

## A Discussion with Benedict Alo D'Rozario, Executive Director, Caritas Bangladesh

January 27, 2014



**Background:** Benedict D'Rozario takes pride in the long history of Caritas' effective service in Bangladesh, as a truly Bangladeshi institution. He reflects on the elements that account for Caritas' success, especially its commitment to a participatory approach that emphasizes community ownership of projects. He also reflects on recent tensions in Bangladesh and their root causes. This discussion took place in London on January 27, 2014, between Dr. D'Rozario, Katherine Marshall, and Nathaniel Adams, in the context of a meeting there on development and religion in Bangladesh. It followed on discussions with Katherine Marshall in Dhaka in July 2013.

### ***What brought you to Caritas and what was your background?***

After graduating from the University of Dhaka, I was invited to work for the Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace, with a Holy Cross priest, Richard Williams Timm, the executive secretary of the Commission. After two years, I was sent to Portland University in Oregon, under a scholarship of the Holy Cross order. I studied in Portland (1985-86) with a focus on sociology. I later did my Ph.D. at the University of Bath (1995-99), on mobilization and social organization. I have a keen interest in the sustainability of civil society organizations, and focused on Latin America and Africa. I did anthropological studies in the northwest of Bangladesh for a year and wrote my dissertation on the sustainability of grassroots organizations. My study and dissertation at the University of Bath was supervised by Professor G. D. Wood, my external supervisor was Professor David Lewis (now professor at the London School of Economics).

When I returned to Bangladesh after completing my studies, in 1987, it was a decision of the Archbishop and his team that I would join Caritas. I was reluctant to do so, because I was preparing to return to the Justice and Peace Commission, where I had worked before. But I was offered the Caritas position, focusing mainly on charity and development, but also human rights. This blend of activism and operational work was rare at the time.

I joined Caritas Bangladesh as assistant director for development programs. I moved around within the organization in different capacities and different positions and in 2005, I was promoted to executive director. I will complete 30 years at Caritas in 2016! Caritas has over 6,000 full-time employees and many volunteers. We work all over Bangladesh. Caritas is the largest NGO working in Bangladesh, after BRAC.

Caritas Bangladesh began in 1967. It was then Caritas East Pakistan. It had a small start after the 1970 cyclone, focused on relief and rehabilitation. Then came the Liberation War in March of 1971 and its tumultuous aftermath. Independence came in December. Many volunteers came from Japan and America, all over the world. Directors were from the US and Canada. Because of our long history Caritas has a strong grounding in the history and realities of Bangladesh.

***Has your family been Catholic for a long time?***

Yes, for more than 400 years. Even before the British arrived, the Portuguese came to Bangladesh, and at that time our forefathers were converted. We came from a district called Gazipur, which is some 15 kilometers north of Dhaka Airport. There was a large concentration of Catholics in that area.

***What kinds of issues did you work on earlier, when you were with the Justice and Peace Commission (in the early 1980s)?***

All sorts of human rights violations which included issues involving minorities, indigenous people, and more generally, problems facing rural people and workers. We worked mainly for people who had no knowledge of human rights and their own rights and no organization to support them. In Bangladesh human rights were little known and understood at the time. Our work thus involved a kind of a sensitization. We did investigations and reporting within the country, as well out of the country. We had contacts with Human Rights Watch in Washington, Amnesty International in London, Law Asia in Australia, and a wide variety of other worldwide connections.

***And you liked that work?***

I liked it very much, because I saw that there were not many people, not many human rights organizations working in the country at that time so we had an important role to play. The only other one I knew was Bangladesh Enforcement of Human Rights (BSEHR). The Episcopal Commission of Justice and Peace was doing very meaningful work around that time. It owed much to an American priest who had come to investigate and write, in Bengali. Working together, we published two newsletters, one in English and one in Bengali.

***As a member of Bangladesh's Catholic community, do you see it as having a special role to play either in human rights or in development in general?***

Historically, Catholics have been playing a large role in development in the education sector and the health sector. The human rights sector was another where the Church was doing very important work. My motivation to join Caritas was indeed the very good work being done by Catholic Church, including Caritas and the Justice and Peace Commission. I was convinced in discussions with them that the work of Caritas for development and the issues of human rights were truly interrelated. And indeed, we worked together closely: the Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace, and Caritas Bangladesh. I have worked to move us in that direction, and have made proposals that bring us closer together. A committee was formed taking two members from the Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace and two from Caritas; I was one of the committee members, which also included two bishops. We decided to take up a joint project that is still running. Initially it was a human rights awareness education, but it has evolved into a broader justice and peace program.

