



# U.S. International Assistance Reform and our Catholic Response

## What is the Issue?

The United States' international assistance program today is based on overlapping objectives, encompasses no unifying strategy and is poorly coordinated. The poorest countries in the world receive as little as one fourth of U.S. international assistance. Many assistance programs are designed with little input from the people who are supposed to benefit from them. Today, the more than 20 federal agencies that implement these programs have almost 50 different objectives, including some that are duplicative and others that are contradictory.

## Why Should People of Faith Care?

Our Catholic faith and tradition is rooted in a rich body of social teaching that calls us to uphold the life and dignity of the human person and to be in solidarity with our brothers and sisters here at home and around the world. Our Church teaches us to promote the common good, put the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable people first, and allow those people closest to a problem to help resolve it with social support as needed (subsidiarity). As Catholics, we are urged to be peacemakers – to resolve conflict through peaceful resolution.

Based on these teachings, the Church has long and extensive experience helping our brothers and sisters in need throughout the world. Catholic lay movements and religious communities of men and women operate numerous missions, schools, health structures and humanitarian groups throughout the globe. Catholic Relief Services, the official relief and development agency of the U.S. Catholic community, promotes international relief and development in 100 countries.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has a long history of addressing global poverty and supporting U.S. international assistance. The Catholic Church in the United States also has profound and abiding relationships with the Church in developing countries where the Church's many schools, social service agencies and health facilities serve the needs of the poorest members of the human family.

## How Does International Assistance Affect Real People?

As with many other developing nations, East Timor was colonized by foreign powers for 450 years, first by the Portuguese and then from 1975 to 1999 by Indonesia. Before it officially gained independence on May 20, 2002, the East Timorese experienced systematic destruction, murder, burning of buildings, and general looting at the hands of pro-Indonesian militias.



Domingas de Sousa presents her recent candlenut harvest.  
Photo by Sean Sprague for CRS

The challenge for East Timor's development towards a nonviolent and just society is to strengthen the capacity of communities and institutions to build a peaceful and democratic nation, which highlights good governance and economic recovery as the country realizes its full independence.

In countries such as East Timor, international assistance can make a huge difference. Domingas de Sousa (pictured above) of Baucau, East Timor, is participating in an innovative development project funded by U.S. international assistance that seeks to improve the quality of life for her and other candlenut farmers in her region.

These farmers, who have formed cooperatives, are receiving training on agricultural techniques, marketing and sales methods so that they can enhance and extract the full market value of their product and thereby secure a stable and growing source of income for these rural communities.

## What Response is Needed?

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic Relief Services urge the U.S. to make the following reforms to our nation's international assistance program:

**Make human development the fundamental goal of U.S. international assistance.** Our assistance should focus on *reducing poverty*, increasing the *participation of poor people* in development, and helping local governments and civil society *develop plans* to reduce poverty.

**Create a development strategy that focuses on poverty reduction and human development.** This strategy should, through coordination at the highest levels of government:

- **Address both immediate humanitarian needs and long-term development assistance, and balance broad global priorities** in sectors such as health, agriculture, nutrition, water and sanitation, and education, with country specific needs.
- **Identify opportunities for more effective coordination with global actors** to confront global challenges, such as climate change and soaring food and commodity prices, which are best addressed on a global level, and to reduce program duplication which places unnecessary burdens on recipients.
- **Prioritize the poorest.** At least half to two thirds of all U.S. international assistance should be allocated to poor countries and communities.
- **Provide assistance to failed or failing states and those emerging from conflict.** This will enhance global stability and our own national security. We should help these governments serve their people, respect human rights, and strengthen civil society (civic and social organizations that are not part of government).



*Photo by CRS Staff*  
After the 2004 tsunami, these women in Sri Lanka took part in a Cash-for-Work assistance program to clear brush to make way for new homes. The women earned income while rebuilding their community together.

**Give development a status and structure that places it alongside diplomacy and defense as the “third leg” of U.S. foreign policy.** Civilian agencies such as USAID should be in leadership and control of development efforts. This will help ensure that long-term development goals do not become subordinated to short-term security and political concerns.

**Build local ownership of development through the active participation of local communities and civil society organizations in development work.** Allowing beneficiaries to participate directly in their own development will ensure that local governments are more responsive to the needs of the poor and enhance the effectiveness of development assistance.

**Increase our commitment to poverty reduction** by ensuring that sufficient resources, both financial and human, are available to meet long-term development needs and address emerging and unanticipated humanitarian needs:

- **Gradually increase overall foreign assistance** so that it meets a commitment that was made by richer nations, including the U.S., to devote 0.7% of their national income to global development. (The U.S. currently spends about 0.2 % in this area.)