'Artisans of our own Destiny’
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ABBREVIATIONS OF DOCUMENTS:

[http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_15051961_mater_en.html]


[http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum_en.html]

[http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_letters/documents/hf_p-vi_apl_19710514_octogesima-adveniens_en.html]


[http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_ip-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus_en.html]


An ever more effective world solidarity should allow all peoples to become the artisans of their destiny. (PP 65)

Not all are called to be artists in the specific sense of the term. Yet, as Genesis has it, all men and women are entrusted with the task of crafting their own life: in a certain sense, they are to make of it a work of art, a masterpiece.’ (LA 2)

The Compass 2015 report is based on research commissioned by CAFOD, which seeks to engage with the perspectives of the poor and the marginalised – ‘voices from the ground’ – as a resource for formulating development policy after the expiry of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2015. The research involved 1,420 participants from 56 different communities in four countries – Philippines, Uganda, Zimbabwe and Bolivia. It is an expression of ‘CAFOD’s determination to ensure that the perspectives of those living in poverty are included in the post-2015 process’, so that they might become, in the words of Populorum Progressio, ‘the artisans of their destiny’. (p. 11)

This theological reflection takes its focus from that idea that every person is called to become an artisan of his or her destiny, in solidarity with others. As Pope John Paul II expresses it in his 1999 ‘Letter to Artists’, we are called to make of our lives a work of art, because we participate in the creativity of the Spirit who is ‘the mysterious Artist of the universe’. (LA 15) In the Catholic theological tradition, this entails more than the meeting of a person’s physical needs:

It is not just a question of eliminating hunger and reducing poverty. It is not just a question of fighting wretched conditions, though this is an urgent and necessary task. It involves building a human community in which people can live truly human lives, free from discrimination on account of race, religion or nationality, free from servitude to others or to natural forces which they cannot yet control satisfactorily. It involves building a human community where liberty is not an idle word, where the needy Lazarus can sit down with the rich person at the same banquet table. (PP 47)

This short paragraph includes most of the themes addressed in the Compass 2015 report. It evokes a sense of the truly human life as one in which freedom from hunger and poverty, discrimination and servitude, and natural disasters, is also freedom to enjoy the good things of creation in solidarity with others, and through full participation in society. This is what it means to live creatively – to live as artisans of our destiny. It is to have the liberty and energy to seek and enjoy beauty and goodness in community with others, rather than being enslaved, exhausted and isolated by deprivation and violence.

The report shows that there have been significant gains and losses during the fifteen years covered by the MDGs. For example, changing social attitudes have had a positive impact on many people’s lives, as discrimination and prejudice yield to greater inclusion and acceptance. This is particularly true for indigenous
peoples, for people living with HIV/AIDS and, to a lesser extent, for women. Increasing political consciousness and an awareness of rights have given previously marginalised and excluded communities a greater sense of participation and agency. Yet in spite of the fact that people’s aspirations with regard to development and wellbeing are mostly realistic and attainable, the overall picture during the period of the MDGs is of deterioration and dwindling opportunities. Most of the people interviewed had experienced a decline in wellbeing during that time.

A Church for the poor

Pope Francis has said that, in order to become ‘a Church which is poor and for the poor’, we must learn from those who are poor and ‘let ourselves be evangelized by them’. (EG 198). Compass 2015 offers an opportunity for such a process of evangelization. It invites us to go beyond a simplistic or romanticised idea of ‘the poor’, to a more nuanced appreciation of the many different conditions which enable individuals and communities to become ‘artisans of their destiny’, or which rob them of the creativity and agency they need to break free of the shackles of exploitation and hopelessness.

The report makes clear that poverty cannot be measured only in economic terms, by way of ‘a simple money-metric approach’. (p. 12) In order to enter into a dialogue with those who are poor and to allow ourselves to be evangelized by them, we must attend to the complex diversity of poor people’s lives and aspirations. For example, the narratives in the report show differences between the experiences of the urban and rural poor, and also between the poor and the very poor. These differences are highly significant when it comes to evaluating how well people are able to cope with the multiple challenges of poverty, and this has implications for development goals. There are also wide variations in terms of opportunities for income-generation, employment and long-term security, all of which are vulnerable to changing economic circumstances, and also to war, conflict and natural disasters.

The economic effects of poverty are exacerbated by multiple factors such as ‘gender discrimination, lack of land and the effects of conflict’, in such a way that ‘each factor multiplies the impact of the others’. (p. 20) Again, this emphasises how important it is to be attentive to the complexity of poverty, and to the particularity of each person’s story in the context of his or her social and natural environment. We cannot simply help ‘the poor’, for only by recognising the unique circumstances which make up each poor person’s life can we begin to meet that person in a process of solidarity through dialogue which goes beyond paternalism to a truly human encounter.

