



## Speech By AFJN Executive Director

**During the AEFJN Contact Persons Meeting on March 12, 2026 in Brussels, Belgium - Delivered Virtually.**

### **Theme:**

A Joint Statement of the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and the Justice, Peace and Development Commission of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM)

Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to share a reflection today on the joint statements by the Bishops of the United States and Africa, especially in light of the theme of this meeting—*Development Cooperation to Promote Economic Justice*.

On February 2, 2026, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace and the Justice, Peace and Development Commission of SECAM—the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar—issued a joint statement titled “Brothers and Sisters in Hope.”

In this statement, the bishops of the United States and Africa called for renewed solidarity between the peoples and Churches of our two continents, particularly at a time when international assistance programs are facing significant reductions and when global cooperation itself is increasingly under pressure.

At the heart of the document is a powerful reminder about the Church's mission.

The bishops reaffirm that “integral human development—the development of every person and the whole person, especially of the poorest and most neglected in the community—is at the very heart of evangelization.”

This insight reminds us that development cooperation is not simply a matter of economics or diplomacy.

It is fundamentally a moral commitment rooted in the dignity of every human person and the pursuit of the common good.

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## **Guiding Principles for Cooperation**

Drawing from Catholic social teaching, the bishops highlight several guiding principles for cooperation between Africa and the United States.

First is the protection of human dignity and human life, particularly for the most vulnerable.

Second is the shared responsibility of Church and state to promote justice, peace, and integral human development.

Third is the principle of solidarity, recognizing that nations and peoples flourish when they freely share their resources, talents, and spiritual gifts.

And fourth is subsidiarity, which calls for strengthening local communities and institutions so they can care for those closest to them and lead their own development.

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## **The Church as a Partner in Development**

The bishops emphasize the unique role of the Church in delivering humanitarian assistance and building local capacity.

Across Africa, the Catholic Church operates an extensive network of schools, hospitals, clinics, parishes, and community programs. These institutions are often present in remote areas where government services may be limited.

Because of this deep presence in local communities, Church institutions are uniquely positioned to deliver assistance in ways that respect human dignity and strengthen local resilience.

The bishops remind us that development cooperation must not only provide relief but also strengthen self-reliance and local capacity.

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## **Supporting Families**

The statement also emphasizes the importance of supporting families, which it describes as the foundation of society.

In many African cultures, families provide stability, care, and economic support. They are often the first line of resilience during times of hardship.

When development cooperation strengthens families—through education, healthcare, and dignified livelihoods—it strengthens the social fabric of society itself.

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## **Youth and Entrepreneurship**

Another key theme is the enormous potential represented by Africa’s youthful population.

Africa is the youngest continent in the world.

This presents both opportunities and challenges.

Young people bring creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurial spirit. But without opportunities for education and employment, many face uncertainty and frustration.

The bishops therefore call for cooperation that supports education, entrepreneurship, and meaningful economic opportunity for Africa’s youth.

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## **Climate Justice and Care for Creation**

The statement also highlights the urgent issue of climate justice and care for creation.

Although Africa contributes relatively little to global emissions, the continent experiences some of the most severe impacts of climate change.

Droughts, floods, and environmental degradation threaten agriculture, food security, and livelihoods.

Environmental injustice deepens poverty and instability.

For this reason, the bishops call on the international community to make care for creation a central concern in development cooperation and public policy.

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## **Critical Minerals and Ethical Development**

The bishops also address the issue of critical minerals.

Africa is rich in the minerals needed for modern technologies and the global energy transition.

Yet the extraction of these resources has often brought exploitation and conflict rather than development. The bishops warn that in the race to secure these resources “many have trampled on the dignity of local peoples.”

They therefore call for economic partnerships that respect communities and ensure that natural resources contribute to equitable development.

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## Peacebuilding

The statement also highlights the role of the Church in peacebuilding.

Across many parts of Africa, Church leaders act as mediators and advocates for reconciliation in situations of conflict and instability.

Their work includes dialogue between communities, support for displaced populations, and advocacy for justice and human rights.

As Pope Paul VI famously reminded the world in his encyclical *Populorum Progressio*:

“Development is the new name for peace.”

When communities have access to land, food, education, and meaningful opportunity, the foundations for lasting peace are strengthened.

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## Why This Statement Matters Today

This message is especially important in today’s global context.

Across many countries we are seeing increasing pressure to reduce international development assistance and retreat from global cooperation.

Yet the bishops remind us that development cooperation is essential for economic justice, human dignity, and peace.

At the same time, the conditions under which the Church carries out its mission are also changing.

Missionary life today increasingly unfolds in a world where international cooperation is becoming more uncertain and where resources for development partnerships are under strain.

Missionaries working in African communities see this reality every day.

Schools, clinics, and agricultural programs that once depended on international partnerships now face new challenges.

For example, missionaries in some regions have seen farming communities lose access to their land when large-scale investments move in without protecting local rights.

Experiences like these show how global economic decisions affect the daily lives of communities.

They also help inform the advocacy work of networks such as **AFJN** and **AEFJN**, ensuring that the voices of African communities are heard in international policy discussions.

At this point, an African proverb comes to mind:

***“If you want to go fast, go alone.  
If you want to go far, go together.”***

The journey toward economic justice and sustainable development requires exactly this kind of partnership.

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## **The Work of AFJN and AEFJN**

This is where organizations like AFJN in the United States and AEFJN in Europe play such an important role.

AFJN promotes equitable Africa-US relations while advocating for systemic change including food sovereignty, ensuring that African farmers have the ability to feed their communities and control their agricultural systems.

AFJN also works to prevent land grabbing, where large-scale land acquisitions displace local communities.

In addition, AFJN addresses issues of conflict and human exploitation, including advocacy against early marriage and domestic servitude.

Similarly, AEFJN in Europe works within European policy spaces to address structural injustices affecting Africa.

Its work focuses on corporate justice, promoting accountability for multinational corporations.

It also works on food sovereignty and international trade, helping ensure that global economic systems support sustainable development rather than reinforcing inequality.

Together, these efforts address the structural factors that perpetuate poverty, helping ensure that development cooperation promotes dignity and justice.

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## **Closing**

Ultimately, the question before us is not simply about development assistance.

It is about whether our global relationships will be shaped by extraction and inequality...  
or by solidarity and justice.

The bishops remind us that the faithful of Africa and the United States are  
“gifts to one another.”

Strengthening that solidarity is one of the ways the Church contributes to building a culture of  
peace.

If we take this message seriously, then supporting organizations like AFJN and AEFJN becomes  
part of living out that solidarity in practice.

Together, we can help transform the structures that perpetuate poverty and build economic  
systems that respect the dignity of every person.

And in doing so, development cooperation becomes what it is meant to be:  
a path toward economic justice, human dignity, and lasting peace.

Thank you.