

Spring 2008

Undergraduate Program in Eastern Africa for Adults Serving the Poor

Susanne M. Dumbleton Ph.D.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj>

Recommended Citation

Dumbleton, Susanne M. Ph.D. (2008) "Undergraduate Program in Eastern Africa for Adults Serving the Poor," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 28 : Iss. 2 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol28/iss2/15>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Vincentian Journals and Publications at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vincentian Heritage Journal by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.

Undergraduate Program in Eastern Africa for Adults Serving the Poor

By

SUSANNE M. DUMBLETON, PH.D.

Professor and former Dean of DePaul University's School for New Learning

Apologia

Fresh from an assignment in Nairobi, I find in my mail an invitation to reflect on work in which I have been immersed — launching an undergraduate degree program for Catholic sisters, brothers, and laypersons engaged in social service work in Africa. I am pleased. I would love to write about the seventeen students who brought such energy and enthusiasm, warm spirits, and generous aspirations to the classroom I have just left. Who could resist the opportunity to speak of the fine faculty we have engaged, the vigorous program we have designed, and the effective leaders we have in place? I might even be able to exclaim about the beauty of Kenya.

But the closing sentence of the invitation brings me up short. The article is intended for a special issue of *Vincentian Heritage*, on poverty reduction and higher education. I am not competent to write such a piece. I have no effective comprehension of poverty reduction in its formal definition — of economic systems and their essential interaction with geography, climatology, hydrology, history, political infrastructure, international relations, cultural assumptions, environmental science, engineering, epidemiology, human health, or the score of other factors integrated into the creation and reduction of poverty. I know what we are doing is addressing the plight of the poor, not working a scale definable as poverty reduction.

The students whom our new program serves are superb individuals committed to lives of powerful service. They work in emergency housing, HIV/AIDS-based health care, and personal hygiene. They struggle to make sure people get clean water and food. They bring schooling to children otherwise ignored, and design training programs for widows and poor mothers who need sources of income. They help individuals think about ways to improve the lives of their neighbors. They provide loving care for children orphaned or abandoned. They work to meet subsistence needs of great numbers of people, in numbers that seem not to diminish in spite of all they accomplish.

The courses they take with us focus on spirituality, leadership, and management. On completing their studies, they expect to be more effective in

the projects for which they are responsible, and will be able to lead and manage within their religious or service communities. But poverty reduction is not specifically on their minds, and it has not been a conscious aim of our program design. Indeed, some critics imply that well-intentioned, necessary social ministry activities — micro-approaches to poverty alleviation, so to speak — can actually exacerbate or extend deeply entrenched poverty by enabling governments and communities to escape the pressing need to build long-term solutions.¹ That is not an argument which makes much impact on those in the social services, confronted daily by individuals in dire need.

Poverty Reduction

The problem of reducing poverty is formidable, especially in the area where we have begun to work — sub-Saharan Africa, the region in the world most affected by low income. The most recent data from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) lists the five nations we are serving — Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Eritrea — as among the poorest places in the world. Of the 177 nations for which data of the *Human Directory Index* (HDI) are available, Ethiopia ranks 170, Tanzania 162, Eritrea 157, Uganda 145, and Kenya, our host nation, 152. The HDI is a composite of data describing three major qualities of life: “1) living a long and healthy life; 2) being educated; and 3) having a decent standard of living.”² In Kenya, life expectancy is only 47.5 years-of-age, adult literacy is 73.6 percent, school enrollment is 60 percent, and the GDP per capita is \$1,140. Thirty-nine percent of people are without access to an improved water source. Unemployment is 40 percent, and ranks as high as 60 percent among youth.

Most compelling are the data which indicate that these numbers have been stagnant from about 1990. The data are common to other nations in sub-Saharan Africa and defy trends in virtually all other parts of the world. As I prepare to send this article to the editor, good and bad news fills the press. A World Bank report is announced that this trend may show its first change — welcome news if it proves accurate: Economic growth for Kenya will exceed 5 percent again this year.³

On the other hand, the highly competitive 2007 presidential election in Kenya has resulted in allegations of fraud which have led to a violent

¹ Francisco Gonzales, S.V.D., “Report of Kayole Parish on Evangelisation in Towns,” *Mission Ad Gentes: The Challenge for the Church in Kenya*, ed. Alexander Lucie-Smith, *Tangaza Occasional Papers* 21 (2007), 78.