In order to reflect theologically upon such a wide variety of narratives of poverty, struggle and hope, we need to begin by asking what it means to live a fully human life. Postmodernism aims at the dissolution of so-called ‘metanarratives’ which seek to arrive at a common understanding of the good life, in favour of a multiplicity of competing and conflicting narratives arising out of different traditions, cultures and definitions of what it means to be human. A
theological anthropology must resist such relativism, while remaining sufficiently open and flexible to accommodate different interpretations of what it means to live well. The aim of justice should not be be to prescribe how people must live, but to ensure that people are not deprived of the conditions they need in order to be able to choose to live well according to their beliefs, values and aspirations.

With this in mind, I begin by reflecting upon the good life from the perspective of the Catholic understanding of the human. I then turn to Catholic social teaching (CST) to flesh out that concept by applying three core principles of solidarity, subsidiarity and participation to the findings of Compass 2015. I show that, when these principles are respected, people experience a sense of wellbeing and hope. When they are violated, the sufferings of poor people are intensified and their sense of hopelessness increases.

Although this is a theological reflection, it seeks to show that the visions and values enshrined in CST are by no means restricted to those within any particular religious tradition. Rather, they invite us to discern fundamental truths about what it means to be human, about the conditions which every human being needs to live a fully human life, and about the conditions which no human being should be asked to endure as a result of the ‘new tyranny’ of a global economic system based on ‘the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose’. (EG 55)

**Living a truly human life**

The truly human life belongs to those who, free from every form of enslavement, become artisans of their destiny through the creative telling of their own stories, the making of their own histories, and the shaping of their own futures, in communities in which the equal freedom and dignity of every person is respected and protected. This requires imagination, memory and hope, but it is far from being a fashionable postmodern language game – a ‘discourse’ of the poor – for it is incarnated in the material and social realities of people’s lives. It takes as its starting point the fundamental equality in dignity of every human being. All humans are ‘created in God's likeness, since they have the same nature and origin, have been redeemed by Christ and enjoy the same divine calling and destiny’. This means that,

> With respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, colour, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent. ... It grows increasingly true that the obligations of justice and love are fulfilled only if each person, contributing to the common good, according to his or her own abilities and the needs of others, also promotes and assists the public and private institutions dedicated to bettering the conditions of human life. (GS 30)

If this vision of justice and love is to permeate the social order, it requires us to ask searching questions about what we mean by the good life. What is human
wellbeing and how can we achieve it? What does it mean to live in such a way that we find fulfilment by using our gifts and abilities to contribute to the common good? How much is enough, and how can we work to ensure better distribution of the world’s resources for the good of all? What are the effects of war, conflict and environmental disaster on people’s lives, and how can we work towards the creation of a less violent and more sustainable future?

Chapter One of the Compass report, ‘Perspectives of Wellbeing’, shows that people with modest aspirations and relatively few possessions can experience a deep sense of contentment with their lives. Several of the older participants refer to the satisfaction that comes from having a home, food, somewhere safe and warm to sleep at night, and a community within which to work and rest. For example, Berida is a 66 year-old Ugandan farmer and widow with four children. She says: ‘If you are living well, in your home you should have oxen, goat, sheep, groundnuts and all that food. This will make you live well.’ (p. 16) Younger respondents refer to other important factors such as education, health care, personal security, communal projects and places of recreation. As the report points out, these aspirations of wellbeing ‘are often both concrete and achievable, within the realms of what is politically and economically feasible’. (p. 16)

The report identifies food security and access to land as major factors in creating a sense of wellbeing, but the good life encompasses a more aspirational vision than these basic necessities, which would include a wider range of social and cultural goods such as those identified by younger interviewees. As Pope Francis points out, ‘We are not simply talking about ensuring nourishment or a “dignified sustenance” for all people, but also their “general temporal welfare and prosperity”. This means education, access to health care, and above all employment, for it is through free creative, participatory and mutually supportive labour that human beings express and enhance the dignity of their lives.’ (EG 192, quoting MM 402)

Listening to the voices of poor people enables us to understand their needs, but it also challenges us to re-evaluate our own needs. How does the simplicity of Berida’s account of the good life call into question the values of commodification, competitiveness and consumerism which dominate modern society? Radical inequalities in the distribution of goods afflict the lives of rich and poor in different ways. In the words of Pope John Paul II, ‘there are some people – the few who possess much – who do not really succeed in “being” because, through a reversal of the hierarchy of values, they are hindered by the cult of “having”; and there are others – the many who have little or nothing – who do not succeed in realizing their basic human vocation because they are deprived of essential goods.’ (SRS 28)

