

The whole world in our h

As the first female secretary general of Caritas Internationalis, the worldwide humanitarian agency of the Catholic Church, Lesley-Anne Knight is hopeful but pragmatic. Women are under-represented in the confederation of 162 national agencies (Catholic Relief Services and Catholic Charities U.S.A. in the United States), and she hopes her appointment will help change that.

Her gender, though, doesn't matter day to day. "I have a job to do and I am trying to do it to the best of my ability, just as anyone would," Knight says.

She was elected to a four-year term as the leader of Caritas in 2007 because of her 25 years of experience working on development and humanitarian issues. The Zimbabwe-born British citizen has lived in eight countries and speaks five languages. "Growing up in Zimbabwe and going to university in apartheid-era South Africa left me with a profound awareness of injustice," she says.

Knight is realistic but confident about taking on the world's problems because humankind does so together. This hopeful attitude comes from her faith. "'I say to you, whatever you did for these least brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me,'" Knight says, referring to Matthew 25:40. "Jesus' words... remind us of a universal truth: Whatever our race or religion, we are all part of one humanity."



Lesley-Anne Knight

Secretary General
Caritas Internationalis
Vatican City

Former International Director, CAFOD
(Caritas, England and Wales)

Poverty is a global problem, and the entire human family will have to contribute to the solution.

The editors interview Lesley-Anne Knight

What's the state of global poverty today?

Our world today is as unjust as ever. Because of globalization, we are now so much more acutely aware of our human interdependence and interconnectedness, which makes the ongoing reality of poverty and injustice all the more scandalous.

You will remember that when the Asian tsunami struck in December 2004, it killed 230,000 people. The same number of people die every five days from the effects of extreme poverty. That is the scale of the problem. The United Nations estimates around 18 million people die every year from hunger and preventable diseases related to poverty.

Poverty, however, is not just about people dying. It is about people living today and knowing that tomorrow they will not eat, living with disease, living without proper housing, living without education, living without clean water and sanitation, living with no sense of personal safety or security.

How can the world meet such overwhelming challenges?

I see three key areas that could make a huge difference: aid, trade, and debt relief. Clearly, an increase in development aid is urgently needed, but aid alone is not enough. It must go hand-in-hand with coherent and just policies on trade and debt.

It is estimated that poor countries lose out on more than \$2 billion a day as a result of unfair trade policies such as subsidies, tariffs, and dumping—14 times what they receive in aid. If the remaining debts of the poorest African countries were canceled, the money they would have spent on debt repayments could be redirected to poverty reduction.

Two other really pressing issues for the 21st century are violent conflicts and climate change. Out of the 40 humanitarian appeals that Caritas launched last year, 28 were climate-related. The expected results of climate change—rising sea levels, violent storms, floods, drought, encroaching deserts, diminishing supplies of glacier water, and erratic weather

patterns—have the greatest impact on people living in poverty in developing countries, those who are least able to adapt to these changes.

The links between climate change and violent conflict, too, are particularly worrying. Increasing pressures on natural resources—in particular water, minerals, and oil—coupled with food shortages and crop failures strain fragile social and political systems. For instance, drought has been identified as one of the factors contributing to the conflicts in Darfur.

Conflict reduces people's capacity to adapt to climate change, producing a vicious circle that worsens poverty and hampers development efforts. We just need to look at Sudan, the Congo, Zimbabwe, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, East Timor, Indonesia. Campaigns to tackle climate change must be linked to development and to emergency humanitarian programming.

What role does Caritas play in poverty relief?

We are entering a whole new phase for our confederation. We need to modernize and we need to professionalize. We need to take stock of the expertise we have and focus on making the greatest impact. I think one of our tendencies in the past has been to be spread very thinly, to be doing a lot of work around the world and yet not knowing where to focus to make the biggest difference.

That doesn't mean that our core programs—professional, rapid assistance in emergencies and our development programs—aren't priorities. But increasingly we need to be able to speak out about the root causes of the injustice that we deal with on a daily basis. We have a moral obligation and a legitimate voice to ensure that policy makers in governments know the realities of the poor.

There will clearly be a shift toward ensuring that our advocacy messages, our research work, the positions we take—on conflict resolution, climate change, the increasing number of female migrants

and refugees, the delivery of aid, or issues of trade and debt—are robustly researched. We need to have policies to put on the table. We need to ensure that we have a very good position at the table—be that with national governments, the European Union, the United Nations—and that we are credible and respected because of our expertise on the ground with poor communities.

Does this mean that Caritas is evolving from simply an emergency relief agency into an advocacy group?

I think there was a perception that all we did was relief work, but the reality is that all of our Caritas organizations have been doing some advocacy work, even though they receive very little recognition for it. We need to give advocacy the position that it merits and become a respected, legitimate voice that can speak

context and empower local people to take development forward in their own hands. Our global humanitarian network has enormous potential, but it often isn't acknowledged.

