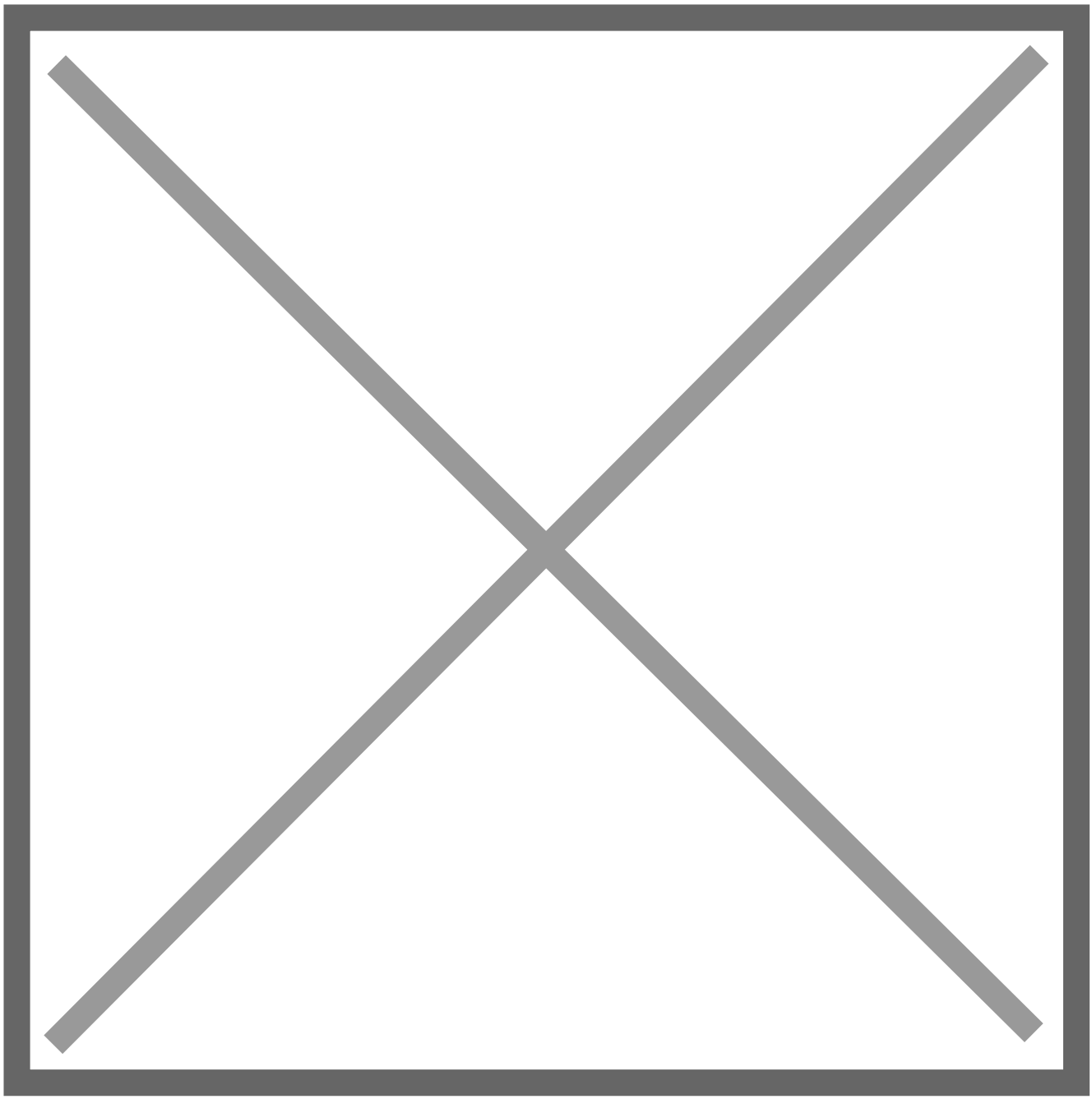
News



A mother and son in Manila, Philippines, sign in for a routine check-up at a health center Jan. 26, 2021, amid the coronavirus pandemic. (CNS photo/Reuters/Eloisa Lopez)



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Long-existent disparities between people with low incomes and those who live comfortably must be addressed if the world is to overcome the coronavirus pandemic, climate change and poverty, said three leaders working in diverse areas of the world during the annual Catholic Social Ministry Gathering.

