

Meeting Africa's Needs Through Catholic Relief Services: A Firsthand View

David Orth-Moore '85

March 28, 2019

David Orth-Moore is Senior Director for Integration Support with Catholic Relief Services.

I am a proud, long-term employee with Catholic Relief Services (CRS). In this piece, I describe my experience with CRS, specifically in our work in sub-Saharan Africa. You will recognize two themes in this piece. One theme is what CRS does to meet the basic needs of the poor: food, water, shelter, education, finance, sanitation. The second theme addresses the essential nature of collaboration. You will learn of some of the ways that CRS connects Catholics in the United States and the funding we receive from the US government to work with local communities.

First, a little about myself. I credit Juniata College with the career path that I am on, international relief and development, which may be hard to believe coming from central Pennsylvania. Bear with me so that I can explain. Currently, I am the director for integrated information systems at Catholic Relief Services. After twenty-five years in Africa, starting as a Peace Corps volunteer in Senegal immediately after I graduated from Juniata College, I now find myself working as the bridge between our staff overseas and the technology we use to do our work.

Catholic Relief Services is an American international relief and development nonprofit. All the money that we get we give away. Our goal is to help as many people as we can. Last year, our budget was about a billion dollars, and we helped 130 million people around the world. We work in over a hundred countries, primarily in Africa.

Figure 1 is a picture of me in El Geneina in West Darfur, Sudan, one of the most remote places in the world. You might have heard about Darfur and the genocide that occurred there in the early 2000s. CRS was doing some relief work there, and I had the chance to visit from time to time to check our work, which included building school rooms for kids who were displaced due to the fighting.



Figure 1. David Orth-Moore (tall man on left) in El Geneina, West Darfur, Sudan. Photo credit to the author.

DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY DEVELOPER

The context of my youth helped get me here. In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan, in contrast to how flamboyant Donald Trump is, projected a grandfatherly persona. Yet he had a rather radical agenda. That agenda was—to summarize by the movie *Wall Street* with Leonardo DiCaprio—greed and avarice are everything. He also believed in something called trickle-down economics, which cut taxes on the wealthiest in the belief that they then would give money to the poor. It never worked. During his tenure, we also had the Iran-Contra affair. His administration sold arms to Iran, and the proceeds from those sales we gave to a rebel force in Nicaragua to overthrow their government. It was illegal because Congress had already passed a law making it illegal to support the Nicaraguan rebels, but, within the context of the Cold War, it happened anyway. Those events shaped me.

I was a bit of radical at the time, embracing the “no nukes” position, protecting the environment, and opposing Reagan. This was pointed out to me once when, as a member of the college newspaper, a drunk guy called me a “communist” during a dormitory party. I did not subscribe to communism, of course. I did, however, hold a different view than many people.

Another reason I held a different view stemmed from going to Juniata College. Here, you should be questioning assumptions and questioning what you believe. That is what education is all about. If you don't do it now, pretty soon you're going to be stuck in work and finding it harder to do. Now is the time

to question things, to ask what is happening and for what reasons. I had some good professors, like Janet Lewis for argumentative writing, who forced me to develop good arguments and not only rely on passion in communication. Others instrumental professors included Dr. Robert Wagoner (philosophy) and Dr. Craig Baxter (international relations). They encouraged me to think about things differently. I also found myself going to England for my junior year abroad and that opened my eyes. I encourage as many of you as possible to study abroad because it is a profound way to understand who you are and where you are from. You must get out of your home country and out of your culture to better understand who you are. It also helps you to understand what it means to be an American, and it's good to also realize how blessed—despite our flaws—we are here. We live in a country with tremendous natural resources, an open economy. You can vote. You can say what you want and vote for anyone you want.

