

## 10. Signs of Hope

At the international level one has to look hard for encouraging examples of deliberate and concrete actions which bring more than piecemeal improvements for poor people and the environment. Despite its shortcomings, the HIPC initiative to reduce foreign debt (see p.61 above) is one such step in the right direction. Changes in the policies of the World Bank, aimed at greater transparency, environmental awareness and cooperation with organizations in civil society, should be welcomed. The United Nations' series of conferences on environment, population, social development, gender issues and human rights have produced important declarations and promises though most still wait to be implemented.

Regionally, several noteworthy examples of cooperation beyond mere economic liberalization can be found, of which the European Union is the most advanced example. Yet it too is finding it difficult to convince its citizens that improving social policies is at least as important as promoting economic cooperation.

The scope for independent national policies is generally reduced in the wake of growing globalization, and local initiatives can also hardly avoid the negative effects of this process. Nevertheless, at the level of civil society there are examples of initiatives which go against the tide in seeking to participate in the (global) economy on their own terms and to establish just, participatory and sustainable communities. A few examples of such signs of hope are given in this last chapter. While not downplaying the importance of charity, we shall concentrate here on examples which emphasize self-help and participation.

### Fair trade

When people bought goods and services in earlier times, they often knew the producer. The development and spread of international trade has steadily weakened this link between producer and consumer. Not knowing where the goods we purchase come from or the conditions under which they have been produced limits the possibilities for socially

and environmentally responsible consumption, making it difficult to apply ethics in everyday economic life.

At the same time, small producers have gained little from expanding conventional international trade. Their percentage of the price paid by the ultimate consumer is negligible compared to what is received by the intermediaries who sell the products to export companies which pass them on to shopping chains in the country of destination. Peruvian asparagus-pickers earn only 0.2 percent of the final price. Wages for Sri Lankan tea plantation workers – whose health, education and housing needs are almost completely neglected – account for only 7 percent of the price paid by the consumer. Brazilian grape workers, who often suffer from pesticide-linked illnesses, get less than 8 US cents per kilo.

To shorten this gap between producers and consumers, Alternative Trade Organizations (ATOs) buy goods directly from small producer groups in the South and sell these through shops, mail order companies, churches and the like. Producers thus have a better chance to realize a fair price for their products and a decent and more secure income. Since the mid-1960s several hundred ATOs have been established, and the retail value of "fair trade" between the South and the North is estimated at US\$300-500 million per year.<sup>1</sup> Although this is a small proportion of overall trade flows, it is rising and can be significant in key markets such as coffee. Fair trade has also enhanced awareness of the social and environmental impacts of purchasing decisions, as products often include information about their origin.

Fair trade products are now moving into mainstream outlets such as supermarkets, greatly increasing their potential market shares. In the Netherlands, for example, the Max Havelaar Foundation and others have been successful in introducing fair trade coffee, tea, chocolate, honey and bananas in supermarket chains. In the United Kingdom, Christian Aid launched a Global Supermarket Campaign urging supermarkets to establish a set of ethical principles for their purchases from the South and to implement an independently monitored code of conduct for all

overseas suppliers of own-brand products by the year 2000.

Church-related organizations in Switzerland were successful in convincing the giant Migros supermarket chain to pressure Del Monte to ensure that conditions for pineapple plantation workers in the Philippines were improved. Since 1983, when Del Monte agreed, several monitoring visits have been paid to evaluate the implementation of the agreement.<sup>2</sup> Another Swiss campaign encourages buyers of athletic shoes to ask shops to adhere to a code of conduct guaranteeing workers who produce the shoes a decent salary, minimum social rights and freedom to organize.<sup>3</sup>

Working conditions in the textile and clothing industry are notoriously bad. While some seamstresses in Honduras may work 20 hours a day for 31 US cents an hour, conditions in the North are not always much better. In 1995 state officials in California freed 71 Thai immigrants from a sweatshop in Los Angeles. They had been forced to work for up to 17 hours a day, were held captive in a razor-wired compound and were paid between 60 cents and \$1.60 an hour at a time when the legal minimum wage was \$4.25. Encouraged by a survey showing that three-quarters of US shoppers would be willing to pay higher prices for clothing and shoes bearing a "No Sweat" label, it has been agreed to establish a code of conduct which prohibits child labour, forced labour and worker abuse, establishes health and safety standards, recognizes the right to join a union, limits working hours to 60 a week and insists that workers are paid at least the legal minimum wage in every country in which garments are made.