The new challenges of the 21st century require us to be flexible. There's climate change, ongoing violence, terrorism, and we need to know our positions on these issues. We owe that to the poor with whom we work.

For instance, one of our key concerns, especially in the West, is terrorism, but often we don't link it to its root causes. We create more security for ourselves—through military action, tighter borders—instead of addressing the injustice or poverty that causes it.

Where is that playing out?

If we look at countries such as Pakistan or Afghanistan or Sudan or the Congo,

our greatest concern is that they become stable, secure countries because we fear that terrorists are being cultivated there or that the people there don't respect our way of living, our

standards, our democracies. But at the end of the day, what those populations want is a better life. They want jobs. They want a just standard of living for themselves.

So if we aren't putting our resources into longer term sustainable development, we're just plastering over the symptoms, which can be perceived as "simply" security issues.

How would you like to see the relationship between the aid-givers and the developing world—the global North and South—change?

We need to recognize that poverty is a

global issue, a global scandal that affects us all. The rich northern countries need to recognize their responsibilities to the poorer countries of the world and acknowledge how they may have contributed toward their plight through unjust relationships. We also need to recognize people's right to development. It is not enough that we provide poor countries with handouts—they must be empowered to become agents of their own development.

The United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a set of clear targets all countries have agreed to work on in order to reduce the impacts of global poverty and foster development, are a step in that direction. Critics of the MDGs say that to judge the progress of individual countries against global targets risks labeling some countries as failures.

I think this argument misses the point. If a country fails to meet the MDGs, it's not a failure for that country; it is a failure for all of us, for the entire international community. The MDGs are not a set of goals that individual countries have to strive to achieve on their own. They are goals for the whole global family of humanity.

The idea of the South and North starts to become so insignificant when you think of poverty as a global problem. Globalization has made us acutely aware that there is a lot more that brings us together than divides us. The solutions for a natural disaster are the same if there's an earthquake in Peru or in Indonesia or in Pakistan.

Why should a Catholic organization work on international development?

The gospel moves us to be there for the poor, to be wherever there is need and wherever there is suffering. Christ impels us to be there.

Particularly for me it's the message of the church as a Samaritan church. It could be an individual who is beaten

For me it's the message of the **church as a Samaritan church.** It could be an individual who is beaten up in the ditch; it could be **a whole country that's beaten up in the ditch.**

up on development issues.

But I wouldn't say everything's now going to be advocacy. First and foremost, our global Catholic network deserves recognition alongside the Red Cross, the world's largest humanitarian organization.

If there's a disaster tomorrow in Nepal or Paraguay or Zimbabwe or the Congo or Somalia, there is a Caritas organization and a network of our volunteers who can spring into action within 24 hours. As a Catholic organization committed to total human development, we were there before the emergency struck. We know the local

up in the ditch; it could be a whole country that's beaten up in the ditch. And whoever that is and wherever

they are, no matter their race or their creed, we need to be there because we are Catholic.

Does Caritas bring a different perspective to international development because it is Catholic?

We follow the same guidelines of international humanitarian law, codes of conduct, and standards as other humanitarian organizations. The difference, however, is that our communities, our workers, our Catholic organizations are on the ground. Before any disaster strikes, they're on the ground working

It is **absolutely essential** for Catholic organizations to bring that **care and love for the whole person.**

with the poorest of the poor. Before and during and after, we are there looking out for the good of the whole person.

We are saying that I'm not just here to provide you with food; I'm here to ensure that you as a person feel that I value your dignity and I value you as my sister, brother, father, or mother.

I think that does make a difference. For me it is absolutely essential for Catholic organizations to bring that care and love for the whole person.

We are also not entirely centered on rights. We go the step further and say that the people we serve also have

responsibilities. I am respecting your rights and I'm here to defend them, but I'm also asking you: What is your responsibility to your family, to your community, to building up your own country?

So you are concerned that relief aid recipients can become dependent on outside intervention?

I think of the floods in Tabasco, Mexico last year, the earthquake in Peru, the people that we serve in Sudan and Afghanistan and Pakistan. The critical thing for me is the people there know best the context and they know best the development they need. I don't.

The principle of subsidiarity is fundamental. As aid agencies of the Catholic Church, we respect the local context. We empower people to be protagonists in their own development. We

Catholics make a difference

An excerpt from Lesley-Anne Knight's speech at the USCCB Social Ministry Gathering

Speaking at the U.S. bishops' Social Ministry Gathering in Washington last February, Lesley-Anne Knight addressed the progress of poverty reduction and the role of the Catholic Church in furthering this progress. She bases the progress report on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a set of eight goals for poverty reduction and improving health, education, and other standards agreed upon by the United Nations with a target date of 2015. An excerpt follows:

The overall picture provided by the Millennium Development Goals report in 2006-07 provides us with some encouraging signs. Two million people now receive AIDS treatment. There are 41 million more children in school. Two million lives are saved every year by immunization.

