

The Congregation's Work as NGO at the United Nations



by Joseph P. Foley, C.M.

*Vincentian NGO Representative
to the United Nations*

I want to begin by thanking Fr. Greg for this opportunity to write to you about the Congregation's work as a non-governmental organization (NGO) at the United Nations. I will restate the mandate given by the Superior General. I also hope to provide an example of how the NGO Office functions, and I will offer some suggestions for closer collaboration between the Office and the Provinces.

1. The Congregation of the Mission at the UN

In our application for affiliation with the UN, Bob Maloney wrote: "The Congregation of the Mission's principal focus is on the economically poor. Its founder, Vincent de Paul (1581-1660), is well known internationally for organizing groups to assist the most needy. The Congregation began in France in 1625 and has now spread to over 80 countries. It has close ties, and many cooperative projects, with other branches of the 'Vincentian Family,' which consists of various groups founded by Vincent de Paul himself or founded later by others who shared his original inspiration. Among such groups are: the International Association of Charity (AIC), which has 260,000 members, the Daughters of Charity, which has 25,500 members, the Vincent de Paul Society which has 900,000 members and various youth groups which have more than 200,000 members. A recent study identifies more than 268 institutes for educational and charitable works that have been founded in the spirit of Vincent de Paul over the past 380 years."

Specifically, the NGO mandate is contained in the description of our principal focus: economically poor persons. *“Our members focus on self-promotion, education, relief, evangelization of persons who live in situations of poverty; and we assist them in changing the structures that keep people in poverty.” In the designation of our areas of interest, we named: economic and social development; peacekeeping/peacemaking and literacy/education.*

This mandate as it stands is still very helpful. It can be acted on in several ways: one, by initiating or participating in working groups that are concerned directly with the issues spelled out in the mandate; and two, by working on “crosscutting” issues, e.g., HIV/AIDS, malaria, inadequate clean water and sanitation, the situation of refugees. These issues are, in most instances, poverty issues, human rights issues, peace issues, education issues. The basis for selecting what to work on in any given year is compliance with the mandate and the practical judgment on what stands the best chance of making an impact.

2. The Work of the NGO Office

NGO representatives organize themselves into short-term or long-term working groups in order to influence some aspect of global policy that the UN is addressing. Some examples are the NGO Committee on Poverty Eradication, the NGO Committee on the Trafficking of Persons, or the War in Iraq, the Working Group on HIV/AIDS, or the NGO Committee on Economic and Social Development.

The working groups and committees produce working papers and shadow reports; they work with the relevant departments of the UN Secretariat and other international organizations; and they lobby governments and sponsor public forums. One recent public forum was to support church witnesses who produced a report, **Let the Stones Cry Out**, on the extra-judicial killings in the Philippines. The working group on Poverty Eradication published one useful document called, **Best Practices in Poverty Eradication**, and another called, **Guiding Principles on Human Rights and Extreme Poverty: the Rights of the Poor**.

A recent example of a working group activity is the preparation by the NGO Committee on Migration for a Global Forum on Migration

Global Forum on Migration and Development-Background

a) In September 2006, the United Nations General Assembly convened a High-Level Dialogue to discuss the connection

between migration and development. The former Secretary General Kofi Annan vigorously supported this Dialogue, and believed it should mark the beginning of inter-governmental discussions about migration and development. He proposed the creation of a **Global Forum**, which would make (1) new policy ideas more widely known, (2) catalyze constructive conversations about the issues among governments, (3) add value to existing regional consultations, and (4) encourage an integrated approach to migration and development at both the national and international levels.

More than 127 countries were represented at the High-Level Dialogue, the majority at ministerial level. Following a constructive debate, more than two-thirds of those present at the UN meeting expressed support for the creation of a permanent *Global Forum on Migration and Development*. The Belgian government offered to host the Forum's inaugural session in Brussels in 2007.

b) Aim and Agenda of the 'Global Forum on Migration and Development'

"The Global Forum is a government-led initiative that is open to all United Nations Member States. It is not a decision-making or policymaking body. It is a voluntary process that wants to address issues related to migration and development in a manner that goes beyond mere analysis. It aims to identify best practices, promote the exchange of experiences, identify obstacles to smart policymaking, explore and adopt innovative approaches, and enhance cooperation among countries."