Child labour has become a growing international concern. According to the International Labour Office (ILO), in 1995 more than 30 percent of children in Bangladesh between 10 and 14 years were "economically active". While most of them work in the informal sector, many are employed in the clothing and textile industry, which is of great importance for the economy of Bangladesh. Between 1983 and 1995 the number of manufacturers of clothes in the

country grew from 47 to 2224; and clothing exports rose from 4 to 63 percent of total exports. After the Child Labor Coalition in the USA threatened a boycott campaign, the clothing industry in Bangladesh signed an agreement with the ILO and UNICEF to end child labour in the production of clothes for export. Schools were established to rehabilitate the children, and it was agreed that parents of formerly employed children would receive a monthly compensation for income lost.

The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) has signed an agreement with FIFA, the world football governing body, to ensure that footballs bearing its logo are not produced by using child labour. The code says that only workers over 15 will be employed, limits the work week to 48 hours, sets health and safety standards and acknowledges the rights of workers to form or join trade unions and bargain collectively.<sup>4</sup> Another international programme, Rugmark, has targeted the use of child labour in the production of hand-knotted carpets. Exporters may attach the Rugmark label to their carpets after meeting stringent requirements ensuring that no child labour is used and that official minimum wages are paid. Importers voluntarily contribute 1 percent of the export value of the carpets to support schools and vocational training for children.

Although the reduction of child labour can be applauded, these campaigns also leave some open questions. Since only about 5 percent of child workers are employed in export-oriented sectors, actions of this kind cannot finally solve the problem.<sup>5</sup> Only the reduction of absolute poverty can finally end child labour.

Moreover, Southern countries fear that new social and environmental regulations can be a disguised form of protectionism which increases their production costs, harms their competitiveness and thus reduces their access to Northern markets. Indeed, the US law on child labour stipulates that such labour should not endanger the jobs of adults in the North. Southern countries also argue that some of these trade measures are inherently unfair as they can only be used by

the economically powerful against the weak. What comparable instrument might Bangladesh use to ensure that the North does not export products which have been produced with high carbon dioxide emissions?

Positive measures to encourage socially and environmentally responsible production, such as reduced taxes and lower tariffs, may be preferable to boycotts and bans. Rising consumer awareness of the social and environmental aspects of production can also provide new opportunities for Southern economies. Although only 6.5 percent of the OECD countries' consumption was met by imports from the South in 1996, this is expected to increase to 14 percent over the coming decade.<sup>6</sup> Many of the export products are in sectors where new social and environmental requirements are emerging. Innovative action is needed to link up with these newly emerging markets for fair trade products so that benefits can be reaped from the globalizing economy.

Growth rates in the fair trade sector often surpass those in other sectors. Producers of fair trade products receive higher prices for their products, can create more jobs and often benefit from more secure export outlets than their counterparts in conventional trade. The International Federation of Alternative Trade (IFAT), which groups the ATOs, has identified several differences between ATOs and conventional trade channels:

- They give priority to small producers who find it difficult to undertake export trade without a sympathetic marketing partner.
- They are specially interested in how producer groups are organized, preferring groups in which members have a say in running the organization and which provide such benefits as education and welfare schemes.
- They pay prices which allow the producer a reasonable return and often pay for orders in advance.
- They build their range around the products made by the producers they want to support.
- They promote their suppliers among their customers, giving information about the project, the locality and the difficulties faced by small producers.

