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## **RELIGIONS AND CULTURES, RESOURCES TO IMAGINE THE WORLD**

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### **Abstract**

Asia is characterised as a continent of the young, a continent of the poor, and cradle of the world's major religions and ancient cultures. The poor, and their cultures and religions can offer the world an alternative vision and model of development. Asia abounds with various cosmologies of sustainability. Yet all over Asia, development has metamorphosed from political engagement and social responsibility to "market" models and is facing a "moral crisis." With rationalisation and neo-liberal autonomy, society is not only being "de-religionized" but increasingly "de-ethicised" as well. If development is not an end state in itself but a process, then what needs to be sustainable in development is the integrity of the process itself. This process calls for a conversion of our thinking and living. Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Sí* has rightly pointed to the eco-system that exists and of which humans are part but not the centre. He asserts that "authentic human development has a moral character." To regain its moral compass, development has to engage in a living triple dialogue with the poor, their cultures and religions. Such a path of development calls forth personal transformation in the actors, as it promotes a spirituality of friendship with the world,

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with creation, with others, and oneself. It is rooted in the awareness that all life is sacred, inter-related and inter-dependent.

**Keywords:** Asia, Culture, Development, Dialogue, Poor, Process, Religion, Spirituality, Sustainability, The Young

## 1. Background

Asia is so vast and diverse that one can easily feel incompetent to comment on her. One can surmise that there are three characteristics that define Asia — it is a continent of the young, a continent of the poor, and a cradle of the world's major religions and ancient cultures.<sup>1</sup>

- Asia sustains 4.3 billion people or 60% of the world's population currently, and 40% of these are below 25 years of age.<sup>2</sup>

- At a more realistic poverty line of \$1.50 a day of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), one third of Asia would be living under poverty. If we account for food insecurity and rising vulnerability, the poverty rate jumps to nearly 50% of Asians.<sup>3</sup> That is, a large number of humanity living in poverty.

- Asia is also the cradle of major religions and ancient cultures of the world — Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Confucianism, and others. In others words, it is a world of many worlds — with diversity and plurality — and 'being different' is a gift of Asia to the world.

This article proposes that these three characteristics of Asia — the young, the poor, and their cultural and religious diversity — are resources for building the world. For example, living in Malaysia which has a mix of cultures, languages, cuisine and religions, one can have a Western breakfast, Chinese lunch, Malay snacks, and Indian dinner all in the same day.

## 2. Asia Today

Asia is marked by fast and far reaching transformations with profound social changes. The physical and social landscape of our traditional societies are changing rapidly. Cities that took Europe

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<sup>1</sup>Rosales & Arevalo, ed. *For All the Peoples of Asia, Volume One* (FAPA 1), Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) Documents, Quezon City, Claretian publications, 1992, 4.

<sup>2</sup><http://worldpopulationreview.com/continents/asia-population/>; <http://statisticstimes.com/population/asian-countries-by-population.php>, accessed 17 Sept 2015

<sup>3</sup>"Poverty in Asia," *The Economist*, 30 August 2014. See also <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2014/sep/09/why-asia-probably-poorer-than-we-think>, accessed on 17 September 2015.

centuries to build, Asia is leap-frogging to construct in 5 to 10 years! Look at China, Korea, and Malaysia as examples. There is an explosion of megacities in Asia — Asia will have 30 megacities each with more than 10 million population, inviting in-migration and spinning off urban problems. With it comes the loss of fertile agriculture lands, displacement of farmers and villages, affecting livelihood and national food security. Large parts of Asia are ill-prepared for these rapid changes.

Parallel to this rapid change, is an on-going awakening<sup>4</sup> among Asians that can be clustered as follows:

- A resurgence of traditional religions contrary to all predictions that it will wither away — which both sociologists and theologians have difficulty to explain;
- A heightened awareness of one's cultural identity and diversity — breaking away from the yoke of colonialism and minority complexes; and
- A new consciousness among civil society and the masses of their strength and hopes — thanks to the work of religious institutions, community movements and social media.