² United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 16 November 2007, at http://hdrstats/undp.org/countries/country_fact_sheets/cyt_fs_KEN.html.

³ Sharon LaFraniere, “World Bank Reports Progress in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *New York Times*, 15 November 2007.

response, effectively shutting down the country for at least two weeks and disrupting functional government for at least three months. As is often the case, the poorest areas of the country have suffered the most damage, and the vast majority of the estimated 250,000 persons burned or beaten out of their homes and businesses are the nation's poorest — residents of slums in the cities and in the impoverished edges of tiny rural villages. Images of rampaging young men, a demographic group trapped in unemployment and frustration, fill the press. The Economist reports that the economy lost a precious one billion dollars in the first ten days of violence. There are now an estimated 300,000 internal refugees to be cared for immediately. Although the international humanitarian relief organizations are rallying, governments are threatening to cut off ongoing financial aid until order has been restored. If allegations that candidates promised land and money to their constituents prove to be true, it will confirm the observation that poverty is a major cause of the violence — as well as a consequence.⁴



SNL students in Kenya salute SNL students in Chicago.

Photo courtesy of the author

Context

In this context, the challenge to write about Vincentian higher education and poverty reduction is sobering, even as it is compelling. While I have heard intensely argued debates about aid to Africa, I have never before felt competent to assess, much less develop, a cogent point of view. Now, to address the question I must also confront the question whether what we have designed is sufficient. If we do adopt a goal of poverty reduction, are there elements we should reconsider so that our students graduate prepared to have broader impact? How can we be sure we do not inadvertently exacerbate poverty and its impact?

⁴ “Kibaki’s Peace Plan,” *The Daily Nation*, 3 January 2008, quoted from http://www.nation-media.com/dailynation/nmgcontententry.asp?category_id=1&newsid=113.

Formal Economic Considerations

The question becomes: What role, if any, can higher education — especially Vincentian higher education — play in poverty reduction, especially in sub-Saharan Africa?

As economists make clear, the situation is complex and likely to remain so for a while. In “Poverty Reduction in Africa,”⁵ Paul Collier and those he consults are not optimistic in the short run. He argues that Africa is experiencing what any region would, given its circumstances.

- Ready solutions simply are not available.
- There is not sufficient income to solve poverty by redistributing wealth.⁶
- There are no obvious new markets.
- Intense new competition has emerged from Asia to draw off global opportunities just at the moment when Africa could have leapt forward.
- The sum of current physical, human, and political geography prevents the economies of Africa from growing for a sustained period at a necessary rate.
- No current economic approach has proven effective on a scale sufficient to make a difference.⁷

His well-reasoned analysis removes the element of human blame from the equation. The problem does not lie in the people of Africa. The distribution of population and natural resources in eastern Africa is such that well-intentioned but insufficiently planned or inadequately resourced approaches bring scant benefit, even while they exhaust good will.⁸ Meanwhile, widely publicized humanitarian aid efforts directed toward emergency or short-term goals bring frustration. Though these programs were never intended to bring about long-term improvement, those not directly involved — including the media — are nonetheless disappointed when they do not see systemic change.

Unintended Consequences

As an educator I am, of course, convinced that education is always a benefit to individuals. I have learned, however, that glibness is harmful. Education

⁵ Paul Collier, “Poverty Reduction in Africa,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 104:43 (October 2007), 16763-16768.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 16763.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 16768.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 16767.

does not immediately lead to opportunity in regions beset by multiple economic and social problems. In developing nations, advanced education, can be a liability to individuals if educators do not attend carefully to the graduates' context. In Kenya, for example, unemployment is so widespread and seemingly so intractable that degree-holders can be at a subtle disadvantage. Having raised their skills and expectations, they languish as employers find them over-qualified, and shrink as neighbors consider them intimidating.⁹ Senator Barack Obama writes poignantly of the tragic unhappiness of his Harvard-educated father, unwelcome in his place of birth because he cannot put his exceptional education to meaningful use.¹⁰ Current unrest among educated but underemployed youth in developing nations underscores the need to link educational programs to meaningful employment and appropriate compensation.¹¹

Student Aspirations

As I noted earlier, our students in Kenya are remarkable people, each dedicated to alleviating the impact of poverty on individuals. There are, for example, two Salesian Brothers whose mission is to make a home for boys who otherwise would be on the streets. One lay student has begun a school for HIV-positive children and a women's cooperative in the Korogohio slum. A sister is to learn how to make community projects financially sustainable. Another student is a member of administration police, charged with learning how to reduce violence and improve relationships between the Samburu people and government officials. A Scholastic Brother is studying negotiation skills so he can reduce violence among youth gangs. An Assumption Sister of Nairobi is laying groundwork for a center for renewal to reduce burnout among women in religious life.

