



# Embracing Global Solidarity

**The Rwandan Genocide Forced this Catholic Agency to Change the Way It Works in the World**

**I**n 1943, as war raged across Europe, thousands of bedraggled Polish refugees fleeing Soviet forced labor camps streamed across the border of Iran. Most were women and children, or very old men, their bodies emaciated, their feet swollen and bleeding. Realizing they had reached sanctuary, many fell to their knees and wept.

There to meet them were representatives of a newly formed agency, War Relief Services, representing the mercy and goodwill of American Catholics. From these beginnings, that charitable organization would become Catholic Relief Services (CRS), the official relief and development agency of the U.S. Catholic community.

Today, CRS is known for its response to the world's high-profile emergencies and disasters, like the Indian Ocean tsunami, the earthquake in Pakistan, and the ongoing conflict in Darfur.



**BY KEN HACKETT & DAVE PIRAINO**

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But emergency relief is only a part of the agency's work. CRS also helps communities develop the resources they need to sustain themselves. Our overseas assistance efforts in 99 countries around the world involve programming that helps farmers improve their yields; provides assistance to vulnerable people such as women, children, and orphans; assists poor people in accessing credit; improves community health and nutrition; and increases opportunities for education.

Underlying this work is a commitment to the U.S. Catholic bishops' call for global solidarity. CRS sees itself as an agency that promotes global solidarity, justice, and human dignity through programs of relief and development. But this has not always been how CRS saw itself.

This is the story of a relief agency that experienced tremendous growth, struggled with its identity, and went through a transformation fostered by rediscovering a source of its Catholic tradition.

## CRS'S HISTORY

From its beginning, CRS has always understood itself as a Catholic agency. But for much of our history, our identity and mission was as an agency that performed the corporal works of mercy: to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, and so forth. We first did this in the context of war relief: resettling refugees, ministering to orphans, and providing other assistance.

A confluence of events in the mid-1950s helped the agency expand: the end of colonial rule in Asia and Africa, the beginnings of the Cold War, and the granting of U.S. government funds to CRS as a result of the Truman Doctrine. The agency's name was officially changed to Catholic Relief Services in 1955, and the next 10 years saw it open 25 country programs in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Our programming focused on the provision of basic relief, including simple distributions of food,

clothing, and medicines.

As we grew, our programming focus widened, adapting to meet the needs of the post-World War II Catholic Church and the circumstances of the people we encountered. In the 1970s and 1980s, there was an evolution toward socio-economic development and more efficient emergency response. Although this evolution was for CRS a positive step, it was largely secular in nature and driven by increased funding from the government.

Events in the late 1980s and early 1990s fundamentally changed the world in which we worked. Those years brought two new factors. The first was the end of the Cold War, which led to volatile political and social climates in many developing and Third World countries. Throughout Africa and parts of Europe, Asia, and Latin America, governments were weakened—and sometimes destroyed—by ethnic conflict coupled with famine, drought, and other natural disasters.

At the same time, many CRS staff members began to reflect seriously on the strengths and weaknesses of the agency's approach to development. This was the second factor. There was a growing recognition that CRS had slowly drifted from its moorings. On the one hand, we knew what we did when we handed out packets of food in Europe and, later, in the developing world. But now we had



G. Jefferson Price III/CRS

**CRS agent Abdoulaye Bawa distributes grain in Niger during a 2005 food crisis.**

expanded our programming. There was an increasing sense that the agency's identity was being obscured, and this caused our mission to come under question. That process of introspection intensified under new leadership when Ken Hackett was named executive director of CRS in 1993.

Then came an event that forever changed us as people and as an institution: the Rwandan genocide.

By 1994, CRS had been working in Rwanda for three decades, since before that nation won its independence. Our

## SUMMARY

For more than 60 years, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) has provided emergency relief overseas. But the guiding principles underlying the organization's work have evolved over time—particularly over the last decade—as staff members have adopted a new view of their role in supporting people in need worldwide.

