



Ken Hackett visits a CRS program in Ethiopia in 2003.

Photo courtesy of Catholic Relief Services

A regular feature of The Catholic New World, **The InterVIEW** is an in-depth conversation with a person whose words, actions or ideas affect today's Catholic. It may be affirming of faith or confrontational. But it will always be stimulating.

'Quiet crises' top Catholic aid agency's agenda

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Catholic New World staff writer Michelle Martin talks with Ken Hackett.

Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops' international relief agency, brings help and hope to people suffering from poverty and other crises in more than 90 countries around the world, as well as educating U.S. Catholics about what they can do. Well-known efforts include the annual Lenten Operation Rice Bowl collection and education campaign, as well as emergency relief following wars and natural disasters around the world. But the biggest crises it is trying to solve don't hit the front pages as often, said CRS President Ken Hackett in a telephone interview from Baltimore.

The Catholic New World: What's the biggest crisis CRS is responding to now?

Ken Hackett: There is one that exceeds everything else, and that's the whole pandemic of HIV/AIDS and the way it is devastating families, communities and nations in Africa, in India, and other places around the world. It's crept into Eastern Europe and what we see is that we are only at the beginning of its impact.

AIDS has devastated communities and families, leaving so many hundreds of thousands of young children without adult heads of families. When grandmas and grandpas have died too, you're going to have not just orphans. You're going to have kids who don't have anybody to bring them up. AIDS devastates economies and it will impact on the security of countries and more importantly, on the family life and the mores and the make-up of society.

We're at the beginning, not at the end, of a major disease.

TCNW: How are you responding?

KH: For the last 10 years, we have been attempting to help families transition through the disease. That means, if the husband died, the wife is left as the sole income earner, we would try to work through some income-generating activity for her, maybe start a small business, so she can support her kids. Then we're trying to work through the stigma that's attached to contracting AIDS—especially with women—so they can get diagnosed and go for treatment early. Thirdly, we work with communities, either at the village or the parish level, to come together as a support group to help the people who have AIDS and help the children who will be losing parents.

Recently, we made a determination that we have to go to another level. We have to engage in drug therapies, helping Catholic and other health facilities around the world to be able to offer various types of drug therapies.

TCNW: What kinds of therapies are you talking about? AZT? Anti-retrovirals?

KH: We're talking about the whole range. Nobody's got the answer, therefore, we need to be prepared to change options as we go along. ... We're saying we have an obligation, because of the vast network of Catholic health facilities that we work with, to make available the best science and the best therapies.

TCNW: The first question that brings to my mind is cost.

KH: Two years ago, we started lobbying—advocating very hard for the administration to do something for AIDS. A year ago, a year and a half ago, the president announced a \$15 billion approach—he was willing to spend \$15 billion over 5 years on research and treatment.

We are hoping to receive a grant from the new White House office that is handling this money, with the Catholic Medical Mission Board and a couple of other agencies, the University of Maryland Institute of Human Virology and a grouping of mainline Protestant health groups. We've requested about \$300 million over 5 years just for therapy and treatment.

TCNW: How much do you spend now?

KH: Our current investment in AIDS comes mostly from individual donations, and it's about \$40 million. That's a pittance. This year, I think new money is something in the range of \$18 million.

TCNW: What other approaches are you taking besides drug therapy?

KH: We're hoping to expand our program for orphans, where the community comes around and takes care of the kids who have lost their parents and their aunts and uncles. The other adults in the community make sure they have some opportunity to stay in school, learn how to farm, learn how to cook. ... We have another proposal to the U.S. government for \$10 million over three years to expand that program.

Last is an abstinence education program.

TCNW: You're also in the midst of a massive feeding program in Africa, which is once again suffering from a critical food shortage. How do AIDS and the food shortage affect one another?

KH: Very directly. One is a causal factor. That is, as the incidence of AIDS in countries increases, the ability to produce food decreases. Then when you add climactic factors, as in Ethiopia and Eritrea and other places, you have a real calamity.

Then, if you have contracted AIDS, your caloric needs increase as much as 30 or 40 percent. So, say in Zambia, where up to 20 percent of women of childbearing age have contracted AIDS, and there is less food available because of the food shortage, there is a huge problem.

The food crisis is severe, aggravated by the AIDS pandemic—and the food crisis also aggravates the situation of AIDS.

TCNW: How do we end the crisis?

KH: I don't see it stopping. Even if a vaccine was developed tomorrow, what has been set in motion is a terrible cycle. I think what we have to do is try to ameliorate and slow down the cycle. But the cycle will continue, because you have 12-year-old heads of families. The community has to pull around them and help guide those decisions.

One of the biggest problems is you have young girls with no supervision from their families, and they get exploited. When I was in Zimbabwe last year, I saw some success with the community-based program. You've got the women in the village, and they come together as part of the parish program, and they're visiting those young girls and making sure no one's exploiting them. They know what's going on in the village, and they have changed the mores.

TCNW: What challenges do you face working in non-Catholic environments, such as Iraq, or in response to the December earthquake in Iran?

KH: We've been doing this now for 60 years. In many of the countries, most of the countries, where we operate, we don't attempt to hide our identity. In Christian or non-Christian countries, people respect you for what you are. If you're a good Christian, they respect you for being a good Christian. If you're a good Muslim Buddhist, they respect you for that. We don't proselytize or try to convert people. We're saying our Catholic Christian values tell us we should act in certain ways: we respect human dignity, we work for the common good, all the elements of Catholic social teaching we embody in our program.

Most of our staff are non-Christian, and we make it very clear to them what we believe as a Catholic agency. They don't have to believe what we believe, but they have to respect our beliefs. We have some wonderful Muslims and Buddhists and Hindus on our staff, and they very much respect what we believe, because they find it coincides what they believe about the fundamentals of human dignity and natural law.

Having said that, in the new day, we find that there are individuals who would kind of use the occasion of our American presence and our Christian presence to create an event to stir the pot a little bit. So for instance, in Afghanistan, we didn't hide our Christian beliefs or Catholic name, but there were other agencies that were Christian and American going in trying to convert people to Christianity from Islam. It created some confusion. ... We have to be clear as we go about our work that people understand who we are and what we believe, and that not all Christian agencies have the same motives.

In Iraq, we're not making a lot of noise. The communities with which we work know we are an American agency, a Catholic agency, a Christian agency. We're kind of like the Catholic bishop in Basra—if he's good, we must be good, because we're seen as being all one. But you don't want to make yourself a target, so we keep a low profile in Iraq. We operate in southern Iraq, in Basra, in Nasarea and in that area.

TCNW: AS we approach the season of Lent, what would you wish from American Catholics?

KH: Even in spite of the recent confusion and terror, call it what you want—concern, anxiety—in the United States, anxiety that we are under attack, concern that some of our liberties are being compromised to respond to the terrorist threat, remember that we are blessed as a nation and a community of faith. It is so important that we look beyond our own anxieties and see that we can have a powerful, positive effect on people around the world, and particularly the poor of the world. Some of our government's policies are misunderstood. When American Catholics reach out and engage in so many ways—it's creating a whole new dialogue and respect and appreciation for each other, It's building solidarity. That's what I would hope: that we can find ways to reach out and engage, and build solidarity, both here and around the world.

For more information on Catholic Relief Services, visit www.catholicrelief.org. To donate, call (800)736-3467.