Higher Education and Poverty Reduction

In what way can individuals committed to alleviate the impact of poverty learn also to address the causes? In what way can we help them translate their knowledge and skill on service to effect systemic change as well? To what extent is this consistent with the mission of liberal arts universities in the U.S., and, in particular, DePaul University's School for New Learning (SNL), the home of the program under consideration?

American liberal arts education considers awareness of the problem

⁹ Sister Loretta Brennan and Dr. Oscar Mapopa, 14 November 2007, narrated stories of persons they know. One felt a need to hide in the house once he had returned with his degree, because he could not get a job and was ashamed. A second felt compelled to be seen reading all day.

¹⁰ Barack Obama, *Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Crown, 2007).

¹¹ James Tooley, 30 November 2007, at <http://www.templeton.org/africa>.

of poverty as part of its norms. The four aims defined by the American Association of Colleges and Universities¹² are:

- preparing all students for an era of greater expectations;
- educating students for a world lived in common;
- making excellence inclusive;
- taking responsibility for the quality of every student's liberal education.

That is, students are to graduate knowledgeable about and responsible for the world in which they will live. These aims do not specify active redress for poverty or social injustice.

DePaul University, within this liberal arts tradition is more specific, focusing on persons in critical circumstances, but once again in service, not reform (italics mine):

Motivated by the example of St. Vincent de Paul, who instilled a love of God by leading his contemporaries in *serv-ing urgent human needs*, the DePaul community is above all characterized by ennobling the God-given dignity of each person. This religious personalism is manifested by the members of the DePaul community in a *sensitivity to and care for the needs of each other and of those served, with a special concern for the deprived members of society. DePaul University emphasizes the development of a full range of human capabilities and appreciation of higher education as a means to engage cultural, social, religious, and ethical values in service to others.*

Similarly, the School for New Learning, focuses on expanding access, but also on contributing to improve social justice (italics mine):

The School for New Learning *deliberately works to shape a more just, livable world, to ensure that those who have historically been ignored, excluded, marginalized, oppressed, and economically disenfranchised benefit from the many learning opportunities available through the School for New Learning and beyond.*

¹² The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) is the leading national association concerned with the quality, vitality, and public standing of undergraduate liberal education. Its members are committed to extending the advantage of a liberal education to all students, regardless of their academic specialization or intended career. Founded in 1915 by college presidents, AAC&U now represents the entire spectrum of American colleges and universities — large and small, public and private, two-year and four-year. AAC&U comprises more than 1,100 accredited colleges and universities that collectively educate more than five million students every year.

What Vincentian Higher Education Can Do

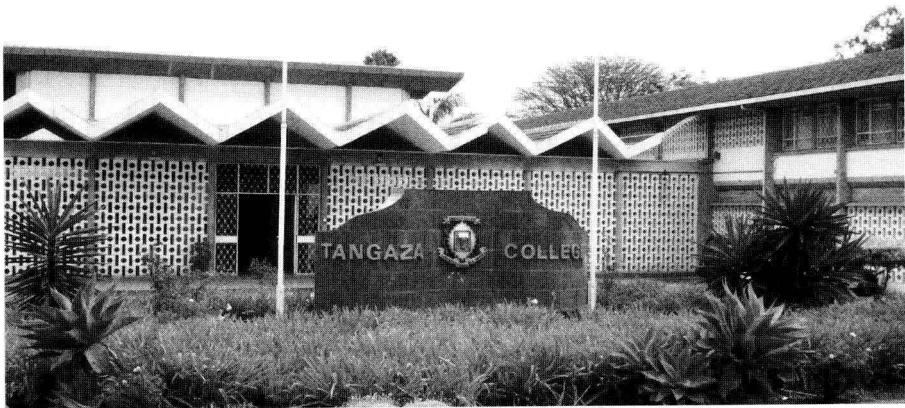
Within this context, what are the ways in which Vincentian higher education can assist in poverty reduction as well as the alleviation of suffering? I suggest four:

1) Informing career preparation with poverty elimination awareness. Through directly teaching the complexity of poverty while positioning students to engage with poor people, Vincentian universities can enable graduates consciously to prepare for careers in which they can influence government and the private sector to seek optimal approaches to poverty reduction. They can also educate students to avoid exacerbating poverty.

