

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 44

Article 6

September 2013

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Recommended Citation

Hollenbach, David S.J. (2013) "Accompaniment, Service, and Advocacy: Responding to Global Poverty and Displacement," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 44, Article 6.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol44/iss1/6>

Accompaniment, Service, and Advocacy

Responding to Global Poverty and Displacement

By David Hollenbach, S.J.

My reflections on the commitment to justice in Jesuit higher education will draw on my experience of teaching a number of times at Hekima College, a Jesuit institution of higher learning in Nairobi, Kenya, and on my work in collaboration with the Jesuit Refugee Service at the Boston College Center for Human Rights and International Justice. I focus primarily on two groups of people who carry particularly heavy burdens: the millions of Africans who have been driven from their homes as displaced persons and the many millions more who live in extreme poverty in the continent.

The Challenges of Refugees and Poverty

Refugees are persons who have fallen through the cracks of the international political system, cracks very often created by war. The loss of human life is war's greatest cost, but the displacement of people from their homes receives insufficient attention. The division of the world by the borders of over 190 countries is a crucial determinant of their plight. Refugees are legally defined as people who have fled across an international border because of "well-founded fear of being persecuted." Forced migrants also include people displaced inside their own countries (IDPs) by war, human rights violations, and natural or human-made disasters. There are well over 60 million persons in our world who have been forced from their homes by such causes. This involuntary

movement of people threatens their most basic human rights such as having a home, sustaining their family, moving freely, having some say in the political life that shapes their fate, and even surviving.

Poverty raises equally daunting challenges. There has been some progress on the elimination of poverty in the developing world in recent years, for which we should be grateful. Nevertheless, nearly 50% of Africans continue to live in extreme poverty. This raises the challenge of how our ethical responsibilities reach across frontiers.

Normative Considerations

Catholic thought possesses important resources that can help meet these challenges. There are important biblical bases for our response. The historical memory of Jews and Christians recalls that when the people of Israel were poor and displaced in Egypt, God liberated them and gave them a new home flowing with milk and honey. The people of Israel are called by God to befriend the orphan, the widow, and the alien, for when they were poor, oppressed aliens in Egypt God came to their aid (Deut. 10:17-19). Matthew's gospel tells us that right after the birth of Jesus, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt...Herod is going to search for the child

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to destroy him.” So Jesus, Mary, and Joseph became refugees (Matt. 2:13-14). In his parable of the final judgment, Jesus taught that those who enter the kingdom of God are those who cared for the poor and welcomed the stranger (Matt. 25:35). The poor and the refugees should, therefore, be of special concern to Christians.

These biblical perspectives overlap with principles that can be affirmed also on secular grounds. The dignity of the person is the basis of human rights, including the rights of refugees and the poor. And our dignity as persons be attained only in community. No person is an island. People driven from their homes as exiles are harmed by that very fact. The same is true of those who are excluded from the growing benefits of our increasingly integrated global economy.

The situation of the displaced and poor people of Africa is a serious injustice. In their pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All* (1986), the U.S. Catholic Bishops stated that “Basic justice demands the establishment of minimum levels of participation in the life of the human community for all persons.” Put negatively, “The ultimate injustice is for a person or group to be treated actively or abandoned passively as if they were non-members of the human race.” Displaced people suffer this fate. Precisely because they have no community to call home, they lack the support needed to attain minimal human dignity. In effect, they are being told that they simply do not count as human beings.

Poverty also wounds both the dignity of poor persons and the well-being of the communities in which they live. When 50% of Africans today are living on less than \$1.25 per day, politics easily falls into violent conflict, as it has in eastern Congo and Sudan. Such conflicts in turn create large numbers of displaced persons and thus exacerbate the conditions that cause poverty. Conflict, displacement, and poverty reinforce each other in a vicious circle.

Structural Challenges

These injustices imply that there is something seriously wrong with a system of global politics that fails to protect so many millions of people. In his 1963 letter “Peace on Earth,” Pope John XXIII argued that realities such as the acute suffering both of the poor and of refugees imply that “the shape and structure of political life in the modern world...are unequal to the task of promoting the common good of all peoples.” We need to reexamine the presuppositions of our global system. John XXIII and Benedict XVI both called for a “public authority, having worldwide power” capable of advancing the worldwide common good, including the good of refugees and the poor. At the same time they also insisted that this global

authority should be governed by the principle of subsidiarity—it should not seek to replace nation states or distinctive cultural communities but should aid them in their service of our common humanity.

