

African bishops: Continent has not shared success of poverty reduction

CAPE TOWN, South Africa – Although average incomes in Africa have risen, the continent has not shared in the global success in reducing poverty, African bishops said before a visit to Europe to share their concerns over efforts to reduce extreme poverty worldwide.

The bishops called for a new approach in Africa, focusing on implementing the Millennium Development Goals in Africa, using the “principles of morals and ethics, economic growth, subsidiarity, common good and benefits accruing from resources.”

World leaders will meet for a three-day summit at U.N. headquarters Sept. 21-23 to review the eight goals set in 2000 with a 2015 deadline. Health issues are the backbone of the development goals, which include cutting child mortality rates by two-thirds, halving world hunger, reducing the maternal mortality rate by three-quarters, providing universal access to health care for women, and reversing the spread of HIV and AIDS.

The statement from the Symposium of the Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar, which represents bishops in 54 African countries, was issued just before a Sept. 7-24 bishops’ visit to Europe.

It said the bishops view the development goals as an opportunity “to restore to the poor their human dignity and to correct the grave injustices done them.”

They said records show that the Catholic Church in Africa “has contributed significantly to the provision of schools, hospitals, clinics and health centers, mostly in rural areas where governments in Africa are unable to reach.”

The statement said that, based on its own analysis, the symposium agreed with findings by the African Union that “progress in the key areas of poverty reduction, employment and most of the health-related goals remains disappointing despite notable progress” in primary school enrollment, immunization, stemming the spread of HIV and AIDS and increasing the representation of women in decision-making.

The statement urged the European Union to place “greater emphasis on graduating the poor from external reliance to self-sustaining independence.”

Unemployment in Africa has been worsened by the economic crises in developed countries and the “exploitation of natural resources in Africa has not benefited the people of Africa” in terms of job creation, the bishops said.

“Africa is particularly rich in human and natural resources, yet many of our people are still left to wallow in poverty and misery, wars and conflicts, crisis and chaos,” the bishops said.

The church in Africa is concerned at the lack of skills among young Africans to enable them to benefit from multinational companies’ extraction of minerals on the continent, the statement said.

The bishops commended the U.S. Congress for making disclosure of payments from oil and mining companies to governments around the world a legal requirement, noting that this “will go a long way in fighting corruption globally” and “significantly contribute to meaningful development” and achievement of the development goals.

“SECAM will continue to use advocacy to ensure that national governments are accountable for using revenues to address essential services like health care, education and job creation,” the statement said.

Bishop Louis Portella Mbuyu of Kinkala, Republic of Congo, president of his nation’s bishops’ conference, said in a statement that “large sums of money flow out of the African continent illicitly” and are “pocketed by African elites and transnational companies,” disappearing into “secret (often European) bank accounts.”

The European Union “could contribute to recuperating these uncollected tax revenues,” said the bishop, who was leading the delegation to Europe. He noted increasing pressure to ensure that European Union legislation includes a requirement for companies, including those in the extractive sector, to be “transparent about their operations in every developing country they operate in.”

Bishop Francisco Silota of Chimoio, Mozambique, said “inadequate ambition, the lack of a human rights approach, and an emphasis on outcomes at the expense of

processes” have caused problems for the Millennium Development Goals.

Noting that “northern donors have failed to deliver the money they pledged for development,” Bishop Silota said that recently promised investment in small-scale agriculture will be insufficient to rebuild this sector after decades of neglect.

Noting a “growing awareness” in Africa “that we Africans, and Africans only, will find our way out of poverty,” he said the church in Africa plays an important role and “is often the only actor, in the cases of the absence of effective governments, to reach remote communities.”

The church’s “experience puts us in a strong position to inform government policy for Africa’s development,” Bishop Silota said.