

Conference Review: International Conference on Sustainable Alternatives to Poverty Reduction and Ecological Justice (SAPREJ-18), The University of the South Pacific, 26-29 June 2018

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From June 26-29, 2018, the 18th international conference on Sustainable Alternatives to Poverty Reduction and Ecological Justice (SAPREJ-18) took place at The University of the South Pacific (USP). The aim of the conference was to strengthen academic and interfaith dialogue on major social and environmental challenges that the Pacific Islands and other parts of the world are facing in the 21st century.

SAPREJ-18 was the fourth conference in a series. The series was established by the Orthodox Academy of Crete at Kolympari, Chania, Crete, where the first international conference on Sustainable Alternatives for Poverty Reduction and Eco-Justice (SAPREJ-12) took place in September 2012.

The aim of the SAPREJ conferences is to engage in dialogue on key social, economic, and ecological concerns from a variety of perspectives. Its goals include the promotion of social and ecological justice (among others). SAPREJ focuses both on religiously based as well as academic approaches to challenges of sustainability and injustice.

After the 1st SAPREJ in 2012 in Crete, organizers and participants felt a need to engage particularly scholars and practitioners in the developing world in dialogue about poverty reduction and eco-justice. Accordingly, SAPREJ-14 was organized and held in 2014 in Antananarivo, Madagascar. Two years later, in 2016, more than 100 scholars met for the 3rd SAPREJ conference at the Kyambogo University in Kampala, Uganda. At this occasion the School of Geography, Earth Science and Environment at USP was selected to host the conference in 2018, discussing issues

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of environmental ethics, poverty, and sustainable development in the face of the threat of climate change.

SAPREJ-18 attracted some 35 social scientists, clerics, activists, and governmental representatives from 22 countries (Australia, Belize, Canada, Chile, Denmark, Fiji, France, Germany, Greece, India, Israel, Kiribati, Mali, Philippines, Solomon Islands, Switzerland, Tonga, Turkey, Tuvalu, Uganda, UK, and the USA), including six participants from Iran, who delivered their presentations via video conferencing, and one participant who addressed the audience remotely from the Climate Change meeting of the World Council of Churches being held in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

On June 26, 2018, the guest-of-honor, Mr. Penijamini Lomaloma, Deputy Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Development Forum, highlighted the responsibility people today have to assure that living conditions for generations to come will be humane. Mr. Lomaloma stressed that it would be irresponsible to continue business as usual. He demanded considerable change in the way people treat each other as well as the environment. The abolition of poverty and an end to environmental degradation need to go hand in hand. To achieve both of these aims, science and religion are equally important and need to cooperate.

In the keynote address, Professor Matthew Allen, Director of Development Studies at USP, spoke on “Natural Resource Justice? The Political Ecology of Resource Extraction in the Western Pacific.” The keynote address was a very timely acknowledgment that issues related to political and economic realities of resource exploitation in Melanesia pose very serious threats to local communities. These threats have existed since colonial times, but even in an era of formal independence they add to the vulnerabilities of local communities in many ways. Impacts of climate change do not create such vulnerabilities, but they increase the challenges people are facing.

The first day of the conference was dominated by papers on social justice and poverty alleviation in the context of environmental and climate change. Liam Saddington (Oxford University) talked on “Small Island Imaginaries, Climate Change and Geopolitics: An Examination of Seychelles and Kiribati”; he was followed by Renata Varea and Rufino Varea (both of USP), who looked at aspects of environmental entitlements in their paper titled “Environmental Inequality and Ecological Justice: Pretext of Environmental Entitlement in Community-based Marine Management in Fiji.” Professor Heather Worth and her PhD scholar, Karen McMillen, (University of New South Wales, Sydney) presented on their research on “Climate Change, Urban Poverty and Sex Work in the Pacific.” Another paper on urban poverty and social justice was presented by Camari Koto (USP) in her paper on “Questioning

Social Justice in Informal Settlement Upgrading: The Case of Namadai.”

The afternoon session of Day 1 started with a paper on “Gender and Social Capital Dynamics in Adaptation to Climate Variability and Change in Semi-arid Northeastern Nigeria” by Othniel Yila (Climate Finance Adviser, Kingdom of Tonga) and Jummai O. Yila (International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT), Mali), before Aylin Yildiz (University of Bern) talked on “A Legal Challenge for Ecological Justice: What Is Our Common Normative Framework?” Day 1 ended with a video conference presentation from Tehran, Iran, on “Protecting Environment's Protectors” by Ali Akbar Siapoush, (Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran).

