives at home and at the UN General Assembly.

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U.S. elections 2008: Loving our neighbor in a shrinking world

*Amando a nuestro prójimo en un mundo cada vez más pequeño*

Foreign policy decisions made in the U.S. reverberate around the world, in positive and negative ways. To educate voters in the U.S. about how the decisions made by their legislators and leaders can affect our brothers and sisters in other countries, the Maryknoll Global Concerns Office has prepared an election guide based on the principles of Catholic social tradition and gospel teachings, and inspired by the deep and long experience of Maryknoll missioners around the world. This guide can be viewed as a companion piece to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ “Faithful Citizenship.”

Please contact us for copies of the 12-page guide, in English and/or Spanish. Donations are warmly accepted; the suggested donation for large orders (over 100) is 25 cents per copy. Call or email: 202-832-1780; ogc@maryknoll.org

Visit our website -- www.maryknollogc.org -- for a PDF version (English or Spanish) and for other resources on the U.S. 2008 elections, including homily helps written by Maryknoll missioners and staff, and education packets.
Workers’ rights and HIV

Despite global advances in workers’ rights, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has had a devastating impact on the lives of workers and their employers. Labor populations have been reduced due to illness and death, strains on families and workplaces have grown, and the vulnerability of women, children and migrant workers has increased. As productivity declines, workplaces must train and replace employees, tax revenue falls, impacting the national budget, and governments are challenged to produce medical, social and economic responses.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that 25 million workers 15-49 years of age are infected with HIV. A 2007 report indicates that the ensuing reduction in employment is resulting in one million fewer jobs per year in the worst hit countries and identifies HIV and AIDS as a “workplace issue.”

In home and family, one person’s illness causes stress, particularly in case of a parent. But in poor countries, in addition to loss of income, someone needs to be pulled from work (or school) to be a caregiver, and scarce resources used for medicines mean less food for the family. When a breadwinner dies, someone else must make up the difference in income, frequently meaning children.

An ILO 2004 study in Uganda reported that over 95 percent of children living in AIDS-affected households were engaged in some type of work. Girls tended to stay home to look after ill parents or younger children, therefore did not go to school. Also, girls faced higher risks than boys of being sexually abused and being infected with HIV at the workplace. The majority of children and youth who are living with the virus do not know that they have HIV.

Women workers are especially impacted by HIV/AIDS. When a family member is ill, their work time will be displaced by the fact that they are primary caregivers (ILO, 2004). Where women are responsible for subsistence farming (across most of Africa), the burden of caring for the sick may displace available time for farming and providing food for the household. Also, women are at risk of sexual violence traveling to and from as well as in the workplace, leaving them more vulnerable to infection with HIV.

Seven million agricultural workers in the 27 most affected countries in Africa have died from AIDS, resulting in severe impacts on their families, farming systems and food security, as well as local and national economies. The lack of adequate housing and poor living conditions for agricultural workers also increases the risk of HIV.

Informal workers and undocumented migrants tend not to use the health care system. Because they are mobile and focused on survival, they are generally overlooked by government and private services. The human rights of migrants are often ignored, and “highly abusive migration” (e.g. trafficking for sex work) places migrants at the highest risk of HIV, as do certain types of contract and domestic labor.

Industries, unions and governments are experiencing severe consequences of AIDS, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Absenteeism means less productivity and more instability in the workforce. A study in Malawi indicated that between 1990 and 2000, six times as many government jobs were vacated in that period due to HIV/AIDS than previously vacated. In many industry workplaces, there is still denial that HIV and AIDS is a problem.

The International Transport Federation reports that railway and road transport workers are currently the most affected by HIV/AIDS; seafarers are also at high risk for virus and discrimination, due to sexual practices in seaport cities and due to government restrictions on persons living with HIV or those from countries with a high AIDS prevalence.

The Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility’s (ICCR) Health Working Group aims to “improve the corporate response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, including the provision of anti-retroviral drugs to employees and their families.” The Global Business Coalition says that business is doing only a fraction of what it could do to fight AIDS, and works to increase the number of businesses formally involved in fighting AIDS, motivating them to devel-
HIV/AIDS: Task force faces travel restrictions

On June 10-11, the UN will hold a General Assembly (GA) High Level meeting on the progress made on HIV/AIDS. The meeting will include plenary sessions, panels on substantive topics, and a civil society hearing. Dr. Srgjan Kerim, president of the GA, requested that UNAIDS convene a Civil Society Taskforce (CSTF) to ensure effective participation of civil society and the private sector in the high level review meeting.

