

Faith-based aid succeeds by focusing on the aid

James, Ron . The Ottawa Citizen ; Ottawa, Ont. [Ottawa, Ont]27 Aug 2010: A.15.

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ABSTRACT

Just like Hurricane Katrina blew the lid off New Orleans' poverty, Hartigan says, the Pakistan flood may do the same for Sindh. [...] international donors were ignoring the region because it had no strategic significance.

FULL TEXT

Can faith-based relief agencies work in countries where the local population subscribes to another religion? The question is not purely academic; most of the world's largest faith traditions have major relief agencies, many of which are active outside their own religious communities. From World Vision to Islamic Relief, faith-based charities are an important part of the world's response to natural and human-made disasters.

The issue is particularly timely today, because many of the groups providing relief to Pakistan's flood-stricken communities are not Muslim. This is true even though that country has a powerful international reputation as a centre of fundamentalist Islam.

One answer can be found in the working style of the Catholic Church. In recent weeks, Caritas – a global confederation of Catholic relief agencies – has been hard at work, providing washed-out Pakistani villagers with equipment to purify water and build shelters. Soon, Caritas agencies will start helping those same farmers prepare for winter.

Globally, the Vatican-based network is a charitable powerhouse, second in size only to the Red Cross. In the flood zone, Caritas-Pakistan has been joined by international counterparts such as Caritas-Ireland and Holland. The largest Caritas contributor, however, is the U.S.-based Catholic Relief Services (CRS), an \$800-million, 6,000-person agency active in 100 countries. Its Canadian sister-agency is Justice and Peace, a Montreal-based group.

Last week, I asked Kevin Hartigan, CRS's Asia manager, how his agency avoids religiously-based tensions. "Across the world," Hartigan said, "the composition of our national staff typically reflects local demographics." Thus in Pakistan, "over 90 per cent of our 250 staff are Muslim." Much of the face-to-face contact with Pakistani beneficiaries, moreover, is done through local organizations.

Still, I find the notion of Catholic relief in Pakistan's hinterland hard to understand. But CRS has never been physically attacked during its 55 years in-country, Hartigan says, noting that Pakistanis judge the agency on its actions.

CRS also benefits from the local church's reputation as a quality provider of education and health care. And, since most local charities are religiously based, CRS's church affiliation seems unremarkable.

It also helps that CRS prioritizes aid by need, rather than faith, and that it never proselytizes. As a result, most of its Asian beneficiaries are Muslims, Hindus or Buddhists.

CRS has already secured \$8.5 million for Pakistani flood relief, and expects the total to go much higher. Eventually, much of this will come from the United Nations or western governments, but in the first weeks, CRS relied heavily on private donations. Those funds were crucial, Hartigan says, because they allowed his staff to begin work before the big international monies arrived. Private donations, moreover, will keep his staff active long after donors shift attention elsewhere, and will insulate them from the vagaries of international donor politics.

This kind of ongoing presence is crucial, Hartigan suggests, noting that CRS has been active for years in Sindh, the hardest-hit province.

Although Sindh's flat plains rendered it vulnerable to rising flood waters, most international aid agencies and donor funds were concentrated in Pakistan's north-west, where the Taliban insurgency thrives.

The same mountains that offer the Taliban good military cover, however, also limited the flood waters' reach. Flash floods rushing through narrow mountain gorges claimed lives, but many villages were spared because of their higher elevation.

Down south, by contrast, thousands of villages in Sindh province were devastated when the flood waters slowly breached the river banks and flooded vast agricultural lands.

There may be a silver lining in Sindh's cloud, however. "Just like Hurricane Katrina blew the lid off New Orleans' poverty," Hartigan says, "the Pakistan flood may do the same for Sindh. Until now, international donors were ignoring the region because it had no strategic significance."

Although many argue that the relief effort has been too slow, Hartigan has a more charitable view.

"The severity of the flood grew over weeks," he explained, contrasting this gradual onset with the immediate impact of disasters such as Haiti's earthquake. As a result, it took time for the international response to gear up. Today, the biggest problem CRS faces in Pakistan is access. "We have funds in hand," Hartigan says, "but we can't get supplies to people as fast as we'd like." The waters destroyed bridges and roads, cutting off many from relief. Helicopters are in the air, but there is a limit to what they can do.

In Ottawa, a senior Canadian official confirmed Hartigan's assessment. "The Canadian press has been critical of our efforts," she said, "but in reality, physical access is the biggest issue, and this is not something that can be fixed overnight."

Canada's foreign ministry is focusing on rebuilding bridges, she said, while Canada's development agency is funding the kind of relief supplies that CRS and others are distributing.

CRS's procurers work locally when possible, cutting costs and boosting the local economy. In Pakistan, CRS has been able to purchase all the supplies it needs in-country.

Once the goods are in place, CRS hires a local transport company to bring the material to designated distribution points. There, a handful of CRS staff are already in place, working with partner NGOs, local councils, and local religious leaders to draw up lists of affected households.

Each household receives a non-replicable token, entitling it to a basic ration. Then, CRS co-ordinates with local authorities to police the distribution process.

Until now, Hartigan says, most relief distributions have gone smoothly. There have been no reported instances of corruption, and local government is keen to help.

"Any government would be overwhelmed by a disaster like this," Hartigan says, "and most Pakistani local authorities have been washed out." Still, he has few complaints about Pakistan's civilian or military officials.

In the months to come, international attention will gradually turn to the next disaster, but Caritas and its partners will remain. Some Canadians may fear that supporting Catholic institutions in Pakistan will stir up religious tension and controversy. Based on CRS's record in Pakistan, however, that danger seems unlikely.

If all faith-based relief is done with similar care and sensitivity, the potential for aid-related tension would be dramatically reduced.

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Credit: James Ron; Citizen Special

Illustration

Photo: Paula Bronstein, Getty Images / Families walk a flooded road in Baseera, Punjab, Pakistan.; Caption:

DETAILS

Subject:	Floods; Humanitarian aid; Earthquakes
Company / organization:	Name: Catholic Relief Services; NAICS: 624210, 624230
Publication title:	The Ottawa Citizen; Ottawa, Ont.
First page:	A.15
Publication year:	2010
Publication date:	Aug 27, 2010
Section:	News
Publisher:	Infomart, a division of Postmedia Network Inc.
Place of publication:	Ottawa, Ont.
Country of publication:	Canada, Ottawa, Ont.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--Canada
ISSN:	08393222
Source type:	Newspapers
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	Opinion
ProQuest document ID:	748059658
Document URL:	http://login.ezproxy.lib.umn.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/748059658?accountid=14586
Copyright:	Copyright CanWest Digital Media Aug 27, 2010
Last updated:	2017-11-17
Database:	Global Newsstream

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