Alongside this awakening there are also clusters of challenges:

- The growing threat of wealth disparity,<sup>5</sup> emergence of elites, globalisation of markets without any conscience, land grabbing by multinationals — all threatening the survival of the poor and Asia. The new colonialists of Asia are the emerging wealthy elite families with business and political interests, as in the Philippines, Malaysia and elsewhere. It is similar to feudal Europe.
- The challenge of national integration, with numerous ethnic groups, religious fundamentalism, political hijacking of spaces once held by authentic religions, and recurring authoritarian regimes with different ideologies. Look at Pakistan, pockets of Indonesia, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka.
- The third is the challenge to harmonise tradition and modernity as ancient Asia encounters the rapidly transforming forces of modernity, technology, science; growing relativism of individual rights against long held collective values and reference — Asia is in mutation, uncertain at times of her own identity and way forward.

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<sup>4</sup>Felix Wilfred, *FAPA 1*, xxvi.

<sup>5</sup>Asian Development Bank (ADB) Report 2014.

### 3. So Who Needs Development?

With the new found freedom of independence, and learning from their colonial masters, most Asian nations began to pursue ambitious development of their countries. The casualties of this models of capitalist development based on the rationalistic, exploitative and utilitarian models of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment, are often the vulnerable sectors — the environment, the young, the poor and marginalised. Six, seven decades of post-independence years and decolonisation, development has lost much of its appeal — “the actors have lost sight of meaningful linkages between developmental actions ... and reflective understanding,”<sup>6</sup> where we have come from, and the compass we are using. In fact, development has metamorphosed from political engagement and social responsibility to “market” models<sup>7</sup> and is facing a “moral crisis.” A common plethora of ills plague most Asian nations on the chosen road of development — massive corruption, oppressive political family dynasties, exploitation of the environment and national assets, disregard for the poor and indigenous peoples.

With rationalisation and neo-liberal autonomy came de-religionisation and secularism. It set the stage for “the desacralisation of both the anthropos (humankind) and cosmos (creation),” paving the way for the “rapacious commoditisation of labour and the financialisation of nature,” The practice of integrity and justice toward creation and humans is blurred and often ignored. Society is not only being “de-religionized” but increasingly “de-ethicised” as well.<sup>8</sup> The post-modern culture is constructed on the right to choice, and individual human rights has become the sole frame of reference for any ethical and universal norms. The community, religion and cultures, and glaring realities are brushed aside in the pursuit of personalisation. But it raises the question, “what would become of ethics if human rights were themselves cut off from stable frame of reference and become dependent only on arbitrary collective judgement?”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Giri, Ananta Kumar; Van Ufford, Philip Qarles, “A Moral Critique of Development.” *Working Paper* 128, DIR & Institute for History, International and Social Studies, Aalborg University, Denmark, 2004.

<sup>7</sup>Michael Edwards, “*Future Positive; International Cooperation in the 21st Century*,” London: Earthscan Publications, 1999.

<sup>8</sup>Jojo M. Fung, “Sacred Space for Sacred Sustainability,” *Landas* 20 (2012) 267-290; *Living in Awe: A New Vision and Mission for Asia*, Petaling Jaya: Public Media Agency Sdn Bhd, 2015.

<sup>9</sup>Julius Dusin Gitom, *Moral Relativism*, BILA III, Sabah, Malaysia, 6 August 2015.

If development is not an end state in itself but a process,<sup>10</sup> as any trajectory taken continues into the future, then what needs to be sustainable in development is the integrity of the process and the players itself. This process calls for a conversion of our thinking and living. The neo-classical growth-cranking models of economy are often flawed in their basic assumptions that resources are infinite, and at best finding some balance to the three-legged stool of our market economy, social well-being, and the environment is sufficient for business to go on as usual.<sup>11</sup>

Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Sí* has rightly pointed to the eco-system that exists and of which we humans are part but not the centre. He asserts that “authentic human development has a moral character,” and thus the need for an “integral ecology... cultural ecology... social ecology.” He invites us to examine what is “the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet... and the throwaway culture” modern societies have espoused. He invites all to “slow down and look at reality in a different way..., to recover the values and the great goals swept away by our unrestrained delusions of grandeur.”<sup>12</sup>

It will be helpful from the onset to differentiate between development and growth — development is a quality of life that encompasses health, education, work, friendships, habitat and spirituality. Growth often measures a set of economic and financial gains that do not necessarily translate into human development.<sup>13</sup> More so, many business and economic projects do not even factor in the social or environmental costs to their activities — as these are often borne by public funds.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Meadowcroft, James, “Planning, Democracy and the Challenge of Sustainable Development,” *International Political Science Review / Revue internationale de science politique* 18, 2 (1997) 167-189.

