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Observations on the Role of CARITAS-
India: A Memorandum

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OBSERVATIONS ON THE ROLE OF CARITAS-INDIA

A MEMORANDUM

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INTRODUCTION

In return for providing me with some introductions to the Bishops whose diocese lie in disaster affected areas, Father Remigius asked that I put down on paper a few observations on the present and possible future role(s) for Caritas-India. Father Remigius asked that I try to form some impression of the impact which voluntary agencies in general have in the field of humanitarian aid. He asked also if I might try to suggest what the "proper" role of a voluntary agency might be in India and, in particular, what Caritas-India might do to be most useful. Of special interest were any deficiencies which might come to light in planning which could be remedied by the provision of training; and the role of Caritas as a co-ordinator of foreign resources. Father Remigius specifically requested that I include comments, not only on the practice, but also on the ideology supporting what is presently done.

I must stress that, first of all, the following comments are based on observations which I made in a very small number of diocese. This sample is unlikely to be representative of India as a whole, and I must be excused for ending up with a slant which is inevitably biased by the sample of people that I happened to meet. I must also say that I did not have the opportunity to witness at first hand the projects which Caritas is engaged in sponsoring. The time available to me was limited, and I therefore restricted myself to collecting observations on Caritas as an organisation rather than as a manager of projects.

For the most part, the observations which follow are not my own, but represent a summary of feelings of the people whom I met on my trip. Many of these people are associated with, or have in the past been associated with, Caritas. My role has been essentially that of the rapporteur, rather than expert. I would not like to be judged as being too frank if my comments simply record the observations of others.

DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

One of the most striking things to an outside observer is the very wide gulf which appears to exist between the interests and priorities of those who work at the field level, and the interests and priorities of the Bishops to whom they are largely responsible.

From the point of view of facilitating Caritas' growth and development in the future, it will be important to address the different perceptions which are held by responsible officials at different levels within the organization. A more unanimous view about what the role of the Church should be in modern society will help in delivering a real benefit to the poor, as well as helping the Church to perform its pastoral role.

A particular problem in this context is that there is, as yet, no consensus of opinion that development is something which the Church in India ought to be involved with. One official voiced the opinion that the charitable orientation of the past and the concern now to help the poorest of the poor, does not necessarily mean that Caritas should

be involved in the setting up and management of practical development projects. Indeed, the moral obligation to give charity may, in some circumstances, work against the psychological attitude needed to achieve self-sufficiency and a democratically controlled society. The theology of development is already a fact and Caritas as an organization supports this viewpoint. But some of those who work in the field are not totally convinced that a development orientation rather than a charitable (relief) orientation is the best course.

FOREIGN AID RESOURCES

There appears to be no shortage of money from abroad for the carrying out of projects. But it was observed by a number of people that the foreign aid money which had been made available in recent years had, in many instances, done a disservice to the recipient community and the wider interpretation of the Church. In some instances, the foreign aid funds had strengthened the decision making influence of the local Bishop at the expense of the democratic participation of their parishioners.

Although it might have been unkind to say so, some people remarked that the Bishops were seen by the managers of projects in their diocese rather like the directors of a new banking system. In a few cases, the money which had come from abroad had had the effect of separating the hierarchy from the very people whom it wished to help. More than one commentator

suggested that if Caritas was really interested in sponsoring development at the village level, then the best thing it could do would be to announce a moratorium on the use of foreign funds for, say, 10 years. This would, it was said, allow spontaneous development from below.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

A surprising number of commentators, both within and from outside, noted that there appears to be a reluctance within the Church to share its ideas with those of other organizations which are similarly striving for social development. The Church is a large autonomous body which is splendidly self-sufficient in many areas of work. Perhaps in the past it has not needed to collaborate with outside organizations for the performance of its mission. But some say that this very positive self-sufficiency has resulted in a "closed circuit" type of environment which now militates against the achievement of present objectives.

Although Caritas is presently trying to build up its contacts with outside groups, it is worth highlighting the problem here, for unless much progress can be made in this direction, it will be very difficult for Caritas to progress towards becoming a thoroughly competent and efficient agent for social development. Development is an extremely complex process, and can only be tackled in an atmosphere which encourages (not only permits) the sharing of information and ideas. Inter-action with non-Catholic bodies will help, not only in carrying through a social development role, but also in defining Caritas' unique

character as a Christian organization.

One of the advantages of more dialogue with other sections of the community - including Hindu and Moslem - is that Caritas will find it easier to launch any new venture, including the setting up of a Disaster Training Institute (or anything similar). At the moment, it would be very difficult for Caritas to persuade other organizations that they should collaborate for the purpose of setting up a Training Institute. Its denominational label would not be acceptable. But unless Caritas can sell its training services to other agencies, it will be very difficult for it to make the Training Institute an economically viable proposition. Even if the Institute were to be limited to the collecting of information on what happens in disasters in India, then without a much larger degree of trust between Caritas and the officials of other organizations, it would be very difficult for the Institute to get to know in detail what is going on, and to be able, therefore, to compare and contrast different relief and reconstruction policies.

THE NEED FOR TRAINING AT THE FIELD LEVEL

One of the difficulties which Caritas faces as a development organization, as well as a relief agency, is that the people who apply its policy in the field are for the most part not specifically trained. Priests, for example, receive no special training which would help them in their social development role. Management subjects, social organization, community development and social welfare are disciplines in

their own right and need to be learned. Many parish priests do a remarkably good job, but there would seem to be plenty of scope for supporting priests and sisters in the field with a training which would better equip them to use their talents in a development context. It is not only the Diocesan Directors of Social Work who would benefit from such training, but also (in the case where they have them) their staff. The staff generally remains to serve the incoming Director when the outgoing Director is assigned to other duties by his Bishop.

