

Marilia Schüller GBGM Missionary
News from October 2010 to February 2011
Advance number 15172Z

The 4th Ecumenical Gathering

The 4th Ecumenical Gathering promoted by the Brazil Ecumenical Forum (FE Brazil) was one of the major activities of my work on the fourth quarter 2010. KOINONIA had a leading role in the organizational process. The Gathering took place in Itaipu, São Paulo 11-15 November 2010.

The FE Brazil (Brazil ACT Forum) is formed by the ACT member organizations in the country, local representatives of aid agencies and 21 representatives of churches, councils of churches, ecumenical organizations and theological seminaries.

The 4th Ecumenical Gathering had approximately 300 participants from Christian denominations and other religious traditions of different regions of Brazil and from Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Colombia, Bolivia and Peru. Ecumenical formation, learning and reflection on issues related to the theme of Ecumenism, Ecology, Economy and Life have received major attention. The main objective was to develop advocacy strategy plan on these issues.

The youth had a primary role at all levels of the 4th Ecumenical Gathering activities: worship services, round tables on Ecumenism, Ecology, Economics and Life, regional dialogue groups and evening seminars. 70% of the participants were youth between 18 and 24 years old. They have major input on discussions about rights – human, economic, social, cultural and environmental – and the challenges that the youth face today.

The Ecumenical Gathering received the financial support from GBMG of the United Methodist Church, office for Youth and Young Adults to guarantee the participation of 43 young people. Financial support to the Gathering has also come from Christian Aid, CREAS, CNBB / Caritas Brazil, the Lutheran Foundation for Diakonia (FLD) and United Church of Canada.

Some of the specific activities I have developed previous and during the Ecumenical Gathering were: writing of the project application on Youth Participation to submit to the office of Youth and Young Adults of GBGM, member of the preparatory committee on Methodology, facilitator of one of the Dialogue Circles that met 4 times during the Gathering and assistance with translation/interpretation to international guests.

KOINONIA and ACT Alliance

During the months of December 2010, January and February 2011, my work assignment in KOINONIA has focused in two activities developed in partnership with ACT Alliance. One was ACT Alliance Learning Event which took place in São Paulo, 22 – 25 January and the other was the Pre-Appeal and Appeal writing to respond to the emergency in the mountain region of the state of Rio de Janeiro. The Learning Event had 43 participants from South America and addressed concerns related to emergencies, development and advocacy.

In an initial response to the emergency situation in the state of Rio de Janeiro ACT Alliance sent two experts to accompany KOINONIA on the Pre-Appeal and Appeal writing and emergency area field assessment visit, this process last between January 25 and February 16. My assignment to this mission was two fold: to receive the formation on Appeal writing and

field assessment visits. I will continue to be part of the project development, specially on monitoring and reports writing, if we are successful in receiving the necessary grant, which is focused on rebuilding the sources of livelihood of small farmers who work on family agriculture in the cities of Petrópolis, Teresópolis and Nova Friburgo.

Information on the natural disaster

The emergency situation happened on January 12, 2011. Almost one month of rain fell in 24 hours. Some areas recorded over 250mm of rain over 36 hours. This triggered a series of flash floods and mudslides in the Brazilian Serrana mountain region near Rio de Janeiro and the states of Minas Gerais and São Paulo. As a result the thin soils of the mountains became saturated resulting in massive landslides, better described as avalanches. River levels rose rapidly, in some areas by over six meters, resulting in large scale loss of life and destroying buildings, roads, houses and large areas of farm land. The national government has declared a state of emergency in the seven affected municipalities of Teresopolis, Petropolis, Nova Friburgo, São Jose de Vale do Rio Preto, Areal, Bom Jardim, Sumidouro. Estimated loss to the local rural economy is US\$168m. This disaster has been described by the national government as the worst natural disaster in Brazilian history. The UN has described the landslides as the eighth worst in world history.

The Brazilian Civil Defence official data on the effect of this disaster in these seven municipalities in the mountain regions of the state of Rio de Janeiro currently stands at: number of dead people 883, 14,106 homes destroyed or severely damaged, 23,353 people displaced and either living in shelters or with friends and family members and 172,259 people directly affected by the disaster.¹ The Civil Defence do not give any estimates of missing people but the RST and KOINONIA field assessment received estimates from the Lutheran churches of more than 1800 missing. Others suggest this is an underestimate due to the number of unregistered migrant workers in the farming and tourist industries in the region. It was the height of the summer holiday season.

The majority of the population are small farmers producing vegetables and salad crops. This area provides 20% of the total requirements for these crops for the metropolitan area of Rio de Janeiro. In the seven municipalities over 700 irrigation systems were destroyed which are vital for the market garden industry in these regions. 13,806 families in the affected area are dependent on family farms the majority of which engage in market gardening. The destruction of the fields and loss of livelihood as a result of the mudslides and flash floods has left them extremely vulnerable. These communities are some of the most remote and hardest to access which has been exacerbated by the destruction of the bridges. Reports suggest that in large areas of the municipality of Teresopolis over 80% of the agricultural area has been totally destroyed.

The priorities of the national government are on rebuilding the infrastructure such as roads and bridges, electricity, the clearing and cleaning of land and the provision of new housing. As a result these communities are unlikely to get any major assistance in the near future. Many of the farmers are in "legal limbo"; local farmers government agriculture departments estimate that 80 - 90% of small farm owners don't have papers to prove they are farmers. Many others are tenants paying rent either in-kind or cash, others never managed to register their ownership after inheriting a piece of land. As a result specialists say just a small percentage of the farming population will have access to official grants to replant or restart their farms. Unofficial credit sources have dried up as many of the business community have also been badly affected.

Most of the communities have identified their basic needs in terms of rebuilding their source of livelihood and supplementing the government's basic assistance with a better balance of food, particularly protein, and the replacement of household furniture and domestic appliances.