EKTHA—UNITY

Newsletter of SAVE A FAMILY PLAN (SAFP)

Issue 12: 2007 ***"partnering with the poor for a just world"***

SAFP and Good Governance

The role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's) in Good Governance was discussed at Save A Family Plan India's Annual General Meeting held in February, 2007. According to the Commission on Global Governance, governance is defined as "the sum of many ways individuals and institutions, public and private, manage their own affairs. It is a continuous process through which conflicting or diverse interests may be accommodated and co-operative action may be taken."

Good Governance

- accountability
- transparency
- efficiency and effectiveness
- participation
- responsiveness
- equity
- empowerment
- ecological soundness
- rule of law
- partnership

Local Village Development Committee formed in Josephnagar, Karnataka

Right to Information in India

Information is the pre-condition necessary for citizens to exercise their rights and responsibilities to make informed choices. The greater the access of citizens to information, the greater will be the responsiveness of the government to community needs. With the intent of introducing transparency and accountability (two fundamental principles of good governance) , the Government of India's **Right to Information Act** (2005) provides a legal process for the citizens of India to access records of Central and State Governments.

In *A Discourse on Good Governance*, D. Beena of the Kerala Institute for Local Administration states that the concept of governance is different from that of government, and refers to the "process through which all the individuals and groups in the society can participate in making social, cultural, political and economic choices." A "highly energetic" civil society is critical, she says, for the sustainability of governance. Civil society movements play key roles in advocating for changes in legislation and in raising awareness of issues; they provide a mechanism to counterbalance the power of the state and to hold it accountable.

Government Decentralization in India

The 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian Constitution mandated the setting up of Local Governments (Panchayats) as a third tier of government, after Central and State Governments. In rural areas, these operate at the Village, Block, and District levels, and are primarily concerned with economic development and social justice issues of the poor and marginalized. In all the Panchayats, seats are reserved for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in proportion to their population and one-third of the total number of seats are reserved for women.

NGO's, as members of a collective and diverse civil society, contribute to development and democratization through support of social discourse and social movements. As non-state actors, these organizations are critical to achieving public policy that responds to the needs of the people.

According to SAFPI Director Fr. Augustine Bharanikulangara, *"...governments, starting from local to national, are the providers of all basic services and are the key players concerned in the welfare of the poor. Hence any disorganization, inefficiency or bad governance in government will further marginalize the poor and the deprived...Promoting good governance and improving the responsiveness of public institutions to the community needs are two of the best strategies for addressing poverty on a long term basis." (*News & Views: Apr/Jn 2007)

SAFP is committed to a grassroots democratic approach to poverty reduction. Sustainability through Participation, Empowerment and Decentralization (SPED II) is the name given to the SAFP/Canadian International Development Agency-community development program, which funds interventions and activities that promote good governance. By building the knowledge and leadership capacity of local people through training and education, SAFP programs encourage awareness of rights, self-advocacy, and interest and involvement in public policy matters—all necessary for a strong civil society.

My Once-in-a-Lifetime Indian Experience

Angela Aísa, Zaragoza, Spain, 3 July 2007

I feel very lucky indeed to have spent January and part of February 2006, six weeks in total, in India, accompanying SAFPC President Lois Côté during her last visit there. I had met SAFP founder Monsignor Kandathil in London back in the sixties. Everybody I knew was giving him support for his project then and, like them, I sent money for an Indian family to buy a goat. Then, it was that simple. In 1988 I moved back to Spain, returning to visit London regularly to see my friends.

Back to my Indian trip–I was utterly amazed by what I saw. The results of the self-help programs are impressive. The growth and the depth of the changes was a constant proof of the progress of SAFP. We visited projects in Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra and Orissa.

The sense of "community" present in the sanghams is particularly remarkable. It has allowed these very poor women to avoid isolation and aloneness, to develop a sense of self-worth, to defend their rights, to learn leadership, to speak in public. This aspect of the SAFP program is the envy of those friends of mine who work with other NGOs.

Another aspect which impressed me was the skill development programs of the sangham members and the continuous formation of the coordinators and the animators. I have a wonderful memory of a street theatre show one night. It lasted over three hours (we were the first to leave at 1 a.m.). All the villages from the surrounding area were present: children, men, women, the elderly, Hindus, Christian and Muslims. That night there were around 300 people sitting on the floor (actually, the soil). The coordinators and the animators prepared the stage with lovely hangings, a microphone, a couple of chairs and a table. They also wrote the sketches. Not a minute was wasted. They treated, with a great sense of humour, very serious problems, like alcoholism in men, visiting a doctor or a shaman, negotiating a dowry. People laughed heartily, had a great time and learned at the same time what should not be done.

