Dear Readers,

Welcome to the 53rd Online Issue of the VIVAT Newsletter!

A long-awaited calm has settled over the VIVAT Office after months of frenzied preparation for the Rio +20 conference on Sustainable Development. The conference, taking place from June 20-22, gathered an estimated 50,000 participants and 120 heads of state in Rio De Janeiro. This large attendance included 40 VIVAT members, whose attendance helped ensure greater protection of human rights in the conferences outcome document.

In addition to participating in the Rio conference, VIVAT International has also been engaged in numerous other exciting ventures. Working in collaboration with the Mining Working Group at the UN, VIVAT organized an exhibit entitled “Bearing Witness: Panning for Justice” for the United Nations Forum on Indigenous Issues. Moreover, VIVAT members have also been hard at work alleviating and documenting suffering in Sudan. At the Mother of Mercy Hospital in Sudan, a few catholic sisters and volunteers are courageously offering life-saving care to thousands of Sudanese refugees. To support this critical fieldwork, VIVAT advocates are actively campaigning for greater international action to stop the bloodshed in Sudan. For greater coverage of these topics and more, just continue reading!

You inspire us! We always welcome feedback, ideas, stories, and updates from our members! Please send us your comments and feedback to: viny@vivatinternational.org

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The Future We Need: People’s Power at Rio +20

From June 20th to 22nd, world leaders and government officials gathered in Rio de Janeiro for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development – commonly referred to as Rio +20. The conference, which marks 20 years since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, sought to further the goals of poverty reduction, social equity, and environmental protection. Observers estimate that 50,000 participants attended the Rio +20 conference, including 120 heads of state, marking it as the largest United Nations summit in years. The Rio +20 conference is one in a long line of international environmental conferences since the 1970s. Initially, these conferences focused exclusively on environmental conservation efforts. However, recognizing the importance of pursuing environmental protection and poverty reduction simultaneously, organizers soon developed the Sustainable Development approach. Sustainable Development denotes the ability to meet today’s needs without threatening the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The term challenges environmental advocates to create not only an environmentally friendly world, but also a more prosperous one.

VIVAT International contributed to the push continued for sustainable development at Rio +20 both through policy recommendations and direct conference participation. One of the major goals of the conference was to develop an outcome document, entitled The Future We Want, which outlines a comprehensive institutional framework for sustainable development and demarcates concrete policy goals. Before and during the official conference, UN negotiators and civil society members extensively debated the contents of this document. VIVAT International advocated for several important inclusions to the mining portion of this document. Specifically, to protect vulnerable indigenous populations, VIVAT called for Free Prior and Informed Consent in areas where mining involves indigenous peoples. VIVAT also supported the polluter’s pay principle in addressing damages caused by mining operations. Finally, VIVAT pushed for greater acknowledgment that the negative extractive practices of corporate mining can only be mitigated with governmental regulation. Among these initiatives, the argument for regulation proved most successful and was included in the Final Rio+20 outcome document. Helping to further these goals on the ground, forty VIVAT members were in attendance at the Rio+20 conference.

Unfortunately, however, the final document produced by Rio +20 included few of the other concrete commitments that civil society advocated for. The Rio summit’s governmental participants proved unwilling to authorize tough objectives at a time of economic uncertainty. Furthermore, the debt crisis and the domestic election constrained the participation of the European Union and the United States. With the preoccupation of these key players, the Rio+20 conference often did not meet the expectations of organizers.