To begin to transform this culture of inequality and exploitation requires a sustained commitment by rich and poor alike to work together for a better world. It means that ‘the more fortunate should renounce some of their rights so as to place their goods more generously at the service of others’. (OA 23) It also means restoring private property to its rightful place, not as an absolute right
but as our legitimate share in the common goods of creation. Private property is ‘under a “social mortgage,” which means that it has an intrinsically social function, based upon and justified precisely by the principle of the universal destination of goods’. (SRS 42)

Time and again, the people interviewed for the Compass report emphasised the significance of land, so that the most abject poverty and despair are often related to the loss of land through conflict or natural disaster. In urban western societies it is easy to lose sight of the fundamental relationship between human wellbeing and the productivity of the land, but for subsistence communities this is a daily reality. Land ownership, private property and the common good are inextricably interlinked in our modern economic system, and the quest for justice cannot avoid addressing politically-charged questions to do with the environment, natural resources, and the rights of all peoples to share in the common goods of creation while preserving those goods for future generations.

This brings me to the next part of this reflection, which is to consider the findings of Compass 2015 from the perspective of three related principles which are fundamental to CST – solidarity, subsidiarity and participation. What kind of solidarity are we talking about, if we seek a world in which every person can achieve his or her vocation to self-fulfilment by becoming artisan of his or her destiny? How does this idea of solidarity entail the principle of subsidiarity, which in turn requires participation if these abstract concepts are to find material expression in the daily realities of people’s lives?

**Solidarity**

The idea of solidarity is rooted in the theological doctrine that the human is essentially relational, for we are made in the image of the communion of persons that constitutes the Trinity. In philosophical terms, the human is, in the words of Thomas Aquinas, a ‘civic and social animal’ (ST, I-II 72.4) by nature. This means that we cannot flourish except in relationship with others, and it is why Catholic social teaching puts the common good before individual rights. In modern secular thought, these two are often perceived as mutually opposed, so that political systems associated with capitalism privilege the individual at the expense of society, while those associated with communism privilege society at the expense of the individual. However, this is a false dichotomy, for the individual cannot flourish unless he or she is part of a society with just laws and institutions which serve the good of each and the good of all. Solidarity means striving together in recognition of this truth. It means refusing to see others as competitors or rivals, and recognising instead that the good of each and every individual is enhanced, not diminished, when it contributes to the good of others.

However, this is a difficult and challenging ethos. Solidarity demands resistance to any sentimental or emotional appeal which panders to the vanity and guilt of the rich while neglecting the demands of social justice. Solidarity is not ‘a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to
commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are really responsible for all.’ (SRS 38).

The Compass report provides rich material for reflecting on the fundamental significance of solidarity for human wellbeing. The community plays a major role in many of the responses, with a strong sense of the interconnectedness of peoples across social and geographical boundaries. Bolivian respondents in particular were noted to associate wellbeing with a strong sense of community. In the words of one respondent, wellbeing is ‘When all of us in the community are self-sustainable and we do not depend on anyone else. That the community has all the basic services and no one suffers hunger in the community.’ (p. 17)

The report also enables us to see the catastrophic consequences which result from a breakdown in solidarity, when humans are forced to compete for scarce resources, or when war and conflict blight people’s capacity for cooperation and collaboration. In Uganda, a Teso leader recognised that the ongoing conflict between his community and that of the Karamojong is because the latter resort to cattle raiding in times of drought because they are poor: ‘If you visit households in Karamoja, they have nothing. ... If people in Karamoja are forced to live like animals, how do you expect them to behave with us?’ (p. 20) There is pathos in this observation, for it shows this leader’s willingness to understand and empathise with those who attack his community, and yet he himself is powerless to change the circumstances which lead to conflict. Another Ugandan community leader emphasised the importance of ‘community-led security’ in a region plagued by ethnic conflict and militarisation. ‘We have tried to explain as local people how we want to work on the concept of peaceful coexistence with our neighbours’, he said. (p. 57)

These are concrete examples of what Pope Francis means when he attributes violence to the fundamental injustice of the socioeconomic system: ‘until exclusion and inequality in society and between peoples is reversed, it will be impossible to eliminate violence’. Increasing law enforcement and surveillance will do nothing to achieve peace, for injustice is ‘the toleration of evil’ and ‘an evil embedded in the structures of a society has a constant potential for disintegration and death’. (EG 59) Time and again in the Compass report, this insight is borne out by the narratives of people who, as victims of injustice perpetuated by the global socioeconomic system and exacerbated by more local situations of poverty and inequality, are particularly vulnerable to violence in all its forms – war and conflict, gender violence, and broken relationships within families and communities.