<sup>11</sup>Neil K. Dawe and Kenneth L. Ryan, “The Faulty Three-Legged-Stool Model of Sustainable Development,” *Conservation Biology* 17, 5 (Oct 2003) 1458-1460.

<sup>12</sup>Pope Francis, *Laudato Sí, On Care for Our Common Home*, 5, 16, 114.

<sup>13</sup>Herman E. Daly, *Beyond Growth: The Economics of Sustainable Development*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1996. See also *Ethos Genesis: Is It Time to Replace GDP?* According to the economist Manfred Max-Neef, growth is not the same as development, and development does not necessarily require growth. The fact is that the more our ethos promotes consuming as a positive goal, the more detrimental it is. The madness comes when we consider that our entire economic system is based on this principle. <http://www.collective-evolution.com/2015/09/20/ethosgenesis/> accessed on 26 September 2015.

<sup>14</sup>Malaysia and Singapore have been experiencing haze caused by pollution and forest burning since some years. The daily newspapers quote authorities who allege

#### 4. Experiences in Development Work

These small examples of the author speaks of the approach to development in parts of Asia:

When I first arrived in Myanmar or Burma in the year 2000, and travelled through the Irrawady region, I was struck by the poverty — the rice bowl of South East Asia had become the poverty-bowl. In the capital city, and as we drove south, we had to stop at 14 military checkpoints! Health, education, politic, civil society had all collapsed. Besides the military, the only other institution standing were religions — the temple, the mosque, and the church. They were the only places of solace, providing some relief to the poor and displaced — peoples whose villages had been burnt down; children in remote village boarding houses that were mere huts, run by religious, but where they could get a morsel of education. Religious institutions were the only ones that could to some extent protect and care for their people.

The first mission was the demanding work to establish the national Caritas (Karuna) and build teams all over the country.<sup>15</sup> Unicef seeing the only way they could access remote communities and tribes were through the local religious institutions engaged these to do “mother and childcare programs.” It not only created relations and goodwill among all, but went on to produce some ingenious thinking and collaboration in social awakening. The healthcare program<sup>16</sup> developed by the local Karuna was then promoted by Unicef as a model program in neighbouring countries! Imagine a model coming out of the experience of a poor and war-torn country.

In 2005, Fondacio<sup>17</sup> launched a youth leadership program in Myanmar, to conscientise the young of their situation and equipping them with some skills and self-confidence. This program continues —

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some companies are burning forests cover to plant palm oil. This week “the pollution index jumped to 262. Visibility is barely 30 meters. School are closed, eyes and throat are poking,” my wife texted on 28 Sept 2015. Cloud seeding is being done again to try and wash down some of the pollutants. Who bears the social and economic cost for this?

<sup>15</sup>The National Karuna Myanmar Social Services (KMSS) and its offices in 15 dioceses.

<sup>16</sup>The Unicef mother-child healthcare program was supplemented by Karuna with critical thinking, community organising, and Catholic Social Teachings (CST). This proved to be a key success factor in spurring change. Karuna then shared this approach and findings with other faith groups, who picked it up and added on their own faith values.

<sup>17</sup>Fondacio is a faith-based international movement present in the four continents working for the humanisation of society through personal transformation, leadership formation and social development.

10 years later, 350 young adults have been trained locally and abroad, and many of them employed in civil society groups. Fondacio also animates 'CLUBS' where it brings together young people of different faiths to witness to solidarity and acts of charity together. It builds understanding, goodwill and changes their attitude to life and one another.