Angela Aisa (left) and Lois Côté (second from right) visit villagers in the state of Orissa in January, 2007

We also visited two tribes, one on a mountain (the Muthuvans) and one on a plain. The Indian poor, and especially the tribes, have very serious hygiene problems. They are used to defecating out in the open. Since they do not have potable water, their faeces are contaminated with parasites, which poison the soil. They think it dirtier to have a latrine in your home. Educating the children in their school, if they have one, is their hope for better health. The Muthuvans do have one lovely school, where there are two hundred beautiful children who are learning to use a latrine and wash their hands before and after meals. They will educate their parents.

The day we visited the mountain tribe, they allowed us to attend the funeral of the tribal chief's sister. They rolled her up in some kind of a light bamboo carpet through which they inserted a thin tree pole. The men lifted the bundle upon their shoulders, and with a knife or machete in hand, they ran down the mountain at great speed – no shoes, of course. They kept hitting the air so that the evil spirits would not seize the woman before they placed her in the hole they had dug in their beloved mountain. We stood there filled with respect for them and grateful for the honour we had received.

On the visit to the plains tribe, two lines of young women welcomed us. They were dancing with their arms intertwined, while a few men accompanied them with their drums. Three years ago their women would not step out from behind the trees. They still find it hard to look up at you and smile, but Lois and I ended up dancing with them. They also washed our feet and placed their foreheads on them as a sign of respect. I felt so small. I was overwhelmed by the beauty of their souls and their culture. The children danced and sang for us. All were very bright and they did wonders with the little they had. I many times wonder what will happen to them, which opportunities they will have, will they be happy. I will always remember the priests, the nuns and the many lay people, volunteers and workers, dedicated to the poor: wonderful people, magnificent people!!! They already have a martyr: 26 years old, newly ordained, went to live with a tribe in a hut to get to know and help them. Some people belonging to a radical nationalist group killed him with poisoned arrows. I met the priest who took his place. He is not afraid. And I will remember the poor, those women and children: all beautiful looking, all very thin. The courage of those women, with unpronounceable names, their immense love for their family, their intelligence, their very hard work, their hospitality, which made them give us what they could not spare: a coconut with its lovely drink, a cup of tea. They would take our hands in theirs and would rest their foreheads over our hands as a sign of respect. Before such suffering and injustice, how can one deserve the respect of these people, when you know that, even if you try to be part of their solution, you are still part of their problem – you and this selfish first world you belong to. But today I feel especially blessed. Finally, and thanks to this trip, I have put faces to the poor.

MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOAL 7

Ensuring Environmental Sustainability

An international commitment to:

- Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs and reverse the losses of environmental resources
- Halve by 2015 the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water.
- By 2020 to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers

Save A Family Plan is committed to protecting the natural resources on which the health and livelihood of so many rural Indian people depend, and SAFP's community development program (SPED II) has dedicated funding for such efforts. Effective local level management of natural resources and environmental sensitivity in all programs and activities is necessary for sustainability, and is achieved through integration of environmental concerns as a cross-cutting theme. SAFP and its partners use Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) as a tool to assess the environmental implications of planned program activities. Local language handbooks are used by the facilitators and resource teams in the village communities to assist in this process. Awareness training at all levels (eg. SAFP, partner organizations, community-based organizations/sanghams) continues to increase the capacity of all stakeholders to understand environmental issues and the need for responsible management of natural resources.

An Environmental Impact Assessment would have been necessary prior to this constructon of this roof rainwater harvesting tank in Kottayam District, Kerala.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Delima Xavier is a 38-year-old widow from Chennavali who is living with her 16-year-old daughter Ancy and 14-year-old son Jomon. A lack of toilet facilities had created difficulties for the family. She recollects her past experience, "We (would) either rely upon our neighbors or wait for the sun to set in order to defecate...and that (was) in the open air. Through Alleppey Diocesan Society (Kerala) and her sangham membership, this woman's family was selected as a beneficiary and assistance was facilitated. SAFP, with the funding assistance of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), commits a significant amount of its community development budget to integrated watershed development in 32 targeted villages. The need for sanitary latrines has been identified as a specific need in many of these communities. 123 units have been constructed since the beginning of the SPED II program.

