



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development
Office of International Justice and Peace

**Background on Poverty-Focused International Assistance
February 2012**

The [global economic and financial] crisis has not only affected families and businesses in the more economically advanced countries where it originated, creating a situation in which many people, especially the young, have felt disoriented and frustrated in their aspirations for a serene future, but it has also had a profound impact on the life of developing countries. We must not lose heart, but instead resolutely rediscover our way through new forms of commitment. --Pope Benedict XVI, January 9, 2012

BACKGROUND:

The U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic Relief Services strongly support international assistance for poverty-focused programs. This amounts to \$19.1 billion in Fiscal Year 2012, just over one-half percent (.6%) of federal spending. These poverty-focused programs serve the poorest communities in the developing world. They support a wide range of life-saving and dignity-protecting activities, including: agricultural assistance so poor farmers can feed their families; drugs to extend the lives of people with HIV/AIDS; cost-effective vaccines to prevent diseases; and mosquito nets to avert malaria. These programs assist orphans and vulnerable children, feed people starving from famines like in Africa, and provide aid in places like Haiti devastated by disasters. International assistance provides peacekeepers to protect innocent civilians in places like Sudan and the Congo, and assistance to vulnerable migrants and refugees fleeing conflict or persecution. Other funds provide debt relief to poor nations, freeing up local resources for education and poverty reduction. [See chart for programs supported by USCCB and CRS.]

There has been a push in Congress to make deep, disproportionate spending cuts in “foreign aid” to reduce the deficit. Working with others, USCCB and CRS successfully resisted a House proposal to cut poverty focused international assistance in FY 2012 by 13%, on top of an 8% cut made the previous year. USCCB and CRS support reducing unsustainable future deficits, but reject making morally unacceptable disproportionate cuts in programs that serve poor and vulnerable people in our nation and around the world.

USCCB and CRS POSITION:

The Church views international assistance as an essential tool to promote human life and dignity, advance solidarity with poorer nations, and enhance security throughout the world. Foreign aid is not simply an optional commitment; it is a moral responsibility to assist “the least of these” (Matthew 25).

In these difficult times of high budget deficits, the Church recognizes the need to reduce future unsustainable deficits. The federal budget is more than just numbers; it is also a moral document. It reflects and defines our priorities. Our national budget must not be balanced by hurting the least fortunate of our brothers and sisters: the poorest of the poor overseas and the victims of disaster and conflict. Catholic Social Teaching offers clear moral guidance for setting our nation’s budgetary priorities. We support a “Circle of Protection” for the poorest and most vulnerable people.

Option for the Poor: This biblical mandate requires us to protect poor and vulnerable people. Poor people have the first claim on limited resources. The federal budget’s current modest allocation to poverty-focused international development and humanitarian assistance programs is a minimum if the United States is to respect its moral commitment to the “least among us.” Though generous in absolute terms, the United States ranks near the

bottom among donor nations as a percentage of our national wealth. And poverty-focused international assistance is just over **one-half of one percent** of the federal budget.

Solidarity: International assistance programs are an effective demonstration that we are “our brothers’ keeper.” They are also a vital recognition that our security and future are closely tied to the human dignity and life of all, especially those living in poverty. Reducing poverty and desperation contribute to global security and prosperity that benefit all of us. Developing countries especially need assistance at times of devastating natural disasters, such as famines, earthquakes, droughts, or floods, as well as with building more resilient societies that are less vulnerable to climate change and conflict. The famine in East Africa is a compelling case.

Stewardship: The U.S. Government should make these programs more effective, accountable, and transparent and is working to do that. It is particularly important to partner more with local civil society and faith-based groups that assist the poor directly and are often led by trusted leaders in their societies. In many parts of the developing world, faith-based development institutions offer health care, education, and community development, complementing government services. In some places they serve as the sole provider in emergencies and in areas where governments are weak. Civil society and faith-based groups help hold government leaders accountable for results and reduce corruption. In partnership with U.S. faith-based institutions, like Catholic Relief Services, local faith-based and civil society groups have produced effective, low-cost, and sustainable development successes throughout the developing world. Effective conscience protections are essential so that the religious community can make its substantial contributions to the common good.

Peace and the Common Good: The poorest countries of the world are often the most vulnerable to civil violence and war. U.S. international assistance must support peacekeeping missions designed to stop violence where it occurs. The recent successful referendum in Southern Sudan, in which the U.S. played a key role, demonstrates the importance of proactive conflict prevention and peacebuilding initiatives. Such programs can save lives and avoid the need to fund large emergency response programs. Long-term human security demands building the capacity of civil society and faith-based institutions to promote human development, protect human rights, and help build stable, vibrant societies. For example, aid to the Palestinian people addresses acute humanitarian needs at the same time that it builds Palestinian capacity for a state of their own; this aid enhances both Israeli security and the possibility of a just two-state solution that is in the best interests of both peoples.

ACTION REQUESTED:

In a time of austerity and fiscal restraints, Congress needs to give moral priority to programs that help the poor, both at home and abroad. Urge Congress to preserve and strengthen funding for poverty-focused development and humanitarian programs that save lives and reduce crushing poverty. Call on Congress to promote effective conscience protections to assure faith-based organizations can serve the common good. (See chart for a detailed list of poverty-focused accounts supported by USCCB and CRS.)

Also ask Congress to preserve assistance to the Palestinian people in order to address their humanitarian needs, reduce economic desperation, and strengthen their capacity to build institutions for a future state. This is in the best interests of both Israelis and Palestinians who need a two-state solution to the longstanding conflict, a secure and recognized Israel living in peace alongside a viable and independent Palestinian state.

If cuts are mandated in the broader Foreign Assistance budget, we urge Congress to make cuts in programs that do not serve the poorest persons and communities, and instead to give priority to those elements of programs that serve the poorest. For example, in the Economic Support Fund, assistance for Sudan and Haiti must be retained. In addition, the civilian capacity at the U.S. Agency for International Development needs to be maintained to effectively carry out these programs. If cuts are contemplated in other assistance programs, we ask Congress to preserve essential help for the poorest people in the poorest places on earth. Urge Congress to draw a “Circle of Protection” around “the least of these.”

RESOURCES: Visit: www.usccb.org/about/international-justice-and-peace/ or www.usccb.org/globalpoverty/
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