

# **Africa Europe Faith and Justice Network History, Mission, Challenges**

## **Introduction**

It is a privilege and a challenge to be here at the opening of the jubilee year of the Africa Europe Faith and Justice Network. So many persons and events are coming back to my mind. My journey towards the founding and with the AEFJN started in 1983 in Washington DC, proceeded to Rome and continues in the Netherlands. The history of the Network, its uniqueness, and its dynamism keeps fascinating me. The first part of this talk is about the Africa Faith and Justice Network in The USA, the second part is about the founding and the beginning of the AEFJN. Part 3: AEFJN during 25 years of observing, analyzing, and action. Part 4: Challenges before us.

## **1. Africa Faith and Justice Network in the USA**

From where did the idea of such a network come? How did it come about? What makes it so unique? Actually, it all started in the United States. Here I turn to the home-page of the American SMA province where Fr. Ted Hayden SMA writes:

### ***1.1. Focus on Africa***

"In 1979 the American Province decided that it should have at least one member of S.M.A. working full time on justice and peace issues as they relate to Africa. Father Leo Op 't Hoog, a member of the Dutch Province of S.M.A. with 25 years missionary experience in Ghana agreed to begin working on justice issues as they relate to Africa. Working with groups opposing apartheid in South Africa he pushed for economic sanctions against South Africa until apartheid was abolished. He helped these groups to widen their interest to other instances of injustice in Africa. He cited the low prices that African countries received for their exports such as coffee, cocoa and minerals and the high prices they had to pay for imports.

### ***1.2. CARA: Feasibility Study and Founding of AFJN***

From these meetings it became obvious that a more concerted effort would be needed if some of the more serious injustices perpetrated against the people of Africa were to be addressed. In 1980 the Provincials of the S.M.A. Fathers, Missionaries of Africa and the Holy Ghost Fathers asked CARA (Center For Applied Research in the Apostolate) to determine if an inter-congregational Justice and Peace office could be established. When the study concluded that there was support for such a venture, about twenty Religious Congregations with personnel in Africa decided to create a coalition which would be called the Africa Faith and Justice Network. It began its work in the fall of 1983. Its first-full time director was Father Joseph Donders, M.Afr., (White Fathers) who had just concluded 25 years of service in East Africa. He was joined by Sister Maura Browne, SND (Sister of Notre Dame de Namur) who was an attorney with twelve years of experience in Kenya.

### ***1.3. AFJN Mission***

“AFJN was founded to transform United States mentality and policy towards Africa and her people. The motivation to work for the transformation of American mentality comes from a deep respect for our brothers and sisters in Africa and the desire to walk with them in their quest for genuine justice and peace.” (AFJN Mission Statement)

AFJN has grown rapidly and now has over seventy members. AFJN monitors U.S. policy toward Africa as well as the policies of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the United Nations and other multilateral agencies. Among the issues which AFJN is addressing are: shipments of arms, ammunition and other military equipment to Africa, and the economic injustices caused by the structural adjustment programs of the World Bank and IMF. AFJN has become known in Congress and among voluntary agencies for its wide grass-roots connections within Africa, the thoroughness of its research and its ability to marshal support policies which would eliminate some of the injustices to the peoples of Africa."

### ***1.4. AFJN 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary***

At the beginning of 1983, I was student at the Catholic University of America in Washington DC, I attended a meeting at the CARA office in which final steps were taken towards the founding of the Africa Faith and Justice Network. From March 1 to 3, 2013 the AFJN will celebrate its 30th anniversary at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, with Cardinal Peter Turkson of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace as keynote speaker.

## **2. Africa Europe Faith and Justice Network**

Without the American Africa Faith and Justice Network we would most likely not have been here today. That is the reason I want to pay due respect to our missionary sisters and brothers in the United States.