Providing a positive parallel to the lackluster political section of the conference, civil society organizations met in a different Rio location for The People’s Summit. Lasting for a total of nine days that overlapped with the 3-day Rio +20 conference, The People’s Summit drew an estimated 15,000 participants each day. The venue of The People’s Summit allowed for a loosely structured debate space, autonomous from the influence of corporations and governments. At the Summit, many groups voiced their frustrations with limited progress on sustainable development issues. These complaints included a critique of the UN principal document, The Future We Want. Advocates contended that instead, the UN and participating countries must take decisive action toward a Future We Need. However, on the whole negativity did not define the People’s Summit. Instead, coexisting with these frustrations were strong themes of empowerment. Possibly due to the Summit’s majority youth attendance, many participants reaffirmed their commitment to personally pursuing sustainable development regardless of governmental support. This belief in the power of the people invigorated the People’s Summit and, given the gridlock in the governmental meeting, such grassroots initiatives currently hold the greatest promise for real progress on sustainable development. The necessity for populist initiative only heightens the responsibility of all people to be active voices for the environment and to live sustainably everyday.
The UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) convened its eleventh session from May 7th to 18th at the UN headquarters in New York. Forum administrators selected the Doctrine of Discovery as the session’s special theme. Focusing on the enduring impact of this colonial doctrine, the session sought to analyze problems facing indigenous communities and to explore just methods of redress for past conquests. This conference commemorates the 5th anniversary of the official adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The landmark UN Declaration, completed in September of 2007, lends greater recognition in the human rights system to indigenous populations.

By analyzing specific challenges facing indigenous populations, the eleventh session of the Forum on Indigenous Issues stressed the persistent influence of the Doctrine of Discovery and its significant impact on vulnerable members of indigenous communities. To discuss these continuing difficulties, the UN Forum on Indigenous Issues allowed all stakeholders to participate simultaneously in the session discussions. This interactive format enabled greater dialogue between government representatives, indigenous peoples’ organizations, and United Nations agencies. In this dialogue, participants often touched on the pressing need for greater indigenous representation in both national politics and constitutions. The common theme of private sector neo-colonialism also arose, with many representatives calling for corporations to include indigenous voices and proposals in their business plans. Participants concluded with the consensus that in order to alleviate unjust policies towards indigenous populations, the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples must be integrated more fully into national laws and polices worldwide.

Many side events and conferences also enriched the UNPFII session, including a multimedia exhibit entitled “Bearing Witness: Panning for Justice” organized by the Mining Working Group. In this event, the Mining Working group presented the original voices of indigenous communities affected by mining operations. These voices both evidenced and denounced the harmful, extractive practices of many mining corporations. Fueled by the incessant demand for growth, many corporations disregard the basic human rights of local citizens near their mines. The disregard for human rights is especially oppressive in regards to indigenous communities, which often possess little political power and a weak social safety net. Therefore, environmental and social damage caused by extractive mining can inflict irreparable damage to a small indigenous culture. To combat this theme of exploitation, The Mining Working Group advocated for a more holistic approach to development that takes into consideration environmental sustainability, equity, social justice and respect for human rights.

For the exhibit, VIVAT International members from around the world collected photographs, videos, and stories of the consequences of mining. These indigenous testimonies echoed many common themes, such as the crippling environmental degradation that accompanies corporate mining projects and the erosion of traditional cultural practices. With presentations such as “Bearing Witness: Panning for justice,” VIVAT hopes to combat the negative environmental and social consequences of unadulterated mining extraction for indigenous communities and contribute to the larger implementation of the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. We hope that VIVAT members continue to work to shift the global community’s discourse and action to more fundamentally respect human rights through a regulated, accountable extractive industry system for the Earth, her resources and her people.

VIVAT International is grateful for those global contributors, especially members from Brazil, Indonesia, Chile and Papua New Guinea, who helped make this event possible and gave voice to the suffering of indigenous communities.

Pushed off their land by a nearby mine, many indigenous people in Papua New Guinea are reduced to panning leftover minerals

Photo: Philip Gibbs, STD
In preparation for the recent 13th session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), 21 May - 4 June 2012, VIVAT International made a submission on the situation of human rights in Indonesia. This submission was created at the grassroots level in collaboration with VIVAT International Indonesia. The UPR session this year enjoyed strong attendance, with several delegations being led by high-level government officials such as one Vice-President and ten Ministers. Furthermore, at the 13th session an average of 68 statements were made per country review, an increase of nearly 20 statements from the last cycle's average. Governments will benefit from this increase in recommendations, increasing their motivation and ability to protect human rights.