In CRS' early years, its focus was on corporal works of mercy: providing food, drink, clothing, and other material goods. Although the organization's breadth of services and geographic presence expanded throughout the

latter part of the 20th century, it wasn't until the mid-1990s that the agency questioned its foundational principles and made an organization-wide move toward change.

The impetus for change was the 1994 Rwandan genocide crisis. CRS staff members were deeply affected: not only were their aid programs destroyed; they also lost friends, colleagues, and family members. CRS staff realized that unless they addressed the justice issues underlying their beneficiaries' concerns, their aid would have minimal impact.

Changing the way the organization approaches relief has been an extensive process. Staff members developed a strategic plan, held retreats and workshops to define the concept of justice, educated colleagues worldwide on the new approach, facilitated "Justice Reflections" to explore the basics of Catholic social teaching, and developed guiding principles and a vision.

Despite challenges, CRS is successfully transforming itself into an agency that not only provides physical relief but also strives to help build a culture of justice, peace, and reconciliation.

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staff was aware of the ethnic tensions between Hutus and Tutsis. But we had concluded that addressing these tensions was not a part of our mandate as a relief and development agency. We simply tried to work around them.

Then, in April 1994, the genocide began. More than 800,000 people were murdered over three months. It deeply affected us. Our CRS staff lost friends, colleagues, and family members. And we learned that all the good work we had been doing—the silos and schools we built, the children we fed, the farms we planted—was not enough. Our programs were wiped out within days and many of the people we had served perished.

Partly because of the Rwandan genocide, CRS began to take a hard look at itself. What we learned from the horror of Rwanda was that our work in relief and development, though carried out effectively and efficiently, was not enough. Our identity as “development professionals” came under serious question. We realized that we had not addressed the justice issues relating to the structures that perpetuated societal imbalances in Rwanda. We had failed to support programs that fostered right relations among peoples, among institutions and people, and inside the church.

#### THE ADOPTION OF THE “JUSTICE LENS”

After much reflection, we resolved to address not just the symptoms of crises—burned-out houses, homeless refugees, and food shortages—but also the systems and structures that cause crises. We concluded that this was sound policy as well as a moral imperative. Without true systemic change necessary to produce more peaceful or tolerant surroundings, relief and development efforts could not succeed.

The events in Rwanda were a catalyst that impelled CRS through what can only be described as an institutional transformation. As we went through this process, we were guided by a jewel we rediscovered in our religious tradition: Catholic social teaching.

Catholic social teaching provides the perfect framework for an organization like ours. It calls people to solidarity, to balance relationships in society and among themselves. It places the dignity of the human person at the center of all we do. It upholds the principle of subsidiarity, which says that higher levels of an organization like CRS should perform no function or duty that could be

better handled at a more local level, by people who know the cultural, social, and political context better than CRS people do.

At the same time, the principles of Catholic social teaching speak universal truths to people of other faiths. As an international agency, we faced the challenge of regrounding ourselves in our Catholic identity while at the same time maintaining and strengthening our community of staff and partners, who represent religions and cultures from every corner of the globe. Catholic social teaching promised to make that possible.

The operational changes demanded by these insights did not happen overnight or easily. And, in fact, it is still a work very much in progress. There have been a number of milestones along the way.

Beginning in late 1995, CRS embarked on a strategic planning process to guide its choices and actions. People throughout the agency entered the process ready to expand their understanding of our mission to include justice, peace, and systemic change. This involved a good deal of debate, as would be the case any time a successful organization considered making a change to what it had been doing well for decades.

In 1996, as the result of a series of retreats and executive workshops, we determined that the concept of *justice*, as defined in Catholic social teaching, was a distinct strategy. From this came what we call our “Justice Lens,” a commitment to “build a culture of justice and peace through the promotion of just and right relationships.”