- They aim to provide assistance with information on overseas marketing requirements and help with matters such as design, technology, packaging, labelling and sales promotion.<sup>7</sup>

### Eco-wood

Tropical deforestation (an example is the Philippines, where 60 percent of the land was forested 40 years ago, compared to 10 percent today) is the object of intense scrutiny by Western environmentalists. This often annoys Southern governments, which accuse rich countries of hypocrisy (they razed their forests ages ago and produce 80 percent of the world's greenhouse gases) and protectionism. But the clearance of tropical forests is also a concern for local populations, which depend on them for their livelihood. The clash between the interests of local communities on the one hand and business and government on the other hand can result in violence. Frustrated local landowners on Pavuvu, in the Solomon Islands, set three bulldozers of a Malaysian logging firm on fire in 1995; a few months later an anti-logging leader was brutally killed.

In the Solomon Islands, uncontrolled logging – mostly by Malaysian and South Korean companies – continues at three times the estimated sustainable level, with forests predicted to be logged within the next ten to fifteen years. With logging accounting for 42 percent of exports, 16 percent of GDP and more than 60 percent of government revenues, forest depletion is a looming disaster for the Solomon Islands' economy. Meanwhile, local communities see their forests destroyed, their environment polluted and their land rights violated.

The United Church in the Solomon Islands is very much involved in efforts to improve the social situation in the country. In a review of its Integrated Human Development Programme in 1993, the church was asked to assist local communities in the marketing and transport of timber. The challenge was to find ways of combining environmentally sustainable timber production with a dependable income for the villagers. This led to the establishment of SWIFT – Solomon Western Islands Fair Trade – in 1994.

Under the supervision of foresters, forest management plans are developed in which small-scale and sustainable yields are the key elements. Full respect is paid to the land rights and the customary decision-making rules of the tribes and the local communities. To limit environmental destruction to a minimum, trees are sawn into beams and boards on the spot where they are felled and then carried from the forest. The timber is sold to a wholly owned Dutch subsidiary of SWIFT. SWIFT activities are based on the ten criteria for ecologically and socially sound forestry of the International Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), an independent non-profit organization.

Although the price for eco-wood is higher than that for "normal" tropical wood, SWIFT's supply can hardly keep up with demand. It now works with 300 village groups, covering 50,000 hectares of forest, and has generated US\$750,000 for local producers. The price producers receive per tree is about 40 times higher than what is offered by the logging companies. SWIFT also offers an extensive package of courses on forestry, timber inspection, saw maintenance and bookkeeping. In addition, legal assistance is offered to groups which are disadvantaged by large woodcutting companies. SWIFT's non-profit activities are financed by ICCO, the Dutch inter-church organization for development cooperation.

## LETS

A group in Montpelier, Vermont, has begun to print and circulate its own money to boost the local economy. Anyone can take part in this initiative by putting in US\$5 in cash and receiving \$40 in local bills called "Green Mountain Hours", which members agree to accept for goods and services. Since the scheme began in October 1996, more than 100 businesses have signed up.

This is one example of a growing number of initiatives by local communities to decrease their dependency on outside forces through an organized barter system. Since time immemorial people have exchanged goods and services without money. While the introduction of money has made economic systems much more efficient by eliminating the

cumbersome task of finding a match for specific goods and services offered or asked, money economies can also create dependencies. Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS) seek to reduce such dependencies.

The principle of LETS is very simple: points or local currency can be earned by offering goods and services to other members of the LETS, who pay an agreed number of accounting units. A central office keeps track of the members' balances, and no interest is charged on account balances. Since the accounting units can be spent only in the system in which they are issued, they do not have the same spending power as cash. They are not an alternative to cash but supplementary to it, and they reduce the dependency on normal money as well as on state benefits.

In a short period of time, LETS have become very popular in Canada, the USA, Australia and Great Britain. The largest system is based in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, with more than 2000 members, including many small enterprises.

## Unemployed self-help initiatives

Many unemployed persons would prefer organizing themselves and taking care of their own livelihoods to relying on handouts. In Aotearoa New Zealand, two People's Centres have been set up to organize the unemployed. The two centres have a membership of over 4000 families (some 12,000-13,000 individuals) which pay a fixed monthly membership fee of NZ\$7 per family. With the proceeds, the People's Centres offer services like:

- completely free medical care;
- low-cost dental care;
- hairdressing for a price of NZ\$2 (so that people can look better when they go for a job interview);
- free membership of the Green Dollar Exchanges (the LETS mentioned above);
- counselling, welfare advocacy, chaplaincy, budgeting, education and other similar personal services;
- cultural programmes which use music, art and drama as a method of building self-confidence and creativity, and



as a way to support the political work of the unemployed;