### ***2.1. Initiative of the Society of the African Missions***

In 1986, Fr. Patrick Harrington, at the time General Superior of the Society of African Missions (SMA), asked Fr. Wim van Frankenhuijsen SMA, member of the SMA general council and executive secretary of the Justice and Peace Commission of the USG/UISG, to investigate the feasibility of setting up a Africa Faith and Justice Network in Europe, similar to the American Network. Wim accepted the challenge and invited a few persons to form with him an Ad Hoc commission. Among the members were Maryknoll Sister Helene O'Sullivan, Associate Director of SEDOS, a few members of the J&P Commission and some others. I was at the time JPIC coordinator at the SVD generalate and member of the USG/UISG J&P commission and was asked to join the Ad Hoc commission.

### ***2.2. A complex and challenging process***

It was rather easy to accept the vision statement of the American Network with a priority focus on the promotion of economic justice for Africa. But how to give concrete expression to our mission and through which channels? Rather early in the process we concluded that the members of the network, still to be founded, would be the general administrations of missionary congregations /

institutions. Participation of the members of the congregations/institutes in Africa as well as in Europe would be promoted through the generalates. Later in the process we developed the idea of creating national antennae in Europe as well as in Africa. We were very conscious of the importance of the participation of the membership in Africa. We envisioned a full African-European partnership. While the American Network placed its focus on the American Congress in Washington DC, where would the European Network focus its attention and action? Wim van Frankenhuijsen travelled to Brussels and Strasbourg. After consulting various persons and organizations it was decided that it would be preferred to target our attention in the first place on the European Commission in Brussels and secondly on the European Parliament. Wim was also advised that it would be difficult to start a lobby and advocacy office on our own. It would be easier and more effective to join an existing organization.

Following this recommendation an agreement was reached with the European Ecumenical Organization for Development (EECOD) to operate under their umbrella as the Africa Desk.

There was also the question of the name for the Network. From the side of AFJN in the United States the objection was made that we would use the same name. For that reason it was decided to use AFJN/Europe. After some years it would become Africa Europe Faith and Justice Network, which highlights much better the partnership idea. If I am not mistaken has the French name from the beginning been Réseau Foi et Justice Europe-Afrique.

### ***2.3. Financial self-reliance: a guarantee for an independent voice***

One important issue remained to be resolved, namely, the financial support for the office and the salary for the executive secretary and other members of the staff. I was proposed to ask each participating congregation/institute a fixed amount and in addition a certain amount for each member working in Africa. The financial dependence on the participating congregations/institutes has throughout the years been experienced as a strength and a weakness. The Network did not need to worry about particular interests of sponsors and it gave the member congregations/institutes the feeling of ownership. This financial self-reliance placed, of course, constraints on the budget. From the president's report I have come to know that finances are still a matter of great concern. It is actually rather amazing that the Network, in spite of limited annual budgets, has had such dedicated and competent staff members and that so much has been accomplished.

### ***2.4. Foundation Day June 13, 1988; Start Executive Office 1 January 1989***

After a process of more than two years representatives of 13 congregations / institutes came together at the office of SEDOS for the formal founding of the Africa Faith and Justice Network/Europe. From among the members an executive committee of nine was elected. It was decided that the executive secretary would become the tenth member of this committee. The various proposals of the Ad Hoc committee were presented and approved. On January 1, 1989, the first executive secretary, Fr. Frans Thoolen SMA, began his work at the Africa Desk of EECOD in Brussels.

### ***2.5. Pioneering years***

There were many advantages in starting under the umbrella of EECOD, but the cooperation did not

always go as smooth as we had hoped for. The executive Committee resided in Rome and Frans Thoolen had to find his way within the context of EECOD and the European Commission on his own. I remember that Wim van Frankenhuijsen, being the president of the Executive Committee, quite often had to function as crisis manager. With the guidance of the Executive Committee Frans proved to be a dedicated pioneer and laid the foundations for an effective functioning office. The challenges were many: how to get in contact with the membership in Europe as well as in Africa, how to choose priority issues, how to design actions programs? Looking back after so many years my admiration for Frans is increasing. In 1992 he published the first position paper with the title "Western Development Models and Small Farmers in Africa". I would like to quote from the introduction of this paper, since it gives a good insight in the manner of the Network's method of operating at that time. I quote:

"AFJN/E exists to promote more just en equitable relationships between the people of Africa and the people of the North. The Network recognizes that changes are necessary within African countries. **However, its orientation is to action and advocacy in Europe.**" **The paper continues:**

"At the end of 1989 and early 1990 AFJN/E invited contact persons of the Member Institutions in Africa and Europe to respond to questions raised in "Partners in Change" paper and its supplement. The responses gave a strong indication of what members considered to be the most important themes for the Network. These were discussed at by the General Assembly of AFJN/E in Rome, January 1990. The executive committee then confirmed the focus of Western Development Models and how they affect the position of small farmers in Africa."

