

The WCC embraces sustainable alternatives for poverty reduction and ecological justice in Uganda

“Science and Religion can provide solutions to poverty and injustice”. This was the theme of the 3rd *International conference on Sustainable Alternatives for Poverty Reduction and Ecological Justice (SAPREJ)* that took place in Kampala, Uganda, from April 4th to 7th 2016.

Introduction

The first international conference on Sustainable Alternatives for Poverty Reduction and Ecological Justice (SAPREJ) took place in Kolympari, Chania, Crete, at the Orthodox Academy of Crete (OAC) in September 27th – 30th, 2012. Then the second SAPREJ was organized in Antananarivo, Madagascar in 2014 and, after Uganda, the fourth SAPREJ 2018 will be held in Fiji Island of the Pacific. SAPREJ has brought hope and shared knowledge on poverty alleviation and ecological justice on local and international levels. Among the impacts of the conferences, articles and book series entitled ‘Sustainable Alternatives for Poverty Reduction and Eco-Justice’ vol.1 and vol.2 were published and distributed worldwide.

The aim of the SAPREJ conference is to engage multidisciplinary and ecumenical dialogues on key social, economic and ecological concerns from a variety of perspectives. Among others, the goal of the conference is to build a permanent partnership and long life learning process to promote eco-justice. The conference is a blend of learning and discussion, while sharing the perspectives of local communities and attending to the magnificent physical and cultural beauty of the hosting country.

1. Religion and (political) science in Uganda: Black Monday, corruption and poverty



After the welcome addresses by the members of the SAPREJ organizing committee, a Bishop, from the Roman Catholic Church of Uganda, Rev. Zak D. Niringyej, opened the conference as first invited keynote speaker. He emphasized the collaboration between religion and (political) science in tackling poverty and injustice. He pointed out that 67% of the population of Uganda lives in absolute poverty and over 70% or 80% in other places- of the Ugandan youth are without jobs. Corruption is among the worst causes

of poverty and ecological injustice in Uganda but some churches remain passive or even collaborate with the corrupted system. Religion and science can provide solutions to poverty and ecological injustice when both are actively working for the poor and the common goods. However that is not always the case; so, instead of nurturing its people with sustainable food, religion may push vulnerable communities into the irreversible pitfall of poverty.

Bishop Zak. D. Niingyen has been arrested in the past for proclaiming that truth and it was feared that police would again intervene during his speech at the 3rd SAPREJ conference. Fortunately nothing abnormal has happened!



The Roman Catholic Bishop Zak gave the right tone to the conference and he highlighted his “Black Monday” movement against corruption. Black Monday is to remind Ugandan people that corruption kills lives and we have to mourn for every life which is gone – *by wearing black, supporters pledge themselves to eco-justice*. He distributed the “Black Monday newsletter, issue 33, November 2015, reporting the visit of Pope Francis in Uganda in 2015 by quoting his saying: *“I ask you to ensure that humanity is served by wealth and not ruled by it” (Honor the Pope with a theft-free visit)*. He denounced as monsters those who foster corruption and steal from the lives of the poor because of personal or corporate greed. Pope Francis said in the Black Monday newsletters while addressing the poor people of Uganda that *“poverty in the world is a scandal. In a world where there is so much wealth, so many resources to feed everyone, it is unfathomable that there are so many hungry children, that there are so many children without an education, so many poor persons”*. In 2015, more than 20% of world population lives under poverty line of 1 US\$/day (World Bank, 2015) and still no greed line for the rich has been discussed on an international agenda!

2. Highlights from the conference

The 3rd SAPREJ was attended by more than 100 representatives from Africa (Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa and Madagascar), Europe (UK, Germany, and Greece), the Americas (Canada and the USA), Middle East (Qatar) and Asia (Taiwan). Forty-eight (48) abstract proposals were submitted and many students from the faculty of Education and development studies of the Kyambogo University followed all the presentations without fees. Kyambogo University Students expressed their enthusiasm and gratitude for the opportunity to attend an international conference, such as the SAPREJ, because poverty has been always a limiting factor. Students and presenters were eager to ask questions and the entire day was filled with non-stop discussions both during the Q & A sessions and during the breaks and meals. *“It is a life time chance to interact and discuss with advocated international scholars”*, mentioned Tusubira Mathelo, a young student at Kyambogo University, during the conference.

After the blessing and opening speeches made by church leaders, the first formal presentation on the first day of the conference was an “eco-poetry readings”, entitled *Leaning into the Light—Poets and Prophets Illuminating the Way*”, presented by Prof. Diana Woodcock, originally from the USA but teaching at Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar/School of the Arts. This is a unique characteristic of the SAPREJ conference and it is always well appreciated by the audience as it demonstrates the implementation of multidisciplinary and multi-faith approach of the conference. Participants discussed seven major topics: *economical ethics and eco-theology; financial crisis, global market and poverty; ecological crisis, climate change and eco-justice; sustainable policy, religion and ethics; production, distribution and consumption patterns; food science and biodiversity conservation; ecological justice and ecological economics; permaculture, sustainable practices and case studies*. Presentations were short in length to promote more discussions and interactions between participants.

