



Caritas response to UN Global COVID-19 Appeal: Global cooperation essential, but don't forget the contribution of civil society and faith leaders

Today, the UN launches its UN Global Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) on COVID-19 to mobilise international funding in support of both direct public health and indirect immediate humanitarian consequences of the pandemic.

Faithful to its mission to serve and protect the most vulnerable, members of the Caritas Confederation¹ are at the frontline in the global response to COVID-19 health crisis guaranteeing health services to those most in need.

In the face of this critical moment, multilateral cooperation will be essential to ensure an effective and robust response to the COVID-19 crisis, and faith-based organization and faith leaders are at the frontline of efforts to promote such cooperation at all levels of society. From within the Catholic community, this has extended from Pope Francis' calls for cooperation, solidarity and ensuring assistance reaches the most vulnerable through to the work by priests and faith-based organizations at the community level in affected countries.

For example, staff and volunteers of Caritas Lodi, a town in Northern Italy - one of the most affected areas by the pandemic - are continuing to assist, in a challenging context, a group of asylum seekers who survived the Mediterranean crossing to flee war and persecution.

Aloysius John, Secretary General of Caritas Internationalis said: *"In this time of fear and uncertainty, it's essential that world leaders rally to global cooperation on the Coronavirus response in a spirit of solidarity. As long as any one nation is afflicted by this pandemic, then we are all at risk. These kinds of public health crises can lead to the rise of negative narrative and tendency to stigmatise COVID-19 survivors, and discriminating against vulnerable sections of society, including migrants and refugees. Governments need to show leadership by demonstrating how a more humane approach is also more effective in tackling the epidemic, grounded in science and ensuring assistance reaches everyone that needs it, without discrimination."*

Caritas welcomes the reference in the UN Global Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) to the *"on-going work on community engagement in the field"* by faith-based actors and religious leaders.

¹ Caritas Internationalis is a global Confederation of Catholic-Church related humanitarian, health and development organizations, and as such constitutes the largest global network of faith-based worldwide.

Several national Caritas member organisations work in partnership with their national or local government authorities and UN agencies on health and other humanitarian challenges.²

However, we are concerned that current challenges in the UN system, may result in delays and challenges in the HRP funds reaching frontline work by faith-based organisations, and other local civil society organisations.

Suzanna Tkalec, Director of Operations of Caritas Internationalis said: *“Donor governments and UN agencies need to recognise the role played by civil society organisations, including faith-based groups, and factor this into the COVID response. It is absolutely right that their focus is on a health systems strengthening approach in partnership with national governments. But in many countries around the world, civil society plays a critical role in partnership with government. Take the Democratic Republic of Congo for example, Catholic health facilities provide around forty percent of the health system there. Faith leaders also often have a huge amount of respect, particularly in areas affected by conflict where government or UN actors do not have the same trust. In the recent Ebola crisis in DRC, this was not adequately factored into the response strategy, and lives were lost as a consequence.”*

To ensure that funding mobilised through the UN Global Appeal reaches local organisations and faith groups, Caritas Internationalis calls on donor governments and UN agencies to engage with them in a whole of society approach to COVID-19. Funding and partnership approaches need to be adapted to a highly dynamic situation, particularly in contexts where Government or UN officials may not have access to all affected communities, but local civil society is present. The greatest risks in the crisis response will be born by those in the frontline efforts, including local volunteers, faith groups, nurses, doctors and others working in community-level structures helping individuals, families and communities survive and cope with its impacts. Their priorities, their insights and their safety should be at the forefront of taking forward the UN Global Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) on COVID-19.

² Caritas Venezuela has scaled up efforts in extremely difficult circumstances and with limited resources available to continue to offer remote services to the most vulnerable and marginalised groups, including distribution of hygiene kits, remote psychosocial and spiritual support to families and elderly, and providing regular *“Stay-at Home”* announcements over social media and radio. Caritas Iraq, while abiding by protection and prevention measures, printed and distributed awareness raising leaflets on COVID-19 in close coordination with the government, and continued provision of life saving food distributions at the Community level, where it operates. Caritas Jordan shared in all its centers all the publications of the ministry of health, and while abiding by the general lockdown measures maintained cash assistance for its beneficiaries. Caritas Lebanon, despite the economic crisis pre-existing to COVID-19, mobilized its resources and adapted its services to respond to the epidemic by abiding to strict protection and preventative measures, while still providing crucial food and health assistance, and reaching out general public with awareness raising messages on COVID-19 via social media.