The CSTF includes 12 individuals representing multiple sectors of civil society, including youth, people living with HIV, marginalized communities, labor, private business, women, and faith-based organizations. The CSTF has met twice, focusing on key issues for the review meeting. One major issue is that of travel restrictions for persons living with HIV; this already impacted the Taskforce, preventing two members from attending the February meeting due to difficulties in obtaining visas. This may also be a difficulty for civil society speakers planning to attend the hearing. At this time, according to the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance, a number of people who hope to attend the Review are facing challenges in their visa application processes.

UNAIDS has set up an international task team to heighten attention to the issue of HIV-related travel restrictions (both short-term and long-term) on international and national agendas and move towards their elimination. Physicians for Human Rights has called on the White House and Congress to lift the U.S.’s HIV travel restrictions entirely, and Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA) has introduced the HIV Nondiscrimination in Travel and Immigration Act of 2007, which would appoint a commission to examine public health aspects of the U.S.’s travel restrictions against people with HIV.

To conclude, an effective and global response to HIV and AIDS means working across and among different sectors and will be based on respect for the human rights of people living with HIV. Workplace and labor programs should include clear and enforceable guidelines against stigma and discrimination, peer education and the provision of adequate health services including prevention, counseling, testing and treatment for workers, their families and the community. They should require monitoring and accountability from top management throughout the workforce. Workers should be protected against HIV, and those who are positive should be assured of their right to safe and equitably paid labor.

A few global responses:
* The ILO has published an education and training manual, a thorough and accessible resource for the workplace, as well as a “Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS and the World of Work” with a human rights response to HIV in the workplace.
* Coca-Cola, in response to criticisms that its HIV and AIDS educational and health programs focused only on their own employees, has initiated programs with the bottling companies with which it contracts.
* The government of Peru has decided to sanction any enterprise which fires a worker on the basis of his or her HIV status.
* Colgate Palmolive (CP) recently established a workplace policy on HIV/AIDS that protects HIV positive employees, offering anonymous voluntary testing, support services for employees, and education activities in the workplace and community.

Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns    www.maryknollogc.org

May-June 2008
June is Torture Awareness Month

In Washington, D.C. and around the world, activists will gather in June to educate the public about the continuing legacy of state-sponsored torture, and to witness against the complicity and impunity surrounding the legal framework that justifies the current violations of human dignity and rights.

The Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns has joined other organizations in the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT). In order to build nationwide awareness, NRCAT encourages congregations to sponsor a banner that reads, “Torture is wrong,” or “Torture is a moral issue” and hang it on their churches, mosques, or synagogues for the entire month of June. The goal is to have at least one congregation from all 50 states, D.C. and Puerto Rico support the banner project (http://www.nrcat.org/).

Starting at 7 a.m. on June 28, the Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition International will host a 24-hour vigil in Lafayette Park, across from the White House, to remember the victims of torture and to pray for abolishment of our current U.S. policies that allow for torturous interrogation techniques (www.tassc.org).

Legislatively, there has been some progress in Congress to regain a bit of moral ground that has been stripped in recent years related to state-sponsored torture. In December 2007, the House passed a conference version of the Intelligence Authorization Bill, and the Senate passed it in early 2008. The bill included a provision that would create one standard by which all military and intelligence officials could interrogate prisoners. It would also prohibit the use of certain techniques that the administration has allowed previously in the War on Terror. They sent it to President Bush, but on March 8, 2008, he vetoed the bill on the grounds that it would inhibit critical intelligence from being procured: “The bill Congress sent me would deprive the CIA of the authority to use these safe and lawful techniques. Instead, it would restrict the CIA’s range of acceptable interrogation methods to those provided in the Army Field Manual.”

Advocates within human rights circles, military personnel, and persons from the legal community have all disagreed with the president’s analysis, however. The limitations in the Army Field Manual ensure that interrogators abide by U.S. and international law, and have been proven effective and sufficient for balancing national security needs with the necessity of upholding the dignity of the detainee and the values of the U.S.

