Dispatches from the Margins: Social Protection
Input from JCoR's Global Network to the 64th UN Commission on Social Development

BACKGROUND & FOUNDATION:

In 1995, the world's governments met for the First World Social Summit. At this summit, they made a series of commitments to social equality, which are enshrined in the text of the *Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development*. Among these many commitments were promises to provide the following for all people in their respective countries: food security, education, employment and livelihood, primary healthcare services (including reproductive healthcare), safe drinking water and sanitation, adequate shelter, and participation in social and cultural life. In 2025, the *Doha Political Declaration* was adopted at the Second World Social Summit. It reaffirmed the people-centered vision of the *Copenhagen Declaration* and emphasized that social justice and development are inseparable from peace, security, and human rights.

As a collective of 24 United Nations-accredited NGOs representing Catholic Religious Sisters, Brothers, priests, and their partners in mission, the Justice Coalition of Religious (JCoR) highlights these seven areas of governmental commitment from the Copenhagen Declaration, because they relate directly to *themes of our Catholic Social Teachi*ng. Each of the seven areas is an essential component of *human dignity*. Shortcomings in these areas tend to disproportionately affect *the poor*, for whom we are called to exercise *preferential option* or concern. Furthermore, three of these areas implicitly call for *care of Earth* whose ecosystems' prosperity is intertwined with that of the human community and stands as a prerequisite for the just and inclusive resolution of human food, water, and shelter insecurities. The call for employment and livelihood aligns with the principle asserting the *dignity of work and rights of workers*. The pledge to make social and cultural life accessible to and inclusive of all constitutes an important recognition of humans' social nature and prioritises a pathway for the exercise of that nature through *participation in family and community*.

These themes of our faith tradition constitute a kind of road map to the just and peaceful world our hearts believe is possible. We seek to align our personal behaviors, spiritual lives, and ministries with them, not only through direct service to our families and communities throughout the world but also by tirelessly calling upon leaders in political and economic spheres to install these pillars of justice and peace into the structures of our social, economic, and environmental order.

GOOD PRACTICES from JCoR'S GLOBAL NETWORK:

JCoR's network members are active in a wide variety of ministries that contribute to the fulfillment of the Copenhagen-Declaration commitments. These include:

- Health education in slum communities and informal settlements (Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in Kenya)
- Meal and food-parcel distribution programmes for the food insecure (Claretian Missionaries in Haiti; Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd in Lebanon; members of the Sisters of Charity Federation in the United States of America and Canada; Congregation of Sisters of Our Lady of Consolation in Venezuela; Religious Sisters of Charity in Zambia)
- Primary and secondary education (Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd in Hong Kong; Sisters of the Apostolic Carmel and Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary in India; Society of the Sacred Heart and Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in Kenya; Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic in Tanzania; Comboni Missionary Sisters in Uganda; Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in the United States of America; Congregation of Sisters of Our Lady of Consolation in Venezuela; Religious Sisters of Charity in Zambia)
- Alternative education and/or healthcare services, including holistic therapies, psychological support, and/or spiritual/pastoral care (Congregation of Notre Dame of Montreal in El Salvador and Honduras; Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in Kenya; Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd in Lebanon and Syria; Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic in Tanzania; Missionary Sisters of Mary Mother of the Church in Uganda)
- Skill training for livelihood opportunities (Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; Society of the Divine Word and Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary in India; Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in Kenya)
- Life skills and family workshops and community-building activities (Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd in Lebanon; Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic in Tanzania)
- Hostels to support rural students' school attendance in urban centers (Society of the Divine Word in India)
- Economic self-empowerment groups for women (Society of the Divine Word in India; Religious Sisters of Charity in Zambia)
- Safe drinking water and sanitation services (Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; Society of the Sacred Heart and Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in Kenya; Religious Sisters of Charity in Zambia)
- Primary healthcare services and/or distribution of medicines/hygiene supplies (Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd in Lebanon and Syria; Comboni Missionary Sisters in Uganda; Religious Sisters of Charity in Zambia)
- Environmental/agricultural training and action to promote environmental restoration, protection, and sustainable use (Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; Laudato Si' Movement of the Dominican Republic; Missionary Sisters of Mary Mother of the Church in Uganda; Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in the United States of America; Religious Sisters of Charity in Zambia)
- Photovoltaic systems for provision of clean energy (Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in the Democratic Republic of the Congo)
- Awareness-raising on social issues, justice and action (e.g. anti-racism) (Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in the United States of America)

