

Commenting the book

‘Caring for our common home: sustainability, justice and solidarity in university partnerships’

At the occasion of the 40th anniversary of USOS

By Loic De Canniere

‘Caring for our Common Home’ is a beautiful title for a book. An invitation to love and to take care of our wonderful planet: both the planet’s environment as well as the planet’s inhabitants, especially the vulnerable and the poor.

The title refers to one of the so-called Universal Apostolic Preferences of the Jesuits. A very relevant priority!

Let me start by expressing my respect and admiration for USOS, for its achievements and its team. Reading the history of USOS reminded me of two great persons, Louis Van Bladel en Jef Van Gerwen, who have both shaped my convictions. There are many other inspiring men and women. To name a few that I know: Stefaan Marijsse, Michel Van den Bogaert, Johan Bastiaensen, Pedro Marchetti (FDL), Johan Verschuren, Gerlinde Verbist. And a special tribute to Sara Geenen who is navigating the vessel today with her team (in troubled waters today).

I took me almost 4 days to read this book, from the morning until the evening. But I did not regret my reading time! The book took me on a fascinating journey to Africa, Latin America and Asia. It was all the more fascinating as these places resonate with me (except Suriname). It started in Bukavu (DRC), together with CEGEMI, that has been founded with the help of USOS. The authors confronted me with artisanal miners, the workers in the

building materials industry and the workers of a Chinese cement company in Katana, a bit more to the North. It also elaborates on the poor social responsibility practices of extractive companies in the Congo basin.

Then the trip took me to Recife in Brazil, to the State of Pernambuco, where USOS works together with UNICAP, mainly with the architecture program. I met with inhabitants of occupied buildings, with families in a low-income community, including one that had been relocated to a desolate housing complex. I learnt about UNICAP's work in the field of disaster risk management, where Service Learning (another great Jesuit product) suddenly popped up.

The journey continued to Suriname, where I read about the cooperation with ISTT in Moengo. I learnt the incredible story of the Maroons, the descendants of enslaved Africans and their ecology of wood. I had never heard of them. Very instructive.

Then came Nicaragua and the collaboration with the Central American University (now unfortunately dissolved). I read about the installation of climate stations, not top-down but in close dialogue with farmers. How molecular techniques can be applied for environmental monitoring.

Finally India, The State of Jharkhand and West Bengal. I learnt about the traditions of the Adivasis and their Sarhul Tree Festival which teaches us a lot about the preservation of forests. There was also the interesting story of the conversion of wetlands into salt pans and fisheries and the impact on the local communities.

The book includes brilliant Photo Essays: one about the artisanal gold miners in South Kivu, one about the workers in the construction materials in Bukavu and one about the Sarhul Tree Festival in Jharkhand, India. Impossible to remain insensitive when looking at these essays.

I was invited to share some thoughts. I will share three recommendations..

First. What makes this book so valuable and beautiful is that it transpires a genuine interest for the most vulnerable. The interest is true and pure. It is not faked. The vulnerable are the main character of this book. Putting the vulnerable first reveals a precious attitude. The more so in a global context where self-interest is increasingly the guiding principle. In my professional life, as an impact investor, I have been working closely with European Unikon facilities for Africa for more than 20 years. I have experienced a shift from interest in the wellbeing of the other party to so-called common interest, which is disguising self-interest. The change in paradigm in the documents of the European Union is striking. Good that USOS encourages genuine interest for vulnerable people. I recommend and encourage to maintain this attitude and educate students to responsible leaders of the future interested in the well-being of the other.

Second. I hope you will forgive me that I am making a recommendation as a person who pushes for action. I noticed that in some cases the authors reflect on the desirability of action beyond academic research. An example is the water research programm in Nicaragua, where the authors clearly advocate that the research results should be translated into environmental conservation policy. The contribution about the conditions of

artisanal miners in Kivu also reflects upon action beyond research to improve the mineral supply chains to the benefit of local communities. My recommendation: please include a path to action in your projects. Our common home needs it! Action based on research is a blessing for our planet.

My third and final recommendation to all of you: read this book!