## 5. The Bias of Development

In the course of work, the bias of development organisations and staff who come from Europe and America, including UN offices, are noticeable. Many are ignorant or biased towards faith based organisations. In fact, religion, cultures, and spirituality in development is a "mental taboo."<sup>18</sup> They push their agendas assuming certain models of economy and human development: the primacy of the individual, the trickle down economy, the absolute separation of secular and sacred, alienation of religions, and so on. The warning call of sociologists, that in so doing states and institutions would only "provide fundamentalism with fresh nourishment..."<sup>19</sup> was ignored. Sadly, many societies have come to see the terror of fundamentalism in extreme manners from the United States to the Middle East — we are all deeply affected by the pain, tragedy and loss of humanity.

In promoting such biased perspectives, the West suffers too from amnesia. "[It] forgets that these are late products of their own cultural development... [which has] suffered many ruptures"<sup>20</sup> Europe is now

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<sup>18</sup>Anne-Marie Holenstein in *Role and Significance of Religion and Spirituality in Development Co-operation*, Bern: Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC, 2005, 5.

<sup>19</sup>The sociologist Thomas Meyer warns such responses would "only provide fundamentalism with fresh nourishment if, in the light of the currently growing misuse of ethnic-cultural and cultural-religious differences for the domination strategies of identity politics, we were to come to the conclusion that the religious factor should be banned as such from public life and wholly limited to the private sphere. Such a misunderstanding originates from the unacceptable assumption that we should first recognise fundamentalism as religious belief rather than as a political strategy... Contrary to the expectations of the Enlightenment and to technocratic concepts of development, even in modern culture, religious ways of life are to be counted among the most important grounds for forming personal and collective identity. They are also among the most powerful sources of energy for the cultivation of moral motives for public action." "*Identitätspolitik, Vom Missbrauch kultureller Unterschiede*," Suhrkamp 2272, page 226. As quoted by Anne-Marie Holenstein in *Role and Significance of Religion and Spirituality in Development, Cooperation*, 12.

<sup>20</sup>Dieter Senghaas, peace research worker and development theoretician, writes in the *SDC-Newsletter*, October 2004, "...The transition from old Europe to the present political culture, which is now by and large no longer disputed, suffered many

rudely awakened by north-African and Middle-Eastern refugees<sup>21</sup> fleeing the proxy war in Middle-East and the Islamic terrorism it has spun off. (Europeans and Americans need to raise their voices to lobby their governments and armament manufacturers to re-think the notions of “justified war” and the infamous “axis of evil” propaganda which has set loose this humanitarian disaster.)

In the continuum between fundamentalism on one extreme, and on the other, an attack on faith and cultural values promoted vigorously by globalisation and post-modern secular thinking, it is vital to find one’s roots and keep an equilibrium. The voice of the moderates has never been more important. In the face of so many global changes and uncertainty, adherents in every religion have withdrawn into their religious houses and renewal movements to be reassured of their identity<sup>22</sup> and regain some form of control. Yet to remain there, and silent, would be fatal for humanity.

## 6. Spirituality and Development

For the vast majority of Asians there is an innate sensitivity to all things spiritual. Asian peoples respect the spiritual authority of masters, gurus, and teachers. History shows that these masters, gurus and teachers do not derive their power and authority merely from their institutions. “Their moral authority comes from their immersion in the Divine life and the wisdom they draw from it.”<sup>23</sup> Their radiance of the inner life and wisdom attracts people of all walks of life to draw close to these masters and teachers, and to seek their guidance.

In Asia, any genuine development effort has to take in consideration of the importance of religion, cultures and spirituality. Without divinising everything in cultures and religions, we can acknowledge the liberating and enslaving elements. The Church itself

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ruptures. There were revolutions and wars. It was a process that aroused opposition — not something that was already implanted in the cultural genes of old Europe....,” as quoted by Anne-Marie Holenstein, 13.

<sup>21</sup>The International Commission on Migration says at least 470,000 refugees have risked their lives to cross the Mediterranean into Europe in the first nine months of 2015. <http://www.cfr.org/migration/europes-migration-crisis/p32874>, accessed 23 September, 2015.

<sup>22</sup>Susan E. Ackerman, and Raymond L.M. Lee, *Heaven in Transition: Non-Muslim Religious Innovation and Ethnic Identity in Malaysia*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988.

