

## Interview with Cordaid on the occasion of 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Cordaid.



### Passing on the gift of knowledge

**Dr. Benedict D'Rozario heads Caritas Bangladesh, with a 6000+ staff one of the biggest Caritas organizations in the world. It is a highly regarded Catholic organization operating right in the heart of one of the biggest Muslim countries in the world.**

Much of D'Rozario's time is spent in high level meetings in Bangladesh and abroad. But as a student in development studies and a young development worker, he literally spent years living with isolated Bangladeshi communities. Still today, as executive director, not a month goes by without a longer visit to a rural village. Most of his insights and principles related to the concept of Caritas have ripened during these longer stays.

D'Rozario: "For me Caritas is the opportunity to return and share some of the gifts I was given by God without asking for it. It is also a responsibility to share, because the love I have received by God, by my family, my community, my schoolmates, my Muslim brothers and sisters, has made me the person I am today. So I am indebted to them."

### The knowledge and wisdom of survivors

Sharing and spreading, not only his own knowledge, but mainly the knowledge others have in coping with adversity, this has become the essence of what D'Rozario is doing professionally. For him, every person is a book and every community a university. And this philosophy has turned into a basic organizational principle of Caritas Bangladesh. D'Rozario: "It struck me when I started working with Caritas, that in some places where we did not intervene after disaster struck, people were better at solving problems of survival, even without our help. So these were the places I went to, to learn. For example, when floods hit Bangladesh in 1988, people from Dhaka asked for assistance, but people from places that were hit more badly, didn't ask for help. I discovered that these communities had worked out all kinds of community coping mechanisms. Every morning people gathered under local leadership to assess the flood situation and discussed whether or not the time was ripe to send their children to school or call them back home, to send cattle to the fields or not, to wrap seeds reserves in plastic, etc. They had their own systems to save food and to prepare for floods and other natural disasters. So I saw it as our task to spread the knowledge of these lifesaving coping mechanisms. We documented them, published and shared it. Likewise in the coastal areas, all villages are equally affected by salinity, but some never apply for help. Why? Because they have adapted their livelihood systems, for example by changing poultry farming for ducks who are less vulnerable to salt, and fish farming for crab farming, or by raising the dykes, by planting trees on embankments. So we started organizing visits of communities who were at a loss because of salt water floods to these farmers who had adapted themselves. This way of passing on practical knowledge is much more efficient than to impose changes. For me, this way of sharing knowledge is in essence a form of Caritas."

### **How to 'organize' Caritas?**

Caritas is hard work, and not necessarily because of the hard physical and human condition in which the work takes place. D'Rozario: "The main hardship of this work is to convince staff of the importance to work selflessly; not to expect anything in return yet remain very responsive and proactive. It is a common human reaction to feel superior when you give something to someone. So for many, also among our staff, it is hard not to feel superior in whatever form, but to feel blessed to be given the opportunity to share."

Aid or care that is given in a top down or superior manner cannot be effective, according to D'Rozario. "People reject support from governments or international donors if they weren't listened to beforehand or if they weren't involved in the needs assessment. It is aid that is not asked for, not needed and therefore rejected. So there is not a single Caritas Bangladesh aid project that has not been discussed and designed with the communities from the start. All of them are evaluated together, with complaint boxes in the villages. Participation and financial contribution should be shared as much as possible. Local so called 'aid receiving' communities share immense parts of their time, their resources and their money to the humanitarian work. We act together, in all senses of the word. That's why the budget of Caritas Bangladesh consists for 40% of local contributions. Everybody shares. Even staff shares from their own pocket. We pay 1 day fully salary for the Lenten Campaign, 1 day basic salary for educational projects and we all contribute freely to the staff solidarity fund, used for small and immediate needs of mothers, fathers and children in poor communities, without needing to go through difficult **and lengthy** administrative procedures."

So this is how 'Caritas' is organized... By learning from others, passing on knowledge and stimulating personal involvement.

### **Catholic organization in a Muslim society**

But how do you organize yourself as a Christian organization in a largely Muslim society? D'Rozario: "70% of our staff is non-Christian, mainly Muslim. But within Caritas we don't identify ourselves as Muslim, Christian or Hindu. Every morning we pray together, reading from the Bible, the Qu'ran, the Gita... We work and learn together and through our work and formation the Christian will become a better Christian, the Muslim a better Muslim, **the Hindu a better Hindu**, the Buddhist a better Buddhist. So within the organization there are no tensions. But there have been other tensions. More than once Caritas Bangladesh has been the subject of public investigations and allegations coming from fundamentalist Muslim leaders of having a hidden religious agenda inside Muslim communities, of trying to convert people. But no ground or proof of that was ever found. Today we are highly respected by the government, the army and all indigenous and religious communities. Even so much so that in some areas we are the only NGO that is given entrance, for example in the Hill districts in the southeast, which is a politically highly sensitive area because of separatism and social unrest. The reason for this broad acceptance lies in our objectivity, our financial transparency, our commitment and our principle to keep at a safe distance from government and politics. Which doesn't mean that I cannot advise the finance minister on budget issues, which is what I do, but that I will never accept any political appointment or invitation. My dealings are with the state and state officials, never with politicians."

As to staffing, D'Rozario's main concern is how to retain Christian employees. "last year was our worst year. The bombings, killings and other attacks of Muslim fundamentalist drove many Christians out of the country. A lot of our Christian employees, highly educated and

well to do people, left Caritas. So my concern is how to keep Christians within the organization. I think that about 35% of Christians is a necessity to keep the identity of Caritas alive, an identity that is built around core values like selflessness, sharing, forgiveness and the love of your neighbor.”

### **Badly needed**

Core values of Caritas, or rather the tendency to lose track of them, is something D’Rozario is worried about. Even though a lot of valuable theological thinking has been done in recent years, to give the work of Caritas a thorough intellectual and spiritual basis – the encyclical Deus Caritas Est for example, this thinking is not well embedded in the daily work of many Caritas organizations and not well accepted by Caritas members, according to D’Rozario. “I have some frustrations that some members are moving away from our core values. That’s why I think this conference here in Vught focusing on the Caritas identity and catholic social teachings, is badly needed. I hope we can reflect and define the meaning of our work, which for me is about witnessing the love of God. Because we are created and loved by God as equals, as brothers and sisters, we have the responsibility to share and give to each other, rich to poor and poor to rich.”

### **Allowing the other to give**

“What I personally hope this conference will bring is that we will find more meaning of what we do and that we will have sharpened the tools of solidarity and found ways to become more effective. What I hope we will leave after these 3 days in Vught is pride and arrogance. And finally I hope these days will help us to become better ‘receivers’. It is a common thought that Caritas is about giving to others. But in order to give you must be able to receive. We usually feel satisfaction by giving and we don’t care much to receive. But my experience is that every person, even the poorest beggar, maybe especially him or her, has a treasure to give. We need to allow the other to give.”