In the summary of all the submissions made by NGOs, the document prepared by VIVAT International Indonesia is referred to four times. This document is called, “Summary of stakeholders' information” and its reference number in the UN system is: A/HRC/WG.6/13/IDN/3.

In regards to the Human Rights situation in Indonesia, VIVAT International Indonesia raised four main concerns:

1) Cooperation with special procedures (cf. par. no. 20);
2) Right to life, liberty and security of the person (cf. par. no. 29);
3) Indigenous people (cf. par. no. 58);
4) The Situation in or in relation to specific regions or territories (cf. par. no. 63)

Elaborating on this submission, the co-executive director of VIVAT International Indonesia, Paul Rahmat, said: “The second cycle review of Indonesia was the first time I participated in the UPR process. By doing so, I have learned a few important things. First of all, I feel happy that I can contribute something for our country (Indonesia); in raising some concerns about human rights [violations that] we have faced on the ground. It seems that the Indonesian government is not very serious about coping with issues of human rights which are of concern to the people. By making those concerns known at the international level through the UPR mechanism, our government is pressured to handle them seriously.

Twenty seven civil society organizations contributed to the report in relation to the UPR-Indonesia, including VIVAT International-Indonesia. The role of NGOs and other civil society organizations or associations in that process is very significant. Recognizing the important role of NGOs is really encouraging and motivating me to collaborate closely with them in promoting and advocating human rights in Indonesia.”

Another contribution from VIVAT International for the 13th session was an effort made by the Spiritans in Manchester and other local NGOs that collaborated in the preparation of a submission for the review of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland.

We, the executive team of VIVAT International wish to congratulate the leadership of VIVAT International Indonesia and the members in UK and Northern Ireland for their initiative. We call upon all members across the world to make use of this unique mechanism to review the human rights situation in all countries. It is possible for us to have a say.

Other countries that were reviewed during the 13th session include: Ecuador, Tunisia, United Kingdom, India, Brazil, Philippines, Algeria, Poland, Netherlands, and South Africa.

The Universal Periodic Review is a process through which the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva exercises a very important function. The council examines “the fulfillment by each State of its human rights obligations and commitments.” It is a peer-review, that is, each country is examined by representatives of all of the other countries. This review of all 193 member States is spread out over a four-year cycle. The first cycle began in 2008. With the 13th session we began the second cycle. In the last two UPR cycles, participants made approximately 2,000 human rights recommendations per cycle to governments under review.

In the second cycle of the review, the committee has also sought to review the implementation of all 2008 recommendations. This review of implementation increases the accountability of states. Some states do choose to postpone their responses to recommendations, however roughly half of the participants agree to respond immediately.

Country delegations participate in the UPR in Geneva
Source: UN
Transparency International PNG (TI PNG)

The fight against corruption has always been dear to my heart. Why is this so? Because being an accountant who is sometimes called to audit financial reports, I am motivated to produce accurate financial reports, free of errors and frauds. Therefore, when Transparency International PNG published their profile and a headline “TI PNG fighting corruption today,” I got very interested and decided to apply for membership, not as individual but as an association -Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters in PNG.

What is TI PNG? Ms. Yvonne Ngutlick, their Communications and Public Relations Officer, wrote a brief profile of TI PNG as follows:

“Transparency International PNG is a member of Transparency International a worldwide global movement. The member country organizations are independent and are called chapters. There are over 100 national chapters around the world. The TI PNG chapter fights against corruption and promotes openness, honesty and accountability both in public and private dealings.

We do not support individual politicians or parties. Instead we try to strengthen the integrity systems of our country such as the police, the parliament and the judiciary”.

How does TI PNG fight corruption today? They have many partners with different capacities to assist members to report corrupt practices or issues observed.