- Prevention efforts and responses to violence against women and children (Missionary Sisters of Mary Mother of the Church in Uganda; Religious Sisters of Charity in Zambia)

In each of these contexts, network members preferentially seek out and serve members of the most vulnerable and marginalised local populations, ranging from women/girls to persons with disabilities, migrants and internally displaced persons, pregnant youth, older persons, rural communities, residents of urban slums, ethnic and religious minorities, and survivors of violence and conflict.

OBSERVATIONS from JCoR'S GLOBAL NETWORK:

From the contexts of the ministries cited above and countless more, JCoR's network members have opportunities to witness the extent to which governments of their own countries have fulfilled the promises of the Copenhagen Declaration in the thirty years since their adoption. Just ahead of the Second World Social Summit, JCoR invited members of this network to articulate their observations as to the status of the Copenhagen commitments, particularly for the marginalised communities alongside whom they live and work. Responses came from 16 different countries, including parts of Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and North America. In each area of commitment, more than half of this diverse group of respondents reported significant gaps. Their specific observations are as follows:

Area of Governments' Commitment to Delivery for All People:	Countries in which Respondents Observed Gaps:
food security	Brazil, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Hong Kong, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Uganda, United States, Venezuela, Zambia
education	Democratic Republic of the Congo, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Hong Kong, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Tanzania, Uganda, United States, Venezuela, Zambia
employment and livelihood	Brazil, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Hong Kong, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Uganda, United States, Venezuela, Zambia
primary health-care services	Democratic Republic of the Congo, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, India, Kenya, Uganda, United States, Venezuela, Zimbabwe
safe drinking water and sanitation	Democratic Republic of the Congo, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Honduras, India, Kenya, Uganda, United States, Venezuela, Zambia
adequate shelter	Brazil, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Honduras, Hong Kong, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Uganda, United States, Zambia
participation in social and cultural life	Democratic Republic of the Congo, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Hong Kong, India, Lebanon, Tanzania, Uganda, United States

Their responses paint a picture of a world still suffering deeply, not only from social deprivation itself, but also from the failure of political leaders to invest justly and earnestly in measures that would address social insecurities and inequalities. For example:

- El Salvador has seen deepening income inequality as a result of public funds being disproportionately invested in public safety and tourism while the educational system and economy were neglected, resulting in increased student dropout rates, school closures, teacher dismissals, large-scale layoffs, and collapse of micro-enterprises.
- In India, public underinvestment in educational and skilling opportunities for youth has fueled an upward trend in young people's drug addiction and dealing, which has long-term, adverse effects on the population's health and employment rate.
- Despite the ongoing extraction of Zambia's valuable natural resources with potential to yield significant revenue for social programmes, respondents from the country indicate that much of this revenue is lost to corruption and poor prioritisation among political leaders. As a result, professional providers of social-protection services, such as teachers, do not earn monthly wages sufficient to even afford the "Basic Needs and Nutrition Basket" (i.e. local monthly cost of essential food and non-food items). While enrollment in government schools is free, under-staffing and -resourcing of these schools severely diminishes the quality of education provided and, ultimately, the opportunity and security that education offers to young people. Naming the root of social inequality in their country, our Zambian respondents say, "Governance is the big monster."
- In the United States, the national government is conducting a campaign of slashes to spending on social protection and good governance both domestically and internationally. These cuts to social programmes systematically destabilise the lowest-income communities in the populus, exacerbating pre-existing food, income, and shelter insecurities across the US and former recipients of its Official Development Assistance around the globe. At the same time, national tax policy is increasingly structured such that savings from social-spending cuts are not even distributed across the US population but extracted from the poorest and preferentially funneled to the very wealthiest.
- In Haiti, corrupt misappropriation of public resources in the midst of long-term decline in social development played a central role in fomenting the dissolution of its government and the rise of brutal gang rule. Five years after this collapse, the Haitian people continue to suffer extreme, violent, and pervasive consequences of domestic and international failure to address the country's lack of social development at an earlier stage. Speaking to the depth of the devastation and chaos caused by political leaders' inattention to social-protection needs, our respondents from Haiti share the sentiment, "There is no governance. We have been abandoned."