***What does the program involve?***

Above all capacity building of leaders who are instrumental in settling conflicts and disputes outside of court, or alternative dispute resolution. It also builds capacity to investigate human rights violations. And there are broader awareness seminars that include information about referrals. Say, someone grabs the land of a tribal community: how do you get justice? Who do you go to for counseling or legal aid? All these things are there.

***When you engage with some groups that do conflict resolution extra judicially, do you engage with local leaders?***

That is very rare because there are other people who are more knowledgeable than me. I was initiating the process, making the connection/contact, but there are few cases where I was invited to be a part. That is usually done by the matbar (a village leader), or a community leader. Sometimes local elected representatives are involved. In many cases I was present there as an observer, without playing any significant role, just observing.

***Could you describe the general approach of Caritas in Bangladesh?***

Caritas approaches every community and every issue initially and primarily through dialogue. In any kind of work, any community where we go, we start the dialogue with the leaders, with the community people. We have a dialogue with the teachers and government officials, to understand them and ask them to explain to us why we should be there. And slowly, gradually when they have developed trust in us and we have trust in them, then only we encourage them to come together in a group to analyze their problems. They explore the roots of their problems, digging deeply into them. Then they identify what they can do by themselves. And only after that, we come in to find and fill some gaps. We would agree, okay, the community can do what needs to be done up to this point, and beyond that they need some assistance. They can do many small things for themselves. For example, if it is repair of a small road, they can do it. But if it is a small bridge, they need to buy some bricks, or they need to have some items shipped; then they need some money. But they collect the materials and carry them back from the market. Sometimes we give them some subsidies. Even in something like building a school or installing a deep well, the process and our style is always participatory. We always follow the teachings of Lao-Tse, a Chinese philosopher. His constant message was: go to people, stay with them, learn from them and let them do what they can do. Then, when the work is done, the people will say, "We have done it ourselves." These are the basic things. In that way people finally will feel that this is their work: we have done it; this is our responsibility.

***How do you decide where to work?***

Geographically, Bangladesh is a very small country, though population-wise it is very large. Caritas Bangladesh has one national office in Dhaka, eight regional offices, and over 200 field offices. Thus we can cover almost half of the country through this implementation network. But if there is a disaster, in any corner of the country, we are ready to go there, with no hesitation. We have trained people to work and mobilize immediately when they are needed. For regular development activities, we have some selected areas. We focus on areas where not many NGOs or government entities are working. Our role is to complement, to fill in the gaps. We are mostly based in rural areas. We work where nobody is going: in the hill areas and in the coastal areas, for example. Not many people go there, so we go there.

***Do you notice a lot of difference in terms of the priorities of local people in different regions?***

There are big differences. If we go to Mymensingh, their priority will not match with the Chittagong Hill Tracts. If we go to Barisal, to the coastal area, their main problem will be salinity. They need water, safe water, fresh water. In Mymensingh the main issue is the land problem: the community people lost land because of the many different kinds of disturbance and violence there. People had to flee and when they came back, they could not get the land back. Or they were displaced by monoculture developments or deforestation. Usually the indigenous communities do not have any formal land rights, though they have been there for years, for centuries. But the system has been based on

community property and resources, more than individual land rights. Property, including land and forests, belong to a community, and they use and protect it. But now, slowly, gradually, they are getting rights to the land and we help them. In some areas the main problem will be water, both for drinking and for irrigation. Some communities have land but no water; in others it is the reverse. Some communities lack inputs.

***How are you experiencing, as Caritas, the interreligious tensions and relations that people speak of in Bangladesh today? You said Caritas never has been attacked?***

Yes, we have never been attacked. And the areas where Caritas works have seen little to no violence. Through our process, with community people coming together, there is a sense of brotherhood, a sense of responsibility to each other, so people protect each other. When there is a crisis, they come together and try to prevent it. They even know how to help others. Thus the presence of Caritas and its work over many years prevents the kind of violence you see in other parts of the country.

***Is it something as simple as the participatory tools, where you map community issues, and make a plan that engages different religious groups? Does this provide a space to open dialogue while such space is lacking in other places?***

Yes, through dialogue, people come to know each other and they have some joint action already, digging a pond, repair of a road, helping a sick person, or his treatment, or providing some support for marriage of a daughter, so that kind of activity is already there. Thus there is a sense of belonging and brotherhood, a community feeling. That is what we've observed.

