

Testimony of **Sean Callahan**  
**President and CEO, Catholic Relief Services**  
Regarding **Fiscal Year 2025 appropriations** to the Senate subcommittee on  
**State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs**  
May 31, 2024

Chairman Coons, Ranking Member Graham: Catholic Relief Services (CRS), the international relief and development agency of the Catholic community in the United States, along with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) requests that you increase international poverty-reducing humanitarian and development assistance in Fiscal Year 2025 (FY25) appropriations. We ask Congress to increase the international affairs budget to \$64.4 billion, including \$62.4 billion for the FY25 State-Foreign Operations bill, to support poverty-reducing international assistance. We urge you to prioritize the accounts below to at least the levels indicated.

### **An Opportunity for Renewal**

Pope Francis calls on us to confront our current global challenges—such as hunger, climate change, and ever-growing humanitarian need—as opportunities for renewal. In the lead up to Easter, the Pope’s Lenten message reminded us to “keep seeking and be ready to take risks. At this moment in time, we face enormous risks...let us find the courage to see our world, not as being in its death throes but in a process of giving birth, not at the end but at the beginning of a great new chapter of history. We need courage to think like this.”<sup>1</sup>

CRS works in this spirit of restoration, supporting communities in their efforts to enter more hopeful chapters of their lives. CRS answers Pope Francis’ call to “keep seeking,” as we pursue solutions to the seemingly insurmountable challenges of our time. In order to do so, Congress must provide robust funding to address these issues head on. Strong funding must be complemented by a continued openness to, and oversight of, locally-led development and humanitarian responses, to ensure sustainable results by placing local actors at the forefront of program design and implementation. CRS encourages Congress to build on this willingness to confront challenges, not out of fear, but with the courage that Pope Francis deems necessary to bring about a more just and peaceful world.

### **Hunger**

This year, almost 300 million people are projected to face “acute” levels of food insecurity in Gaza, the Sudan, Ethiopia, Haiti, the Democratic Republic of Congo and beyond.<sup>2</sup> The U.S. government has a history of investing in long-term solutions to combat hunger in such places. *Feed the Future*, a USAID-led initiative, addresses the underlying drivers of hunger by bolstering agriculture-led growth, building livelihoods and supporting nutrition in target countries. CRS implemented a *Feed the Future* project from 2013 to 2018 in Nigeria, where households still benefit from the project:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/lent/documents/20231203-messaggio-quaresima2024.html>

<sup>2</sup> According to the [2024 Global Report on Food Crises](#), 281.6 million people are projected to experience Phase 3 or higher on the International Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) scale (3-Crisis, 4-Emergency, 5-Catastrophe). Populations in Crisis or worse face high levels of acute food insecurity and are in need of urgent assistance.

in 2023, 5 years after the close of the project, 80 percent of participating households said they felt able to withstand rising food prices, changing weather patterns, and disrupted livelihoods to maintain their levels of food security. In response to the current global food crisis, the U.S. government launched the global initiative “*Vision for Adopted Crops and Soils*” (VACS), which aims to boost agricultural productivity and nutrition through the cultivation of climate-resilient indigenous crop varieties and the promotion of activities to rejuvenate healthy soils. CRS has championed elements of the VACS approach for years and can attest to the enduring returns. By increasing funding to the **Development Assistance** account, Congress can help communities be more resilient to such setbacks that continue to confront these communities and sustainably address global hunger.

While the global food crisis has re-vitalized our understanding of the need for sustained development investments like Feed the Future, it also requires Congress to invest in new, innovative humanitarian programs that help the most vulnerable communities prevent overwhelming humanitarian need in the face of emergencies. CRS’ *PRO-RAICES* project in Guatemala does just that. While farmers in the region experience drought and irregular rainfall, leading to unpredictable harvests, *PRO-RAICES* works with local partners to create agricultural systems that can withstand the pressures of a changing climate. CRS helps farmers increase yields by training them in techniques that improve soil moisture retention and minimize the use of chemical fertilizers. Simultaneously, at the municipal level, CRS staff and partners collaborate with local governments to facilitate their own investment in disaster risk reduction. Since the 2023 launch of *PRO-RAICES*, two municipalities have established Offices for Disaster Risk Reduction that help communities identify and mitigate the risk of natural disasters. Institutional improvements like these, which are driven by local stakeholders and supported by CRS, make communities less vulnerable to food insecurity. Increasing funding for the **International Disaster Assistance** account, which supports *PRO-RAICES* and other such projects, will make the necessary investments now, to prevent greater humanitarian need in the future.