Juxtaposed to my college experiences and the United States political context was the famine in Ethiopia in 1984-1985. There was this little song “We are the World,” sung by such rock and roll icons as Ray Charles, Billy Joel, Michael Jackson, Stevie Wonder. That song sought to raise money to help people suffering from famine. It really moved me, and I decided I would try to join the Peace Corps. The Peace Corp is a US government agency founded in 1962 by President John F. Kennedy. It helps developing countries become more self-reliant. Peace Corps volunteers give two years of service aimed at three objectives. One is to help people. The second is to learn about a culture so that when you come back, you have a bit broader perspective of the world. The third is to impart a little bit of America overseas because people are eager to know about Americans and our way of life.

I accepted a placement in Senegal, and that is where I really got my development education. By development education, I mean I was working in rural Senegal, equipped with good will and only rudimentary language skills and needed to support the community in figuring out what it is they wanted to do. It turned out they wanted to improve their access to water.

The United Nations set twenty-five liters of water per person per day as a goal in Africa. Meanwhile in the United States, our per capita consumption is close to 400 liters per person per day. The project was necessary because there wasn't enough water in Miname. Residents drew water from a well fifty meters (150 feet) deep and six feet in diameter. Women had to pull water out of that. Why did women and not men pull water out of the well? Because that is women's work in Africa. There are certain tasks that women do; men do certain other things.

So I went to the capital city, Dakar, and filled out a proposal. I got around \$5,000 from Catholic Relief Services and was able to bring it back to do a well project. I said, “Hey, everybody, we got this money to do a well project!” I was trying to help the women deepen their well so that they would have more water. On the day that the well digger arrived, I looked around and said, “Where is everybody?” They had to pull the ropes to help to extract the rock that was in the well in order to deepen it. Nobody

came. I took the money back to CRS. I sat down for a couple of months, and, after a while, they said, “What are you doing? We thought you had this well project. How come you're not doing it?” I replied, “You never came to help. When you're ready, come and see me.” A few months after that, the village came and said, “We're ready. We will help you.” I got the money again, and we hired the well digger to deepen the well with the active support of the village. That was a development lesson. Never do for others what they can do for themselves.

After Peace Corps, I earned my graduate degree from American University in Washington, DC. I figured out by that time that I wanted to spend my career on development.

FURTHER EXPERIENCES IN DEVELOPMENT AND AID

My wife and I took our first assignment in Liberia in 1990, a country experiencing civil war. My job was helping to deliver food assistance to people on the other side of the line. The capital city, Monrovia, where we lived, was controlled by West African forces, and everything on the other side of that line was controlled by rebel forces. We regularly got to checkpoints, where cars are stopped and identification checked, and often were asked for bribes to pass the checkpoint, staffed by thirteen-year-old boys with AK 47s hanging on their shoulders. It was pretty intense.

After Liberia, I went to Togo, then Ethiopia. Following that, we came back to the United States. I wanted a change, so I worked for Catholic Charities of Central New Mexico. Catholic Charities is the sister organization of Catholic Relief Services. CRS focuses on people overseas whereas Catholic Charities focus on the poor here in the United States. Wherever you hear of any kind of conflict or need, Catholic Relief Services is there.

We lived in New Mexico but decided to move overseas with CRS again because I missed the work and we wanted our children to be shaped by life in Africa. I wanted the kids to understand what it was to be an American citizen and to live in Africa. So, we moved to Ghana, then Ethiopia, and later Kenya.

CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES

Let me talk a little bit about CRS. We were founded in 1943 to help resettle refugees during World War II. After World War II, millions of people were displaced and CRS, Catholic War Services back then, delivered food assistance to primarily French and Polish refugees until they returned home. We are the overseas relief and development agency of the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops. It's important to know that, even though we our roots are Catholic, we help everybody based on need, regardless of their race, creed, nationality, etc. As you think about your careers, there are many ways to assist people. You do not have to work for a nonprofit. There are volunteer services. You all have

tremendous capacity. I argue that helping others is also helping yourself because it gives you a positive sense of self-worth.