<sup>23</sup>Eilers, Franz-Josef, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences Documents from 1997 to 2001. vol. 3 (FAPA III)*, Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian, 2002, 323.

does not advocate for any single model of development, but seeks to bring the essence of religion into the questions of integral human development. The *etat laicite* — or denying religion its space — may never produce positive results, but engaging them critically and constructively will help all sides. More so, people should have the possibility of determining for themselves what new practices or methods (of development) would be in conflict with their culture and spirituality and if or how they would want to adopt them.<sup>24</sup> In his recent address to the United Nations, in October 2015, Pope Francis called on international donors and agencies not to impose external ideologies on local peoples through aid and development.

The best in religions and cultures can teach us to imagine the world differently. Asia abounds with various cosmologies of sustainability. They are fostered and nurtured by the “dynamic triadic relationship” of the human world, the natural world and the spirit-world. At its deepest core is the diverse ‘spiritualities of sustainability.’ The wo/men elders, healers, mystics, sages, shamans and spirit-mediums in Asia draw sustenance from these sapiential and mystical sources.<sup>25</sup> Modern society has looked down and dismissed indigenous peoples’ knowledge and practices as ignorance and of no value to progress and development. Yet we see a turning to spirituality and interest in organic and sustainable practices, long promoted by indigenous peoples. These are founded on their ethos of not hoarding but taking only what one needs, communal good over any private claims to land, etc. This consciousness is part of an emerging shamanic theology of sacred sustainability from Asia.<sup>26</sup>

## 7. Development as Dialogue

In its work with the young, Fondacio Asia’s efforts are work-in-progress. They propose short skills training with values, leadership formation, academic scholarships, and social projects. The process includes taking them to live with the poor and marginalised, to ask questions, to understand the situations, and to reflect theologically with their faith traditions i.e. to find the prophetic divine impulse in

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<sup>24</sup>Amartya Sen writes, “If a traditional way of life has to be sacrificed to escape grinding poverty or minuscule longevity (as many traditional societies have had for thousands of years), then it is the people directly involved who must have the opportunity to participate in deciding what should be chosen.” *Development as Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1999, 31.

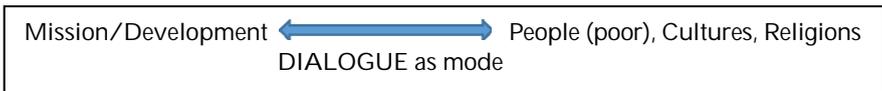
<sup>25</sup>M. Nadarajah, *Living Pathways: Meditations on Sustainable Cultures and Cosmologies in Asia*, Penang, Malaysia: Areca Books, 2013, 79 - 87.

<sup>26</sup>Fung, *Living in Awe: A New Vision and Mission for Asia*, 2015.

the squalor of the ordinary — by silence and contemplation. The methodology is to dialogue with people and life realities, to discern what could be a response from within themselves and the local community, before planning and acting with others. It becomes a spiral of life and learning when completed with evaluation and new application.

For more than 40 years now the Asian Church has been promoting this same method of *see, judge, act* or *dialogue, discern, do*. The tool demands incisive analysis of situations, with responsible and effective action, yet not to lose the spiritual dimension. Faith tells us that our action is a participation in the on-going creative energy of the divine for the liberation of His/Her peoples and ecology, which requires humble listening. It requires also space<sup>27</sup> to allow persons to unfold, things to happen, and a movement to take shape... As the prayer attributed to Oscar Romero, the slain archbishop of San Salvador reads, "We are workers, not the master builders..."<sup>28</sup>

The mode of any mission or development has to begin with respectful dialogue of life to serve the cause of unity, local participation and decision making.<sup>29</sup> This passes through an outlook of trust that promotes encounters between peoples and cultures. Dialogue can be illustrated as a bridge linking the actor/s through a triple dialogue with the people, the cultures and religions.



Anyone can ask, what can the poor teach us? In this perspective, the people, particularly the poor and their culture become resources for development. The poor often live close to the earth and face the daily tempests of life. By their vulnerability, they have developed resilience mechanisms, social relations, local knowledge, creative ingenuity, and a spirituality that places trust in providence. These, among others, constitute the social and spiritual capital of any genuine development.

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<sup>27</sup>Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 222-225 [notions of space and time].

