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Time to rethink and regain control over the future of the human family

Church and civil society leaders call on governments to focus on the poor and plot a new path to a just and sustainable world at the Rio+20 talks

We, representatives of the Catholic Church and civil society from all continents, working on poverty eradication and integral human development call on world leaders to show political leadership at the Rio+20 Summit and on all people of good will to take action for a sustainable and just world.

We cannot wait to re-imagine and realise a more just and greener world where people, women and men, recognise that they are an integral part of creation, living in harmony and respect with it and with each other. The task is urgent, for we have allowed ourselves to build a world where still too many people do not have enough food, water and energy to live in dignity.

We work every day with those in greatest need and want to give them a voice. Poor communities are struggling to access the resources necessary for their own development whilst becoming increasingly vulnerable to environmental threats as the eco-systems on which they rely are depleted or destroyed.

We see demand for land, water, food, mineral resources and energy rising dramatically. It has been the source of violent conflicts around the world and the struggle for natural resources will become even more intense in generations to come.

Climate change is rapidly advancing and we will not be able to undo it unless we act now. The poorest and most vulnerable people around the world are most affected, even though they are least responsible for its causes.

We face a daunting task, because we have allowed the rules of the marketplace to get out of control and to distort our desires and imaginations and to subsume the diversity of God's creation as "natural" and "human capital". We have allowed our human desires and aspirations to become fundamentally materialistic, rather than generous, driven by self-interest instead of solidarity.

Together we are capable of setting a new path towards a just and sustainable world. This change also depends on the individual and it is all our fundamental task to work for a radical conversion, promote an alternative lifestyle, a new culture of respect for creation, of simplicity and solidarity, for greater authentic human development and quality of life. The poor may be marginalised but in their daily struggle for survival, they demonstrate creativity and have forged alternatives that are a deep source of learning and reference in policy-making. We call on the Rio+20 Conference to put in place structural changes to enable equally women and men to reach their full potential and truly flourish.

It is time to rethink and to take back control! It is time to regulate the market for it to serve the common good. World leaders focus on economic growth as the main measure of success. But what does growth mean if the poorest cannot partake of it, if it does not change lives for the better, if it deepens the persistent inequalities? What does economic growth mean if it comes at the cost of destruction of our forests, our oceans and our natural resources? We need to measure the things that matter, let us measure how the economy is reducing poverty, creating livelihoods and decent jobs, improving ecological sustainability and social stability. An economy that truly leads us to sustainable development must be just and equitable, adequately recognising the valuable contribution of local approaches with broad social benefits, and above all, respect the dignity and human rights of both women and men.

Sustainable development must be underpinned by a properly designed and regulated financial system that places human dignity, the common good and the care of creation at the centre of economic life. Subsidiarity and upholding the social function of private property and redistribution through taxes are essential features of a just financial system. The small and informal sector, which makes up an important part of the private sector and is the source of income and employment of millions of poor people, must be recognised and supported. Large corporations including finance institutions, which represent only a small part of the private sector but control the most power and resources, must be required to show how they are contributing to sustainable development through increasing transparency and changing unsustainable and exploitative practices.

Governments must ensure that regulatory frameworks prioritise the basic needs and rights of poor communities and countries to have access to sufficient water, food and energy as well as ensuring they receive the benefits from trading their natural resources.

Priority should be given to women who form the majority of those living in poverty and are adversely affected by the current social, environmental and economic inequities. Strong measures to promote equality between women and men at the social, economic and environmental levels should be at the heart of governments' actions towards a sustainable and just development.

The scandal of one billion people going hungry in violation of the human right to food cannot continue. Greater support must go to the millions of family farmers who produce in harmony with their environment; they are the most important source of food security for the world's poor.

Efforts to address human-induced climate change need a new urgency and focus. This is the most pressing threat we face, particularly for the poorest. More ambitious action must be taken, based on the principles at the core of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Finally, the envisaged framework for sustainable development should capitalise on achievements so far; it should address responsibilities and challenges of developed, developing and least developed countries; it should be measurable and comprehensible to everyone.

We expect that the summit in Rio comes out with a well founded message of hope for those who are suffering and for the generations to come! We expect world leaders to embrace their responsibility and to be held accountable for their commitments. Today we call on world leaders and all people of good will to realise that we have an opportunity to walk a path together, a path towards rights-based and equitable development, towards a truly human life, towards a world where we accept that we are part of creation which has been given in custody to us.

List of signatories

Church Leaders:

- Mgr Pedro Ricardo BARRETO JIMENO – Archbishop of Huancayo and President of the Commission for Justice and Solidarity of CELAM (Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano) (PERU)
- Mgr Jean-Claude HOLLERICH – Archbishop of Luxembourg (LUXEMBOURG)
- Mgr Gabriel MBILINGI – Vice President of SECAM (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar), Archbishop of Lubango (ANGOLA)
- Mgr Paul OUEDRAOGO – Archbishop of Bobo-Dioulasso (BURKINA FASO)
- Mgr Werner THISSEN – Archbishop of Hamburg (GERMANY)
- Mgr John ARNOLD – Auxiliary Bishop of Westminster (ENGLAND)
- Mgr Paul BEMILE – Bishop of Wa (GHANA)
- Mgr Markus BÜCHEL – Bishop of St. Gallen (SWITZERLAND)
- Mgr Claude CHAMPAGNE – Bishop of Edmundston, New Brunswick (CANADA)
- Mgr Raymond FIELD – Auxiliary Bishop of Dublin and Chairman of the Council for Justice and Peace of the Irish Bishops' Conference (IRELAND)
- Mgr Theotonius GOMES – Auxiliary Bishop of Dhaka (BANGLADESH)
- Mgr Richard GRECCO – Bishop of Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island (CANADA)
- Mgr Bernard HOUSSET – Bishop of La Rochelle (-Saintes) and President of the Conseil pour la Solidarité (FRANCE)
- Mgr Aloysius JOUSTEN – Bishop of Liège (BELGIUM)
- Mgr John KIRBY – Bishop of Clonfert (IRELAND)
- Mgr Gerard de KORTE – Bishop of Groningen-Leeuwarden (THE NETHERLANDS)
- Mgr Peter MORAN – Bishop Emeritus of Aberdeen (SCOTLAND)
- Mgr Alvaro Leonel RAMAZZINI – Bishop of Huehuetenango (GUATEMALA)
- Mgr Josef SAYER (GERMANY)
- Mgr Dr. Ludwig SCHWARZ SDB – Bishop of Linz (AUSTRIA)
- Presidency of the Brazilian Catholic Bishops Conference CNBB (BRAZIL)

CIDSE Leadership

- Chris BAIN – President of CIDSE and Director of CAFOD (ENGLAND and WALES)
- Philippa BONELLA – SCIAF (SCOTLAND)
- Ronald BREAU – President of Development and Peace (CANADA)
- Michael CASEY – Executive Director of Development and Peace (CANADA)
- Myriam GARCÍA ABRISQUETA – President of Manos Unidas (SPAIN)
- René GROTEHUIS – Director of CORDAID (THE NETHERLANDS)
- Antonio HAUTLE – Director of Fastenopfer (SWITZERLAND)
- Lieve HERIJGERS – Director of BROEDERLIJK DELEN (BELGIUM)
- Heinz HÖDL - Director of Koordinierungsstelle der Österreichischen Bischofskonferenz für internationale Entwicklung und Mission (AUSTRIA)
- Jim HUG S.J. – President of Center of Concern (UNITED STATES)
- Justin KILCULLEN – Director of Trócaire (IRELAND)
- Patrick KRĀNIPĪ GODAR – Director of Fondation Bridderlech Deelen (LUXEMBOURG)
- Jorge LÍBANO MONTEIRO – Director of FEC – Fundação Fé e Cooperação (PORTUGAL)
- Sergio MARELLI – Secretary General of FOCSIV – Volontari nel mondo (ITALY)
- Bernd NILLES – Secretary General of CIDSE
- Bernard PINAUD – Délégué Général CCFD–Terre Solidaire (FRANCE)
- Rafael SERRANO CASTRO – Secretary General of Manos Unidas (SPAIN)
- Angelo SIMONAZZI – Secretary General of Entraide et Fraternité (BELGIUM)

- Fr. Pirmin SPIEGEL – Director of MISEREOR (GERMANY)

CIDSE Partners and Allies

- Firmin ADJAHOSSOU – SECAM (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar) (BENIN)
- Brian ASHLEY – AIDC (Alternative Information and Development Centre) (SOUTH AFRICA)
- Sr. Denise BOYLE – Franciscans International
- Camille CHALMERS – PAPDA (Plate-forme Haïtienne de Plaidoyer pour un Développement Alternatif) (HAITI)
- Mamadou GOÏTA – ROPPA (Réseau des organisations paysannes et de producteurs de l'Afrique de l'Ouest) (WEST AFRICA)
- Pedro GONTIJO – CBJP (Comissão Brasileira Justiça e Paz) (BRAZIL)
- Jenny GRUENBERGER – LIDEMA (Liga de Defensa del Medio Ambiente) (BOLIVIA)
- Ivo LESBAUPIN – Iser Assessoria (BRAZIL)
- Fr. Martinho MAULANO – SECAM (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar) (MOZAMBIQUE)
- Moema de MIRANDA – IBASE (BRAZIL)
- Paul MUCHENA – SECAM (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar) (ZIMBABWE)
- Fr. Ferdinand MUHIGIRWA RUSEMBUKA – CEPAS (Centre d'études pour l'action sociale) (CONGO-DRC)
- Francis F. NGANG – Inades Formation International (IVORY COAST)
- Br. Rodrigo de Castro Amédée PERET, ofm – Franciscans (BRAZIL)
- Regina "Nanette" SALVADOR-ANTEQUISA – ECOWEB (Ecosystems Work for Essential Benefits, Inc.) (PHILIPPINES)
- L.A. SAMY –AREDS (Association of Rural Education and Development Service) (INDIA)
- Lorenzo SOLIS TITO – CIPCA (Centro de Investigación y Promoción del Campesinado) (BOLIVIA)
- Can TRUONG QUOC – SRD (Sustainable Rural Development) (VIETNAM)
- COPAGEN (Coalition pour la protection du patrimoine génétique Africain) (AFRICA)