At CRS, we help people cope with loss and reduce the risk of further loss. We advocate for people's rights. We help people diversify their assets to protect themselves. We help people rebuild assets after disaster. In the United States, all you need to do is take out an ATM card and withdraw money. Most people in the developing world do not have that luxury. They do not have a bank account. They do not have credit cards; certainly the rural poor in Africa do not. Really, when I talk about assets, I am talking about roofing sheets, cattle, sheep, farming tools, and seeds that they have saved from the last season to plant to grow more food. These are assets. When you experience a natural disaster, like a drought or hurricane, when you lose your home and in your home are your seeds and tools and now your cattle and your sheep are either dispersed or dead and your roof has blown away, you've lost everything. That is where Catholic Relief Services comes in; with relief and emergency aid, we help people recover.

For instance, there was a famine in Somalia around 2010-2011 that resulted in about 500,000 people being displaced. Think on that number—half a million people—who fled their country by walking upwards of 200 miles with their families in search of food and shelter. We could not go into Somalia at the time because it was too dangerous. A radical Islamic group called Al Shabaab denied aid agencies like CRS and the United Nations access to places where communities had no food even though the rains had failed and there were no crops. Famine is actually a political tool. Famine can be avoided when local governments allow aid agencies to distribute food where there is severe drought. Because Al Shabaab did not allow us in, thousands died, and about half a million fled their own country in search of food, water, and shelter.

Currently, there are sixty-eight million people in the world who are displaced. That is the largest number since World War II. People do not want to leave their homes. They leave home because it's unsafe. What would happen if I told you, “Get your things and get out of your dorm”? What would you take? It's like that for some people in Africa.

There are two types of displacement: internal displacement (within your own country) and when you have to leave your country to become a refugee. There has been a lot of talk about migration and people coming into this country and claims that they don't belong here. All I would say is, generally people want to stay home and live in peace. We all like being home, but if there is war, violence, or people unable to make ends meet, they seek other places to go. As people from the Judeo-Christian faiths, we have the responsibility to welcome the stranger.

CRS uses a variety of ways to deliver lifesaving assistance to people in need. South Sudan is the world's newest country, voting to separate from Sudan and become its own country in 2011 after five decades of civil war. In 2006, the warring factions (the Sudan government in the north and the rebels in

the south) finally stopped hostilities and agreed to a five-year timeframe to figure out how they were going to coexist—either to unify as one country or to separate and form two countries. Unfortunately, Sudan didn't try to make it work, so the south voted for independence. Two years later, the country had fallen apart. I used to visit Juba and other places in South Sudan, and it is sad to see. There are many different ethnic groups in South Sudan that joined together to fight the government in the north. Unfortunately, once they had their own country, they could not agree on how to run the nation. Two ethnic groups in particular, the Dinka and the Nuer, have shed a lot of blood fighting others. As a result, civil conflict tore apart South Sudan, resulting in tens of thousands of people dead and injured and a million fleeing their homes. CRS has been there the entire time trying to rebuild livelihoods destroyed in the conflicts and building peace by working ecumenically. In addition, we distributed food, as people have not been able to farm or don't know how to farm after years of conflict. We delivered this food by airdrop because we could not access these areas by road. For one thing, South Sudan has no paved roads. They have no electricity, they have no running water, and they have no telephone lines. The Sudanese are resilient, however, and dream of a future peace.

CRS works through local partners, such as local Catholic churches and other civil society organizations, who know the communities, who speak the language, who know the area, who know the needs, and who talk to local people. This approach proves much more effective if local partners are strengthened because they are going to be around longer than we are. Collaborating with local organizations has been one of the keys of success for development. This is called subsidiarity—don't do for others what they can do for themselves. We brought in resources and technical knowhow, but we also worked with local communities to reach out to their fellow community members.

