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Church plays 'critical role' in development, says economist

Cole Stangler | Feb. 17, 2011

WASHINGTON -- The church, with its proven track record of delivering basic social services, has a critical role to play in sustainable and equitable development, an Oxford University economics professor and development specialist told a meeting of Catholic social ministry leaders here Feb. 15.

"What [the field of economics has] discovered is what you've known for at least a century," said Paul Collier, director of the U.K.-based Centre for the Study of African Economies. "What makes people work properly, is not primarily incentives. It's internalizing the objectives of the organization."

"Around the world, the church has built organizations that do just that," he said.

Collier addressed a plenary session of the 2011 Catholic Social Ministry Gathering, which brought about 300 leaders in Catholic social ministry to Washington Feb. 13-16.

The economist said that development failures in Africa stem from two unsuccessful models. The first is based on 1950s European style state-run organizations that have proved to be ineffective, and the second, popularized in the 1990s, uses monetary incentives too closely tied to performance standards.

These models produced organizations, Collier argued, that often fail to deliver on their promises and mission because people who work for them put their own interests and the organizations' interests ahead of those of the general public.

By contrast, church organizations have time and again proven that they are effective at delivering basic social services like education and healthcare because it is understood that the chruch provides a common good and a service that is in everyone's best interest, he said.

"What I've been advocating is a model, in which on the ground level, a core of basic services -- healthcare, education -- is provided by organizations that have solved the problem of motivating their workforce," Collier said.

Publicly funded development aid should go to the organizations most effective at delivering basic services, whether a church group or a foreign nongovernmental organization, he said.

Collier said that religious organizations have the ability to both "reach down" and "reach up" by providing essential services on a hyper-local level but also appealing to people on a national and global scale in a way that governments in developing countries typically cannot.

He also emphasized the importance of intelligent trade policy, and effective ethical management of natural resources, so that the "sad history of the past does not have to repeat itself."

The Oxford professor had harsh words for what he called "naïve environmentalists" who prioritize preservation over much needed development efforts to combat poverty.

"We are custodians, not curators," Collier said. "The Christian concept of stewardship of nature will harness nature in the struggle against poverty."

Finally, Collier called on Western governments to continue foreign aid, praising the United Kingdom for continuing its aid commitments despite some of the deepest budget cuts in its history. If the United States were to cut foreign aid, it would ethically deprive the nation of its ability to maintain a serious commitment to development, he argued.

"Generosity, especially in a time of adversity, gives us the right to speak and act on other matters,? Collier said.

Later in the day, Catholic Social Ministry Gathering participants attended meetings scheduled with Congressional representatives to advocate for Catholic social and economic justice priorities. The conference concluded Feb. 16.

[Cole Stangler is a Washington-based freelance writer.]

NCR is covering the annual Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington this week. For short updates throughout the day, be sure to check out Michael Sean Winters' blog **Distinctly Catholic** **[1].** For more lengthy reports, see our continuing story coverage:

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