- The Advocacy and Legal Advice Centre office helps anyone prepare complaints about corruption to be sent to the ombudsman’s office and other agencies (TI PNG do not investigate or prosecute corruption complaints).
- TI PNG provide regular comment in the media about corruption issues such as the controls on leaders.
- TI PNG support and work with many partners in the Community Coalition Against Corruption such as the Youth Against Corruption Association, churches and businesses.
- TI PNG implement projects such as the Forest Governance Initiative which helps research and propose better processes and laws for the management of the natural resources.
- TI PNG provide teaching materials for the education systems on good governance and corruption.
- train youth leaders in governance issues through the Annual Youth Democracy Camp.
- lobby for freedom of information and protection for whistle blowers.
- observe elections and comment when the processes used are not democratic or lawful.
- run awareness and advocacy campaigns both in the mass media and through drama in villages on governance and corruption issues.

The variety of network possibilities will make it easier for us to help and support this fight against corruption. One such avenue is the organization Youth Against Corruption Association. YACA was set up in 2002 by John Glynn at Jubilee Catholic Secondary School. Over the years, YACA was introduced to other schools. We have started with a group of Grade 6 to Grade 8 pupils in St. Michael Primary School in Alexishafen. Actually it was started as Vocation Club since they are too old to join the Sunday School. However, gradually the members were taught topics other than vocation. As members of YACA, they have to pledge: always to speak the truth, respect other people’s property, to be gentle in actions and words, to pay debts and to keep promises.

Since sometime in June, PNG will hold its elections to elect members of the Parliament, TI PNG organized a Voter Education Regional Forum to educate voters on their rights and responsibilities. I attended the one for the Momase Region which was held at Divine Word University Auditorium. The participants were encouraged to be observers at the polling place on the day of voting. In 2007 elections, our Sisters were given IDs as observers by the Electoral Commission. We were placed in Malala, Alexishafen, Divine Word University and Holy Spirit Convent, Madang. So I gave our names to be observers again in June. As observers, we can report anomalies or frauds at the polling place.

There are other ways we can support the fight against corruption through the members and partners of TI PNG:

- Community Coalition against Corruption – 67 groups coming together to fight corruption
- Forests Anti-corruption Solutions and Advocacy – address and prevent corruption as a primary driver of illegal logging and continuous destruction of forests.
- Advocacy and Legal Advice Centre – provides free legal assistance by structuring corruption complaints.
- Sir Anthony Siaguru Walk Against Corruption – among other objectives, the walk provides a peaceful avenue for citizens to express their opposition to corruption.
- Youth Against Corruption Association – a membership based organization that is run by youth who are committed in the fight against corruption in PNG by refusing to practice corruption oneself and rejecting the attitudes that support it.
During the Universal Periodic Review for Papua New Guinea (PNG) at the Human Rights Council in Geneva last year, several nations noted the high level of violence in the country and called for a mission by the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women. In response to this call, the UN Special Rapporteur, Ms. Rashida Manjoo, visited Papua New Guinea in March this year. Ms. Manjoo noted efforts made in the country such as the establishment of a CE-DAW implementation strategy, efforts to establish a National Human Rights Commission, and the development of a National Policy for Women and Gender Equality. However, she also noted that violence against women is a pervasive phenomenon in Papua New Guinea, with a wide range of manifestations occurring in the home, in the community and in institutional settings.

Violence against women in Papua New Guinea begins in the home. With regard to intimate partner violence, according to a 1992 report produced by the Constitutional Law Reform Commission (CLRC), “two thirds of married women in PNG had been hit by their husbands”. An academic study conducted in 2009 shared similar findings, noting that 65.3% of the interviewed women were survivors of domestic violence.

Young girls, particularly those living with relatives or step-parents, are reportedly at high risk of sexual violence, which is perpetrated by male relatives such as uncles, cousins, brothers or male family friends. Although marital rape is penalized by the Criminal Code, only two cases have been prosecuted since the relevant legislation was enacted in 2003.

