

Participants at the **Consultation on Poverty, Wealth and Ecology in Asia and the Pacific** were welcomed by Chiang Mai governor Mr. Amornpan Nimanan. The event was organized by the **World Council of Churches (WCC), the Christian Conference of Asia and the Pacific Conference of Churches.**

The consultation is part of the WCC AGAPE (Alternative to Economic Globalization Addressing Peoples and Earth) process. It was preceded by hearings of youth, women and indigenous peoples.

Asia, whose vulnerability to extreme weather events is aggravated by poverty, showcases the links between poverty, wealth and ecology, according to a report presented at the consultation by the IBON Foundation, a think-tank based in the Philippines.

The report describes a context of grave ecological and economic crisis. More than half of the Third World's poor live in Asia. Even though it is generally viewed as a dynamic and promising place to invest, Asia is struggling with extreme poverty, thus reducing the capacity of Asians to cope with climate changes.

***Impoverishment, greed and violence: outcomes of a spiritual crisis***

"Our region's wealth is being siphoned off in the form of corporate profits squeezed from cheap, predominantly female, labour; external debt payments to international financial institutions made at the expense of massive cuts in social expenditures; the privatization and commodification of land; and exports of people, lumber and other 'raw materials' from poor to wealthier nations", the Chiang Mai Declaration says.

"We listened with heavy hearts to stories of: Burmese migrant workers fleeing political and economic oppression only to encounter other forms of oppression in Thailand; tens of thousands of farmer suicides in India; Asian students falling into debt because of spiralling tuition fees; women in the Mekong region trafficked into prostitution", participants stated in the declaration.

"Poverty is the result of exploitation and monopoly, and exploitation is coupled with violence", said Jonathan Sta. Rosa, a young participant from the Philippines, describing how economic globalization impacts poor people in his country. Jonathan's brother Isaias, a United Methodist pastor and a member of a peasant's movement, was killed in 2006 in one of thousands of extrajudicial killings taking place in Philippines.

"In Asia and the Pacific, neoliberal globalization has taken a stronger hold in urban centres especially with the young people. The pressure to consume, to own and to conform is enormous", said Liza Lamis, a communications consultant with the CCA.

"The interlinked economic and ecological crises are manifestations of a larger ethical, moral and spiritual crisis", said participants at the Chiang Mai gathering. Therefore what is needed is "nothing less than a radical spiritual renewal [...] founded on the Biblical imperatives of

God's preferential option for the marginalized (justice) and the sacredness of all Creation (sustainability)".

As "genuine faith and spirituality entail action", the Chiang Mai Declaration calls for "radical and collective responses, not only from Asia and Oceania, but also from the worldwide faith community".

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# **AGAPE Consultation on Poverty, Wealth and Ecology in Asia and the Pacific**

**Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2-6 November 2009**

**WCC-CCA-PCC**

## **The Chiang Mai Declaration**

### **Preamble**

1. We, people of faith and church leaders from Asia and the Oceania, with the accompaniment of our sisters and brothers from other continents, have gathered in Chiang Mai, Thailand, from 02 to 06 November 2009 to reflect deeply on the fundamental links between impoverishment, wealth creation and accumulation, and ecological crisis according to our Christian faith, in dialogue with other faiths, and from the perspectives of Indigenous Peoples, women and young persons. We met at the time of the Buddhist *Loy Khratong* Festival – when people offer flowers and light candles and incense to give thanks to the River Goddess. The festival became for us a symbol of our coming together in the common search for the River of Life.

### **A world and region in peril**

2. Our planet, and particularly the nations and islands in Asia and the Oceania, are confronted by unparalleled and multiple catastrophes.
3. Asian nations, which account for more than half of the global population, have often been held up as a successful application of the neoliberal economic model, described as "economic tigers and dragons" and a "global factory". But our region's wealth is being siphoned off in the form of corporate profits squeezed from cheap, predominantly female, labour; external debt payments to international financial institutions made at the

expense of massive cuts in social expenditures; the privatization and commodification of land; and exports of people, lumber and other “raw materials” from poor to wealthier nations. We listened with heavy hearts to stories of: Burmese migrant workers fleeing political and economic oppression only to encounter other forms of oppression in Thailand; tens of thousands of farmer suicides in India; Asian students falling into debt because of spiralling tuition fees; women in the Mekong region trafficked into prostitution...

4. Because Asia’s system of wealth creation is centred on the global economy, our region has been heavily battered by the current global financial and economic crisis caused by heightened “financialization” (or the de-linking of finance from the real economy). Factory workers in export processing zones have been retrenched in large numbers. The monies sent home by our migrant workers are dwindling. Many of our governments are too indebted and cash-strapped to respond with even the barest of social protection.
5. In the pursuit of super-profits, the neoliberal system of wealth creation and accumulation in Asia has not only produced poverty, it has generated tremendous social and ecological debts – debts owed to Mother Earth; to the impoverished, Indigenous Peoples and women who bear a disproportionate burden of adjustment to drastic changes in the climate and the rest of ecology; and to young people and forthcoming generations whose very futures are endangered by dominant production and consumption patterns that fail to respect the regenerative limits of our planet. We listened with heavy hearts to stories of: forced ecological migrants as sea waters rise and threaten to inundate Oceania islands and archipelagic nations like Bangladesh; Indigenous Peoples dispossessed of their ancestral lands by mining corporations and mega-dam projects, resulting in the ethnocide of indigenous communities and cultures; villages facing famine and water shortages across the region...
6. In Asia and Oceania as in elsewhere, violence has often been used by the economically and politically-powerful in securing the planet’s “natural resources”. Imperialist terror and greed desecrate both Mother Earth and women’s bodies. We listened with heavy hearts to stories of: church people gunned down in the Philippines for defending ecology and farmers’ and workers’ rights; communities dying from toxic pollutants in military

bases; intensified violence against women in their own homes in times of economic hardship and in militarized zones...