This fits well with some of the trends in current international relations theory, which note that not just states but also a complex network of other institutions increasingly shape the globe. The world is neither divided into self-contained nation states nor is it a single global community of all human beings in undifferentiated unity. The global order that is actually emerging can be called a networked world. Multiple linkages across borders give each community the capacity to act in an increasingly interconnected world. Sovereignty should be seen as “a place at the table,” interacting with other states, with intergovernmental bodies on both regional and global levels, and with a host of nongovernmental agencies, including religious communities such as the Church and its many subcommunities.

New Possibilities in a Networked World

Let me offer several suggestions for how we might work more effectively to protect the dignity of the poor and displaced of our networked world.

First, we need sustained efforts to build peace where conflict has killed many people, forced even more from their homes, and kept whole countries in extreme poverty. This requires regional action by states neighboring those experiencing conflict as well as support from more powerful countries of the developed world. It also calls for serious engagement by religious communities and nongovernmental agencies. The commitments of Catholic Relief Services to peace building and of the Jesuit Refugee Service to working for reconciliation are important components of this process.

Second, such efforts should be preventative and not wait until grave violations have begun. Nor should they end when peace agreements have been signed. For example, the needs of the many returning to their homes after war will be addressed only by efforts to heal the wounds of people divided during conflict.

Third, countries of the developed world have a responsibility to share the burdens of aiding the displaced and to contribute to efforts essential to alleviating poverty and conflict. One’s responsibility to help people in serious need is proportional to one’s capability to help. In Africa, many countries receiving large numbers of refugees are so poor they simply cannot assist them. Countries with greater capacity to help have a greater responsibility to do so.



A kid soldier, Rwanda.

Photo by Mark Raper, S.J.
Courtesy of the Jesuit Refugee Service.

Perhaps the biggest challenge is that a call to be “realistic” could cause us to give up before we even start. Regarding African poverty, for example, the effectiveness of aid has been challenged by some analysts who argue that it creates dependency and encourages corruption and thus should be replaced by market-based initiatives. While such critiques contain elements of truth, they overlook the failure of the market-oriented structural adjustment programs of the 1980s and early 1990s in Africa. The present global financial crisis often makes poor countries unattractive sites for investment and less able to enter into global trade markets. And some aid programs have been notably successful, such as those targeted on alleviating HIV-AIDS, on other health needs, and on educational programs essential to longer-term development and thus to peace. Pope Benedict recognized this when he addressed the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences in 2010, stating that “the worldwide financial breakdown has...shown the error of the assumption that the market is capable of regulating itself, apart from public intervention and the support of internalized moral standards.”

Sign of Hope: the Work of Jesuit Refugee Service

Let me conclude by suggesting that we in Jesuit higher education can learn something important about these issues from the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS). The JRS was founded just over 25 years ago, and in this short time refugee and migration issues have moved from a marginal concern to one of the top five priorities of the Jesuit order. How did this happen?

JRS has three dimensions to its ministry: accompaniment, service, and advocacy, which are equally relevant to efforts to address poverty and development issues. Accompaniment means being with the refugees and the poor on the ground, listening to their stories, showing them in action that they are not forgotten. Many refugees say this is the most important help they receive from JRS. It also has a deep impact on those who are listening, stimulating commitment to take action. The analogy in the university is volunteer programs that enable participants to accompany those in need. Such accompaniment leads to service. In the JRS it has led to education programs for refugee children who live in very poor urban areas and to the establishment of safe havens for refugee women threatened with sexual violence. Such service, in turn, leads to seeing the need for advocacy to change the policies that cause displacement, conflict, and poverty. Accompaniment, service, and advocacy thus support each other and, in turn, have an impact on public opinion that can have real influence.

From accompanying and serving refugees, JRS workers learned for example that many had been wounded by land mines. This led to JRS participation in the global campaign to abolish land mines. This advocacy was shaped by intellectually careful analysis and by dialogue between practitioners and analysts. It helped generate a campaign that eventually succeeded in having most of the countries of the world—sadly, not the U.S.—ratify the global treaty abolishing land mines. This campaign received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1977.

This has important implications for the development of Jesuit higher education today. Advocacy should begin with the careful attention to the experience of the displaced and the poor that arises from accompaniment. At the same time, successful advocacy requires serious intellectual analysis. I hope these reflections will help us see that justice calls Jesuit colleges and universities to become more active and effective in their interconnected efforts at accompaniment, service, and advocacy on behalf of the poor. ■