Having done that, we launched an agencywide education effort. Because CRS has nearly 5,000 employees spread around the world, we could not simply assume that each of them would understand, agree with, and want to implement the concept of justice in the same way. Indeed, “justice” is a concept that can carry vastly different meanings, depending on the community in which one sits.

Therefore, we undertook a participatory, reflective process that allowed people to explore the concepts of Catholic social teaching from their own perspectives and, having done that, begin to decide how to carry the Justice Lens out in their work. Over about two years, every CRS office in every country engaged in a facilitated “Justice Reflection” exploring the basics of Catholic social teaching. These Justice Reflections helped us to better understand and “own” the concepts of Catholic social teaching

and the Justice Lens. Feedback from the Justice Reflections led to development of the CRS Guiding Principles (see **Box**, p. 18).

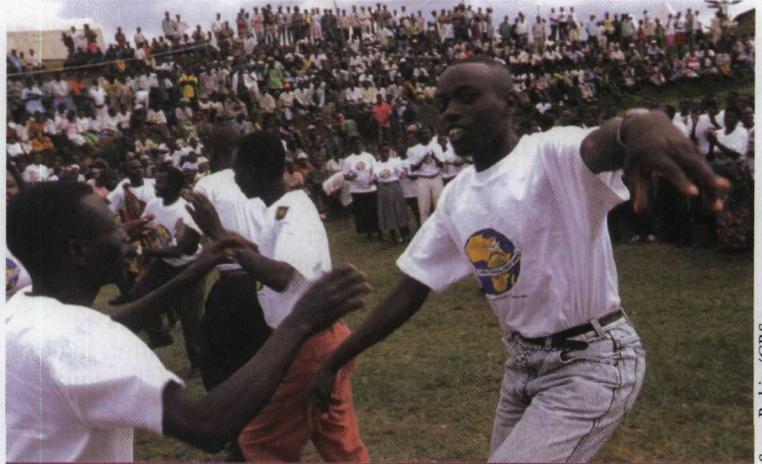
This process took on added momentum in 2000, when CRS convened a “world summit.” We brought together 250 CRS staff members and people from our partner agencies around the world, asking them to bring along the ideas that had been percolating at the agency’s country and regional levels. Once they were gathered, we asked these staffers and partners to develop their ideas into an agency vision and directions for our future. Out of the “summit” came the CRS Vision Statement:

Solidarity will transform the world to:

- Cherish and uphold the sacredness and dignity of every person
- Commit to and practice peace, justice, and reconciliation
- Celebrate and protect the integrity of all creation

In practical terms, implementing the Justice Lens meant reexamining everything we did—our programs, our policies, how we related to the people we serve, how we related to the U.S. Catholic community, how we related to one another as fellow employees of CRS—and evaluating all this in terms of whether it helped to build a culture of justice, peace, and reconciliation. In terms of programming, we now evaluate not just whether our interventions are effective and sustainable but whether they might have a negative impact on a community’s social or economic relationships. Assisting one group in a community, even if its members are in dire need after a disaster or emergency, might alienate the members of a group that did not receive assistance. We must ask what effect our programs might have on relations between leaders and community members, men and women, rich and poor, and Christian and Muslim. All of this enters into the justice equation.

CRS’s commitment to solidarity also led the agency to adopt “peace building” as an agency-wide priority. Peace building we see as the long-term project of building peaceful, stable communities and societies. CRS assembled a team of regional advisors and a headquarters-based technical staff to work with partners to launch peace-building projects in dozens of countries. Each summer, CRS conducts training programs for our staff and overseas partners at the Mindanao Peace Institute in the Philippines and at the University of Notre Dame’s Kroc Institute for



Steve Rubin/CRS

**Graduation for a solidarity camp for Hutu and Tutsi youth in Rwanda in 2000. The event was part of CRS peacemaking activities following the genocide.**

International Peace Studies. An increasing number of bishops from developing countries have attended.