I was particularly struck by the last part of the introduction and I quote again:

"The paper considers the past thirty years of 'development', and presents a model of development to which AFJN/E can subscribe. In the light of that model it examines a future path for the small farmers in Africa. Possible proposals to be introduced in Africa are outlined and European policies which could strengthen and support those proposals indicated. **Since AFJN/E's area of action is in Europe there are directions for action and advocacy in Europe.**"

It is worthwhile to note that the idea of partnership between Africa and Europe does not yet get full attention. Emphasis is on action to be undertaken in Europe. In those beginning years it was not so easy to solicit active participation of the membership in Africa. Many factors had to be considered: the political situation, lack of insight in the structural injustices at various levels, limitations in communication and on the part of many religious the pressures of their daily work. Yet even at time efforts were made to involve the membership. The involvement of the membership would considerably increase through the establishment of more and more national antennae and their common meetings in Brussels.

I would recommend that the position paper "Western Development Models and Small Farmers in Africa" in the course of this jubilee year would be made available and once more studied. The future of small farmers in Africa is presently more endangered than ever before. The small farmers are threatened more than ever, they are facing new issues which in the early Nineties were not yet so evident and which are not mentioned in the position paper. To mention just one issue: extensive land grabbing with the consequence of an increasing number of landless farmers and destruction of local eco-systems,

I conclude this second part of my talk with the mentioning of two important facts in the development process of the Network. Due to the fact that EECOD could no longer support its

office in Brussels and the AFJN/E had developed rather well it was decided that the AEFJN would continue independently. I am not sure about the year but I believe it must have been in 1993 or 4. Another important development has been the change from AFJN/E to Africa Europe Faith and Justice Network (AEFJN)

### **3. AEFJN: a quarter of a century of solidarity**

It is not possible to present an extensive history of the developments and accomplishments of the Network. My choice subjects are therefore limited.

#### ***3.1. Strong points regarding Africa and Europe***

There is no doubt that the AEFJN a rather unique network is. At the core of the network is the presence of the participating congregations/institutions in Africa as well as in Europe. The AEFJN website states: "Our strong points regarding Africa and Europe: knowledge of the African reality at grassroots level based on personal experience; a knowledge of the EU policy towards Africa."

It is true that we do have the grassroots knowledge and experience, but the question is: do we make the effort to put it in writing or in picture and communicate it. This issue has had continuous attention on the part of the executive secretariat in Brussels, at general assemblies and within congregation/institutions. It takes time to become more fully conscious that the 'grassroots' are caught in extensive web of local, regional, and international relations. It is encouraging that awareness of this interconnectedness is growing. At a meeting of the SVD JPIC coordinators in Nairobi in July 2011 I had the opportunity to speak about this issue with my confrères in Africa. I had been invited by Fr. Milan Bubak, the JPIC coordinator at the SVD Generalate. Sr. Begona went last July to Nairobi to create a greater awareness and emphasize the importance of effective communication and cooperation at various levels. The development of well-functioning national antennae is certainly a priority for the near future

The gradual establishment of national antennae in an increasing number of European countries has helped to make the Network more effective. Many of the members of these antennae have had extensive experience in Africa and frequently have a circle of contact persons in Africa. The members of the Antennae are not only concerned with the relation of the EU to Africa, but also of their own country's relation to Africa and its influence on European policy. The extensive contacts with the Brussels Secretariat and regular assemblies have been helpful in choosing priorities and action plans. A number of Antennae are now facing the problem of an aging membership. Can anything be done about it?

