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New Catholic Relief Services head calls for ways to aid world's poor

by Jerry Filteau



Carolyn Woo is seen in a 2007 file photo, holding a child in Ethiopia. (CNS photo/Jim Stipe, CRS)

WASHINGTON -- Innovative approaches and working on the ground with the local people are needed to help the world's poor achieve self-sustaining economies, the new president of Catholic Relief Services told the recent national Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington, D.C.

Carolyn Woo, who took over the reins at CRS in mid-January, said through CRS, the nation's 70 million Catholics touch the lives of about 130 million people around the world.

She warned of a growing tendency in the U.S. government, however, to shift international development aid away from faith-based agencies like CRS to "very large for-profit contractors" and to local governments, where often much of the aid can be lost to graft and corruption.

Innovation means things like bringing health care to pregnant women in remote villages in India who have never seen a doctor, Woo said. CRS workers visit those villages and use cellphones to let the women consult on diet and other health issues with a doctor or nurse who might be a full day's trip away.

Among other examples she cited:

- CRS has established seed fairs, where local farmers sell seeds from their own crops to other farmers, in 30 countries. Where farmers had come to rely on donated seeds from abroad after drought or disaster, the seed fairs have helped restore a self-sustaining agriculture locally.
- In some African villages, it has set up "arbor loos" -- small community outhouses with a shallow hole strategically placed so when the hole is filled with waste, the outhouse is moved to another site, where the waste is treated with ash from cooking fires and covered over with dirt. A fruit tree is then planted there. A wash station near the loo also promotes better hygiene.
- CRS introduced hand-operated rubble crushers into Haiti after its catastrophic 2010 earthquake, helping Haitians turn a major post-quake problem into an asset.

Woo said one of the biggest obstacles to rebuilding Haiti's devastated towns and cities is the massive rubble from the 250,000 homes and 30,000 commercial buildings that were destroyed or severely damaged by the quake.

The country does not have the heavy-duty earth-moving equipment, trucks or adequate roadways to handle the massive rubble removal, she said, but with the rubble crushers brought in by CRS, teams of Haitian men have ground almost 10,000 tons of rubble into sand and gravel, which has then been used to make concrete foundation slabs for more than 4,500 much-needed shelters.

"This is a win-win-win-win-win solution," she said. "There are five wins in there. No. 1, rubble is removed. Second, jobs are created. Third, the economy is stimulated -- we've just created an entrepreneur. Fourth, we have *local* materials for reconstruction. Fifth, the Haitians are empowered to make changes and improvements for their own recovery."

About 10 years ago, CRS began helping women in many countries form local Savings and Internal Lending Communities, or SILCs, Woo said. Women who join a SILC group save up money each month and pool it together, letting any of its members bid to borrow from that pool for a business idea or project.

Since then, 33,000 SILC groups have been formed, and cumulatively they have pooled about \$6.8 million in savings and made \$6.6 million in loans to their members, Woo said.

"There is an integral approach in the work that we do," she said. "What we look for is not just one solution. What we look for is the ability to really help lift life so that there is security, there is stability and there is hope."

CRS views its work around the world as evangelizing, but never proselytizing, she said. She quoted from Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* ("God Is Love"): "A Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and to let love alone speak. He knows that God is love and that God's presence is felt at the very time when the only thing we do is to love."

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About 300 people active in diocesan or other Catholic social ministries across the United States participated in the mid-February national gathering, which included an afternoon of visits to Capitol Hill to lobby members of Congress on current legislative questions involving issues of human life and dignity

and social justice.

Woo urged them in dealing with international issues to stress especially the importance of international humanitarian aid, which is "only about 0.6 percent of the (federal) budget."

Their voice on the Hill was important, she said, because "who else is fighting for the poor?"

[Jerry Filteau is *NCR*'s Washington correspondent.]

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