2) Empowering leaders. Through providing targeted access to education for adults in developing nations, Vincentian universities can improve the knowledge and skill of those already in leadership and management positions, increasing their chances of success in their projects or work.

3) Expanding access for the poor. Through partnering with colleges and universities in areas experiencing extreme poverty, Vincentian universities can expand educational opportunities to persons otherwise excluded, using intelligent and sensitive design to be sure the partnership contributes to solutions and avoids creating additional problems.

4) Conducting research on poverty and poverty reduction. Vincentian universities can assess underlying factors, inform debate, and advise on workable solutions, thus counteracting the damage done by biased approaches, shallow analyses, and self-serving promotions.



Tangaza College, Nairobi, Kenya.
Public Domain

The DePaul-Tangaza Partnership

The partnership DePaul is forging with Tangaza College in Nairobi, Kenya, is dedicated primarily to the first three roles mentioned above. Let me describe the program, articulate our goals within the context of these roles, and give a preliminary assessment of our success to date.

Tangaza College was founded in 1985 by twenty-one orders of Catholic religious to provide education for their members.¹³ It is a constituent college of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA), also located in Nairobi, which serves dioceses in Kenya, Tanzania, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Uganda. The majority of Tangaza's current students are young men preparing for the priesthood, but an additional 25 percent are made up of professed sisters and brothers from international and African communities who are preparing to be formatters and leaders within their community. A third group is comprised of laypersons preparing to teach children and young people, or to serve in church-related missions.¹⁴ The sisters, brothers, and laypersons all engage directly in service to the poor — in schools, hospitals, orphanages, and scores of community organizations that have been started to serve those in poverty. They have studied in a two-year diploma program within two institutes — the Institute for Spirituality and Religious Formation (ISRF), and the Institute for Social Ministry in Mission (ISMM).

The founder of ISRF, Sister Loretta Brennan, C.S.B., wanted her students — all of them over 24 years of age — to be able to continue their education and earn a bachelor's degree. She was confident that if more practicing sisters, brothers, and lay persons were able to complete their undergraduate educations, the projects they lead would have more chance of success. She found a perfect partner in the DePaul University School for New Learning (SNL). DePaul already had a relationship with Tangaza College. The Midwest Province (U.S.A.) of the Congregation of the Mission was one of the founding members; the Reverend John Richardson, C.M., chancellor of DePaul, was on the Tangaza Board of Trustees, and some faculty and staff at both institutions had begun exchange work and special projects.

¹³ The sponsoring orders include the following: Benedictines, O.S.B.; Brothers of the Christian Schools, F.S.C. Camillians, M.I.; Capuchin Franciscan Friars, O.F.M. Cap.; Comboni Missionaries, M.C.C.J.; Congregation of the Marianhill Missionaries, C.M.M.; Consolata Missionaries, I.M.C.; Conventual Franciscan Friars, O.F.M. Conv.; Discalced Carmelites Friars, O.C.D.; Dominican Friars, O.P.; Franciscan Friars Minor, O.F.M.; Holy Cross Congregation, C.S.C.; Missionaries of Africa, M. Afr.; Passionist Fathers, C.P.; Rosminians, (Institute of Charity), I.C.; Salesians of Don Bosco, S.D.B.; Spiritans, C.S.Sp.; Society of African Missions, S.M.A.; Society of the Divine Word, S.V.D.; Vincentians (Congregation of the Mission), C.M.; Augustinians, O.S.A.

¹⁴ The institutes include Christ the Teacher Institute of Education (CTIE), Institute for Youth Ministry, Institute for Social Communication, Institute for Spirituality and Religious Formation (ISRF), Institute for Social Ministry in Mission (ISMM), and Maryknoll Institute for African Studies.