<sup>28</sup>Archbishop Oscar Romero Prayer: *A Step along the Way*, composed by Ken Untener of Saginaw, 1979.

<sup>29</sup>"Mission in Asia will also seek through dialogue to serve the cause of unity of the peoples of Asia marked by such a diversity of beliefs, cultures and socio-political structure." FABC Plenary Assembly Statement, 1990, 4.2. FAPA I, 1997.

Faith based organisations have a fundamental role to play to be close to the poor, to help rediscover and integrate the authentic resources and inherent ethos found in all cultures and religions, and bring them into mainstream development programmes, than to isolate them further.

## 8. Development as Personal Transformation

The spirituality of social work and genuine development is fundamentally based on service and giving of oneself that others may have life. Modern society is pushing a very self-centred personalisation, cold professionalization and efficiency of return on investments. This disconnect from the environment, community, culture and religion is alarming — and the backlash is fundamentalism. In the face of this onslaught, development has to be rooted in the local community, listening to the cry of ground realities, and committed to the growth of every person.

In a humble way, Fondacio's spirituality seeks to integrate the three dimensions of the person, the group or community and the mission in the demands of daily life. This tri-partite model of formation, community and mission is grounded in a spirituality — or learning to *be true* with oneself, to *be with* others and to commit or *be for* a cause, is internalised in a journey of personal transformation.<sup>30</sup> The pedagogy encourages young and old to know and to be true with themselves, to dream a little, to build mutual community support, to become social contributors and to commit their life to a meaningful life mission. It is a "spirituality of friendship" with the world, with creation, with others, and oneself — and becomes a lifetime process.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Charles Bertille, *Empowering Asia's Laity*, Quezon, Claretian, 2014, Chapter IV.

<sup>31</sup>Fondacio in Asia has been working with the urban poor in the squatter colonies of Manila, in *Smokey Mountain* and *Payatas* since the past three decades in small ways providing water, healthcare training, home-based para-medical services, women & youth animation, and some scholarships. The young persons from these communities have gone on to earn bachelors and masters in psychology, education, arts, and they serve in various ways. Three of them are working with Fondacio's institute of formation. Since the typhoon Yolanda, Fondacio has provided relief, trauma counselling, and rehabilitation services in three communities. The project has now moved into longer-term development with poor farmers in ecology sensitive areas in the mountains. In Myanmar, villagers in a dry zone select some of the poorest families to benefit of a goat raising project, the income of which not only uplifts the families but is also shared to sustain the school teacher to educate their children. The underlying ethos is belief in the human persons' potential, and thus not to give everything freely, but help each become co-responsible for their future.

## 10. Climate Change and Development

Contrary to what was believed, the poor are very affected by global climate changes. It has a greater effect than what was previously acknowledged. The impact is not only on the earth and resources, but also on the poor, as their economies are reliant on climate-exposed sectors such as agriculture and natural resource extraction.<sup>32</sup>

The prelate of Yangon, Myanmar, Charles Bo, has lamented that while the poor in his country cannot even spell or understand the word global warming, they have been the victims of global warming the past 10 years. They bore the brunt of the Nargis typhoon and the recent massive floods that have wiped out crops and puts food security at risk.<sup>33</sup> It is known that most of the at-risk or countries vulnerable to climate change are in the south while the higher carbon emitting countries are from the north or developed nations, with America and China leading the list.

In coastal Bangladesh, roughly 20 million people in the country's 16 coastal districts face the risk of vanishing coastal lines as sea levels rise. There are increasingly frequent and severe tropical cyclones, with higher wind speeds and storm surges. The local Caritas programs cover 11 of the most vulnerable coastal districts. They include housing programs, livelihood schemes for displaced farmers, and projects aimed at helping the most vulnerable adapt to the effects of climate change such as introducing alternative crops to cultivate in the saline-prone coastal areas, floating stages vegetable cultivation on water, replacing chickens with ducks, canal construction, etc.<sup>34</sup>

The World Wildlife Fund Report released this year highlights the dangers of massive deforestation in Indonesia's Kalimantan, Sumatra and Papua, due to rampant agricultural development. The devastating impact is already visible with annual rainfall down by 2

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<sup>32</sup>Study by Frances C. Moore and Delavane B. Diaz of Stanford University, "Temperature impacts on economic growth warrant stringent mitigation policy", *Nature Climate Change Journal* 5, (2015), 127–131. See also <http://www.skepticalscience.com/climate-change-could-impact-poor-more-previously-thought.html> accessed on 17 September, 2015.