The trio in a Feb. 7 discussion pointed to Pope Francis' encouragement to overcome this imbalance in recent encyclicals in which he called for greater solidarity and sharing the goods produced from the earth rather than competing for limited resources.

The pandemic showcases such disparities as people in poor communities around the world have had less access to the coronavirus vaccines and treatment despite being disproportionately affected, explained Anta Gueye-James, Catholic Relief Services' country representative for Senegal, Gambia and Guinea-Bissau.

While COVID-19 was the "great equalizer because it really turned the world upside down," poor communities have lagged in gaining much attention from the world, James said.

"We need policies that ensure equitable access to medicine and especially vaccines when it comes to COVID-19," she said in the 40-minute session.

Echoing Gueye-James' concerns, Rachel Lustig, president and CEO, Catholic Social Services of the Diocese of Columbus, Ohio, said vulnerable people, including senior citizens, knew the economy failed to work in their favor prior to the pandemic.

So when the coronavirus swept the country, exacerbating the challenges people already were facing, Lustig said her staff agreed "we've got to build back in a way that reflects the values of the dignity that the Catholic Church stands for."

That required developing an integral approach to responding not just to the pandemic, but also to hunger, lack of access to health care and difficulty in finding work, Lustig explained.

She called for more attention to the social determinants, or causes, of long-term poverty and the disadvantages people have in achieving social equitability.

"The thing about COVID-19, while it's a health crisis, there's an economic crisis that is happening simultaneously that's going to far outlast the health crisis," Lustig said. "These social determinants of health are also the social determinants of work force productivity. They're the same social determinants of educational attainment and success.

"And so when we look at what's going to help our community and especially people who are vulnerable, focusing on these social determinants will allow for lasting change across all dimensions of our society," she said.

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Meanwhile, in Tucson, Arizona, work at Pima County Interfaith began advocating for pandemic relief as the pandemic hit, seeing it as a natural outgrowth of its grassroots work.

Ana Chavarin, an organizer with the Catholic Campaign for Human Development-funded organization, said its community leaders quickly advocated for rental assistance for people threatened with eviction. And, after weeks of activism, members were able to convince health care providers to bring vaccines to some of the most vulnerable communities Feb. 6.

She credited local leaders for their work in neighborhoods, parishes and church congregations. She said the effort is rooted in church teaching on solidarity and recognizing the dignity of each person.

The three panelists agreed that the work toward equitable access to services anywhere requires building relationships across cultural and economic divides.

"We aren't in this world alone. This world doesn't belong to us. It belongs to our maker. We don't choose where we are born. However, where we're born defines our destiny," Gueye-James said.

"And I always wonder if we are born in a place that gives us more, if we are born in a place that brings about opportunity, why can't we reach out to those who were born in a place that doesn't and try to give them a better living? Why wouldn't we do that? To me it's the natural thing to do. That is what our Catholic social teaching tells us," she said.

Gueye-James suggested that such action would prevent limited distribution of the coronavirus vaccine to under-resourced countries. She urged policymakers to ensure that COVID-19 does not become something "in the rearview mirror" in developed countries while poor countries continue to struggle with the illness long into the future.

Recognizing Gueye-James' concern, Chavarin recalled that when coronavirus testing began in Tucson, the site was established far from low-income communities. For people with a vehicle, the trip would take 40 minutes. However, for poor residents it required riding on multiple buses on a trek that took several hours in each direction.

To prevent such inequities, Chavarin urged collaboration among low-, middle- and upper-income residents to develop solutions to community challenges. While such conversations might currently be pertinent during the pandemic, they could also lead to meetings on environmental issues, jobs and education, she said.

She cited the letter to the Corinthians for inspiration in understanding the importance of building such relationships: "When one part of the body is hurting, then the whole body is hurting."

"We need to understand," Chavarin said, "that we are one body in need of creating those connections and having those conversations to talk about specific goals."