Sen. John Rockefeller (D-WV), who chairs the Senate Intelligence Committee, noted in a press release after the Senate passed the Intelligence Authorization bill that included the anti-torture provision, “Interrogation can and should be carried out using techniques that have been used with success by military and law enforcement interrogators for decades. A separate program shrouded in secrecy, however well intentioned, plays into the hands of our enemies. Interrogation experts have told the committee that enhanced techniques are not necessary to get critical and reliable intelligence, and in fact, they can result in bad information.”

After the president’s veto, Rockefeller declared that he would not move any alternative bill to the president unless it contained the anti-torture provision. NRCAT joins others in applauding the work of Congress on this issue, and encourages constituents to vocally support the decision to keep the anti-torture provision in writing. NRCAT has also drafted a resource listing six responses to common fears that the Army Field Manual would unduly restrict critical work to be completed by intelligence officers. Find it at the NRCAT website: http://www.nrcat.org/.

To find out more about groups working to end torture and educate the U.S. American public, go to:

- Friends Committee on National Legislation, http://www.fcnl.org/torture/
- Amnesty International USA, http://www.amnestyusa.org/
Resources

1) A Convention for the Common Good: July 11-13, Philadelphia, PA. This event, cosponsored by Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns, NETWORK, Pax Christi USA and others, will be an opportunity for “delegates” from around the country to come together to discuss the Platform for the Common Good, which will be ratified by conference delegates. We envision people using the Platform to educate and organize voters in their areas and also asking candidates to endorse the Platform. After the November election, we will hold elected officials accountable to the common good. For more information, go to the Convention’s website, www.commongood-convention.org. If you have any questions, contact the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns at 202-832-1780, ogc@maryknoll.org.

2) The War at Home, the War Abroad: Building a Movement to Reverse Course: Immediately preceding the Convention for the Common Good, Pax Christi USA will host two events: an evening speaker series on Thursday, July 10, and a teach-in on Friday morning, July 11. On July 10, Marie Dennis, director of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns and co-president of Pax Christi International, will speak along with Arturo Chavez, president of the Mexican American Cultural Center. On July 11, Iraq war veterans, activists and others will gather to hold a teach-in on the Iraq war. The Sheraton City Center, 201 N.W. 17th St., Philadelphia, PA. Registration is $40; you must register separately for the Convention for the Common Good. Contact Pax Christi USA to register: www.paxchristiusa.org; 814-453-4955.

3) Resources on Iraqi refugee crisis: Go to the American Friends Service Committee’s website for analysis and information about the Iraqi refugee crisis: http://afsc.org/iraq/refugee-crisis.htm. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the International Catholic Migration Commission have released a joint report detailing the results of a February 2008 fact-finding mission to study the condition of Iraqi refugees living in Syria. The final report provides an in-depth evaluation and analysis of the protection needs of vulnerable Iraqi individuals and families residing in Syria, assesses the existing system of response to these needs, and makes recommendations of the best approaches to address their protection needs. For a copy, contact the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns (ogc@maryknoll.org; 202-832-1780) or find it on our website: www.maryknollogc.org

4) Reality in Nairobi’s Kibera: Slum Survivors: This 40-minute web-based film from IRIN News, produced in October 2007, shows footage depicting the lives of people who struggle just to exist on a day-to-day basis in Nairobi’s largest slum. [IRIN (Integrated Regional Information Networks) is part of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, but its services are editorially independent. Its reports do not necessarily reflect the views of the UN, its agencies, nor its member states.] Go to www.irinnews.org and click on “film and TV” in the top menu to find the video file and transcript. If you need assistance, contact the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns; the direct link can be emailed to you: ogc@maryknoll.org.

“Short-takes on a shrinking world” video invitational: As part of our 2008 election project, high school and college-aged youth are invited to submit videos that highlight importance of issues in the next president’s foreign policy agenda. Participants may submit one 60-90 second video incorporating the one of the election project’s five themes: 1) climate change; 2) global economy; 3) migration/immigration; 4) HIV/AIDS; and 5) peace and sustainable security. Entries will be accepted from mid-August until Thanksgiving. Videos will be reviewed to determine appropriateness of content and message, and must be appropriate for audiences of 18-30 year olds. Selected videos will be posted on the web and be made available for educational purposes. For information on how to submit entries for “Short-takes on a shrinking world,” contact ogc@maryknoll.org (202-832-1780) or go to the Global Concerns website: www.maryknollogc.org.