#### ***3.2. The Executive Secretariat***

The experience of the past almost 25 years has shown that the executive secretary is the key figure for the functioning of the Network. From Frans Thoolen SMA to sr. Begona Inarra MSOLA we have had truly committed executive secretaries. The pressure of their responsibility and work has been high, sometimes too high. With only a few members on the staff and frequent staff changes, the task became even more demanding. Yet the office tackled a wide range of complex issues and provided well-researched positions papers and dossiers which helped the antennae and frequently resulted in action. Less known is the contacts with politicians such as members of European

parliament, and the European Institutions. Quite a number of volunteers have rendered their services translating documents or offering their expertise on issues.

### ***3.3. Important issues and their interconnectedness***

The effects of the debt burden on the people of Africa have been a major concern of AEFJN for a number of years. Questions were raised about the origin of the debts and the terms of re-payment under the so-called structural adjustment programs. An objective observer can easily get the impression that Africa is used and misused as a source for economic benefit. This phenomenon is quite evident in the trade relations that are imposed on the African nations. I mention the Economic Partnership Agreements which the EU on the basis of the Cotonou Agreement is trying to establish with the ACP countries. The underlying principle is: a free market, free trade zones and abolishing existing preferential treatments. Another issue has been and still is the access to quality medicine for all Africans. Economic profit is placed above the health and well-being of people. The trade in small arms and its contribution to so many conflicts is a scandal that needs continuously exposed.

International legal restrictions are of little use without proper instruments for their implementation. The experience of the past years makes us more and more aware that hardly any problem can be dealt with as a single issue. It is interesting to take a look at the AEFJN website and take note of all the topics pertaining to Corporate Justice. To name a few: The World Bank – a major player in land grabbing; exploitation of natural resources and land grabbing; capital flight and its impact on Africa. Climate Change is another multi-factor issue. It is encouraging that in Forum for Action and in the AEFJN newsletters much attention is given to the interconnectedness of issues and problems.

### ***3.4. Land Grabbing: a multiple threat to the economic and cultural integrity of Africa***

The Plan of Action 2011 -2013 which, after extensive consultation with the Antennae, was prepared by the executive secretariat in Brussels gives a good picture of the progress the Network has made in the course of the past 24 years. The Plan of Action paper lists some of the network's strong points regarding Africa and Europe, admits a number of weaknesses and indicates some promising potential partners in Africa. Our partners in Africa, in the first place the members of our own congregations, are going to be of increasing importance for the effectiveness of AEFJN in the future. The players in the socio-economic field in Africa are not only foreigners but also Africans. A good, or maybe a bad example, is land grabbing. Large scale land-grabbing by foreign companies for the production of food and bio-fuels is becoming a major threat to the cultural, socio-economic and ecological integrity of many African countries. It needs to be pointed out that land-grabbing frequently involves an indirect way of water grabbing. As member of the Dutch AEFJN antennae I have become interested in the issue of large-scale land grabbing through food and animal feed companies and particularly through biofuel companies. There is, for example, a rapid spread of jatropha plantations in a number of African countries. The jatropha tree produces nuts for the production of biofuel. It is claimed that the tree does well on poor soil, but this does not mean that only less fertile land is acquired for the jatropha plantations. A Global Market study indicates that in 2015 jatropha plantations will cover 600.000 hectares in Ghana, 226.000 ha in Malawi, 500.000 ha in Madagascar, 170.000 ha in Mozambique, 166.000 ha in Tanzania, and 125.000 ha in Ethiopia. "Half of the 3.2 million hectares of biofuel land identified - in countries from

Mozambique to Senegal - is linked to 11 British companies, more than any other country."

Another example of land grabbing at the service of biofuel and its negative effect on the local population: The Dutch Pension Fund "Stichting Pensioenfonds ABP" - the world's second largest pension fund with a total asset value of €246 billion - is increasingly turning to land and agriculture as targets for investment and profits. Signaling its interest with the slogan "**The world is our farm**". Recently ABP has decided to add timberland to its investment portfolio on the basis that 'investing in timberland is attractive for pension funds as it provides stable and potentially high returns. One such investment is the 60% interest ABP acquired in 2007 in 'Global Solidarity Forest Fund (GSFF)' - a \$100 million investment fund founded by a Swedish diocese and the national Norwegian Church Endowment, OVF, claiming to focus on 'investments with potentially high returns and a strong ethical, environmental and socio-economic profile'.

