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Rio+20 concludes with disappointment

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Catholic groups see positive aspects, weaknesses in final Rio document
By Catholic News Service

RIO DE JANEIRO (CNS) -- Representatives of some Catholic nongovernmental organizations expressed disappointment at what they described as weak wording in the final document of Rio+20, the U.N. Conference on Sustainable Development, but others found positive aspects.

"If this is the future our leaders want, today and tomorrow's poor and marginalized people certainly aren't part of it. Their right to live in dignity and in harmony with nature has once more been denied," said Denise Auclair, a policy expert with CIDSE, an international alliance of 16 Catholic development agencies.

The final U.N. document, "The Future We Want," included 700 voluntary commitments by social groups, businesses and governments in addition to those commitments negotiated among country delegates. The volume of investments in these commitments was more than $513 billion.

Rio Cardinal Odilo Scherer, the pope's special envoy to the conference, told leaders from around the world that people were nature's stewards, and they had a "duty toward future generations who will inherit the consequences of our decisions. In this regard, this conference provides an opportunity for governments to come together to help chart a course for advancing development for all people, especially those who are most in need."

A CIDSE statement said the conference "failed to deliver concrete measures to tackle climate, food and financial crises, without which sustainable development remains a distant dream."

According to the alliance, Rio+20 fell short of a decision to create a new economic model, which according to CIDSE representatives is very different from the "green economy" being discussed today.

"Innovative financing mechanisms such as a financial transaction tax could make an important contribution to finance the fight against poverty," said Markus Brun, head of policy of CIDSE's Swiss member Fastenopfer.

Other Catholic organizations had a more positive outlook.

Sr. Caroljean Willie, Sisters of Charity Federation representative at the United Nations, told CNS: "What is positive about the Rio+20 document is that governments have agreed to start a process to develop SDGs (sustainable development goals) and that there may be more NGOs involved in this discussion process."

Caritas Internationalis released a statement saying it welcomed "a renewed commitment to the full and timely achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. However, this commitment is weakened by referring to 'making every effort,' rather than undertaking concrete actions."

Sr. Suzanne Golas, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace representative at the U.N., said Catholic nongovernmental organizations "are trying to show our communities that our local problem is a global problem."

"What we need to do is to pull out (of the document) what you really believe in and work with it," she said.

For Sr. Placida Lihinikaduwa, a member of the Franciscan Sisters of Mary order working in the slums of Colombo, Sri Lanka, "it is not the official document that matters, it is the work on the ground which is important ... the work which we can then take to government officials to show them."

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