Within nations across the globe and in the realm of inter-governmental affairs, this pattern repeats: Leaders propagate narratives of scarcity to prolong regimes of wealth concentration and resource hoarding for an elite class. They declare that public funds are too scarce to ensure the kinds of opportunities and basic social protections that comprise a healthy social fabric, but they can routinely and readily be found and allocated to causes such as:

- meeting the standards and expectations of international tourists with far greater disposable incomes than the local populus,
- subsidising extractive industrial and so-called "development" projects that privatize their own gains while externalising and collectivising their tremendous, global, and intergenerational risks and harms,
- offering financial incentives to major corporations and tax exemptions to the wealthiest segments of the populus, and
- robustly resourcing and enacting militaristic responses to crime and violence after the social order has broken down.

With respect to existing policies and programmes ostensibly aimed at addressing inequalities, our network members observed the following:

Social-Development Phenomenon:	Countries in which Respondents Observed Phenomenon:
Various ministries or departments of government are working toward addressing inequalities, but they are all working separately. They do not seem to be aware of one another or coordinating their efforts.	Dominican Republic, Honduras, Hong Kong, India, Lebanon, Uganda, Zambia
When the government is designing or implementing a policy that attempts to reduce inequalities, they are not sufficiently consulting or working with the people (e.g. civil society organisations) that are already working to address inequalities.	Dominican Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, El Salvador, Honduras, Hong Kong, India, Kenya, Lebanon, Uganda, United States of America, Venezuela
Government policies are addressing inequalities for some groups in our society but not for others.	India, Kenya, Lebanon, Uganda, United States of America, Zambia
Our policies that attempt to address inequality treat the needs of all people who are living in poverty, vulnerability, or exclusion as though their needs are the same. They do not recognise that some people require more or different forms of support than others.	Brazil, Dominican Republic, Hong Kong, India, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, United States of America, Zambia

The broad observations summarised above arise from our members' long-term service on the margins of their respective nations. From these vantage points, they note specific "lines of exclusion," identities and characteristics which tend to correlate with the most extreme deprivation or insecurity in the areas of commitment of the Copenhagen Declaration. In this regard, a few noteworthy trends emerged from their reports:

● Respondents from contexts as varied as Honduras and India reported that, while laws designed to address inequity in the delivery of social-protection schemes, they are not adequately implemented so as to have any meaningful impact on the people. Meanwhile, in the United States, national political leaders is are aggressively dismantling policies and enforcement mechanisms that were designed to promote equitable social protection for historically and systematically marginalised social groups as varied as persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples and ethnic groups descended from regions other than Europe, persons with a gender identity other than male and/or sexual orientation other than heterosexual, migrants and their US-born children.
● Across regions of the world, Indigenous and Tribal Peoples tend to experience an especially egregious marginalisation. Within every vulnerable group, our respondents report, women and girls experience additional obstacles to enjoyment of the basic, social necessities promised by their governments in 1995.