***Does Caritas often work in Christian communities?***

Caritas works in Christian communities about 5 percent of the time; non-Christian will be 95 percent. The Christian community in Bangladesh is very small, less than one percent, and many of the Christians live in the city and don't need support. Many have a job or have some food. We work far more in the rural areas. We reach about 2.5 million people annually. Out of that you can say a maximum of ten percent in any area or project will be Christian, but it is usually closer to five to seven percent. We have around 6,000 staff members and more than 60 percent are Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists.

***When Caritas goes into a community, what kind of tools do you use for that initial discussion? How do you choose who to involve in that process?***

The initial contact is with the matbar, the local leader or local representative, school teachers, or religious leaders. Then there is a community gathering. We have some criteria that guide us in terms of beneficiaries: land ownership, monthly income, level of education, etc. Caritas has notional ceilings on levels of education, land ownership, and monthly income. These criteria are discussed with the community. The community then decides who qualifies to be a member in the Caritas group. They will decide who is eligible for any benefit, say, for a housing program, and the name will be listed on the board. In case anyone has an objection he can raise it and explain. Others will clarify and argue for the proposal. So there is a dialogue. At last the criteria are finalized.

***So the criteria will differ in each community?***

Yes. For example, in the Hill Tracts, the maximum land ownership to be eligible is five acres, but in a community in the Dhaka region, it will be half an acre, because the land there is far more fertile so it produces more, and three crops a year are possible. In the Hill Tracts, even harvesting one crop a year is uncertain; if there is no rain, nothing will grow. If there is a landslide, there will be no crop. So the landholding criterion will be

different. Income levels also will be different. Thus it is dependent on the community and on the area. In one place, the number of boats is not an issue, because they don't have access to water, but in another, boats are an important asset. Someone who has a boat could be considered very rich because it will be used for his family but also rented to others.

***Is this kind of community development that, as you said, reaches 2.5 million people the main activity of Caritas?***

It is one of our main activities. We also have more than 1,000 centers; we do not call them schools, because they do not have the infrastructure needed to be a school. But it is a place that we call a center, and children are taught there. As I said, there are more than 1,000. While there has been a significant rise in school enrollments in Bangladesh, there are still some pocket areas, hard to reach areas, where there are children not going to school. We negotiated with the EU, and they gave us over 10 million euros to run 1,003 centers in six years.

Another important program is youth training. We run programs for four years, three years, two years, one year and six months, depending on the type of trade or vocation and also the demand of the specific job. If someone will be working only on constructing swimming pools in Saudi Arabia, that's one skill, so may be they need only three months for training before they are tested and start work. Someone preparing for multiple tasks will need more time. Thus the training is customized in a modular form, depending on the demand.

We also have a program with the Bangladesh government, ILO, and UNICEF for children from the urban areas, from slums, including street children. The training is not formal. UNICEF provides some non-formal education, and Caritas runs a five-month skills program. ILO takes responsibility for placement in entry-level jobs. This program will cover 7,500 children this year, in six large cities, including Dhaka, Chittagong, Barisal, Khulna, and Rajshahi. Caritas Bangladesh has a high reputation and the training is considered the best in the country. Originally the training was to be provided by the government, but after two years, UNICEF, ILO, and the Bangladesh government concluded that it was not successful, and they approached us. So for the last two years we have done the training.

UNICEF and Caritas have a new project to provide sanitation for schools in the coastal area. More and more we are doing work the government would normally do because of our expertise and because of our access to the community. Our work aims to promote a culture of life following the Gospel values and Catholic Social and Moral Teachings. We do not accept funding from any organization that does not respect our position.

***There is much discussion around what level of engagement with the government is fruitful. In Caritas' experience, how do you engage with the government and local authorities? Can you accomplish more with or without government? Do you have high-level discussions on policy with the government?***

We are highly selective. We do not engage on each and every thing, and we have our way of doing things. We don't go by the agenda of the government; we have our own agenda. But there is always a discussion and an organization involved in our programs, whether it is UNICEF, ILO, or the government. For example, for the education project that will reach several thousand children, we had discussions on design and approach. We set preconditions that we thought were essential. Because we are reaching many indigenous students, we believe firmly that they need to be taught in their mother tongue, not only in Bangla or English. So our precondition was that the European Commission and the Bangladesh government should allow and approve money for multi-lingual books. We have already published books in seven different languages that are already being used.