Its oldest and largest project is 'Chikweti Forest of Niassa' in Mozambique, a commercial forestry plantation comprising pine and eucalyptus mono-culture that is to deliver wood for the domestic and regional construction market in the short term but move into the export of forestry products over the longer term. According to GSFF, the project will also provide environmental benefits and contribute to community based development.

An attractive presentation, but what are the facts? According to an investigation of the Mozambican Ministry of Agriculture and the national Directorate of Lands and Forests in September 2010 is Chikweti occupying 32000 hectares of land illegally without the required land title or 'DUAT'. GSFF denies the findings but does not provide precise information. It has also become evident that there has been no adequate consultation with the local communities and made promises were not fulfilled. Government officials have colluded in this shady land acquisition process. The loss of farmland has not been compensated by long term employment. For example the number of workers in the Chikweti project has halved from 3000 in 2011 to 1500 in early 2012. The mono-culture of pine and eucalyptus threatens the native ecosystems. The eucalyptus requires enormous amounts of water. It is right to speak of a land and water grab.

Undertaking action requires a thorough verification of the facts. The most important part of this has to be done by our partners in Mozambique. What are the real facts about the land acquisition, how and to what extent have the local communities and owners been victimized, what about the involvement of corrupt local players? Action undertaken at the European level will remain ineffective without solid information about the real facts and action at the local level. Hopefully it will be possible to move towards a Mozambican Antenna which can cooperate with concerned NGO's and groups in Mozambique. This example shows that land grabbing involves various elements of corporate justice. I would therefore recommend the brochure; "**An ethical and biblical view on land grabbing**" published by the Working group of AEFJN for Food Sovereignty in June 2011.

In the introduction is stated; "The members of the Africa-Europe Faith and Justice Network offers this paper, as a tool for reflection and action, to groups in Africa and Europe who are concerned with the protection of vulnerable communities affected by land grabbing."

#### **4. Challenges before us**

I was asked to give some tips for the future. It is like walking on a slippery road. Anyway, here are a few challenges for the future.

#### ***4.1 Africans must own the agenda***

This is one of the subheadings in the article “International Solidarity Through AEFJN” published in Forum for Action, 2007/1, n.45. Kenyan academic Peter Mbuchi Methu writes: “... This article does not claim to represent any official position. On the contrary, it represents the perspective of the author as both African and Christian. It is my opinion that AEFJN has great potential and importance in addressing, and hopefully redressing, issues of faith and international justice. Yet, no one is known to have eaten potential. On the contrary, anything potentially useful must be personally known and made known to others before it can be appropriately transformed into good services. AEFJN is not exempted from this rule.” In simple words personal experience and firsthand experience are essential in the work of the Network. I am not use if it would not be better to speak of co-ownership. When I Looked with African confrères at the mission statement on the AEFJN website, they wondered why not more attention is given to the African side of the Network. The role of the African membership and antennae is not yet spelled out.

#### ***4.2. The importance of well-functioning antennae***

Europe has had a number of well-functioning antennae, yet some antennae are facing the problem of aging and as a consequence a loss of membership. Within the past two years 4 members of the Dutch antennae died and a fifth member resigned at the age of 90. For some time we thought that we had to stop, instead we started thinking about new ways of new recruiting members and revitalizing the Antenna. Now we have a few young religious from Africa and Asia, a lay-missionary, and a few lay persons who are close to the world of the religious and have a particular interest in Africa. One of the lay participants is going to work at the Catholic University of Mozambique and will become an important link between that country and the Dutch antenna. The challenge is: How to keep the Antennae dynamic with a mixed membership of lay and religious.

#### ***4.3. An executive director***

The third suggestion which I had in mind is already formulated in proposal 3 of the “Proposals to the AGM based on the 2012 Review”.

Herman Wijten SVD  
AEFJN AGM, 9 November 2012