Among the priority topics to be discussed in Belgium are: 1. Human Capital Development and Labor Mobility: Maximizing Opportunities and Minimizing Risks, 2. Remittances and other Diaspora Resources: Increasing their Volume and Development Value, and 3. Enhancing Institutional and Policy Coherence, and Promoting Partnerships.

c) The NGO Committee on Migration

In the world today there are 191 million migrants. When one considers this fact, it becomes obvious that most people are "migrating" to get away from poverty, corruption, violence and war, and the inability to make a living at home. Migration is a key poverty issue. The newly formed NGO Committee on Migration believes that the reason the meeting is being held in Belgium rather than in the United Nations is that countries want to avoid having to deal with the constraints of UN treaties and

international agreements. The Committee further believes that without NGO advocacy, migrants will continue to be treated largely as one more factor in the production chain in the global marketplace.

To give voice to these concerns two members of the Committee on Migration have become members of a Steering Committee that was set up to advise the Belgian government on the Global Forum. The Migration Committee members have written letters and visited the Missions of the governments that will attend the Forum. The Migration Committee created “talking points” that speak to the NGO agenda. (The NGO agenda: migrants cannot simply be considered as “commodities” or reduced to “labor units” in a global marketplace. Migration needs to be treated in a more integrated fashion, one that is person-centered; and within a human rights framework. Migration policy should be global).

In preparing for the Forum, the United Nations University has greatly helped both the governments and the NGOs by providing briefing papers and conducting seminars on such topics as (1) Building Partnerships, (2) Facilitating Migrants’ Participation in Society, (3) International Migration Law, and (4) Diasporas as Development Actors. As your representative, I participated in several of these seminars and found them very useful.

It should be said that if Belgium had not offered to host this Migration Forum, it is doubtful that it would have taken place at all. Most countries that agreed to the Forum didn’t really want it. Most countries see migration as a “sovereignty” issue and they prefer bilateral negotiations between the “sending” countries and the “receiving” countries. In this type of agreement, the migrants are usually the losers.

By using this example, I want to show one way that NGOs work together and interface with governments and other international institutions. I also used the example of migration because most of us live in countries that send or receive migrants, or both.

3. Possibilities for further collaboration

Last year, I had the privilege of being a guest at the regional meeting of the Asia Pacific Visitors. I met the Provincials, learned about (and saw) some of the works and projects of the Provinces. I was also able to share with the Provincials in more detail some of the Congregation’s work at the UN. This year I will have a similar possibility when the Visitors of Africa meet in Kenya. Such meetings are personally enriching for everyone. They increase the effectiveness

of the NGO Office, and they are a good way of connecting ministry in the Provinces with advocacy at the UN.

I would welcome the chance to contact confreres who are responsible for justice and peace (or social) ministries in the Provinces. These contacts can open up fruitful avenues for collaboration. I am convinced that the United Nations Headquarters and its Regional Offices can provide a rich source of useful data, resources and contacts.

Finally, as the work of the newly created Commission on Systemic Change becomes available, it will almost certainly offer some additional possibilities for collaborating.

CONCLUSION

In 1999 the Congregation of the Mission was accredited as an NGO. At that time the AIC had already received its accreditation. So had the Elizabeth Ann Seton Federation. This year the Daughters of Charity will receive accreditation as an international NGO. And, the St. Vincent de Paul Society has appointed a person to shepherd its application through the accreditation process. It is clear that the Vincentian Family will soon be positioned to work more collaboratively, and with a stronger voice.

In the end, what matters is that global policies and agreements are translated into national policy for the benefit of people forced to live in poverty and for the benefit of the communities in which they live. That is why knowing the confreres and knowing the works are so valuable.