But a considerable challenge remains. Seventy-two million children are not in school. If the current trend continues, the world is likely to miss the MDGs sanitation target by almost 600 million people. More than half a million women still die each year from treatable and preventable complications in pregnancy and childbirth. More than 33 million people are living with HIV and more than 1 million die from malaria every year, including one child every 30 seconds.

What is certain is that if the MDGs are to be met, cooperation between governments, the private sector, nongov-

ernmental organizations, and civil society is essential. In particular, Catholic faith-based organizations, such as Caritas around the world, have an important role to play.

In many African countries, the Catholic Church is the primary, if not the only, health care and education provider. I myself am the product of 13 years of Dominican-funded education in Zimbabwe. Schools, hospitals, and other vital infrastructure provided by Catholic and other faith-based organizations are second to none in Africa, but international donors are not taking advantage of this valuable resource as a conduit to deliver their aid.

The World Health Organization estimates that between 30 and 70 percent of the health infrastructure in Africa is currently owned by faith-based organizations. But there is often little support for these organizations from mainstream public health programs. One fifth of all organizations engaged in HIV programming are faith-based, and yet we receive just 2 to 3 percent of all international funding.

Faith-based and civil society organizations also have a key role to play in ensuring good governance and transparency in development where there is corruption. Given adequate support, they can successfully hold government to account. We need to encourage donors to use their influence so that governments increasingly open up to civil society.

give them the tools to hold their own authorities accountable.

We're not flying in and saying, "Here's the solution under these conditions, and unless you follow our directions, we'll go elsewhere with our aid because we'll have more impact there."

How do you respond to the debate about using condoms to prevent the transmission of HIV?

The Catholic Church's position on condoms is very clear, and as a Catholic organization we have to respect that position. It is important to realize, however, that there is a huge amount of work that we can do—and are doing—to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS and to help those affected by it.

Caritas Internationalis' work on HIV/AIDS is widely respected by professionals in the field and by international health organizations. The outreach that we have, working through

the church, gives us a unique advantage in being able to break down the stigma attached to HIV/AIDS and change behavior patterns that lead to HIV infection.

It's easy to look at the world's many problems and get overwhelmed. Where do you find signs of hope?

It is not all bad news. There are some significant success stories. The evidence shows that foreign aid does work. In 1990 more than 1.2 billion people, 28 percent of the developing world's population, lived in extreme poverty. By 2002 that proportion had decreased to 19 percent. During that period the number of people in Asia living on less than a dollar a day dropped by nearly a quarter of a billion.

There is 6-percent economic growth in parts of Africa at the moment. Rapid and large scale progress can be made when strong government leadership

and good policies are combined with adequate financial and technical support from the international community. Faith-based organizations such as Caritas help to strengthen civil society, holding governments to account and encouraging good governance.

In Malawi a voucher program for fertilizers and seeds has doubled agricultural productivity in just one year. Ghana is successfully implementing a National School Feeding Program using locally produced foods. Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda have abolished fees for primary schools, resulting in dramatic increases in enrollment.

In 2006 Zambia canceled fees for basic health services in rural areas. The distribution of insecticide-treated bed nets has halved malaria cases in some areas, notably Mozambique.

Poor countries are not helpless and hopeless. There is so much they can do, if given the financial aid that they deserve.

In terms of global poverty, what should U.S. Catholics keep in mind during this election season?

Within your own living room, you will see global poverty on your television; you'll hear about it on the radio; you'll read about it in the newspaper. You'll certainly know if there's a big disaster somewhere.

Remember that you are part of the same family. What is happening in some part of the world as a result of injustice or as a result of the maintenance of your lifestyle is your responsibility. You have the power to bring about and influence change within your government to address global poverty. We all have that responsibility. **USC**



On the Web

Watch U.S. CATHOLIC's conversation with Lesley-Anne Knight on video at uscatholic.org.

More trouble in Myanmar

Lesley-Anne Knight follows up on the recent tragedy in Myanmar after Cyclone Nargis, when aid workers weren't permitted entry by the military junta that rules the country.

Is the situation in Myanmar unique or does it reveal a common challenge to international aid today?

Myanmar has been an exceptional case, but it does highlight some of the challenges related to the delivery of humanitarian assistance by foreign aid workers.

There has been an increasing threat to the security of humanitarian workers in many parts of the world in recent years. Through international institutions such as the United Nations, Caritas is campaigning in defense of "humanitarian space," which is the principle that humanitarian agencies should be able to work independently and impartially without fear of attack.

We must be free to assist popu-

lations in need, making our own choices based solely on the criteria of need, and not be constrained by political or physical barriers.

It is also important to appreciate that foreign aid workers are not always as welcome as you might assume. Aid organizations need to act with sensitivity and respect for local populations. It is not helpful for foreigners to fly in and take over the whole relief operation and then disappear as soon as the immediate crisis is over.

This is where Caritas Internationalis has a distinctive advantage. Because we operate through local church and Caritas organizations, we are present before, during, and after any crisis.