

International Networking in the Society of Jesus: Challenges from a Universal Mission
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Notes and Ideas on Mission, by José CJ Magadia SJ

The “Guidelines for Jesuit Networking in the Social Area,” issued in 2002, indicates that a network exists when a number of independent individuals and/or institutions, separated by distance, associate and cooperate in a rich interlacing of relationships, based on a shared purpose, and with an identifiable coordination. This working definition provides an anchor for the following reflection on mission and networking. It is useful to just begin to articulate an understanding of the new context for mission today.

Context

In many circles, globalization, the buzz word in discussions of context, is defined in economic terms. For purposes of this reflection, the preferred perspective is human experience at the grassroots level. On this level, globalization is felt as a phenomenon of increased mobility throughout the world – of goods, services, labor, technology, capital, and information, with inevitable consequences for culture – as manifested in shifts in values, orientations, life style. It comes with an intensified sense of expanding personal relationships, moving beyond the basic levels of family or local communities.

With this experience of a more interconnected world, globalization’s many benefits are magnified and more easily shared. Unfortunately, so are the many severe problems that come with it, which call for a commensurate response that will need more concerted efforts of multiple stakeholders on an equally global magnitude. It is this challenge that a global Society of Jesus hopes to address in a more impactful and effective way.

For most of the twentieth century, the nation-state was the conventional unit of political organization and its governing body determined the ‘rules of the game’ by which actors within the boundaries of a particular society could engage each other. It is noteworthy that many of the Jesuit provinces (or assistancies/conferences, for the bigger units) were likewise organized according to the boundaries of these nation-states. Mission within these provinces/assistancies was likewise determined by the socio-political realities in these units. This provided useful parameters for mission. However, with globalization, the boundaries between nation-states have blurred in many areas of life, and the nation-state is losing its currency as the conventional unit of governance, especially in regard to many transnational economic and cultural realities. This, combined with “relevant changes in the demography of Jesuits including the decrease in the total number, the increasing importance of southern regions, and the imbalance that this generates in the distribution of persons and resources among provinces,” confirms the needed movement towards new and alternative modes of mission. It may even lead to the diminishment of the province as the exclusive conventional unit of the Society’s governance.

For now, even as the provinces continue to adjust to changing realities, there is also a strong call for more international exchange and interactions.¹ Within the current structures, this can lead to creative cross-province apostolic deployment, cross-province consults, the possibility of viewing local problems from more international perspectives.

Mission directions

The thirty-fifth General Congregation (CG35) points the global SJ precisely in this direction. In facing the problems that globalization brings in, international networking has already proven to be an exciting new way of proceeding or apostolic style, as seen in some of the initiatives that have already been set in place. What is more important to check out is the match between this new style and the sectors/issues that can benefit from it, and afterwards, determine how to optimize its use for the demands of mission.

The social/ecological sector provides the most obvious ‘hotspots’ that can benefit from Jesuit international networking. Indeed, many of the initiatives have been organized in this sector. The environmental issues from the various ecosystems that are common pool resource bases cutting across national boundaries include: climate change, mining, natural resources protection, and water. Among the social issues/sectors not strictly ecological are: poverty alleviation, migration, refugees, human trafficking, health, indigenous peoples, and disaster resilience.

For Jesuits in the social/ecological sector, it is clear that these potential points of intervention provide many of the major venues for carrying out the apostolate. A further and clear articulation of mission objectives then enables those who are working in this sector to determine strategies, to which international networking is a welcome and potent addition. Moving even beyond the general category, a specification of the type of international networking and/or of particular features of international networking that would most facilitate the achievement of whichever mission objectives would allow for even greater focus and hopefully better implementation. What would help, therefore, is the further development of a more expansive typology of networks, and an initial yet in-depth evaluation of how networking has indeed contributed to mission.

Behind recent re-structuring initiatives by Father General Adolfo Nicolás is the same spirit of re-imagining mission, and consequently re-imagining strategic responses. The result has been the re-organization of the secretariats according to the three ‘core’ dimensions of our global mission (the service of faith, the promotion of justice, and collaboration with others), and in key apostolates (e.g. education). Indeed Father Nicolás explicitly tags networking as the primary mechanism of supervising and animating missions such as interreligious/ecumenical dialogue, communications, and others.

¹ From GC31 (Dec 48) in 1966, when Father General Pedro Arrupe made an impassioned plea to “break down the walls between the provinces” until GC34, there has been this continuous push for “interprovincial cooperation.” GC34 D21 begins to speak about supraprovincial cooperation – in other words, a common mission that is more than bilateral cooperation.

Beyond the social/ecological sector, forms of international networking are already in place in other mission settings – research and intellectual work, Ignatian spirituality, youth. As these have to be reviewed and re-evaluated, other *ad intra* concerns might also benefit from international networking, specifically for instance, different levels and areas of Jesuit formation.

Facilitating structures

Starting from the principle that mission determines strategy, a case can still be made for a Jesuit apostolic presence in terms of province/assistancy/conference according to nation-state boundaries. This is especially the case for situations of extreme and intense socio-political problems within particular nation-states, such as poverty and/or inequality.