There is also visibility and publicity: the Education Minister will open an event in February to introduce the books. And William Hanna, who is the European Commission ambassador, will be present during the inaugural program. In the past there were many initiatives, but books were only in English and Bangla and that was not helpful to the children. At least up to class three, we feel that they should learn from their own language. We also participate in policy formulation with NGOs and government. Caritas has been playing a significant role in shaping and revising land, education and water policy of our country.

***Is Caritas one of the leading groups supporting indigenous communities? Are many organizations doing similar work?***

Not many. Caritas is covering almost all the indigenous communities in the country. We have 15 different projects based on their priorities and on their preferences. Because their social and community organization is different from the others, a well tailored approach is needed. But the basic components of the projects are the same: education, health, improvement of quality of life, land retention, and other things.

***Have you found that there are tensions around proselytism in indigenous communities at all in Bangladesh?***

There is always that concern and it flares up sometimes. But by now, after 40 years working in Bangladesh, everybody knows what Caritas is doing. Soon after I joined there were two investigations, prompted by open allegations in a newspaper, one of the best newspapers at the time. Someone thought that Caritas was proselytizing, working to convert in the north of Bangladesh. A committee was formed to investigate, but they found nothing; the allegation was baseless. I myself was interviewed on this particular point. Sir Abed (BRAC) made a strong comment that he knew Caritas and that he knew that Caritas was not doing that. He says that explicitly in his book.

***What about other Christian groups?***

There are some evangelical groups working in different areas (from Caritas) and there have been some problems linked to their approach, but Caritas is very clear on this point. The Church can do it. Caritas cannot do it. It is not Caritas' job to convert. And every project of Caritas is approved by the government and monitored by the District Commissioner and local authorities. Even so, a few complaints come up sometimes, but when they go and investigate they don't find anything.

***How do you evaluate projects? How do you assess whether something is working well? Do you have a separate department?***

We have an audit department, a separate department that comes directly under me. The planning, monitoring, and evaluation (PME) department also comes under me. These managers are not involved with program implementation. They are independent, reporting to me. That is on the internal side, but there are also external assessments. When we do external evaluation, we seek bids on our website. People apply, from consultancy firms, Dhaka University, BRAC University, in Bangladesh and outside. Due process is followed to select the evaluators. In many cases, there are people coming from abroad. Right now there are two groups from Europe, doing evaluations: one from Germany and one from Netherlands.

***Is Catholic Relief Services (CRS) active in Bangladesh and if so, what kind of collaboration do you have with them?***

CRS is active in three areas now: food security, climate change, and disaster relief and rehabilitation (DRR). They do not have separate, independent projects, but work through us. In other countries, they have their own projects. But in Bangladesh, they work

through us so that any project is a Caritas project. They give funds, and also send a grant manager who looks after reporting in their style and monitors the work. Those projects are also approved by the government.

***Some people who focus on the political aspects of events in Bangladesh seem quite pessimistic about the future, but those who do a lot of work on the ground, seem much more optimistic. How do you explain that?***

Some academics do tend to be rather pessimistic, but they are rarely grounded in the field. Grounding in the field does make it easier to be optimistic and more confident.

***You observed that people from Caritas and others (mainly Christians) are leaving Bangladesh. What is their concern?***

Yes, but this is a very new, recent development, within the last three months; 2013 was a different year. In my 58 years, I have never seen anything like it. It has never happened before. Because of fear and uncertainty about the future Christians are leaving Bangladesh. Some of our Caritas colleagues are also trying to leave.

***What do you think is happening?***

I think the main problem is power, politics, and authority, all these things. Both political parties are using religious groups and religion as their basis for authority. That is the root of the problem. The government already knew, well before the January incidents following the general election, which areas would be affected by post-election violence. There is a strong political element when anybody is denounced, or anybody is executed. But I see less seriousness in the steps the government is taking that are precautionary, preventive measures. A concern is the time they have taken to reach the site where the problem started, for example where houses have been burned. I do see worrying, serious signs. New houses are coming up, roads are being cemented, electricity is connected, but right now, our confidence and our trust are damaged. Caritas is being called to many places in communities that are affected.

***It is Hindu communities mainly that were affected as we understand it. Were Christians affected also?***

There were a few cases where Christian communities were affected, in Mymensingh diocese and in Dinajpur diocese. These cases were very few, and the Christian communities were not a general target. But people saw it happening and are afraid that it might spread. I am more hopeful now because the government is taking the problem more seriously. There were many demonstrations. My wife and I, for the first time in our lives (or since our student days) joined in some of the protests. People from all the religious communities joined in the protests.