Critical questions such as “Can Christianity provide an ethical framework for land grabbing in Africa” (By Prof. Alan Weber from Weill Cornell Medicine-Qatar) and “Can biotechnology help poverty reduction and eco-justice in Africa” (By Louk Andrianos from the Foundation for Research and Technology - Hellas) were discussed during the conference. Dr. Jim Chou, from Taiwan,

brought Western theology and Eastern Wisdom together to illuminate eco-justice issues. He cited Jesus calling to “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all Creation (Mark 16:15) and some Chinese cultural wisdom stating that “Too much is as bad as less”; “Loving people and all Creation” and “God is looking at what we do every day”. Prof Lesya Sabada, from the St. Peter's College and St. Thomas More College at the University of Saskatchewan, Canada, talked about religious peace building noting that "Faith brings profound social responsibility and the mandate to work for justice in society. *“It is amazing to see Ugandan people being hungry for information and discussions after each presentation”*, noted Prof Lesya Sabada, who has been an active a member of the SAPREJ committee since 2012.



The second day of the conference, along with many presenters from Kenya and Uganda which were shared in two parallel sessions, Dr Louk Andrianos stressed the need for shaping limits to greed to tackle corruption and poverty. ***“Corruption kills lives”*** and it is the first causal factor of poverty and ecological injustice in Uganda, says “Samuel”, a postgraduate researcher at Kyambogo University. Using the “greedy cup” of Pythagoras that Dr. Louk Andrianos brought from Greece, a demonstration on the catastrophic consequences of human greed was performed and ***“it was an unforgettable***

lesson for upholding justice at all times”, mentioned Dr. Alice Ngunju from MT Kenya university, referring to gender injustice in her home country. Dr. Louk reminded the listeners of the meaning of life and the essence of existence for every human being according to the teaching of Jesus Christ in Luke 12:15. He noted that every creation of God is beautiful and all human beings are brothers and sisters in the big family of Christ who calls everyone to live in peace and harmony with God and nature. *Without the spiritual acknowledgment of our identity within nature, we cannot resist Greed and promote eco-justice.* We should know ourselves and live with inner justice in order to proclaim and advocate for eco-justice.

Rev. Dr. Grace Lubaale, lecturer at Kyambogo University in Kampla and national convenor for SAPREJ in Uganda, noted that this is the first time that the term ecological justice has been so largely discussed among scholars and the general public in Uganda. The same statements have been expressed by the other African participants from Kenya, South Africa, Rwanda, Botswana and Nigeria. The SAPREJ has become an Pan-African initiative, remarked Prof Lesya Sabada, while delivering her keynote speech on “Religious peace building” and its necessity for eco-justice.

3. Pilgrimage of justice and peace in the “wounded” heart of Uganda wildlife



The remaining days of the conference were dedicated to interactions with local people (students, university staff, religious leaders and villagers) by field trips and a pilgrimage of justice and peace in villages around Kampala.

On Friday, representatives from the SAPREJ international committee spoke to three classrooms encouraging them and trying to help

them take control of their lives under a military dictatorship. One of the strong messages that came through, according to Rev Grace Lubaale, the SAPREJ Ugandan convenor, was: "*You are the captain of your ship. Take responsibility for your lives.*", trying to address a victim mentality that was inherent within the population. The first classroom had 175 students. And the other two classes had about 75 students each.

International participants visited also the Murchison Falls National park and the Ugandan "White" Nile River. The River "Nile has its source in Uganda and crosses the African continent passing through Egypt before reaching the Mediterranean sea. The beauty of the Ugandan nature and the richness of its biodiversity reflect the abundance of God's gifts and confirm that the surrounding poverty of Ugandans is a scandal. The natural beauty of God's creation revives our inner energy and it compels us to advocate for peace and for the care of Creation. Poverty is a shame before God and nature so human beings have to react and repent to recover harmony, equity and peace on local and global level.

The ivory trade is pushing elephants to the edge of extinction. Uganda is suffering from illegal animal hunters and poaching said "Emma", our guide at the Natural Park. He noted that during Idi Amin's military occupation, the elephant population went from 15,000 down to about 1,000. The top "big five animals of Africa" (Lion, Elephant, Buffalo, Leopard and Rhinoceros) are threatened to extinction. In Africa, 100 elephants are killed for ivory every day and the illegal trade of wild animals amounts to 19 billion US dollars, reported the team of Avaaz in their petition against the slaughtering of elephants in Africa (1,334,353 signatures in the first week of April 2016).

4. Kampala declaration for ecological justice and vision to the 4th SAPREJ 2018 in Fiji

At the end of the conference, the SAPREJ declaration, as adopted by the participants in Kampala, Uganda called for collaborative actions to raise the voices of the poor (Micah 6:8) and the wounded nature, hoping for salvation and peace (Rom 8:22). The communiqué produced by the 3rd SAPREJ Conference in Uganda confirmed the continuation of the project and fixed their following appointment in Fiji island in 2018 to advocate for the pacific people already suffering from climate injustice and poverty. Prof. Eberhard Weber from the Pacific University expressed his commitment to organize the hosting of the next 4th SAPREJ in 2018 in Fiji Island. He said "*I am certain that the event will make a lasting impression on those attending. It will surely bring small changes for the future, but many small changes can make a difference*".

Let us pray and work heartily for the care of Creation, as for the Lord and not for human masters (Col. 3:23) concluded Dr. Louk Andrianos. "Let us be part of the solutions, not the problems" as Religion and Science can provide solutions to poverty and ecological justice.

Dr. Louk Andrianos, is the founder and international chair of the SAPREJ initiative. He is reporting on the major issues and statements shared by the participants and audience during the 3rd SAPREJ conference that has been organized in Kampala, Uganda, under the auspices of the World Council of Churches (WCC) - Public Diakonia and Witness Programme on Economic and Ecological Justice (EEJ)

Attachment: SAPREJ 2016 Kampala declaration on poverty and ecological justice.