- training and support for people wanting to set up small businesses or cooperatives;
- research and publications on the causes of poverty and unemployment, both domestic and international;
- courses on people-centred development and community organizing.<sup>8</sup>

### **Mondragon**

The Mondragon project in the Basque region of Spain was begun in 1941 when a Spanish priest, Don José Arizmendarreta, set up a school to teach methods of responsible agriculture. Shortly thereafter, he established a number of cooperatives. Mondragon today is an association of some 200 organizations, including 120 worker-owned, democratically controlled commercial enterprises. More than 22,000 workers, who are also the only owners of the organizations, have guaranteed jobs for life, fully adequate incomes, a broad health insurance plan for their families, a pension programme and an insurance programme which guarantees 80 percent of the latest salary received in case of unemployment. *product, methodology*

Mondragon has its own bank, the Caja Laboral Popular, which defines money as an accounting and exchange tool, not a commodity. According to its unusual commercial loan policy, the riskier the loan, the lower the interest rate. Each cooperative shares in the ownership of the bank, which has rarely experienced a default on its uncollateralized loans. The cooperatives of Mondragon are more productive per person than any other group of workers in Spain, and their businesses are more than twice as profitable as the average conventional Spanish firm. When unemployment in the Basque region rose to 30 percent, Mondragon's employment was maintained.<sup>9</sup>

### **Micro-enterprises and micro-credit**

Variously described as the informal sector, the underground economy or the black economy, the myriad activities

taking place at the margin of the modern market economy provide an income for an increasing number of people in the South.

While the world's 500 largest corporations account for 25 percent of the global economic output, they employ only one-twentieth of one percent of the world's population. It is in much smaller enterprises that most people make their livelihoods. About half of the paid jobs in the world are held by people who work in one- to five-person enterprises, and in some places the percentage is even higher. According to the UN's *Human Development Report 1996*, the informal sector, in which many micro-enterprises are located, accounts for nearly 80 percent of all employment in Cotonou, Benin, and Ibadan, Nigeria, 68 percent in Bombay, India, and 66 percent in Douala, Cameroon. In Latin America and the Caribbean, more than 50 million micro-enterprises employ more than 150 million workers.

But the growth of micro-enterprises is not limited to the South. In the US, where bigger companies shed 645,000 jobs between 1992 and 1996, small and medium-sized businesses created 11.8 million new jobs.<sup>10</sup> In the North, the phenomenon often takes the form of an increasing number of consulting firms and independent contractors, as large companies shed jobs by implementing "leaner" production and organization models. In Eastern Europe, many have become hustlers, traders, independent manufacturers or free-lance dealmakers.

Micro-enterprises are not a panacea for human development in the South. They have a mixed record of successes and failures, and working conditions are often poor. Nevertheless, the potential of informal economies and the micro-enterprises that compose them should not be underestimated. Small businesses, with their high flexibility, absence of bureaucracy and speed of decision-making, may be better suited for many tasks than their larger counterparts. In many countries, the informal sector already has a higher growth rate than the formal sector, and in a more appropriate business and legal environment, micro-enterprises could become an even more dynamic sector than hitherto.

Micro-enterprises have several characteristics in common:

- *small scale*: people working in the informal sector often work alone or with unpaid family members;
- *labour intensity*: production is often manual, equipment simple and often hand-made, little division of labour;
- *minimal capital inputs*: investments range from a few dollars for the baskets and working capital of a street vendor, to a thousand dollars or more for the simple equipment and working capital of a shoemaker with five employees;
- *local market orientation*.<sup>11</sup>

The main constraint on micro-enterprises is their lack of access to productive assets, notably land and capital. To some extent, the situation has improved with the recent upsurge in micro-lending.

A decade ago micro-credit, the practice of lending small amounts of money, often without collateral, to poor would-be entrepreneurs, was on the fringes of international finance. Today, more than US\$1 billion a year is being lent to some 8 million people in the South. Even the USA has about 300 micro-credit programmes.

