

Caritas call to action in the face of the crisis

On April 27-30, 2009, the Social Policy Forum of Caritas Europa brought together in Prague Caritas experts from all over Europe. The Forum was titled **“Solidarity: Sustainable Social Strategy”** with the aim to explore how European societies and governments can take up their responsibilities in addressing the social effects of the economic crisis.

Caritas is an expert in managing crisis

Europe – and indeed, the whole world – has been hit by a severe financial and economic crisis and nobody can be sure whether we have yet seen the worst of it. We are still exploring the magnitude of the effects of this crisis on the lives of people in need. What we are beginning to understand, however, is that some of the traditional ‘middle classes’ will become poorer and more people will fall into poverty than in the last decades.

Throughout the world, and in particular in Europe, Caritas has always been responding to crisis situations. We might even say that crisis is our *raison d’être*. Caritas has always been dealing with crises in its own specific way, that is by building solutions at all levels, and always together with those affected. In doing so, we put our confidence primarily in people and communities, not in systems.

A new way of thinking: key Caritas principles

In the view of the present economic crisis and of the need for a new way of thinking about society, Caritas reaffirms with vigour the **principles** underlying this new thinking:

- The eradication of poverty and social exclusion must be the goal of a modern, inclusive society.
- Fighting against poverty and social exclusion must be a concern and a duty for everybody: individual citizens, organised civil society and public authorities.
- Solidarity and social responsibility must be human values having equal importance as individual freedom.
- Social justice must be the key objective for all political action.

The crisis is the result of injustice

The present crisis is the result of injustice – it is the result of wrong decisions and weak politics over the last 20 years. As a consequence more people will be affected by poverty and deprived of the means to a decent life. This is a man-made crisis, not a natural disaster, and it is just as much a crisis of values as it is an economic crisis.

It would be a scandal if the expenses of the ‘extravagant party’ of the past decades are now to be paid by those who were never invited to attend it. Yet this is what is happening: many governments are responding to the crisis by cutting spending on social protection. **Caritas calls upon governments to reinforce social protection systems and to improve their effectiveness as instruments to prevent poverty.**

Caritas calls for social cohesion.

Some politicians are calling for more consumption, while others are calling for less. All are desperately calling for more 'confidence in the system'. In the meantime, on the streets of some countries people are clearly demonstrating that they have lost confidence in 'the system' and in their own politicians. We may witness increasing political instability. Democracy itself may be at risk.

Caritas is convinced that 'crisis' can become a *kairos*, a moment of opportunity, if those caught by it understand that they are actors and not simply victims. We do not allow others to fix our minds and our hearts on a financial or economic crisis – something that is nothing new for the poor of this world. They have lived their own "economic crisis" for decades. Today however poverty and social exclusion are becoming threats for even more people. Social justice must once again take its appropriate place on the political stage.

Community building at grass roots level has always been a priority for Caritas. We are experts in organising community life in Europe and across the world. Community building must now become a key priority for politics as well. In recent decades we have lived through an era of individualism, where people tended to focus more on their own fulfilment than on the development of their communities. Now is the time for a renaissance of communities. Organising communities is not simply a matter of political expediency; it is both a necessity and an opportunity to reinstate solidarity. **Social cohesion must be promoted, shifting from an individual-oriented society to a community-based society where solidarity between people and between nations is a central and consistently practiced value.**

Caritas calls for renewed attention to social services

Social services of general interest have been subject to over-regulation, in stark contrast to economic activities which have been de-regulated to the point of triggering the current crisis. Now more than ever, new and innovative approaches are needed with regard to social services, taking into account the new socio-economic environment. New types of services are necessary not only to care for the poorest of the poor, but also for the new poor. In an interdependent and inclusive society, services must be designed in a way that ensures cohesion and solidarity, not segregation. These social services must be organised within the cradle of local communities, using the skills and personal commitment of both professionals and volunteers. **Investment in social services and in social economy must be boosted, both to alleviate the effects of the crisis and to foster new growth.**

Caritas calls for a new 'ethos' in financial and economic behaviour

Financial services such as solidarity funds and ethical/social banks must be provided with more favourable operating conditions, because their activities directly support the poor and most excluded people, thereby promoting financial inclusion. These financial service providers, who base their business model on ethics and social responsibility, certainly deserve the same - if not better – conditions than all other financial institutions. More broadly, **we call for a redesign of the international financial system and for all economic activities to be based on ethical considerations.**

Caritas calls for direct dialogue with civil society

National governments and multilateral organisations have a specific shared responsibility. They have to work together and help society rebuild itself as a sustainable one. We – Caritas and other civil society organisations – need their help and support. Solutions are already emerging from the grassroots and being articulated through networks like Caritas. **We call upon national governments and multilateral organisations to enable civil society to fully participate in the policy decisions of today.** Without a strong and active civil society, governments and multilateral organisations will be at risk themselves.

Multilateralism is also at risk. We call upon multilateral organisations to make all possible efforts to avoid governmental tendencies towards protectionism. International fora provide good opportunities for trans-national cooperation beyond nationalistic or continental perspectives, and for fostering a sense of solidarity, not only between individuals but also between nations and continents.

Caritas, acting together with people affected by poverty, is committed to contribute to a 'civilisation of love' (Paul VI) which in today's political language translates into a cohesive and inclusive society.