

The Faces of Global Poverty



Catholics Confront Global Poverty

The *Catholics Confront Global Poverty* Initiative is inspired by Pope Benedict XVI's 2009 World Day of Peace Message: Fight Poverty to Build Peace. Our Holy Father declares: "Effective means to redress the marginalization of the world's poor through globalization will only be found if people everywhere feel personally outraged by the injustices in the world and by the concomitant violations of human rights."¹ To fight poverty effectively we also need to know the many faces of poverty.

Church Teaching and Experience

For Catholics the plight of people living in poverty is a priority. The Catholic Church has a long tradition of standing in solidarity with poor persons and communities. The Church's approach to poverty is shaped by both its teaching and experience.

Rooted in the scriptural emphasis on "the least of these" (Matthew 25:40), the Church champions the "**option for the poor**" as a principle of **Catholic Social Teaching** flowing from a commitment to **the life and dignity of the human person**. In his encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI teaches:

Jesus identifies himself with those in need, with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison...Love of God and love of neighbor have become one: in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God. (#15)

Today the Church's **solidarity** with those struggling in poverty finds expression in numerous Church institutions, including schools, health facilities, charitable programs, advocacy organizations, and relief and development agencies.



Photo by David Snyder for CRS

The Church links **charity** and **justice**. In *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict proclaimed that the Church "cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice." The Church also links justice to **peace**. As Pope Paul VI taught: "If you want peace, work for justice."²

The Church understands poverty in light of the vision of **integral human development**. Integral human development encompasses all that is needed for a truly dignified human life, including material, social, and spiritual resources. The **common good** is "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily."³ All persons, including those who are poor, have the right and the responsibility to

contribute to the common good. Governments have a particular responsibility to foster it.

Across the globe poverty is widespread. An estimated 1.4 billion people lived in extreme poverty on less than \$1.25 a day.⁴ Poverty assaults human dignity and robs people of their human potential. But poverty is a disease with a cure. There are countless stories of poor persons and communities rising above crushing poverty. Our mission as Catholics is to work with them.



Photo by Jim Stipe for CRS

The Many Faces of Poverty

Poverty has many faces. It is the face of anguished parents watching their children languish in **hunger**. More than 140 million children are underweight in the developing world. Hunger stunts their growth and makes them more vulnerable to disease. Hunger compromises the ability of women to provide for their families and to birth and nourish healthy children. Hunger robs people of their productivity and creativity. The food crisis, characterized by a dramatic rise in prices, is exacerbating hunger in developing countries.

But hunger has known cures. You can see it in the faces of determined farmers harvesting drought resistant crops made possible by development programs and in the joy of families and communities sharing in the bountiful harvest. The proportion of undernourished children declined from 33% in 1990 to 26% in 2006.

Poverty is the face of persons ravaged by **disease and illness** and of family members and friends watching loved ones die at an early age. Every day, nearly 7,500 people become infected with HIV and 5,500 die from AIDS, largely due to a lack of HIV treatment services. Chronic sickness saps the energy of survivors and reduces their ability to support their families or to get an education. Many of these illnesses can be traced to lack of access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. Nearly 1 billion people cannot access safe water supplies and over 2.5 billion have no sanitation.

But most diseases have known cures. You can see it in the smiles of HIV-positive men and women whose health has been restored by anti-retroviral drugs and in the faces of children at play in a village with a safe drinking supply. Some 1.6 billion people have gained access to safe drinking water since 1990.

Poverty is the face of children whose families cannot afford to send them to school.

Illiteracy wastes human potential. About 75 million children worldwide are not getting a basic primary education. Illiterate persons are often denied active participation in social, political and economic life, confining them to the margins of society. Illiteracy impedes access to services.

But illiteracy has a cure. You see it in the intense faces of adults in literacy programs that help make farmers more productive, and parents better able to promote the health of their families. You see it in the smiles of children getting a chance for an education at a local school. The number of children out of school fell from 103 million in 1999 to 75 million in 2006.

Poverty is the frustrated face of poor persons who often describe a sense of **powerlessness**. They experience an inability to improve their lot by influencing political, social and economic forces. Corruption and policies of exclusion aggravate injustices and poverty. Ironically people in poorer countries endowed with

natural resources frequently do not benefit from extractive industries and have little or no say about how these resources are explored. In fact, exploration at times fuels corruption and conflict. Women, despite constituting the majority of the work force in many developing countries, often lack the ability to affect many aspects of their lives. Some ethnic or religious groups are systematically excluded from active participation in society.

But powerlessness has a cure. You see it in the faces of empowered political and civil society leaders who demand open, transparent and democratic governments that are accountable for the common good of society.

Poverty is the face of frightened civilians fleeing **violence and war**. Violence destroys lives and property, and can reverse years of human progress. Poverty grows in situations of violent conflict. It is harder to deliver urgently needed humanitarian assistance or to provide basic social services, such as health care or sanitation. The plight of refugees or internally displaced persons, who flee their homes and crowd into camps, is particularly devastating.