Commercial banks are reluctant to extend loans to micro-enterprises. The costs of administering many small loans is considered too high, and micro-enterprises, which often cannot provide security or a collateral, are seen as a poor risk. Women are especially affected by local customs and even national laws which discriminate against them in economic life. The UN Development Programme says that in African countries where women make up more than 60 percent of the agricultural labour force and contribute up to 80 percent of total small-scale food production, they receive less than 10 percent of the credit to small farmers and only 1 percent of total credit to agriculture.

Unable to borrow from commercial banks, poor people often have to resort to money-lenders and loan sharks whenever they need emergency or small investment loans. The interest charged on such loans is usually very high. Those who cannot repay debts contracted in this way are forced to

sell their small land-holdings, animals and even homes, eventually joining the ranks of the landless and the deprived.

However, over the last decade or so, pioneering micro-credit schemes across the South and in some parts of the North have shown that the poor are not a “bad risk”, that they are prompt and reliable repayers (especially women) and that they successfully use small loans to increase their income. Leading micro-credit lenders around the world boast repayment rates of 97 percent and higher.

Micro-credit schemes come in many varieties. Some extend loans in local currencies, others in foreign currencies. Some provide grants for self-employment ventures, with repayment in community service; others provide farm animals as a “living loan” with offspring being considered as interest over the loan. Some schemes include a grant component to provide training in enterprise development, business management and market analysis. But all schemes have certain common characteristics. They are democratic and participatory, favour loans to groups or cooperatives rather than individuals, keep procedures for reviewing and approving loan applications simple and disburse small, short-term loans quickly. Because of their repayment record, women’s groups are disproportionately highly represented among the receivers of micro-credit. Interest rates are kept as low as possible. Social and environmental criteria for loans are applied.

To promote micro-credit schemes all over the world, a summit was organized in February 1997 in Washington. Its declaration of intent spoke of a goal of 100 million poor entrepreneurs, 4 million in the North, having access to micro-credit by 2005. But the enthusiasm about micro-credit must be tempered by the recognition that while micro-credit is an efficient and successful additional instrument for human development, it is not sufficient. Micro-credit initiatives can achieve their full potential only if legal systems that discriminate against them and favour conventional lending are changed. Heavy foreign debt burdens, the rigour of structural adjustment programmes, agricultural policies of Northern

(and Southern) countries and inequitable world trading systems constitute important hindrances to the success of micro-credit schemes.

Despite the impediments, micro-credit schemes flourish. Perhaps the best known is the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. Landless people can obtain loans by joining a group of five borrowers who meet weekly with a bank officer trained to understand the needs of the poor. At first only two members of the group are allowed to apply for a loan. Depending on their performance in repayment, the next two can apply, and subsequently the fifth as well. The Grameen Bank now reaches one million rural clients, more than 90 percent of them women. The recovery rate of loans is 99 percent, something conventional banks can only dream of.<sup>12</sup>

### Responsible investment

More and more individuals and institutions are applying social and environmental criteria in addition to financial considerations when they take investment decisions.<sup>13</sup> Since the beginning of the 1980s, the value of investments guided by other than financial motives has risen from US\$40 billion to \$650 billion.<sup>14</sup> US religious organizations have invested more than \$300 million in community economic development with the help of the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility (ICCR) in New York. Many religious organizations have drawn up social responsibility guidelines for their investments. While there are differences of opinion about what makes for "responsible" or "ethical" investment, most use three strategies:

- *avoidance or disinvestment*: not placing money in companies which produce (for example) arms, alcohol or tobacco, which apply discriminatory employment policies, which support violations of human rights, are involved in nuclear energy or contribute substantially to environmental destruction;
- *advocacy*: using investments as leverage to promote corporate responsibility through shareholders resolutions and/or negotiations with management;

- *alternative investment*: a deliberate choice to invest in enterprises deemed to behave in a socially and environmentally responsible way.