I mentioned earlier that when manmade or natural disaster strikes, people with limited assets struggle the most. The percentage of subsistence farmers in Africa is around 85%, which means communities are highly dependent on rainfall. No rain means no crops. Much of our work is improving land and getting access to water for people to use for consumption and to grow food. In Figure 2, you can see two hillsides, one on which we worked planting grasses and shrubs in addition to building terraces to trap water and reduce soil erosion. However, the hillside in the background has not been improved, and you can see the difference. There is no greenery on the far hillside while in the foreground, there are many shrubs, greenery, and little terraces. We found that the hillside where we worked was able to withstand drought better than where we did not invest resources. We call this effort natural resource management, and it is something that we did in the United States back in the 1930s during the Great Depression to thwart the Dust Bowl and soil erosion. Typically, in Ethiopia, they cut down the wood because they have no other cooking and heating sources such as gas or electric. Soon hillsides become denuded, so when it rains, all that soil washes down, and that is a loss of productive topsoil. The water



Figure 2. Terracing Work in Ethiopia. Photo courtesy of Catholic Relief Services.

rushes down and cannot be used. It goes into ravines and goes away. That is a kind of a double loss, as the rainwater didn't really help the farmer at all. CRS constructs these terraces and with each terrace adds plants and vegetation, and, when it rains, the water won't rush off the hillside. Because it does not rush off the hillside, it percolates into the ground and eventually it finds its way into aquifers down in the valleys. Then we can extract the water from the aquifer, and they can use it for the dry season.

Most subsistence farmers can only grow when there is rain. Usually there's only one rainy season, so household food needs have to be produced during that one season. If you can get water during the dry season to plant vegetable and root crops, it is transformative. People can then sell their vegetables to put their kids through school, or buy medicines, or put roofing sheets on their homes. The main thing is to preserve landscapes from soil erosion. When another drought comes around—and we know that in East Africa there's a drought every seven years—we want as many people to be prepared by ensuring their farmlands are protected and, if possible, ensuring access to secondary water sources.

Another way to help people access water is to build small dams. A small dam traps water so that people can extract it again. When it does rain, the water finds the lowest ravine, so, by building dams, we can trap the water for other uses like growing crops or watering livestock.

When possible, we try to provide water in a cost-effective way, but when there are no options, we dig a deep borehole. For example, on a recent project in Somalia, the water table (aquifer) was probably 600 feet below the surface. As an illustration of how amazing a well like this can be, I saw an older man, probably seventy years old, strip down to his undergarments and dance in the water because he had never seen running water before. In the past, nomadic herders took their cattle to water pans or small ponds. Now they have a water source that is plentiful and clean.

The importance of providing water to rural subsistence farmers must not be overlooked. I knew a man that I visited in the field. We provided gravity-fed irrigation to his community. By capturing water in the ground, bringing it closer to the surface, and giving him and the community a well, a little pump to draw the water out into a reservoir up on the hillside, this community grew vegetables. The first time I visited, he had sandals on, his jeans had holes, he wore a tee shirt. In other words, the signs suggested he was not doing too well. I visited him over about a year and a half. Each time I saw him, he had made some improvements in his lifestyle. His clothes improved, and he purchased a phone so that he could go online to check the price of vegetables in the market. He reached the point where he was growing enough tomatoes and onions at a profit that he was able to pay for his child's education, improve their health care, and put iron-roofing sheets on his house. The last time I visited him, he had actually bought his own water pump, which is about \$2,500. Now he is able to rent the pump to others so that they can also get water and grow dry-season vegetables. That serves as an example of the type of work that we do in Catholic Relief Services. It is moving people from poverty to greater self-reliance.

I am proud of the work we do at Catholic Relief Services, and I am proud to have spent my career working in sub-Saharan Africa. I also remind people that, although Africa seems very different and is certainly full of challenges, it is a wonderful place, full of a diverse array of nations, cultures, and peoples. The people I have served are the reason I am blessed to have spent over twenty-five years living and raising my family there. People all over the world have the same needs and share many of the same wants, hopes, and fears that we share here in America. We all want the best for our families, and we want to live in peace. CRS has been helping people achieve their dreams for the past seventy-five years, and, so long as there continues to be poverty and injustice around the world, we will be actively working to provide hope to others.