

## CAFOD: Fifty years with the world's poorest



*Commitment and solidarity of the volunteers of the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development*

In October 1962, in Rome, CAFOD, the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, was established by the Bishops of England and Wales. Against the background of the Second Vatican Council, and inspired by pioneering Catholic women who had initiated Lenten Family Fast Days two years earlier, the Bishops gave CAFOD a mandate to work for justice and human development as a tangible expression of the solidarity and compassion of the Catholic community with our brothers and sisters in some of the world's poorest communities.

Five years later in 1967, Pope Paul VI gave us his landmark encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*, the Development of Peoples. It has guided CAFOD's vision and mission over the years and paved the way for subsequent encyclicals on development, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* and more recently *Caritas in Veritate*, which continue to shape our work and underpin our partnership approach.

Rooted in our Catholic faith tradition, in Scripture and in the richness of the Church's Social Teaching, we have worked together with our local partners in Africa, Asia and Latin America in the face of huge natural disasters and shocking global events. CAFOD's work has grown substantially over these five decades with £43 million being spent directly on our international development and disaster relief programmes in this last year.

An important part of our work in England and Wales is with young people in schools and with parishes which involves awareness raising and education enabling people put their faith into action. Ever conscious of unjust structures, we have also campaigned to change the systems that keep people poor. Time and again, we have been encouraged by the Church's prophetic voice advocating a different world, a world that anticipates the Kingdom of God.

Our work is made possible by the passion and commitment of hundreds and thousands of supporters in England and Wales, who provide two thirds of our income; by women and men Religious many of whom are our partners on the ground; but especially by the worldwide Caritas family – 165 agencies

across the globe – living out the Church’s dedication to the poor.

United in our vision of ‘Just One World’, our motto, and driven by hope, compassion, solidarity and love for the presence of Christ in every neighbour (cf Mt 25:40), we work for lasting change, for the integral development of the human person.

Much has been achieved in these last 50 years: we have responded to and often take the lead in coordinating major emergency responses of behalf of the Caritas network – in places such as Ethiopia, Darfur, Sri Lanka; we have supported long-term development programmes e.g. for small scale farmers, small business schemes, caring for people affected by HIV, providing water and sanitation; we have lobbied governments and international institutions on issues such as the unfairness of international trade rules or the cancellation of the debts of the world’s poorest nations. I believe that if CAFOD is able to be an agent of the transformational change needed to tackle poverty and injustice, it is because our vision, our faith and our gospel values are an integral part of the organisation, of the formation of our staff and volunteers.

This 50th year has been a time to take stock, to give thanks, to look back on many achievements and to ask God’s blessing for our work in the years ahead. However, huge challenges remain. Globally, a changing climate and the world economic crisis. But there are three basic challenges facing every poor community: shortages of water, food and energy – underpinned by continuing powerlessness and lack of education.

This summer, with Archbishop Peter Smith, I travelled to Kitui, central Kenya, where they have experienced drought in one form or another for the past eight years. I met Margaret, a farmer with four children who talked about the heartache of failed crops and having to rely on government food handouts. She described how her family used to have goats, donkeys, and even an ox, but they have all died and they have been unable to replace them. She spoke of how the water supply used to be half a mile away, but in the severe drought of last year this has stretched to four miles. She cannot afford the local health clinic and so walks to a Catholic clinic an hour away. Neither can she afford to send her children to school.

It is not an easy time for our sisters and brothers like Margaret in the poorest half of the world. The UN estimate that a further 100 million people have been dragged into extreme poverty since 2008 because of the global recession. Over 800 million people still do not have access to safe drinking water; three times that number do not have adequate sanitation. And as CAFOD’s new Hungry for Change campaign explains, nearly a billion people are going to bed hungry every night.

And so in this Golden Jubilee year, as we look ahead to the next 50 years, we are spurred on by the challenges of inequality and injustice to read and respond to the new signs of the times and to walk in solidarity with those among us who need help. We do so, inspired by the Year of Faith, and renew our commitment to strive for a world where every human person can flourish, and live in safety and dignity; a world where CAFOD may have no reason to exist.

*Chris Bain, Director of CAFOD*