These factors come together in the story of Anna, a 47 year old Ugandan widow and mother of seven children, who is living with HIV and also caring for her late sister’s three children. It is worth quoting Anna at some length:

I was given land by my late husband’s family but now as a widow, the land has been grabbed away from me. I now depend on only one patch of land where I can grow food. ... That is what is hurting my life so much. And also someone like me who is living with HIV, all the time you worry about the
education of your children. ... At least none of them is infected because it seems I got this virus the time I conceived my last child. ... What prevents me from living well is taking care of orphans without anyone helping me. Because I am taking care of orphans of two families: my brother-in-law killed my sister and he also shot himself. He was a soldier and I do not know why he did that. So I am suffering with their children together with mine. I am the one educating them yet I am also a widow. All the time I do not find happiness in my family and I am living with HIV. (p. 21)

Anna is in the eye of the storm – that space of isolation and abandonment which comes from living in a situation in which all the complex factors of poverty, land insecurity, sickness, domestic violence and war intersect. Her story helps us to understand why it is futile to single out a single factor in the struggle against injustice. We could say that at every level, Anna has suffered from a lack of human solidarity. The causes of her suffering are manifold, but the principle of solidarity provides a lens through which we might understand what needs to change in order to give hope and the possibility of transformation to people like Anna.

Solidarity refers to the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, of neighbourliness and care, which operate at the microcosmic levels of everyday life. For example, one Zimbabwean woman reported how people would avoid buying from the market stall of someone who is HIV positive, ‘as if HIV is transmitted through the products that we sell’. (p. 6) She said that such cases were becoming fewer as people become more aware. Local communities are strengthened by the solidarity that results from education and awareness-raising, which involves a process of attentive listening, understanding and shared responsibility between and among individuals, families and communities. A number of the interviewees also pointed out how education can have a divisive impact on communities, if it allows educated people to enjoy preferential treatment that is not available to those without education. Solidarity, then, would entail the just distribution of access to social goods such as education, health care, employment and land ownership, for only then can one combat tendencies to discrimination and exploitation which result from gross inequalities in distribution.

However, solidarity also has a global dimension. As Pope Francis reminds us, there is a connection between the violence and poverty which have blighted the lives of people like Anna, and a socioeconomic system in which evil is ‘crystallized in unjust social structures, which cannot be the basis of hope for a better future’. (EG 59) People like Anna lack those fundamental goods which are the basis of every just society and the universal and inviolable rights of every human being, in the light of what Gaudium et Spes refers to as ‘the exalted dignity proper to the human person’. In order to tackle the injustices of the socioeconomic system, there are certain basic goods to which every human being has a right, and which must be the non-negotiable starting point for every social, political and economic endeavour, from the smallest community organisations to international development agencies:
there must be made available to all people everything necessary for leading a life truly human, such as food, clothing, and shelter; the right to choose a state of life freely and to found a family, the right to education, to employment, to a good reputation, to respect, to appropriate information, to activity in accord with the upright norm of one’s own conscience, to protection of privacy and rightful freedom even in matters religious. (GS 26)

This is a challenge, but we must also nurture the seeds of hope. As Pope Francis points out, if evil can spread through a system, so can goodness. When we look at Anna’s life, we see the difference one person can make in the face of overwhelming odds. It is difficult to imagine how Anna manages to survive at all, and yet she cares for ten children. Anna is reweaving broken relationships of care and attentiveness to the suffering of others which make solidarity possible. She offers an example of that neighbourly love which is the beginning of all social justice rooted in the example of the Good Samaritan.

**Subsidiarity**

If solidarity is the principle which holds individuals together in just communities and relationships of mutual respect and endeavour, subsidiarity is the principle which governs institutions so that they create rather than destroy opportunities for human solidarity. Subsidiarity entails that ‘A community of a higher order should not interfere with the life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to coordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good.’ (CA 48).

Again, if we read the *Compass* report with a view to identifying how subsidiarity functions in concrete terms, we find ample evidence to affirm that this should be a core principle of every development goal and exercise of institutional authority. In their summing up of the findings, the authors of the report point out that ‘Participants put a strong emphasis on their own agency in achieving wellbeing, looking at other actors as partners or enablers of their efforts.’ (p. 17) They also observe that ‘Across the different research locations, people wanted access to and control over productive assets.’ (p. 32) Such findings attest to the fact that subsidiarity is not an abstract political or economic theory, but an important ethical principle which impacts on the lives of even the poorest individuals and communities. Subsidiarity enables people to work in solidarity by involving them in the process of development and/or recovery from the effects of war, conflict and natural disaster. It does not regard individuals and communities as passive recipients of charity or beneficiaries of donor programmes, but as active participants and partners in the quest for justice and sustainability.