Day 2 put emphasis on ethics, interfaith dialogue, and justice in development. The day started with Reverend Grace Lubaale (Kyambogo University, Uganda) on “Poverty in Uganda: Causes and Strategies for Reduction with Great Emphasis on Ethics and Ecological Justice” followed by Markand Bhatt (USP) who spoke on “Approaches to Sustainability Based on Hindu Scriptures.” Professor Natasha Delani Kuruppu (UNEP DTU Partnership, Technical University of Denmark, København) and Peni Hausia Havea (PACE-SD, USP) talked on “The Role of Church and Indigenous Spirituality in Community Led Health Adaptation” before Lesya Sabada (University of Saskatchewan, Canada) concluded the morning session of Day 2 with her presentation on “Eastern Christian Theological Resources in Action For Peacebuilding and Environmental Ethics.”

The remainder of the morning on Day 2 was an interfaith panel discussion on ethical considerations concerning poverty and environmental and ecological justice. Members of the panel were: The Most Reverend Winston Halapua, Archbishop of the Diocese of Polynesia of the Anglican Church; Reverend Jeremaia Waqainabete, Deputy General Secretary of the Methodist Church in Fiji and Rotuma; Paul B Whippy, Welfare Manager, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; and Roshni Pal, Fiji Hindu Society. Archbishop Halapua told the participants of the conference that, in all the decades he has served for the Anglican Church in the Pacific Island region, this was the first event ever of this kind and he leaves the conference as a different person than he was before he came to attend the meeting. He was particularly impressed by the depth of interfaith discussions and dialogue the conference facilitated.

The afternoon on Day 2 started with a video conference presentation from Buenos Aires, Argentina, where at the same time a Climate Change meeting of the World Council of Churches (WCC) took place. Lucas Andrianos (WCC, Greece) talked on “Oikos Spiritualities and Greed Line Concepts as Principles of Sustainability.” After

two more presentations, one on “Enabling Equity and Poverty Reduction through Community Sustainable Fisheries Management—Case Study from Qoliqoli Cokovata, Macuata Province, Fiji” by Francis Areki (WWF-Pacific, Fiji) and one on “Ethics, Food and Biodiversity—Traditional Food Security Knowledge and Humanitarian Aid in the Phase of Climate Change” by Ilaisa Naca (USP), two further video conference presentations from Tehran, Iran, one by Razieh Mehrdadfar (Tehran, Iran) on “Children’s Education as an Essential and Accessible Sustainable Solutions for Poverty Reduction and Ecological Justice” and one by Zhila Fathi (Iran University of Applied Sciences and Technology, Shabestar, Iran) on “International Obligations of Governments to Educate Citizens to Protect the Environment,” concluded Day 2.

On Day 3, some of the participants went in small groups to nearby squatter settlements to gain a first-hand impression of social, economic, and environmental challenges there. Others went to a community close to Suva where communities had established Marine Protected Areas. The opportunity to see development challenges in Fiji as well as people’s initiatives to make a difference was highly appreciated by participants from outside Fiji and the Pacific Island region.

Day 4 started with “Water Scarcity and Its Negative Impacts on Health – A Case Study of Funafuti, Tuvalu” presented by Maluseu Tapaeko (University of Porto, Portugal); this was followed by Catherine Garnett-Santiago (Belize), who talked on “Urban Livelihoods of Landless People – A Livelihood Vulnerability Assessment of an Informal Settlement in Suva, Fiji.”

“Is There Any Chance for the Poor to Cope with Extreme Environmental Events? A Case Study in the Solomon Islands” was the question asked by Michael Ha’apio, Morgan Wairiu (both PACE-SD, USP), and Ricardo Gonzalez (Universidad de La Frontera, Chile) in their presentation.

From New York (USA), Professor Seyed Masoud Noori (NYU Law School) and Hossein Hafezian (Montclair State University, New Jersey) gave a video conference presentation on “Women’s Participation in Policies and Decision Making as Prerequisite in Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).”

In the afternoon of the last day, Alice Tekaieti (Tarawa, Kiribati) talked about “Sustainability and Indigenous Knowledge: The role of Schooling in Kiribati.” This was followed by three video conference presentations : “The Right to Food and the Right to Environment: Accompaniment or Conflict?” by Alireza Mohammadnezhad Daryani (Islamic Azad University, Tehran) and Zhila Fathi (Iran University of Applied Sciences and Technology, Shabestar, Iran); “Women’s Education and

Leadership as Essential and Accessible Sustainable Solutions for Poverty Reduction and Ecological Justice” by Zahra Azhar (Shahid Beheshti University, Iran) and Shahideh N. Mohajer (Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, EHESS); and “Displacement Due to the Natural Disasters, Refuge Status and Sustainable Development” by Hiwa Hajimolla (Shahid Beheshti University) and Aida Abdollahi (Iran). The conference ended with a presentation by Eberhard Weber (USP) on “Globalization and Poverty in India: How Do Human Rights Relate to It?”

All in all, the conference attracted some 120 participants other than the presenters. Members of the Fiji Government, including the Minister for Waterways and Environment, Dr. Mahendra Reddy, as well as members of the opposition such as Mr. Niko Naiwaikula, joined in the discussions.

In closed sessions of the organizers, it was decided that the next SAPREJ, in 2020, will be held in Kenya.