- Those living at either extreme of population density also face heightened social insecurities. Those in rural areas and near international borders are also systematically unreached by social-protection programmes and policies. Meanwhile, residents of urban, informal settlements suffer from food insecurity due to lack of land and livelihood as well as poor sanitation and health due to overcrowded living conditions that fail to meet the standard of "adequate housing."
- Drought-prone regions (e.g. the Turkana, Marsabit, and Wajir Counties of Kenya) face a cascade of social insecurities initiated by lack of access to drinking water and manifesting in food insecurity, elevated incidence of disease and other negative health outcomes, and reduced school attendance.
- Regions plagued by prolonged conflict and violence (e.g. Lebanon, Haiti, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo) report that the brunt of insufficient social spending falls on refugees and internally displaced persons. This population suffers disproportionately from inadequate, temporary housing; acute food insecurity; high rates of educational interruption and permanent dropout; and reduced opportunities to engage in cultural life, all of which impact children and youth most directly. Conflict's economic implications also have outsized immediate effects on small-business owners (via, e.g., inflation, damaged essential infrastructure), while the secondary effect of unemployment surges has the greatest impact on women and youth.
- Respondents throughout Central, East, and Southern Africa cited particularly severe gaps in the provision of primary and reproductive health services. They reported extreme shortages of basic drugs and essential supplies in government healthcare centers in addition to those centers being too few and too inaccessible to serve many rural communities. In the same region, despite major recent growth in the population with access to energy infrastructure, routine interruptions to service have nearly nullified that infrastructural progress, placing a special burden on small business owners whose livelihoods depend on electrical service.

RECOMMENDATIONS to POLITICAL LEADERS:

We call upon the Member States of the United Nations to carry forward the momentum of the Second World Social Summit and take the following steps to secure social equality and social justice:

- Collaborate with faith leaders and networks to:
  - Conduct popular education about existing government programmes that aim to promote entrepreneurship, job creation, and other forms of social protection to boost public awareness and utilisation of these programmes
  - Build public trust in governmental institutions by consulting vulnerable communities and smaller, local, and low-profile groups that work directly in the field with them with in order to identify (a) local causes/effects of social insecurity and (b) flaws that will impede impact of proposed social-protection programmes (prior to and one year after programme implementation)
  - Map and publish widely the full breadth of public and private social-protection schemes available to and reaching a wide variety of marginalised communities across the country (every 3-5 years)
- Require systematic reporting on all current and proposed social-protection programmes
  - between local and national governmental offices to avoid duplication and gaps in essential-service coverage
  - to the public, including a record of expenditures on social and other spending, to establish transparency and build trust

- Organise all social-protection programmes across all governmental agencies within the framework of a detailed national sustainable-development and social-inclusion plan to streamline integration and communication of local- and national-level programmes
- Maintain a social-protection referral office via which citizens can create and maintain a profile, that details their specific identities and layers of vulnerability and need and be referred to all relevant social protection agencies and programmes
- Provide regular briefings to leadership of all public and private primary and secondary schools on the current and emerging needs of their local and national labour markets to reduce mismatching of labour-force skills and market needs
- Establish standard in-school programming related to menstrual hygiene and comprehensive sexuality education
- Establish small grants for local production and in-school distribution of sustainable menstrual products, prioritising rural areas
- Dedicate public funding to post-secondary scholarships for skilling in medical and teaching fields tied to a commitment to post-graduate service in rural and low-income communities
- Forgive foreign-government debtors and offer no-interest loans and/or loans with borrowing rates comparable to those enjoyed by the United States to all countries currently spending more on debt-service payments than on health or education
- Allocate public funding to ensure healthcare facilities offer all primary-care, reproductive, and mental-health services on a sliding-scale payment structure and no dismissal of patients due to inability to pay
- Designate minimum wages commensurate with local cost of living for all professionals delivering essential social-protection services and foster the establishment of trade unions for all these categories of professionals
- Establish and/or strengthen oversight and enforcement mechanisms of firm policies against discrimination in the delivery of any publicly funded social-protection service or benefit on the basis of dis/ability, gender identity, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, religion, political affiliation or behaviors, Indigenous or Tribal identity, age, or proximity to the hometowns/districts of national political leaders
- Establish adjustability according to demonstrated need in cost-sharing programmes for education, shelter, and healthcare in order to ensure resources are available to fully support those with greatest need
- Eliminate legal and bureaucratic barriers to civil-society organisations' reception of foreign funds designated for social-protection service delivery