



OUR SOCIAL MISSION

BY CARITAS SINGAPORE COMMUNITY COUNCIL

Small and big, we are Caritas



In her keynote address at The Social Mission Conference, Caritas Internationalis Secretary-General Dr Lesley-Anne Knight shared her vision of an economy with a conscience, and how the work of this big federation of smaller Catholic charities focuses on bringing charity and justice to those most in need.

Charity ≠ Justice

The Social Mission Conference

THE increasingly globalised world often implies that bigger is better, and smallness is overlooked.

However, one concept put forth by British economist E.F. Schumacher is that small can be beautiful, and there can be "smallness within bigness". According to Schumacher, if large organisations are to operate efficiently, they should behave like a related group of small organisations.

This is exactly how both Caritas Singapore and Caritas Internationalis operate. Caritas Singapore is the umbrella organisation for numerous Catholic organisations involved in charity and community work in Singapore. And in turn, Caritas Singapore is a member of the Caritas Internationalis confederation.

A grassroots presence

As a whole, Caritas Internationalis is one of the largest humanitarian organisations in the world, made up of 165 smaller organisations.

Though the Caritas confederation includes some of the world's biggest humanitarian organisations, it has many of the smallest groups doing outstanding work in some of the world's most dangerous environments.

Caritas Iraq cares for malnourished babies and children. Caritas Pakistan has been helping refugees fleeing violence in the Swat Valley. Caritas Uzbekistan, one of our smallest Caritas members, was recently confronted with a serious humanitarian crisis following ethnic violence in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan. Our newest member, Caritas Samoa, had to deal with a devastating tsunami last October. Caritas Haiti has been at the centre of relief and rebuilding work following the catastrophic earthquake there early this year.

All these small Caritas organisations give us a grassroots presence in practically every country in the world. They enable us to respond effectively in times of disaster, and their experience in humanitarian services gives Caritas Internationalis a respected voice on the world stage – important, because Caritas is not just about responding to humanitarian crises, but also about playing its part in creating a better world.

Focus on people

The global financial crisis over the past two years has provided a new focus on ethics and values. The lack of these in the strategies and decisions implemented before was what led to the financial crisis. Attention was focused on profits, bonuses... anything but the human being, who stands at the core of Catholic Social Teaching.

Caritas believes that all social and economic systems should serve the common good. The morality of any society is based on how it treats its most vulnerable members. In our humanitarian work and our advocacy campaigns, we exercise a preferential option for the poor, prioritising the hungry, the weak, the marginalised and persecuted.

It is when we start to see global issues in terms of people, that we are more likely to begin to feel real compassion for those affected, and this goes hand in hand with the core value of solidarity – that sense of responsibility we feel for others by virtue of our interdependence as members of a common humanity.

Poverty at the core

At the heart of the major causes of the suffering that Caritas encounters daily, from conflict to climate change, HIV/AIDS, migration and natural disasters, poverty is often both a cause or effect.

Poverty, in all its many forms, is a key focus for Caritas. We lobby the United Nations, international institutions and governments to recognise their moral obligations to end the scandal of global poverty. We campaign for fair trade, debt cancellation, and for governments to honour their commitments to increase development aid spending. We call for poorer nations to have a greater role in their own development, with increased representation in UN organisations, the World Bank, IMF and the World Trade Organisation.



PHOTO: CARITAS INTERNATIONALIS

The poor, especially women and children under the age of 10, were at high risk of death from various diseases after the floods in Pakistan

While economic growth is certainly one factor in economic development, it must be accompanied by genuine social change that tackles injustice and inequality.

Therefore, through local member organisations, Caritas supports the development of civil society in countries where governments need to be reminded of their duties of protection and care for their citizens. Civil society has an important role to play in ensuring that growth and development benefit all sectors of society.

Caritas sees the world as one united human family and it is our duty to respond to poverty-induced suffering comprehensively. For example, in responding to humanitarian disasters like the Haiti earthquake, on top of being involved in emergency relief operations, we also tackle how poverty makes people especially vulnerable, and we help to establish disaster preparedness and risk reduction strategies.

Climate Change

This is another area where Caritas takes a pro-poor, people-centred approach. Climate Change is about people whose homes are swept

away by floods and wrecked by hurricanes, whose crops are failing, whose cattle are dying; people who are forced to leave their homelands in search of food and work. We therefore seek Climate Justice – solutions that prioritise the needs of poorer countries, in terms of adaptation strategies as well as funding for continued development.

Climate change is becoming an important factor in another of our priority issues: migration. A globalised economy tends to view labour as commodity that is imported, exported and exploited. For Caritas, migrant workers are people, whose right to move freely in search of work, and oppose forced migration, is one we support.

HIV/AIDS

The need for a compassionate, people-centred approach is also of vital importance in our work on HIV/AIDS. Part of any solution to the HIV pandemic will clearly be the scientific development of new treatments, but the care of those living with HIV/AIDS, and the prevention of new HIV infection, depend on our ability to work closely with those at risk.

Peace-building

Finally, in the area of peace-building, significant steps are made by courageous individuals working together across racial, ethnic and religious divides, to serve those in need. In the Middle East, for example, Caritas has been involved in a number of initiatives aimed at bringing together representatives of the different religions. We took part in a 'Convoy for Peace' into Gaza, that involved rabbis, imams and priests in delivering truckloads of aid, including hygiene kits provided by Caritas Jerusalem.

No matter what the issue, solutions to global problems must always be founded on the principle of respect for the individual human person. We are all one humanity and every individual is a precious member of that family. If we are to build a better world, our governments, our international institutions, our financial systems, our global corporations must all hold to this principle.

We must learn to value the smallness within the bigness.