During her visit to the Highlands region, Ms. Manjoo was shocked to witness the brutality of the assaults perpetrated against suspected sorcerers — usually older women, which in many cases include torture, rape, mutilations and murder. Sorcery related violence is commonly perpetrated by young men or boys who often act under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

The Special Rapporteur also examined the situation of women in detention. In prisons in the country 90% of women are serving time for murder. All the women convicted for murder that she interviewed were victims of family violence, including being subjected to polygamy and neglect, and, many of them had acted in self-defense. For women in prison who have their children living with them, the prison does not provide food or other necessities for babies and children, and this remains the responsibility of the mother. In a provincial police station, she found women and girls who had been kept in custody for up to three months in extremely inadequate conditions, while awaiting trial. Some of them had not had access to a lawyer.

I attended a public forum with the Special Rapporteur in the capital Port Moresby. The meeting started with her giving a short address, which noted that empowerment of women must be coupled with social transformation to fully address the systemic and structural causes of inequality and discrimination, which most often lead to violence against women. After her introduction she then listened to the opinions of those present who wanted to make a statement. I spoke about how violence against women is one aspect of the wider issue of violence for both men and women in PNG and how there are some men who would like to be involved in advocacy against such violence but do not know how to begin. The support and other relevant services that do exist for victims of all forms of violence are being provided largely by the civil society, which includes the Churches. However, I am under the impression that the Church needs to work not only in pastoral care, but also more closely with those in policy and planning. The findings of the Special Rapporteur will be discussed in a comprehensive way at the UN Human Rights Council in June 2013.

Papua New Guinea: “Accountability, rather than impunity, for all acts of violence”
Trouble in South Sudan: Nuba Mountains

Nuba Mountains (Sudan). Traveling southward towards the border with South Sudan from time to time we see a group of two or three dozen children and a few women. They walk under an implacable sun, with day temperatures constantly over forty degrees, and sometime in the middle of the day they stop and gather in the shade of rare tree. They are all poorly dressed, covered in dust, the women carrying a basket with little food and few cooking utensils, a plastic jerry-can with some water.

There are an average of 400 such children and women arriving every day at Yida, the camp for the Nuba refugees about 20 km inside South Sudan. Most of them suffer from severe malnutrition and dehydration. The registration process is done in a shack, the refugees at the end of May where about forty thousand.

What are they running from? From war and starvation. There is a war looming between Sudan and South Sudan, fed by daily belligerent declaration from both sides and an history of failed negotiations and deeply rooted reciprocal mistrust. But the Nuba are caught up also in another more localized war. Since June last year the president of Sudan, Omar el-Bashir, has been fighting an undeclared war against the Nuba and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-Northern Sector (SPLM-N), guilty of not accepting his centralizing and islamizing policy that have made of the Nuba the most marginalized people of the Sudan. Estimates of the Nuba population resident in the Southern Kordofan state, also called Nuba Mountains and part of the Sudan, varies from 800 thousand to one million people. In an year of war thriving centers and small villages have been bombed indiscriminately. Schools, churches, markets are the primary targets. The Nuba say this is not a war; it is attempted genocide. Buram, last year a flourishing centre to the south a Kadugli, the capital of Southern Kordofan, is now a ghost town, half of it razed to the ground by constant shelling. The new school, completed only a few months before, has been deserted since bombs missed it by a whisker. I met one of it’s former pupils, Daniel, 15, and he recounted how he was scared when he heard the bombs hit, and he embraced a tree, in a desperate attempt to seek protection. A bomb shred hit the tree, and his arms have been cut just below the elbow.

Women and children living in caves to protect themselves from bombings

War generates starvation. The present conflict started just when last year rainy season was about to begin. People fled to look for security up to the rocky mountain, some went back living in the caves, the fertile land of the plains were abandoned. Last December there was no harvest to be gathered. There are reports that in some areas people have started dying of starvation. Yida is the last hope for survival.