Investments guided by social and environmental criteria have proved to give a financial yield equal to or better than that of "normal" investments. For example, from 1985 to 1993, the Friends Provident Stewardship pension fund in the United Kingdom provided an annualized return of 20.2 percent. In 1993, it returned 31.3 percent. In the same year, the Friends Provident Stewardship income fund – also ethically managed – returned 41.3 percent.<sup>15</sup>

### EDCS

In the 1970s, the ecumenical movement was actively engaged in opposing foreign investments in South Africa and bank loans to the apartheid regime. Many South African blacks and some others had pleaded with the international community to cut foreign economic ties with their country in support of their anti-apartheid struggle. Some who supported these campaigns suggested that their credibility would be enhanced if alternative ways of investment were also established.

At the same time, a discussion was going on in the ecumenical movement about the advantages and disadvantages of grants and loans for development. Traditionally, churches and church-related organizations in the North have participated in efforts to promote human development by making available grants and personnel. The churches' own investments were managed to yield a maximum financial return in order to safeguard the financial future of the churches and their programmes. Awareness grew that investment money should at least in part be used to support the message and the ministry of the churches. In the South, more and more people were discovering that working with loans rather than grants preserved their dignity and promoted greater self-reliance. And once repaid, the money lent could be "recycled" – used to the advantage of poor people elsewhere.

These considerations led the WCC in the early 1970s to establish the Ecumenical Development Co-operative Society (EDCS). EDCS lends to commercially viable enterprises that comply with a set of social and environmental criteria. Its capital originates with churches and church-related organizations, which can become shareholders of EDCS. Individuals can buy certificates of shares through support organizations. Each shareholder has one vote in the shareholders' meeting, independent of the number of shares held. Thus, a church in the South with only a few shares cannot be outvoted by a rich church in the North which can afford to buy many shares.

Shareholders in EDCS usually receive an annual dividend of 2 percent – lower than the financial return on “normal” investments, but the social return is higher. By accepting a relatively low financial return, churches, church-related organizations and others are thus challenged to demonstrate that living out Christian faith in economic life is more than going after the highest possible financial return. It has been estimated that EDCS has been instrumental over the years in creating and safeguarding some 12,000 jobs on all continents. In 1995, the WCC decided that by the year 2000, 10 percent of its investments should be in the EDCS.

Much earlier, the Ecumenical Church Loan Fund (ECLOF) was set up to help rebuild church buildings destroyed during the second world war. Subsequently, ECLOF has provided low-interest loans to small business enterprises in the South through national revolving funds. With instruments like grants, ECLOF and EDCS, the ecumenical movement now has available a broad spectrum of complementary instruments to stimulate human development and economic alternatives aimed at promoting justice, peace and respect for creation through the use of money.

Loans for development cannot always replace grants. For example, activities which generate little or no income will always have to rely on grants. But for other types of activities, loans are becoming increasingly important, especially in view of the stagnation or decline in official development assistance and the deteriorating financial situation of

churches in the North. Having achieved a certain degree of ecclesiastical independence, churches in the South are now shifting their attention to financial independence through setting up income-generating activities – often financed with loans – in an effort to become truly local churches.<sup>16</sup>

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Our concern for a just household – a just economy – requires that we discern the signs of the times (Matt. 16:3). In the preceding chapters we have sought to do that. The signs of the times concerning the use of the three traditional production factors in the household – labour, capital and land – produce an ambivalent picture. Great advances have been made, but we can also hear creation groaning and many people crying. The knowledge brought by science and technology – in a sense a fourth production factor – and economic growth have improved the quality of life for many people. Their work is much less drudgery than that of their grandparents was. Their health is improving, they live longer lives, and they often enjoy more time for leisure. Improved education has decreased ignorance tremendously, and communication technologies and transportation systems have made it increasingly difficult to suppress freedom of expression and opinion. The hopeful examples given in this last chapter are also important signs of the times.

Yet our global household is also the scene of large-scale destruction of the natural environment and growing polarization between rich and poor. In his 1987 encyclical letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, Pope John Paul II warned that “superdevelopment” can easily make people slaves of possessions. The pope spoke about “blind submission to pure consumerism”, “crass materialism”, the “cult of having”, the “flood of publicity and ceaseless and tempting offers of products”, and the “all-consuming desire for profit” – all constituting a “temptation to idolatry” (paras 28-30). Large-scale unemployment deprives millions of people of a sense of purpose in life. Communities are undermined and social rela-



tionships are under great pressure and even broken. New forms of alienation are creating apathy, resignation, cynicism, drug addiction, senseless violence and despair.