While in many parts of the world, Jesuits are ready to move towards breaking the walls of provinces and conferences, the assumption that traditional tensions between global and local have diminished should not be taken for granted that easily. Proposals for international networking will have to win the support of Jesuits who still have to break out of the province mentality. The movement beyond provinces may come more readily in those parts where Jesuit numbers are diminishing rapidly, rendering the usual apostolic involvements within a province less meaningful. In other parts, however, where there are still good numbers of active Jesuits and Jesuit institutions continue to flourish, or where there are severe local problems, the shift out of the province paradigm is a little more complex and difficult. For such a change to take place, an explicit mandate from Father General may be necessary in the end. In the meantime, all cross-province exchanges and dialogues will help in preparing the way.

It is worth noting that these new apostolic ways of proceeding and the conventional structures of provinces and conferences need not be mutually exclusive. There are creative possibilities for establishing some form of connection and mutual accountability between them.

The Jesuit conference can assume a more critical role in this effort. GC35 says the conference structures are not “mere instruments of inter-provincial coordination” but rather oriented for mission. Thus, the conference can play a significant part, both in a possible period of transition where coordination might be its key function, and in a possible aftermath where it can be the fundamental unit of apostolic deployment on an international/regional level. The conference can be a viable structure for a specific international region if it can help the region: articulate cross-province needs; direct resources to identified priority areas; provide logistical structures for dialogue first, and then later, cooperation and implementation in shared projects; and mobilize resources for action, especially in terms of Jesuit and lay personnel from within the region.

The experience of the Jesuit Conference of Asia Pacific (JCAP), for instance, has been productive, in the development of its various ‘circles’ of cross-province networking for key concerns – for those involved in various aspects of formation (circles for novice

masters, vocation directors, formators, scholastics and brothers), for treasurers, for development offices, for those involved in migration, indigenous peoples' concerns, migration, environment, basic education, and others. Each began with dialogue and the sharing of experiences, which later moved into other activities, such as the sharing of information and other resources, and joint projects. Moreover, the conference becomes the main body to which these efforts are accountable.

As a result of these efforts, some cooperative engagements have resulted:

1. "Profile of a Formed Jesuit" shows how JCAP is trying to serve the mission of such a diverse region, and help in the formation of our future Jesuits. It responds to the request of GC35 regarding renewal of ministries. See <http://sjapc.net/content/forming-jesuits-asia-pacific>.
2. Environment: "Our Environmental Way of Proceeding" and the work Fr Pedro Walpole SJ and the ecology team have begun within three themes. See <http://sjapc.net/what-we-do/ecology>.
3. Education: Starting from GC35 D3, our Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU) has agreed to be more environmentally conscious. A sustainability programme is being developed. See <http://sjapc.net/content/jesuit-institutions-grow-green-campus>.
4. Migration: Initial efforts show a recognition of and a concerted move towards greater collaboration and networking within the Conference. See <http://sjapc.net/what-we-do/migration>, and <http://sjapc.net/content/jesuit-centres-collaborate-migration>.

These and similar efforts in the other conferences indicate that the foundations for empowering the conference the lines mentioned are already present; they will have to be developed even more in time.

The advantages of international networking are many: effectiveness, more financial and personnel resources, greater reach and impact, greater strength in advocacy, a more solid knowledge and research base, mutual and moral support, improved focus on both actual work and links to spirituality. In the end, advantages can be increased and weaknesses diminished to the extent that there is a match between the type of network and the actual mission needs. It would also be important to match the type of network and the corresponding governance structure needed to sustain it (including, for example, personnel for administration, financial resources, management/leadership organization, issue- or sector-specific expertise requirements).

Likewise critical to the effectiveness of international networking is the readiness of individuals and institutions, linked to our Jesuit apostolates, to engage in this new set of strategies. If the operational key is mission, then the formation of these subjects will

matter – including the deepening of spirituality, the consolidation and consistency of commitment, the clarification of objectives and structures, the strengthening of needed expertise, the preparation of successors and possible next generation leaders.

As many Jesuit provinces diminish, especially in the west, many feel a sense of loss, weariness, heaviness, sadness. How might this desolation be discerned? Is the desolation coming from the Spirit? Is it an experience to be fathomed in depth? Are those who are facing this desolation seeking to overcome it trying too hard, too late, and for the wrong reasons, by now turning to alternatives such as international outreach, cooperation across provinces and collaboration with others? Or do these new alternatives really arise out of a sense of mission?

Finally, special attention has to be given the formation of the next generation of Jesuits, in terms of stronger orientation towards international mission. By going deeper into this new reality of diminishment, inspiring examples of Jesuit life and ministry can be identified that can encourage younger Jesuits, not to lose hope. They can be led to look beyond and look creatively ahead to mission beyond the provinces and beyond our usual boundaries, and indeed explore the frontiers. In this, the words of GC34 D21 #7 and #8 can guide formators: “The universality of the Society is to be presented to candidates ...” and “The universality of the Society as a characteristic of our Ignatian charism is to be emphasized at each stage of formation...” In many parts of the world, where there are too few mentors and leaders for the many younger Jesuits, it will be critical to provide opportunities for a transfer of knowledge and skills in this area, as well as personal accompaniment and presence.