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# UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE

## SUSTAINABLE SOCIETIES, RESPONSIVE CITIZENS

BONN, GERMANY 3-5 SEPTEMBER 2011

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*As representatives of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (IBVM) and Congregation Jesu (CJ), our mission is to improve lives in the world's most impoverished nations, while at the same time encouraging reduced, sustainable consumption by all peoples. This exceedingly complex task has become even more difficult to achieve in the current economic climate.*

This year's UN conference on *Sustainable Societies, Responsive Citizens* was an opportunity to address this challenge. IBVM and CJ delegates joined more than 1 500 members of civil society in Bonn, Germany to engage with speakers, experts and peers on a wide range of themes that fit into the overarching jigsaw of sustainability. The delegates included Marica Basic, Mary Burkart, Elena Cerdeiras, Clare Condon, Alexander Flores, Rene Salazar, Doryne Kirby, Mary Mallany, Aurora Moreno, Maria Llinas Ramos, Mauricio Orellana and Pat Robb.

Sustainable development and the link between social disadvantage and environmental degradation was one of the key themes of the conference. This was powerfully voiced by the international activist Vandana Shiva in her keynote address, where she discussed the false distinction between ecological concerns and poverty alleviation. These are interlinked issues, and in order to solve one, policy makers and responsive citizens must address both. *(For more information please visit the official conference website: <http://www.un.org/wcm/content/site/ngoconference/>)*

This theme of 'connecting the dots' was echoed throughout the conference in discussions from water to the green economy and land rights to resource management.

Many speakers explored the issue of **population** and its effect on **sustainable development**. Sustainable agricultural practices are intertwined with all aspects of social and environmental development, as a lack of employment leads to low incomes, bringing about food insecurity and a reduction in the capacity of agricultural sectors.

**Youth engagement** and **volunteerism** are also linked, and both were of central focus. Volunteerism was highlighted throughout the conference as being vastly undervalued as a resource. There needs to be space in society for youth to engage in civic activities in order to harness undervalued potential, and volunteerism can offer this outlet while encouraging social engagement. Addressing these seemingly disparate factors is key to ensuring development, **more sustainable societies** and **responsive citizens**.



A panel discussion at the 64th Annual United Nations Conference

Conference participants were encouraged to reassess the status quo of development, economics and resource use. Sister Mary Mallany from Canada noted that the words *sustain* and *abstain* come from the same Latin root, adding: **'We can't have everything; we need to learn what we cannot have.'**

These were the same sentiments articulated by UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon in August this year when he stated: **'For most of the last century, we mined our way to growth and burned our way to prosperity. Those days are over.'**

A highlight of the conference was the IBVM workshop presented by Mauricio Orellana and Alexander Flores on **sustainable farming practices** in El Salvador.

Since the end of the civil war, ex-combatants from El Salvador have been supported in their return to work by community groups such as Loreto Canada, Loreto US and SalvAide. Projects include dairy, cashew and brown sugar production, fishing co-operatives, savings and credit unions and youth and women's programs. Despite the poverty of the region, its susceptibility to serious flooding and lack of infrastructure, the farmers' co-operatives that Mauricio and Alexander are involved with have gained certification by Fair Trade, as both organic and environmentally sound, and established markets overseas.



The IBVM workshop on farming practices in El Salvador, from left to right: Alexander Flores, Rene Salazar and Mauricio Orellana

For the IBVM and CJ delegates, this conference was a valuable opportunity to connect with representatives of the Mary Ward tradition. It was also a chance to **engage with advocates** from diverse NGOs around the globe.



Members of the IBVM/CJ group, from left to right: Mauricio Orellana, Maria Ramos, Mary Burkart, Aurora Moreno and Elena Cerdeiras

Meeting the other networks of NGOs clearly illustrated that, even in the face of great challenges, people are working to create a more sustainable society. Poverty, environmental degradation, unsustainable practices and social discord can seem overwhelming, yet the IBVM/CJ delegates left the conference encouraged that action is being taken at many levels. We saw that the United Nations is a forum through which grass roots participation can lead to greater change. As Aurora Mureno from Spain said: 'I felt that the United Nations came down to Earth ... We mustn't think it's inaccessible.'

The conference produced a **declaration** which will be used to shape future policy discussions on the issues of sustainability and civil engagement, with a particular focus on the agenda of the Rio+20 summit to be held in 2012 .

**We would love to hear from you!**

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