Conflict is inevitable, but violence is not. You see this truth in the brave faces of people who promote restitution and reconciliation in post-conflict situations and who often work through the Church and institutions of civil society to address injustices and prevent violence.

The faces of poverty are related to one another, like the members of a family. Malnutrition exposes individuals, especially children, to greater risks of disease. Hunger frustrates the best laid plans for education. The absence of sanitation facilities drives disease. Diseases hamper productivity and the ability of people to support their families. Illiteracy means poor persons may not know how to safeguard against the spread of disease. War deepens every facet of poverty. And there are a thousand other connections.

But there are proven ways to reduce the many dimensions of poverty. In the end, the faces of poverty are as profound and complex as the hopes and aspirations of human persons. The human spirit is remarkably resilient, and poor persons and countries, in partnership with people in richer countries, can alleviate poverty and help people to flourish.



Photo by Lane Hartill/CRS

Broader Forces

There are a number of broader forces in our world that impact poverty and integral human development.

Globalization has generated unprecedented wealth and raised living standards across the world, but the poorest of the poor remain on the sidelines of the global economy. At the United Nations Pope Benedict XVI warned that countries in Africa and the developing world “remain on the margins of authentic integral development, and are therefore at risk of experiencing only the negative effects of globalization.”⁵ In particular, trade policies allow agricultural subsidies in wealthy nations to distort trade and disadvantage poor farmers overseas and small and medium-sized farmers in our own nation.

But there is a remedy for the negative effects of globalization. We can provide trade preferences for the poorest countries and negotiate trade agreements that promote development.

Global climate change impacts poor people in the developing world. Years of drought have destroyed pastoral and agricultural lands. The loss of these lands forces people to move and sometimes brings them into contact – and conflict – with others. This terrible pattern is a major factor in conflicts like Darfur. Climate change also intensifies storms and their impact on the less durable housing of poor communities. It is ironic that poor persons who have contributed the least to the human causes of global climate change experience some of its worst effects.

But there is a remedy for global climate change. We can reverse the build up of greenhouse gases and help poor communities and countries to mitigate and adapt to global climate change.

Migration has grown dramatically due to a lack of economic opportunities and in response to conflicts. There are large migrations of individuals and families from developing countries into the wealthier nations of Europe and North America. Migrants contribute to the diversity of our communities and the growth of our economy, but migration is not without its tensions. Many migrants are viewed with unjustified suspicion and many others would have welcomed an opportunity to support their families in their countries of origin.

But there are remedies that respect both the right to migrate and the right to remain in one's native land. The Church has worked both to address the root causes of migration and to promote comprehensive immigration reform.

A Word of Hope

Global poverty may seem daunting, but the world has made **progress in reducing poverty**. In 1990 more than 1.8 billion people lived in extreme poverty. By 2005 that number had fallen to 1.4 billion.

Catholic Relief Services (CRS), the official overseas relief and development agency of the United States Conference of Catholic

Bishops, has built upon a wealth of hope and ingenuity in some of the poorest communities in the world. Working in over 100 countries throughout the globe, CRS testifies to the effectiveness of programs and policies that can promote integral human development and reduce poverty.



Photo by Sara A. Fajardo/CRS

A Call to Action

What can we do? Catholics can confront global poverty! We can pray, support the important work of CRS, and advocate with public officials for policies and programs that help poor persons and communities to help themselves. Key elements of U.S. foreign policy should address the “many faces of poverty:”

In the short term:

- Support funding for poverty-focused **foreign assistance** that meets short-term hunger and humanitarian needs caused by natural and human-made disasters and invests in long-term development, including agriculture, health care, education, and clean water and sanitation.
- Finish the agenda of **debt relief** for poor nations so that they can invest in the development of their own people.
- Support U.S. contributions to U.N. **peacekeeping** operations to reduce violent conflict.

Over the long term:

- Meet our nation's commitment to **increase foreign aid** toward .7% of national income.
- Promote comprehensive **foreign assistance reform** that elevates development as a priority and emphasizes integral human development, poverty reduction, and government transparency and the participation of civil society.
- Address **global climate change** with a particular focus on helping poor countries to mitigate and adapt to climate change.
- Promote reform of **U.S. trade and agriculture policies** to stimulate sustainable development in poorer nations and protect poor farmers overseas and small and medium-sized farmers in our own nation.
- Support transparency, participation and consent of local communities in **natural resource development** so that these activities lead to integral human development.
- Employ significant resources in **peace building** initiatives and **diplomacy** to address conflicts before they become violent.
- Address the root causes of **migration** and promote comprehensive immigration reform.



Photo by Sean Sprague for CRS

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, World Day of Peace Message, January 1, 2009.

² Pope Paul VI, World Day of Peace Message, January 1, 1972.

³ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, no. 26.

⁴ United Nations, *The Millennium Development Goals Report*, 2008. All subsequent statistics are taken from this report.

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the United Nations, April 18, 2008.