A strongly worded Presidential Statement from the UN Security Council dated 14 February 2012 emphasized that “The members of the Security Council expressed their deep and growing alarm with the rising levels of malnutrition and food insecurity in some areas of Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile States in Sudan, asked the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-Northern Sector (SPLM-N) to cooperate fully with the United Nations and other humanitarian agencies to allow the delivery of assistance in line with international humanitarian principles and standards. There was also a tripartite proposal (UN, African Union and League of Arab States) for the delivery of humanitarian assistance to all conflict-affected population. Nothing has happened. The Khartoum Government has consistently denied access to any humanitarian help.

Yet a large scale internationally-led relief operation accepted by both sides is the only possibility to meet the need of the estimated 420,000 Nuba that are internally and externally displaced by the war.
How can change come to Sudan? The rigid positions that Omar el-Bashir has kept since he took power in 1989 make people think a change through peaceful political means is not possible. That’s why the people of the areas that are most strongly contesting Bashir policy – Darfur, Southern Kordofan and Southern Blue Nile – have formed an alliance, the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF) and have vowed to push Bashir out of power. “Bashir has superiority only in the sky. On the ground we are much stronger and we are ready to march on to Khartoum to make sure this regime will finish” states Adhel Aziz al Hilu, the military leader of the Nuba and also the head of the military head of the SRF.

Violence generates violence. A catechist in Yida, after Sunday Mass, looks around at the hundreds of children and says: “There is a growing hatred in them. Whatever we will try to teach to these children they will grow up determined to drive the foreigners out of their land.”

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IV PAN AM Assembly of Mission Animation and JPIC

The Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters held the IV PAN AM Assembly of Mission Animation and Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) in Cordoba, Argentina, from May 9-14, 2012. The overall theme of the assembly was “Sisters and Laity United in the Same Mission” with the motto “Sent to Proclaim the Good News.” Luke 4:14-21 as our guiding Scripture text.

Fifty-two participants from 10 provinces represented 12 countries within the Americas. It was an historical event in that this was the first PAN AM Assembly where 16 dedicated lay men and women participated.

After sharing our expectations, the coordinating committee gave a historical background. Through networking and cooperation, the assembly was integrated both by rituals and content throughout the session. Afonso Murad, a Brazilian university professor and writer who dedicates himself to environmental and social causes, presented an analysis of Latin American reality, a way of looking at ecology through planetary consciousness, as well as focusing on Vatican II and the Latin American Church.

At the end of the assembly a plan of action was developed that focused on three areas: 1) cooperation between the laity and the SSpsS, 2) JPIC – VIVAT International and 3) institutional visibility. Two general strategies were developed in each of these areas, and the working ministry groups -- education, pastoral ministry, indigenous and health -- concretized them. Each province will implement this plan of action over the next four years. All who attended came away with a renewed commitment to mission and making our world a better place.

“Personally, I believe the speech of Severn Suzuki truly captured the conference’s spirit, a 12 year-old Mrs. Suzuki had given a moving speech 20 years ago at the 1992 Rio Summit, for the present Summit she came again to the podium as a 32 year old mother. In her speech, Mrs. Suzuki called for committed action, articulating how her child has inspired even greater motivation within her to protect the planet for all of humanity’s future children”

-Felix Jones, SVD, speaking on his experience at the Rio +20 conference
The ‘100 Scholars’ project is a direct response of SSpS Philippines North Province (PHN) to the worsening poverty situation in the country by providing skills development opportunities to the last, lost and least for immediate employment.

The following are the objectives of the project:

a. To contribute towards enhancing the skill-base of the country by providing support for the last, lost and least for higher learning and skills development

b. To generate a means of livelihood for the project scholars and therefore directly address the poverty problem of specific individuals and communities

c. To boost the domestic economy by strengthening the labor force within the locality

The ‘100 Scholars’ project is open for persons 15 years old and above, from urban and rural poor communities in which the SSpS PHN presently has a community. It hopes to address a pressing concern in the country, which is to harness the productive potential of this segment of the population so that they can contribute to economic growth but within the bounds of decent work. Year 2011 statistics show that 7.2% of the Philippine labor force is unemployed. Substantial underemployment is also noted that directly contributes to the country’s poverty.

