

Presenters Reflect on the African Oil and Poverty Speakers Tour

By Austin Onuoha and Antoine Dathol Berilengar SJ

Recently, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and the Jesuit Conference organized a speakers tour on the issue of oil revenue management and poverty reduction in Africa. The tour had three main objectives: to raise awareness about the governance, environmental and human rights impact of oil extraction among the poor in Africa through the lens of Catholic social teaching; to raise awareness among Catholics regarding the importance of transparency in the management of oil revenues to combat corruption and promote poverty reduction; and to encourage grassroots support for governmental and industry policy changes on oil revenue transparency issues.

It was a privilege to be invited to speak on this tour, which included 21 speaking events in 10 cities across the United States. Most of these events were held with university staff, faculty and students, as well as members of the local community when we spoke in churches. We also met with policy and government people at the State Department in Washington and attended a forum at George Washington University at which three indigenous leaders from Bolivia and Guatemala shared their stories about oil, gold and mining; this was to celebrate the U.N. World Indigenous Peoples Day. We met and spoke to a group of civil society organizations at InterAction, the Washington-based coalition of major international humanitarian and development NGOs, and

spoke with faith-based civil society groups at the United Nations in New York.

The most striking thing about the tour for us was the level of interest shown by young people, especially women, in these issues. More than 100 people attended the events at Villanova University and Boston College, with nearly that many at Santa Clara University. There was great enthusiasm among the audience members, which was reflected in the flood of comments during the question and answer sessions. At Villanova University, for instance, two law students, a young woman from Ghana and another from Nigeria, were surprised that so much work was being done on the issue of extractives. One enthused: "Are you really confronting these oil giants?" They asked how they could become part of these efforts.

Also striking was the effort by some professors to integrate these issues into their classes. At Georgetown we spoke to two classes, an undergraduate class called Introduction to Peace and Justice and a second called African Government and Politics. In these two classes, both the students and professor engaged us even after the end of the session.

The leadership of the various institutions - especially the Jesuit universities where we spoke - showed great interest in the issues, with either the president or vice president sponsoring the event. At Seattle University, the president, Fr. Stephen Sundborg (ORE), attended our presentation and spoke with us afterward. The

president of Georgetown was unable to attend, but sent representatives from his office.

At most of the speaking events, points were raised during the question and answer sessions that cut across a myriad of issues, including:

1. The role of African governments in oil revenue management. This arose because many felt that most of the blame falls on oil companies. But we made it clear that African governments - in fact governments all over the world - must be the primary providers of development, especially in reducing poverty.

2. The role of China in oil extraction and revenue management in Africa. We explained that the China presence is real but that since the U.S. espouses such values as democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law, these should remain the guiding principles of U.S. oil corporations.

3. Are there any instances in which oil companies have behaved well? Mention was made of examples in Alaska, Indonesia and even Azerbaijan. We are ready to share best practices wherever they can be found, but now we do not have any from Africa.

4. The need for oil corporations to avoid double standards in their dealings with their host communities in Africa. For instance, it is important because of our shared humanity and the various international conventions on the environment that oil corporations must comply with global standards wherever they do business.

5. More efforts should be channelled towards a more transparent and accountable oil revenue management. Though African governments have weak institutional structures to enforce these regulations, it is important for the U.S. and the international community to leverage their influence to enforce these.

6. The presence of oil has led to the neglect of other sectors of the economy. This has two implications. First is that people are losing their sources of livelihood since oil industry is not a heavy employer of labor. Second, it also has made it possible for the various governments in Africa to simply convert other non-oil revenue into their pockets without anyone ever inquiring about it.

We feel strongly, after three weeks on the road, that this is a worthwhile initiative, one we hope to see followed up with integration of these issues into university curricula - not just in justice and peace classes, but in economics, religion and others. The Jesuit universities, given their tradition of engagement in the work of social justice and their desire to educate men and women for others, are an excellent starting place.

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Commitment to Justice in Jesuit Higher Education Conference: Five Years Later

"What can we do now?"

That was the question for more than 300 representatives of Jesuit higher education in the U.S., Korea and El Salvador as they closed the four-day Commitment to Justice conference hosted in October by John Carroll University and sponsored by the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities.

They gathered to assess how their colleges and universities had responded to the challenge issued five years ago by Fr. General Peter-Hans Kolvenbach that the institutions make educating for social justice an integral part of their mission. That gathering was attended by 400 delegates, including AJCU presidents, administrators, faculty and staff, and Catholic leaders from Rome, Latin America and the Far East. There, Kolvenbach challenged Jesuit institutions to work for justice from a deep spirit of faith and aim to "educate the whole person in solidarity with the real world."

The goal of the conference was for Jesuit institutions to continue to explore new and innovative ways to make social justice an ever-developing and fundamental part of the academic curriculum. Some of the

areas addressed included sharing best practices in the formation and learning of our students, in faculty scholarship and teaching, and in the advancement of our institutions as Jesuit; and developing initiatives that will support academic, curricular and administrative innovations leading to a deepening commitment to justice in Jesuit higher education institutions.

The conference included more than 75 presentations and panels in addition to the keynote speakers, Frs. Dean Brackley (NYK), theology professor at the University of Central America, and Paul Locatelli (CFN), president of Santa Clara University. Fr. Robert Niehoff (ORE), newly inaugurated president of John Carroll, welcomed the conferees by recalling the pivotal conference at Santa Clara in October 2000. "What I took away from that was the need to embed our commitment to justice in everything we do," he said. "I hope this conference will spill over and that our walls will listen because we need that, too."

For audio streaming of segments of the keynote addresses, visit http://www.jcu.edu/news/justice_conference.htm.

Correction

Fr. Robert L. Niehoff, recently inaugurated president of John Carroll University, replaces Fr. Edward Glynn (MAR), not John Gladstone, as was reported in the November NJN.