***Are the main issues around land?***

In at least one case that I know the conflict was based on the land. In others, problems arose around the election: why did they go to vote when they were told not to, issues like that.

***Who in Bangladesh today is doing the most interesting peace building work?***

In the past, there was more work along those lines. For example, the Coordination Council for Human Rights was a kind of umbrella organization of more than 100 human rights organizations, but that council divided along the political lines. In fact many of the NGOs are now divided along political lines also: some with Awami League, others the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), with some in between or not joining anybody. The

whole of Bangladeshi civil society is divided along political lines, even university professors. They are identified as such. In the past there was only one Apex Organization of NGOs in Bangladesh (ADAB); now there are two: ADAB and FNB (Federation of NGOs in Bangladesh). FNB was very close to BNP. ADAB is very close to Awami League. As a result of this type of divisions, the influence of civil society on decision and policy making process is less now.

***How strong is interfaith work in Bangladesh? Is Religions for Peace active? Are there locally inspired groups? Are there systematic ways the groups meet?***

One person, a Holy Cross brother, has for a long time led an initiative, the Bangladesh Interreligious Group. Brother Jarlath D'Souza has a regular monthly meeting. Also, in Dhaka University, there is a department for world religions. Professor Nurul Islam started it, and there is also a Catholic priest teaching there. Under this group other intellectuals visit. Third, there is the Catholic Church. They have an Episcopal Commission for Interfaith and inter religious work. In every diocese there is also a branch, and there they take the initiative with other communities to come together and discuss. And recently during the last years or so, the Islamic Foundation has started some programs. They are working to bring different religious groups together under the Ministry of Religion. Bangladesh needs more of this interfaith work.

***What work are the Jesuits involved in? What are they doing?***

I am not sure exactly what they are doing but they are starting in a small way, building and recruiting seminarians, involved with youth activities. They are not very visible at present.

***How have you experienced the Leaders of Influence Program (supported by USAID and the Asia Foundation)? Has it made a difference?***

The program started with only Islamic leaders. I encouraged the US ambassador and the Asia Foundation to broaden it. They did, so that it included a much wider group of leaders. It has been helpful, to a certain extent, but I do not see real commitment and seriousness. It needs to be a sustained program, not a project with a short time horizon. If you have money for such a program, do it. If you don't have money, you don't do it. Work like that needs to be a long-term commitment and it should also involve the local people and the local leaders. The way I saw the program it was too much like someone is giving money to The Asia Foundation, and they do it. The money stops, and they stop doing it. It's like a project. It should be a long-term program, with serious commitment.

***How do you find working with the donor community? Is there open dialogue, willingness to hear criticisms?***

It depends. Sometimes they will be very open to listening, sometimes not. I have both experiences. Sometimes you are getting invited to the house of an ambassador. Or sometimes, they won't invite you. I don't know. In some cases there does not seem to be a policy, or we don't understand what the policy is. Why are they so active in talking about politics in Bangladesh? Why? Every day the ambassadors go to the press and politicians and make noise. Why do they like to speak? We get annoyed. There are areas that they should be active in, but not all.

I have been quite critical of the World Bank over the years. The main issue is lack of cultural sensitivity. There is very little sensitivity for how development works in contemporary society. The tendency is to be top heavy and intellectual and to look to mega-projects. Instead, the need is to focus on the grass roots. This can be seen in the bidding process and the selection of voices to hear. I once raised my voice at a World Bank "consultation", so they don't like me now. Even so, when they invite me I go.

***Do you have advice as to the wisest and most effective approach to research religious aspects of development in Bangladesh?***

In reflecting on the role of religion in Bangladesh, it is better to take an indirect rather than a direct approach. There is no question that all people are spiritually deep in their hearts, even if they all do not practice. That is clear in the way many are attached to principle. The aim is to reach out and to find ways to facilitate a Muslim to be a better Muslim, a Christian a better Christian, a Buddhist a better Buddhist. The goal should be conversion of the heart, not of religion. It is also important to know others better and to show respect. An example is the annual Lenten Campaign of the Catholic Church that we do each March/April. There is always a message that we use in our communications. It has a Christian foundation, but the message is good for everyone. We invite scholars from other three religions - Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist - to share their reflection on what Holy Father has written. Their reflections are published in a booklet, which give benefits and encouragement to people of all faiths, resulting more sacrifice, service, and donations.

Link: <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/interviews/a-discussion-with-benedict-alo-d-rozario-executive-director-caritas-bangladesh>