The School for New Learning exists specifically for persons who are well launched on their work lives. Founded in 1972, it has the specific commandment to open access to higher education to persons otherwise excluded. In the memo through which Reverend Richardson paved the way for the school, he noted the need for these opportunities (*italics mine*):

The developments in Western society during recent years have demonstrated a number of limitations and inequities inherent in traditional higher education: too often curricula are unresponsive to new social and personal needs, too slow to change in needed ways; too often the student with well-defined personal and career goals and interests is required to complete a curriculum which appears largely irrelevant to him simply to acquire academic credentials; *too often higher education is practically limited to the young and the socio-economically able*; too often traditional concepts of higher education seem to force the student to choose between the excessive specificity of vocational education and the frequently excessive generality of the liberal arts curriculum. These deficiencies in contemporary higher education strongly argue a need for a middle course, an alternative to the existing extremes... *Programs, schools, and colleges are needed to provide educational opportunities specifically relevant to current social problems and capable of rapid adaptation to changing social requirements.*¹⁵

The School for New Learning has manifested this vision.¹⁶ Focusing on undergraduates twenty-four years or older, it is committed to expanding access to higher education and all it provides. In operation it blends liberal arts with applied study, and values experience accompanied by reflection as an optimal form of learning. It allows individual adults to customize studies to meet their professional needs. Degree requirements are expressed as competences — the ability to demonstrate mastery of theory by performance. It insists that students develop the ability to learn independently and put what they learn to work in new situations. Students must also become aware of what it takes to learn. It has been very successful.¹⁷

At the request of Sister Loretta Brennan, School for New Learning faculty

¹⁵ Letter from DePaul University Vice President, Reverend John Richardson, C.M., to President, Reverend John Cortelyou, C.M., 17 February 1972.

¹⁶ See details at the DePaul University website, <http://snl.depaul.edu>.

¹⁷ Almost 7,000 persons have graduated and report high levels of satisfaction and achievement.

examined the curricula of the institutes at Tangaza College and determined that students who earned diplomas at Tangaza would be able to enter the DePaul SNL Bachelor of Arts degree program, having completed eighteen of the fifty requirements. They concluded that it would be possible to design an on-site program at Tangaza which would build on prior studies and allow students to complete the other DePaul requirements.

Between 2005 and 2007, DePaul faculty worked on the design and gained all necessary approvals. On 20 August 2007, seventeen students began to study for a Bachelor of Arts from DePaul at Tangaza College. Spirits and hopes are high.

The Partnership and Poverty Reduction

The program is good. The students are articulate, motivated, thoughtful, and capable. The faculty are skilled and determined. But it is not currently configured to address poverty reduction. In the context of the four qualities I have laid out, there are areas we might change to make this possible:

1. Informing career preparation with poverty reduction awareness.

Through teaching about the complexity of poverty and enabling students to engage with poor people, Vincentian universities can avoid contributing to conditions leading to poverty and prepare students for careers in which they can influence the government and private sector to seek optimal approaches to poverty reduction.

We expect students of this program at Tangaza College to graduate well informed about the issues besetting the people they serve, and capable of learning more on their own. The focus is sharp. Because the School for New Learning expects students to develop knowledge and skills transferable to other contexts, we can customize the content of our courses to meet the existing situation. Thus, we enable students in Kenya to meet their science requirements with study of issues severely impacting eastern Africa: health care, particularly HIV / AIDS; and the environment, including water.

Social science requirements are similarly focused on Kenya. Students learn about the impact of globalization on the region, consider and assess social justice issues, and analyze the various forms of government to which African nations are turning.

Humanities requirements include vital skills: critical thinking, textual analysis, comparing ethical systems, and utilizing human creativity to solve problems.

The focus is Leadership and management, with particular emphasis on NGO work. Students learn about religious-based and nonprofit organizations, and about leadership styles. They must develop their skills in writing, research, collaboration, quantitative reasoning and financial management,

information technology, and human resource management. All students must complete and analyze a service project connected to their ongoing work, and a major leadership/management project that will be critiqued externally.

This review leads to the conclusion that the program does sensitize students to issues and resource allocation and encourages them to think about solutions. However, as noted earlier, it does not challenge them to consider solutions at the macro level. We could make the program more effective in poverty reduction by integrating macro analysis into virtually all elements and by asking students to consider their own efforts from a systemic perspective, even as they work to ease individual suffering. Because the program requires considerable self-awareness, we could introduce such changes with relative ease.