<sup>33</sup>Cyclone Nargis is reported to have killed more than 150,000 people in 2008 and left 800,000 homeless. In August 2015, Myanmar struggled to cope with torrential rains and flooding that have affected some 1.7 million. See <http://www.ucanews.com/news/asian-catholic-leaders-call-for-practical-solutions-to-climate-crisis/74098>

<sup>34</sup><http://www.ucanews.com/news/in-bangladesh-coastal-villagers-pay-price-for-climate-change-/73998>

to 3 per cent, and the seasons are changing.<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile, in the Philippines, the Archbishop of Lipa joined politicians, media personalities and civil society groups to campaign against mining and coal plant operations in Verde Island Passage, dubbed as the world's "centre of marine biodiversity."<sup>36</sup>

Initially, many people including religious leaders did not understand the concept of climate change, or were not prepared to speak up. Now there is a growing awareness, and they are slowly joining other groups in civil society to lobby their governments as well as educate their people.

## 11. Some Recommendations

In the light of these experiences and reflections, we can propose some actions that can be undertaken:

1. Institutions such as ADB, World Bank and others need to pay closer attention to what they subsidise or fund as state led projects. Conduct public hearing of policies and large scale programs before implementation.
2. UN offices and large INGOs need to review their salaries, administration expenses and certain modes of working so that local NGOs and faith-based organisations are not put in a disadvantaged position.
3. De-mystify development, transfer management to local communities; and use appropriate technologies.

Do not refuse aid to faith based organisations, rather collaborate to nurture. Highlight the good works being done, and promote inter-faith collaboration in development.

4. Help countries, organisations and communities see the inter-relationship of parts and whole, the consequence of their action or non-action. Set-up people's mediation centres and processes to empower and engage them in civil society.
5. Work in partnerships with local organisations to foster interdependence and mutual learning. Some INGOs are doing a wonderful work in this area — promote the learning.

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<sup>35</sup><http://www.ucanews.com/news/church-in-indonesia-should-speak-up-on-climate-change>

<sup>36</sup><http://www.ucanews.com/news/philippine-archbishop-joins-groups-fighting-mining-coal-plants/73966>

6. Encourage social entrepreneurship with responsible practices especially among the young and in rural areas. It is definitively a model for the future.
7. Support those who work hard and show results in small ways. Don't put too many technical requirements that small organisations can't even fill-up grant forms.
8. Promote a spirituality of friendship with the world, with creation, with others, and oneself; an outlook of trust that promotes encounters with the "other".

## 12. Conclusion

Our capacity to be human and humane is measured by our ability to empathise with the suffering and take measures to minimise it — be it the wounded earth, the poor, or the minorities. The indigenous peoples in various parts of Asia continue to celebrate harvest festivals, the *Gawai* in Borneo, *Ponggol* in South India, and elsewhere as part of their ancient cultures. These rituals not only acknowledge and honour the relation of the Great Spirit with human and nature, but also in turn renders sacred the peoples, their land and forests, the waters and all life. The indwelling and presence of the Great Spirit makes all life and space sacred — it "suffuses, sensitises and sacralises" the cosmos and creation.<sup>37</sup>

These religio-cultural traditions of Asia invite us to a conversion of mind and lifestyle, to move away from a utilitarian and capitalist driven development and learn once again to become mystics and prophets of a new creation. Any sustainable development has to be sensitive to the inter-relatedness and inter-dependence of the sacred web of life, and be rooted in this suffusing sensitising, and sacralising Great Spirit. Such a path of development calls forth personal transformation in the actors, and it promotes a spirituality of friendship with the world, with creation, with others, and oneself. We need to rediscover this spiritual vision of life and development. Together, each one, can lay down our little pebbles and stones to build what one day will be the edifice of a new, sustainable, and just civilisation.

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<sup>37</sup>Fung, *Living in Awe: A New Vision and Mission for Asia*, 2015.