The signs of the times are thus ambiguous. Science and technology have a liberating effect, but the very forces of progress can also spell disaster (nuclear and biological weapons), or take on a dynamic of their own which seems difficult to control when they become masters rather than servants. Developments in the field of genetic engineering may even make us feel like God.

It is not easy to live out the Christian faith in times such as these. Although, with some notable exceptions, Christians are not being systematically persecuted for their faith today, many feel subject to organized as well as hidden temptations which can be experienced as forms of persecution (think of aggressive advertising and the struggle to "keep up with the Joneses"). In economic life, "thou shalt covet" seems to have become the law of the land. Martin Luther's application of the commandment "thou shalt not steal" to economic life seems to have been forgotten, as is the case with the commandments concerning idolatry and misusing the name of God.

The integrity of the Christian faith is threatened by the pantheon of false gods which surround us, demanding our worship and our sacrifices. Nobody is immune to these idols; if we have a chance, all of us venture a little dance around the golden calf from time to time.

If idolatry is indeed an issue, as Pope John Paul II discerns, a major task is to "secularize" economic life and to exorcise the false gods. In this sense, economic life is a vast mission field for the churches. But churches and Christians are objects as well as subjects of this mission, because we are part and parcel of the existing system and the prevailing ideology. The mission task to demask false gods is awesome; the Old Testament story of the destruction of the golden calf speaks of its being accompanied by the killing of 3000 people. However, there is no time to give way to fear and despair. The belief in powerlessness is always self-fulfilling.

As Philip Potter reminds us, pessimism would be a denial of faith in our risen Lord and a misreading of the signs of the times.<sup>17</sup>

If we engage in exorcising false gods, some may accuse us of activism. But why should we be afraid of this? The Bible is full of stories about activists. Much more dangerous than activism is the risk of being uninvolved – like the young Saul, who neither picked up a stone nor lifted a hand but simply watched and guarded the clothes of those who stoned Stephen (Acts 7:54-60). But as Saul became Paul, we too can take heart when we see how many people today are denouncing false hope and following the example of the 7000 who did not bow their knee to Baal (1 Kings 19:8; Rom. 11:4).

The WCC's fifth assembly (Nairobi 1975) observed that "while we confess a Christ who frees and unites, the economic structures in which we live tend to enslave to wealth and divide". Seen in this light, economic practices constitute a confessional issue. They are a matter of faith, a test case for churches and Christians.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Nick Robins and Sarah Roberts, *Changing Consumption and Production Patterns – Unlocking Trade Opportunities: Case Studies of Export Success from Developing Countries*, International Institute for Environment and Development, 1997, p.14.
- <sup>2</sup> Christoph Stückelberger, "Sozialklauseln für fairer Welthandel – 'Testfall Ananas': Neue Schritte mit der Sozialklausel Migros/Del Monte", *EPD Entwicklungspolitik*, no.19, 1994.
- <sup>3</sup> See Betham Brookes and Peter Madden, *The Globe-Trotting Sports Shoe*, London, Christian Aid, 1995.
- <sup>4</sup> *Free Labour World*, no.10, 10 Oct. 1996.
- <sup>5</sup> "Kinderarbeit in der Teppichindustrie: Ursachen, Formen, Lösungsansätze", *Dritte Welt Information*, nos 13-15, 1996.
- <sup>6</sup> Robins and Roberts, *op. cit.*, p.16.
- <sup>7</sup> John Madeley, "Alternative Trade: Symbol and Reality", *One World*, no.177, July 1992, p.12.
- <sup>8</sup> From a paper by Sue Bradford for the Second Commonwealth NGO Forum on "Paths Out of Poverty: The Role of NGOs", in Wellington, June 1995.
- <sup>9</sup> Cf. Terry Mollner, "Beyond Capitalism and Socialism: 'Third Way Economics' Is Already Here", *Breakthrough*, Vol. 10, Nov. 1988;