This commitment to solidarity also led us to realize that, as a Catholic agency, we had not just an opportunity but an obligation to help U.S. Catholics connect with the people we serve overseas. In other words, we recognized that we serve a dual constituency: both poor and marginalized people overseas *and* Catholics in the United States. In 2002, we established the U.S. Operations Division, which seeks to raise the awareness of U.S. Catholics about the plight of the people we serve around the world. At the same time, we provide opportunities for Catholics to put their faith into action by participating in advocacy, programs, and partnerships that address issues of international peace and social justice.

We also realized that, as an organization, CRS had to practice what it preached. This meant examining our management practice as well as our programming overseas. We introduced a concept called the “Just Workplace,” which entails listening to our employees, allowing innovations, engaging various levels of the organization in decision making, and keeping people throughout the organization informed.

### IMPEDIMENTS TO IMPLEMENTATION

Any time an organization makes a change, it will encounter challenges to that change. We encountered three significant impediments: ownership, culture, and religious diversity.

**Ownership** Headquarters leads strategic planning in almost any organization. The larger and more geographically diverse the agency, the more diffi-

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cult it is to use broad participation in developing that strategy. CRS was no exception.

In developing our strategy, we made a tremendous effort to include people from throughout the agency. However, because those who led the initiative were based in CRS's headquarters, it was inevitable that at least some people—especially among staff members in the countries we serve—that the Just Workplace initiative, and to some extent the Justice Lens, were “headquarters initiatives.” As a result, there was a lack of “ownership” among some staff members.

CRS takes the need for participation and sense of ownership of these strategies seriously. Having recognized this impediment, and because we are genuinely committed to the Just Workplace concept, we continue to explore ways to increase par-

ticipation throughout the agency, give voice to the full gamut of opinions, and incorporate feedback into all of our decisions.

**The Identity Dilemma** CRS's staff is culturally and religiously diverse. Indeed, we consider this diversity to be one of our greatest assets. It makes CRS more effective, facilitates the acceptance of our staff and programs in efforts to build capacity in other countries, and helps ensure the practices of solidarity and subsidiarity.

Even so, our new emphasis on the agency's Catholic identity raised concerns among some staff members and partners. They feared that our new approach might hamper the implementation of our justice-focused strategies.

Many CRS staff members overseas live in communities in which religious beliefs are expressed

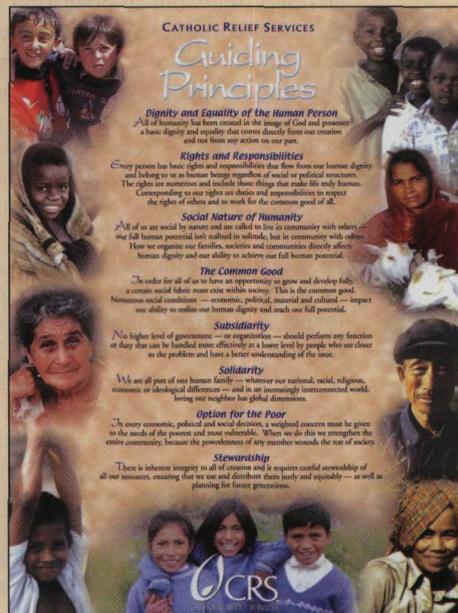
CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES'S GUIDING PRINCIPLES

**Dignity and Equality of the Human Person** All of humanity has been created in the image of God and possesses a basic dignity and equality that come directly from our creation and not from any action on our own part.

**Rights and Responsibilities** Every person has basic rights and responsibilities that flow from our human dignity and that belong to us as human beings, regardless of any social or political structures. The rights are numerous and include those things that make life truly human. Corresponding to our rights are duties and responsibilities to respect the rights of others and to work for the common good of all.

**Social Nature of Humanity** All of us are social by nature and are called to live in community with others—our full human potential isn't realized in solitude, but in community with others. How we organize our families, societies, and communities directly affects human dignity and our ability to achieve our full human potential.