### **Asia-Oceania spiritualities in response to impoverishment, greed and ecological destruction**

7. We believe that the interlinked economic and ecological crises are manifestations of a larger ethical, moral and spiritual crisis. For it is in putting absolute faith in "free markets", in worshipping wealth and material goods, and in following a gospel of consumerism and mindless expansion that human beings have exploited their own sisters and brothers and have ravaged their only home.
8. Therefore, overcoming the crises requires nothing less than a radical spiritual renewal. We reaffirm, according to our Christian tradition, that such a transformation must be founded on the Biblical imperatives of God's preferential option for the marginalized (justice) and the sacredness of all Creation (sustainability).
9. At the same time, we draw important learnings from the deep wells of Asian traditional wisdom. "When you unite wealth, you divide the people. When you divide wealth, you unite the people."
10. From the peoples of Oceania, we learned about the peoples' intrinsic connection with lands and oceans and all life therein in affirmation of God's presence in all Creation. It is in this understanding that the peoples of Oceania are striving to regain a spirituality of the ecology in which we "live and move and have our being".
11. From the spirituality of Asian and Oceanic Indigenous Peoples, we learned to expand the greatest Biblical teaching to "love our neighbours" to "Mother Water ", "Brother Kangaroo", and "Cousin Tree".
12. From eco-feminism, we learned about the falsehood of dichotomies between mind and body and between humans and nature that translate into inequitable relationships.
13. From the vibrant indigenous, women and youth movements in Asia and Oceania, we learned about the spirituality that is found in resistance and political engagement. We derived hope from

stories of: indigenous women transferring traditional knowledge and communitarian values and contributing to sustainable economies; and young people playing a leading role in preventing land grab by Arcelor-Mittal, a multinational steel company in the state of Jharkhand in India.

14. From other ancient faiths and religions birthed in Asia, we learned about Buddhism's "middle way"; Hinduism's *ahimsa* (nonviolence) towards ecology and all human beings; and Islam's injunction to fight oppression in all its forms.
15. Genuine faith and spirituality entail action. We assert that the multiple crises we confront today urgently demand radical and collective responses, not only from Asia and Oceania, but also from the worldwide faith community. United in God's love, we *can and must* begin to construct flourishing and harmonious economies where:
  - all participate and have a voice in the decisions that impact on their lives;
  - people's basic needs are provided for through just livelihoods;
  - social reproduction and the care work done predominantly by women are supported and valued; and
  - air, water, land and energy sources that are necessary to sustain life are protected and preserved.

In short, we can and must shape Economies of Life and Economies for Life.

### **Our commitments and calls**

16. In view of the foregoing, we, the participants of the AGAPE Consultation on Poverty, Wealth and Ecology in Asia and the Pacific, commit to the following:
  1. Build and strengthen a faith-based network or networks advancing social, economic, and ecological justice in partnership with civil society organizations and social movements in the region;
  2. Share widely, communicate creatively (e.g. through websites and videos), discuss deeply, and teach consistently the Chiang Mai Declaration together with the Asia-Pacific Indigenous Peoples',

Women's and Youth Statements on Poverty, Wealth and Ecology to our constituencies, congregations, seminary students, and partners; and

3. Be living alternatives that promote sustainable communities beginning with practising eco-just consumption.

17. We further call on our churches in Asia and Oceania, and global and regional ecumenical organizations to:

1. Emphasize research and advocacy efforts on redistributive economic policies, especially land reform, and alternative consumption and production systems in the Asia and the Oceania;
2. Support Oceania churches' initiatives and advocacy efforts on resettlement plans, adaptation and reparations to small island states in Oceania and other Asian countries rendered victims by ecological and climate change to address the ecological and climate debt owed to them;
3. Accompany member churches of the WCC and PCC in Oceania in:
  - Developing local, national, sub-regional, regional and international plans to ensure respect for and protection of the rights of forced climate migrants;
  - Promoting research on prospective resettlement plans and on instruments such as ecological audits to ascertain the costs of resettlement; and
  - Developing the framework for a new Convention or Protocol on Resettlement to cater for forced ecological migrants; and
  - Commissioning studies on the links between poverty, wealth and ecology in the Oceania region with a view to presenting the findings in the 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the Pacific Conference of Churches in 2012

4. Allocate more resources to WCC's programmes on ecological debt, climate change, and water in order to address the incredibly pressing challenges in these areas;
5. Empower women, Indigenous Peoples and youth – who bring a wealth of wisdom and energy – to participate fully in policy – and decision-making in church processes, especially in the urgent work on economic and ecological justice;
6. Conduct ecological debt and gender audits to account for the social and ecological costs of church initiatives and activities;
7. Strengthen and provide a platform for Indigenous Peoples with adequate financing and resourcing of the existing Indigenous Peoples' desk at the WCC and immediately convene a working group to develop the terms of reference and scope for an Indigenous Peoples' Christian Action Forum;
8. Participate in alternative lifestyle cultures that reject consumerist corporate cultures through regenerating common public spaces of dissent and creation, and engaging in public awareness and education especially among young people; and
9. Organize a dialogue on poverty, wealth and ecology with multi-faith communities to bring meaningful solidarity.