To respect the principle of subsidiarity is to respect the complex ways in which economic and political factors influence the lives of poor people. It calls attention not only to the distribution of land and resources, but to the dynamics of power and privilege and the ways in which these impact upon people’s capacity for
wellbeing. For example, in one region of the Philippines 63 per cent of families are farmers, but the land is mostly owned by only eight influential people. One resident describes the difficulty of life without money to buy seeds and fertilizer, when middlemen charge high interest on loans and farming profits have to be shared with the landowner. As another interviewee observed, this means that ‘no matter how we work hard in the farm, our standard of living still remains low’. (p. 33) This vulnerability of poor farmers to external influences beyond their control extends to international commodity prices, and to the ways in which the food industry organises its production processes. As one Brazilian small trader observed, ‘When the price of the nuts drops, it affects all, us, the traders, the pickers. All the village is affected when the nut price drops, because the entire economy works around this. ... We are traders and we live on those who work. ... They have good money when the price of nuts is good, and everybody prospers. When the price collapses, the only beneficiary is the entrepreneur.’ (p. 34)

This is what Pope Francis means when he condemns the theory of the trickle-down effect, which ‘expresses a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralised workings of the prevailing economic system’, and results in ‘a globalization of indifference’. (EG 54) The principle of subsidiarity is not against entrepreneurship, but it seeks to preserve the bonds of human solidarity by ensuring that the entrepreneur is responsible and accountable to all who are affected in the chain of supply and demand. Without subsidiarity, communities lack the sense of agency and self-reliance necessary to preserve human dignity and promote human wellbeing as a shared endeavour, free from control and exploitation by external forces.

**Participation**

This leads finally to the principle of participation. This is summed up by Pope Francis when he writes:

> Let us not forget that “responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation”.¹ Yet becoming a people demands something more. It is an ongoing process in which every new generation must take part: a slow and arduous effort calling for a desire for integration and a willingness to achieve this through the growth of a peaceful and multifaceted culture of encounter. (EG 220)

Throughout the *Compass* report, we see evidence of human wellbeing when this principle of participation is respected, and we see widespread unhappiness and dissatisfaction when it is violated. The report points out that

> People living in poverty recognise that national governments play a key role in development, and call for new forms of accountability and monitoring. Governments are often the key actor to whom they address

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requests for support. However, this does not mean they are handing over all responsibility – people still want to be consulted and to participate. (p. 40)

This is a clear illustration of the extent to which subsidiarity and participation go hand in hand. The distribution of resources, access to education and development programmes, access to the justice system, the inclusion or exclusion of the most marginalised, all are dependent on the extent to which the political process is participatory, accountable and free from corruption: 'In almost every research session, people's (positive or negative) experience of dealing with the government is mentioned in understanding their situation and their aspirations for change.' (p. 41) The report emphasises how important a sense of participation is to poor communities: 'People identified their direct participation as a crucial factor in their ability to be heard and achieve more transparent and accountable governance. Participants understand their fundamental role in development and are willing to take part in it.' (p. 48) Allied to this was the recognition that those with the greatest expertise are those living in the community. As one Ugandan woman observed,

> The people whom I think are responsible for bringing about change are the very people who live in this community because we are the ones who know our own problems. So we should bring heads together and share ideas that will bring change to our community. An outsider cannot easily know our problems. (p. 48)

This short quotation offers a succinct account of how the three core principles of solidarity, subsidiarity and participation function not only as overarching theories in the quest for justice, but as practical virtues which have relevance for everyday life. Solidarity enables people to work together for change. Subsidiarity ensures that communities have the means they need to bring about such change, while protecting them from undue interference or control by outsiders. Participation encourages every individual to take part in this process, using his or her unique gifts and skills to contribute to the growth of a human culture of peace and creativity in which each person can be artisan of his or her destiny.

With its fundamental vision of the dignity of the human made in the image of God, and its principles of solidarity, subsidiarity and participation, CST offers us a way to rediscover the interconnectedness of the human family. It reminds us that we are part of a good and harmonious creation, in which all living beings participate in the being of God and express the beauty and goodness of God. The voices which speak in the Compass report embody this vision in the lives of many different communities and individuals, and in the particular economic, cultural and political circumstances in which poor people struggle and hope for a better world.