2. Empowering leaders.

By providing targeted education for adults in developing nations, Vincentian universities can improve the skill of those currently in leadership and management positions and increase their chances of success in their projects or work.

All the students in our Bachelor of Arts program at Tangaza College are adults who are or will be responsible for relief services programs. Virtually all of them report frustration at seeing their projects, and those of scores of NGOs, flounder. They want to know why, and they want to learn to do the work more effectively.¹⁸ We can ask students to consider the impact of their work in a larger context. If we are successful, they should be able to contribute to the success of projects and communities. Moreover, because our students are already employed, they will not be pressing the job market. Indeed, if they learn what they seek to know, they may even be in positions to hire other people.¹⁹

We at DePaul have also come to understand what it means to be thoughtful colleagues in Kenya. As was noted earlier, Kenya has an unemployment rate of 40 percent. Among those who cannot find sufficient employment are persons qualified to teach at the college level. With an embarrassment of riches of doctorally trained academics and doctoral candidates, Kenya offers excellent colleagues. DePaul and Tangaza decided to collaborate on recruiting and training the faculty — using as many from Kenya as is possible while ensuring appropriate oversight in Chicago. We have designed the program to have a director and a team of faculty and staff in Chicago responsible for initiating the curriculum, keeping the program up-to-date, and working as a bridge between Chicago-based and Nairobi-based faculty. In Nairobi we

¹⁸ “The Final Session,” *Mission Ad Gente*, 118-124.

¹⁹ Dr. Oscar Mapopa, in conversation with Sister Loretta Brennan, 14 November 2007.

have a coordinator, an assistant coordinator, and a team of part-time faculty to do administrative work, advising of students, and much teaching. Each term, a member of the Chicago-based team — a full-time DePaul faculty member — is on campus in Nairobi for at least three weeks to attend to the program in person — meeting extensively with the on-site coordinator and assistant coordinator, team-teaching in one class, talking with faculty responsible for other classes, interviewing students, reviewing student work, and offering a guest lecture. Each student is developing a portfolio of work that will be co-assessed by faculty in Chicago and Nairobi. We believe it is appropriate to refrain from importing workers and imposing them in a situation where skilled staff is already present and available.

3. Expanding Access to the Poor.

Through partnering with colleges and universities in areas experiencing extreme poverty, Vincentian universities can expand educational opportunities to persons otherwise excluded — using intelligent and sensitive design to be sure the partnership contributes to solutions and avoids creating additional problems.

Many of the students who have enrolled in this program would not in any other way be able to complete their undergraduate educations in Kenya or their home countries (ten students are from Kenya, two from Togo, two from South Africa, two from Tanzania; and one is from Uganda). Many come from rural areas where there is scant preparation for college admission exams. Most had no idea they would ever be able to attend a university. Many did not prepare for or take exams at the end of secondary school.

So, in terms of expanding access, our program at Tangaza College is presently doing so at the micro level. One of our funders — the Hilton Foundation — has challenged us to become a model, to inspire other universities to build programs for adults. If this program is a success and we are able to tell others about it, we will be more in line with goal of systemic improvement.

4. Conducting Research on Poverty and Poverty Reduction.

Through research into poverty, Vincentian universities can assess underlying factors, inform debate, and advise on workable solutions — counteracting the damage done by biased approaches, shallow analyses, and self-serving promotions.

This is not an area to which we have yet paid deliberate attention. But it is clear that if we want to reduce poverty rather than just ease its effect on individuals, we must watch for opportunities to commission or participate in appropriate research.

Conclusion

The extent of human suffering in sub-Saharan Africa in 2008 demands

the attention of millions of people. Vincentian universities can contribute meaningfully to poverty alleviation and poverty reduction by providing thoughtful education for career advancement; by empowering leaders through knowledge; by expanding access to education for the poor; and by conducting research on poverty and poverty reduction. All approaches must include attention to macro issues as well as micro issues.

The DePaul University/Tangaza College program, which aims to educate current and future leadership of Catholic organizations dedicated to relieving the impact of poverty, is off to a good start, especially in empowering students to lead programs of social service. An analysis of the program indicates that it would be possible to improve the potential of its graduates to participate in poverty reduction if it were to:

- Routinely expect students to identify the causes of the poverty-induced problems they are addressing, with an eye to suggesting systemic change, and
- Support research on the causes of impoverishing conditions and advanced long-range solutions.