**The Common Good** In order for all of us to have an opportunity to grow and develop fully, a certain social fabric must exist within society. This is the common good.



Numerous social conditions—economic, political, material, and cultural—impact our ability to realize our human dignity and reach our full potential.

**Subsidiarity** A higher level of government—or organization—should not perform any function or duty that can be handled more effectively at a lower level by people who are closer to the problem and have a better understanding of the issue.

**Solidarity** We are all part of one human family—whatever our national, racial, religious, economic, or ideological differences—and in an increasingly interconnected world, loving our neighbor has global dimensions.

**Option for the Poor** In every economic, political, and social decision, a weighted concern must be given to the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable. When we do this we strengthen the entire community, because the powerlessness of any member wounds the rest of society.

**Stewardship** There is inherent integrity to all of creation and it requires careful stewardship of all our resources, ensuring that we use and distribute them justly and equitably—as well as planning for future generations.

openly and are fundamental parts of daily life. We found that other-than-Catholic staffers accepted and worked with the new approaches once they were given an opportunity to discuss them, understand why the fundamental tenets of Catholic faith called CRS to live by them, and relate these principles to their own religious beliefs and experiences. They needed time to overcome understandable concerns regarding whether CRS was moving to evangelization and whether it was changing its fundamental mission. (They soon saw that we were not.) Once we built trust about those concerns, we got past them.

Justice Reflections were critical in building that trust. In Buddhist countries, for example, a CRS office might invite an expert to discuss the similarities and differences between Catholic social teaching and Buddhist thought. Staffers of other religious backgrounds had the opportunity to discuss the similarities and differences between Catholic social teaching and their own beliefs, and then to plan together how to implement the justice strategy in their work. This was not a process of “relativizing” Catholic social teaching. It was, however, a process of open and honest discussion.

**Resistance to Change** Finally, one of the greatest impediments we experienced was the natural human resistance to change. In 1996, CRS already had a strong track record of “doing good.” We were feeding people, providing for their immediate needs and helping them to live longer and healthier. Our staff felt good about that work, as it should have.

It’s a natural tendency, under such circumstances, to not want to change approaches. As a result, the agency had to become very good at making the case for change. We had to spell out clearly, and in a compelling manner, why addressing underlying structures and creating systemic change was so critical to our mission.

### HOW THE AGENCY HAS CHANGED

It has now been a decade since we launched the Justice Lens. How has the agency changed?

First, staff members throughout the world, whether Catholic or of other faiths, have a grasp of the language and concept of justice as understood in Catholic social teaching and are attempting to incorporate it into all aspects of their work.

Second, the people we serve and the partners with whom we work are receiving support not only to provide for immediate needs but also to create lasting changes for peace, right relationships, and permanent solutions to local problems.

Third, because of our focus on structural change and because of our greater understanding of the principles of Catholic social teaching, the concept of solidarity has taken hold in the agency in a whole new way.

Fourth, CRS has adopted a more participatory approach to making decisions, and this new approach affects the lives of our staff members, our partners, and the people we serve. We are striving for a new kind of ownership in our work. During the visioning work that we did in 2000, we held participation sessions in each of the agency’s world offices. Janitors and drivers worked with senior staff to provide input for our new vision and advice on how we could carry forward the Justice Lens and create a Just Workplace in the coming years.

Fifth, justice is no longer simply a concept we advance as part of a strategy. It has taken root. It has become a given in our approaches, in the way we think about our work, and as a principle we will continue to build on in the coming years.

Sixth, and finally, managers and decision makers throughout the agency are called to an open dedication to justice in the workplace. Staff members can rely on that commitment and can call on the principles behind it. Each person who works for or with us knows that, as an agency, we have made a commitment to try to live out the principles of Catholic social teaching in the way we work and the way we treat each other. While we still struggle to define what that means on a day-to-day basis—and always will—that foundation provides a special peace of mind. ■