SPED II: Sustainability through Participation, Empowerment, and Decentralization

Integrated Watershed Development: Working with SAFP partners and local community-based organizations to protect soil, water, and natural and human habitats by integrating remedial physical and biological activities with social and economic development of local people, in 32 degraded watershed areas the states of Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu.

Mary Baby Pulikka is a 48 year-old poor widow living in Manickamangalam, Kerala with her 22 year-old son, who helps to meet living expenses by doing daily labour jobs. Her village is located in one of the SPED II targeted watershed development areas (community development program), and through SAFP partner Welfare Services Ernakulam and her sangham membership, she was selected to receive assistance for improving the vegetation on her patch of land. With SAFP/CIDA financial support and local contributions, she was able to plant 100 banana trees, which is helping to restore the vegetative cover of the land and providing a sustainable source of income.

What the Heck is Social Justice?

by Rose-Marie Berger

2007 is a Sabbath Year. Every seventh year, according to biblical tradition, the people of God are invited to observe a "Year of Remission" (Shmita, in Hebrew). It is a year in which land and crops and domesticated animals rest, when creditors refrain from collecting debts, and when the Law of the Lord is read in the hearing of all (marking the completion of the Torah liturgical cycle).

These ancient biblical customs and covenants form the foundation for the Christian concept of social justice. In Christian tradition, particularly Catholic teaching, social justice and social charity form the horizontal axis, and individual justice and individual charity form the vertical axis. All four elements work in harmony for individuals and communities to live out the commandment: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

Justice is the moral code that guides a fair and equitable society. When an individual acts on behalf of justice, he or she stands up for what is right. Charity is a basic sense of generosity and goodwill toward others, especially the suffering. Individual charity is when one responds to the more immediate needs of others—volunteering in a women's shelter, for example.

The goal of social charity and social justice is furthering the common good. Social charity addresses the effects of social sin, while social justice addresses the causes of such sin. Brazilian Catholic Archbishop Hélder Câmara famously said, "When I feed the poor, they call me a saint; when I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist." His phrase indicates the societal pressure to separate charity and justice. The two can not be separated. It would be like taking the heart out of a body—neither would live for long.
Social charity is sometimes called compassionate solidarity. A church's decision to buy only fair trade coffee might be considered an act of social charity. It is a communal economic act that addresses the immediate needs of those who are oppressed by an unjust economic system. However, it doesn't fundamentally change or challenge the unjust structure.

The principle of social justice, according to Catholic social teaching, requires the individual Christian to act in an organized manner with others to hold social institutions accountable—whether government or private—to the common good. The "common good comprises the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily," according to Pope Paul VI. However, social justice can become hollow if it is not constantly in touch with rea l people's experiences.

SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES are determined by "discerning the signs of the times" (Matthew 16:3), a careful process of social analysis. First, we listen to and observe the experiences of those closest to the problem. Second, together with those closest to the problem, we look at the context. What's the history and what are the root causes? Are there political and/or cultural forces at play? We take the expanded information (experience plus context) and examine it in light of biblical values and Christian teaching. What would Jesus do in a situation like this? Third, we ask: What action might successfully make this situation more just? Finally, we take the action and evaluate the results. The evaluation takes us back to step one.

Social justice almost always has an economic, as well as a policy, component.. Our lives are organized around basic goods and services that we exchange in order to grow as healthy human beings in families and communities. When we listen to experiences of poor people in the U.S., for example, we learn that many are working full-time but can't afford the basics of food, housing, and health care. The context includes spiraling costs of medical insurance and an inadequate federal minimum wage. We reflect on the experience and context in the light of Jesus' healing ministry and Jesus' parable of the worker getting a just wage. Campaigns for health care reform and a living wage have arisen from such analysis. Success is evaluated by how the lives of America's working poor have improved. Have these actions helped to restore justice and reveal more clearly the reign of God?

The Sabbath Year is a good time to review (and renew) the social justice ethic of the church. Salvation Army leader Evangeline Booth's comments on the women's movement in 1930 are pertinent for social justice movements today. Or what we call the movement, she says, "is not social merely, not political merely, not economic merely. It is the direct fulfillment of the gospel of the Redeemer."

Rose Marie Berger, an associate editor of Sojouner, is a Catholic peace activist and poet. Reprinted with permission from Sojourners, (800) 714-7474, www.sojo.net.

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