

# **CHRISTIANITY POVERTY & WEALTH IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

**(A Prototype World Church Report)**

**The findings of 'Project 21'**

**with a Foreword by**

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## FOREWORD

Fighting poverty has moved back into the centre of the international agenda after having been over-shadowed for some time by a primary emphasis on policies of structural adjustment and incentives for growth. In preparation for the UN conference on social development (Geneva 2000) and the Millennium Summit of the United Nations the target of reducing poverty to half by the year 2015 has been adopted as a benchmark by all international organisations involved in social development. Recent meetings, like the UN conference at Monterrey on Financing for Development have given rise to new doubts whether there is the political will to work towards reaching these goals.

The Christian churches have been involved in the struggle against poverty long before the proclamation of the first development decade. Traditionally, the churches' response has been characterised by the work of charity without challenging the political, social and economic structures that are the root causes of poverty. Over the last more than 30 years the ecumenical community of churches has become more and more involved in the development debate. It has sought to spell out what it means to be a 'church in solidarity with the poor'. It has sponsored studies on 'patterns of poverty' and engaged in advocacy programmes challenging the root causes of poverty.

Even though the biblical tradition is much more explicit about excessive wealth and the ways it can corrupt human community, the Christian churches have been reluctant to address the ethical and spiritual issues related to wealth. In some traditions wealth has been regarded as a sign of divine blessing, often with the implication that the poor are to blame for their poverty. Today, these views are being defended by churches that proclaim a 'prosperity gospel'. At the same time, however, ecumenical discussion has begun to focus attention on the hidden links between poverty and wealth. Just as it has become common to speak of a 'poverty line' there should be a limit beyond which the accumulation of wealth becomes greed and is no longer ethically and socially acceptable. This would mean calling for an 'economy of enough'.

The geo-political changes during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the accelerating process of economic globalisation have obliged the churches and ecumenical organisations to rethink the principles, objectives and methodologies guiding their participation in development. The project 'Discerning the Way Together', sponsored in the years after 1993 by the World Council of Churches with the participation of four Northern church related development agencies and four networks of Southern partners reinforced the need for further critical reflection.

Here is the origin of the initiative leading to the present publication. It began in 1997 when the World Council of Churches and its ecumenical partners in the Association of Ecumenical Development Agencies in Europe (APRODEV) initiated a process of case studies in order to gain a better understanding of how churches, agencies and ecumenical organisations could respond more effectively to poverty in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Eventually 19

country studies were commissioned with a clear priority on countries in the Southern hemisphere and complemented by five issue studies. All studies followed a similar methodology. The objective was to give voice to the people who are exposed to poverty and not to add to the plethora of academic research publications or political action programmes. The outcome of 'Project 21' was intended to be informative and also challenging with a clear emphasis on the role of the churches in the broader struggles against poverty.

The story of 'Project 21' is told in the last chapter of this book. The main body of the publication represents a summary of the findings of the 24 case studies. The structure is clear and self-explanatory with each chapter being introduced with a caption highlighting the main contents. Much of the information emerging from the case studies is not new or surprising for those who are familiar with the ecumenical development debate. However, the book makes a specific contribution by including wealth and greed alongside poverty in its investigation, by placing the churches into the wider ('ecumenical') context of civil society, and by arguing for the need to form a global advocacy alliance for eradicating poverty.

Considering strategies for stimulating effective action by the churches, those responsible for 'Project 21' developed the proposal to issue in regular intervals a 'World Church Report on Poverty and Wealth' to complement the development reports by UNDP and the World Bank. Instead of tables and statistics this church report should reflect the specific experiences of people in local contexts. Published every 3-5 years the report would allow for an assessment of how far the churches have been able to meet the targets set. And in fact, the present book which is presented as a 'prototype' of a future World Church Report includes a list of 10 goals for the churches' action until the year 2015 (see p 97). These goals are an attempt to develop a clear strategy for combating poverty and greed.

The project has set a very ambitious goal for itself. It is unavoidable that a report of this kind will leave many gaps and that its conceptual and methodological assumptions may be open to challenge. However, in spite of the disclaimers included in the report itself, this publication represents a very significant effort to arrive at a common framework of interpretation which is the very precondition for building a global alliance in the struggle against poverty. This book invites critical discussion in order to learn from such reactions how to improve the conceptual framework of a World Church Report on Poverty and Wealth.

Konrad Raiser  
General Secretary, World Council of Churches  
May 2002

## INTRODUCTION

The dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century seemed an appropriate moment to ask whether churches were bringing good news to the poor and going about it in the right way. Over 24 countries were part of this study project initiated by the Association of Ecumenical Development Agencies in Europe (APRODEV) in collaboration with the World Council of Churches and nicknamed 'Project 21'. Twenty four case studies were written. Nineteen of them were based on countries (Bangladesh, Chile, China {Hong Kong}, Colombia, Fiji, Germany, Ghana, India, Jamaica, Malaysia, Namibia, Nicaragua, Palestine, Philippines, Russia, South Africa, South Korea, Uganda, West Indies). Five of them focused on particular subjects (the labour movement, liturgy, transnational corporations, the especially disadvantaged position of women, the United Nations). In writing them, rich and poor, high and low, activist and official, lay and expert were asked for their views. All the case studies are available on the Project's website: [www.aprodev.net](http://www.aprodev.net)

The Project involved several meetings of the case study writers and a major Colloquium in New Delhi in November 2000 which produced an interim 'Working Document'. The full story of the Project is told in chapter VIII.

Chapters I-VI draw together what the 24 case studies had to say. Where they are quoted, their English (often their second or third language) has not normally been changed. Chapter VII sets out 5 priorities and, in the light of them, ten '2015 Millennium Goals' for the churches. They are designed to complement the UN Development Goals not to copy them; though, like them, they represent a more urgent challenge than the date 2015 might suggest, which is why they are reproduced at the front of this book as A Call to Action. They include a proposal for a 'World Church Report on Poverty and Wealth' to be published every 3-5 years. The following pages have been written up as a 'prototype' to illustrate what such a World Church Report might be like and how it could be produced.

Michael Taylor  
Director 'Project 21'  
June 2002

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<sup>i</sup>1. Excerpt here presented was part of a larger work prepared for the Workshop on "Poverty and Social deprivation in the Mediterranean Area: the local, national/regional, and global dimension" organized by The Comparative Research on Poverty (CROP)/UNESCO and Democritus University of Thrace, Komotini, Greece, June 2003 by Saad Nagi Professor Emeritus of Sociology, The Ohio State University; and former Professor and Director, the Center for Social Research, American University in Cairo.