THE NEED FOR FINANCING OF ADMINISTRATIVE OPERATIONS

Although informants referred to the need for the training of Caritas workers in the field, it was very clear that training was not the only obstacle to greater effectiveness and efficiency. Perhaps the biggest difficulty was the shortage of staff and a shortage of finance with which to run administrative offices. In many instances, the Diocesan Director of Social Work was the sole person in charge of a large programme. He was Director of a food programme, Development Organiser, Relief Official, as well as parish priest! Without adequate staff to handle the volume of work involved, no amount of additional training could possibly take effect. It is not clear whether the problem is that the diocese lack sufficient resources to employ additional staff, or whether it is that the Bishops do not see that as a priority. Whatever the explanation, Caritas-India will have to try to address this difficulty before it can do anything else to improve its programmes in the field.

ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR CARITAS

It was suggested by one Director of Social Service that Caritas might consider mounting a programme to strengthen existing diocesan social service structures, or to create new ones where they did not already exist. He recommended that precise objectives be set up, and that the programme be timed to complete itself within, say, three years. At the end of this period, Caritas-India should probably see its role as terminated. It was suggested that one of the objectives of such a programme might be to see the diocesan social service organizations registered as a local society under The Societies Registration Act of 1860. This would facilitate the greater involvement of ordinary people in the work of the Church, and would also make the diocesan level organization more easily accountable to donor agencies and to the Central and State Governments. It was pointed out that unless the social service organizations at the diocesan level are properly developed, then it will be very difficult to take advantage of further foreign aid resources and to use these properly.

An organizational development plan for Caritas would also counteract one of the tendencies which some observers noted, namely a tendency towards centralized decision making, which inhibits local initiative. It was suggested that any future work undertaken by Caritas-India should, as far as possible, be de-centralized. In this vein, one of the functions which Caritas could perform was to disseminate ideas and information relevant and useful at the diocesan level. For example, news of Government policies which affected the work of voluntary agencies would be especially welcome.

SETTING UP A DISASTERS CELL

Some thought has already been given to the setting up of a Disasters Cell, staffed by a person or persons who would travel quickly to a disaster affected area and assist the local Director of Social Work in formulating an emergency programme. This appears to be an excellent idea but, in practice, its success will depend very greatly on the individual or individuals appointed. One of the characteristics the appointee will need, is the ability to present ideas and suggestions in a form which is acceptable to the people who are ordinarily responsible for the work of the diocese in the affected areas. Most notably, this would be the Director of Social Service, but includes also the Bishop of the diocese. In some areas, the Bishops play a very active role in decision making with respect to the type of programme to be set up after a disaster, and they may not take kindly to a person from outside who appears to "take over" the role of decision maker in an area they regard as rightly their own. The work to be done as Director of a Disasters Cell requires great tact as well as enthusiasm.

It perhaps does not need pointing out, that the Director of a Disasters Cell will himself require appropriate preparation and training if he is to do credit to Caritas as an organization. A copy of the report on training for disaster mitigation accompanies this memorandum, and will show something of the breadth and complexity of the subject. Intertect would be happy to provide a programme of training and support for any staff appointed by Caritas to a Disasters Cell. If necessary, and if considered desirable, this training might include a short

period of study abroad.

THE NEED FOR AN EMERGENCY FUND

As a corollary to the setting up of a Disasters Cell, Caritas-India might consider establishing an emergency fund which could be called upon by the affected diocese at very short notice. One of the problems at the moment is that the diocese have to wait for the offer of funds, often from abroad, before they can inaugurate any major programme of relief. It should be possible to set up an emergency fund at the national level which could be replenished by the diocese as they receive donations during the course of the disaster period. This measure would help quite as much as the proffering of information and advice through a Disasters Cell.

A POSSIBLE NEW ROLE FOR VOLUNTARY AGENCIES

Some commentators have recommended a role for the genuinely concerned voluntary agency which is somewhat different from its traditional function.

Much lip-service is paid to the idea of fostering peoples' organizations; ones which can help to solve community problems in a self-reliant fashion. However, few voluntary agencies have pursued this approach, possibly because they lack the necessary contacts at the village level, and possibly because the agency sees itself in the role of "problem solver" rather than as a facilitator of community processes.

Nevertheless, it is suggested that voluntary agencies can provide a valuable service by attempting to link community groups with the machinery of government. Undoubtedly, it is the most disadvantaged groups in society which suffer most in times of disaster. These people are disadvantaged, not only by their lack of economic resources, but because they lack access to the government machine. This is true also in a non-disaster or development context. Many levels of government official interpose themselves between the aid available and its actual receipt. Corruption in the government service is widespread. This is especially so at the lower levels but is not necessarily confined there. Even where money is not extorted before aid is given, then tribute in humility or some other service is frequently expected. The voluntary agency may, therefore, have a role in highlighting and publicizing these difficulties which are encountered by numerous poor people. The agency can take up the specific or collective cases of discrimination or extortion through whatever channels of influence are available to it. The Government will often respond to the greatest public clamour. Even if resources are shifted away from some other priority to satisfy the demands of a pressure group, then this creates a precedent which can be taken up by community groups in other areas. News of a victory in obtaining one's rightful assistance from the Government spreads quickly.

ANNEX : LIST OF PERSONS WHO PROVIDED COMMENTS

Sister Lucy Cancunum,
Hospital Administrator,
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Shri Charles D'Cruz,
(Regional Projects Officer),
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Father Donaghue,
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Bihar.

Sister Anna Mae Doran,
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Holy Family Hospital,
Patna,
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Mr. Bjorn O. Eng.,
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