SSpS local communities are encouraged to conduct a study to identify available vocational courses in the locality and corresponding employment possibilities that will ensure generating livelihood for the project scholars either leading to self or company employment. Self-employment will mean setting up one’s own enterprise as a result of the vocational/skills training acquired through the project.

A screening committee, designated by the Provincial Leadership Team, will select the project scholars based on a set criteria consistent with the objectives of the project.

The project will provide tuition fees. The beneficiaries can also apply for additional allowance for food, transportation and school supplies. The selected scholars may also be housed in the local SSpS community, in cases where this will be needed and possible. The live-in scholars will help in the community for a certain number of hours in a week as their contribution for the free board and lodging. Support for those who intend to start their own enterprise will also be considered.

The Project Management will explore “pay it forward” schemes that can create an opportunity for the project scholars to help other unemployed or underemployed. Those who will set up their own enterprise will hopefully generate employment among members of the community.

‘100 Scholars’ is one of the projects to be supported by the SSpS PHN Centennial Funds to mark the Congregation’s 100 years’ presence in the Philippines.

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VIVAT News Updates

VIVAT Launches New Spanish Version of Website

VIVAT International.org/es. This new website edition bridges the language barrier and widens the possibility of participation for many members of our community. Previously, only the VIVAT Newsletter was published in multiple languages (English, Spanish, German, and Portuguese). However, the expanded coverage will now allow VIVAT members to participate in online forums and to stay more up-to-date with evolving news updates on the VIVAT website. Ultimately, VIVAT hopes that the new website version will allow for stronger communication within our online community. Please check out our spanish version by clicking on español in the top right corner of the VIVAT homepage or by following the link above.
UN Protects Human Rights of ‘land grab’ Victims

In recent years, rich countries and corporations have begun directly buying land for cultivation in some of the world’s poorest countries. Ethiopia, South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sierra Leone are among the worst affected. In the case of Sierra Leone, investors had bought an estimated 17% of the country’s arable land by early 2011. In most cases, this land is being cultivated for intensive agricultural production and then export.

Foreign investors claim that these ‘land grabs’ are legally viable and support the local economy with new agricultural jobs. However, indigenous people are regularly thrown off their ancestral land and moved into poorly constructed government villages to make way for these sprawling, monocrop farms. The situation is complicated because these indigenous people often do not possess formal ownership of the land they inhabit. Furthermore, foreign companies provide these workers with as low a wage as possible, often under one dollar a day in these regions.

To guard against such abusive practices, the UN has launched an important new set of guidelines for rich investors buying land in developing nations. Most importantly, these guidelines call for the inclusion of local communities in the decision making process. Moreover, the guidelines call for women’s rights to own land to be respected and for all deals regarding land acquisition to be transparent. Ultimately, the UN hopes that the institution of these guidelines will end human rights abuses in the regions affected by ‘land grabs.’

Getting to Know the UN: UNEP

UNEP, one of the United Nations many acronym organizations, is the United Nations Environment Program. Founded in 1972 at one of the first climate conferences, UNEP’s mission is to “provide leadership and encourage partnership in caring for the environment by inspiring, informing, and enabling nations and peoples to improve their quality of life without compromising that of future generations. UNEP headquarters is located in Nairobi, Kenya. Within the UN family, UNEP is the leading agency for environmental issues and often advises governments on issues of ecosystem management, climate change, disasters and conflict, harmful substances, and resource efficiency. In the past, UNEP has participated in several groundbreaking initiatives such as the fight to defend the ozone layer, the creation of marine preserves, and a highly successful solar-panel lending project in India. UNEP is also instrumental in organizing many international climate conferences, including this years Rio +20 conference in Brazil. To complete its mission, UNEP stays in close consultation with regional NGOs. In recent years, UNEP has increased its advocacy for global climate change.

For more information, feel free to explore the excellent resources on the UNEP website, www.unep.org.

The UNEP logo incorporates the original UN Laurel leaves as a circular border. However, the UNEP logo brings the leaves full circle, indicating the greater cooperation required by Environmental problems.