### **Climate Change**

In 2021, speaking about the imperative to be good stewards of the Earth, Pope Francis exhorted the world to “take our proper place as a ‘Restoration Generation’.” CRS and local partners respond to that call through climate adaptation programming around the world, including the Climate Resilient Cities project in the Philippines, funded by USAID through the **Development Assistance** account. CRS, with six local governments, implements urban-focused nature-based solutions – such as mangrove-planting along coastlines to mitigate harms from storms. The projects’ longevity will depend on building strong local leadership, so CRS is building the capacity of municipalities to access climate data, as well as to secure financing for future adaptation projects. We ask Congress to scale up bilateral investment in climate adaptation and reinforce the vital work embodied by the Climate Resilient Cities project. Additionally, CRS recommends that Congress complement bilateral investments with funding to multilateral entities like the **Green Climate Fund, Adaptation Fund, and Least-Developed Countries Fund**.

To ensure the effectiveness of increased adaptation funding, CRS asks Congress to require federal agencies, including USAID and the Department of State, to establish a data baseline of bilateral climate adaptation investments. Year-over-year data will allow U.S. government stakeholders and non-governmental organizations like CRS determine the scale and scope of current programming

and identify the most effective approaches to support climate-vulnerable communities. CRS also urges Congress to ensure that the multisectoral impacts of climate change – for example, impacts on food systems and infectious disease rates – are recognized and integrated into long-term planning. We appreciate current efforts led by USAID and the Department of State to do so.

### **Humanitarian Crises**

Pope Francis reminds us that “global crises...could be the occasions to bring about beneficial changes.” And while CRS staff witness great suffering, they also see glimmers of hope. CRS works tirelessly in crisis-affected areas like Gaza and Ukraine, where devastating conflicts have captured international attention. In Gaza and the West Bank, with funding from the **International Disaster Assistance** account, CRS provides food assistance, health kits, psychosocial support, and shelter materials for conflict-affected families. This assistance aims to ensure that families survive and can begin their journey to recovery after conflict subsides. At the same time, we provide emergency relief to hotspots that are often overlooked, like the Sudan, Haiti and the Sahel region. We urge Congress to increase funding for **International Disaster Assistance** and **Migration and Refugee Assistance** to save lives today, and lay the groundwork for a better tomorrow.

Humanitarian assistance alone will not resolve these crises. Rather, solutions must ultimately come from within, and require our support. In the Sudan, where ongoing conflict has displaced over eight million people, CRS implements the *People 2 People* project, which began in October 2022 in Central Darfur. *People 2 People* works with local citizens and peace actors to build cohesion among groups that have historically clashed. These efforts have been crucial in mitigating the intensity of the Sudanese conflict. Similarly, around the world, those affected by conflict and crisis are not giving up; instead, they are leaning into Pope Francis’ call to create a brighter future. Therefore, we urge Congress to fund peacebuilding and social cohesion activities through the **Complex Crises Fund** and **Economic Support Fund** to support communities like those in the Sudan.

### **Global Health**

The world has made substantial progress combatting infectious diseases like malaria, tuberculosis, and HIV, but we find ourselves at an inflection point. Progress on malaria, for instance, has stalled due to insufficient funding and growing humanitarian crises. CRS urges Congress to advance the Pope’s vision of a renewed world by investing in global health accounts such as the **Global Fund to fight HIV/AIDS, Malaria, and Tuberculosis**. In 2022, CRS programs funded by the Global Fund distributed 55 million bed nets and reached 21 million children with preventive malaria vaccines. Through these efforts, CRS has prevented more than 75,000 malaria deaths among children under five since 2020.

Moreover, Global Fund investments support locally-led health programming through the “High Performing Implementers” (HPI) initiative. Through HPI, CRS assists government partners to build institutional capacity to become strong implementers of Global Fund grants, which increases the effectiveness and sustainability of such activities in the future. After CRS’ capacity strengthening support through the HPI initiative in Guinea, the Minister of Health commended the National Malaria Program to be the best national health program in the country. Investments like these not only help save lives, but also foster stronger systems to advance development.

As the U.S. strives to revitalize gains in global health, CRS strongly urges Congress to maintain the Helms Amendment in FY25. CRS has grave concerns about utilizing taxpayer funding for activities inconsistent with the Catholic faith. Further, integrating such programming elements is not in the best interest of the U.S. and would exclude providers that are sometimes the most credible and trusted amongst local communities. CRS asks that lawmakers prioritize the dignity of human life across all aspects of humanitarian and development assistance.

### **Keep Seeking**

Pope Francis calls us to confront poverty, hunger, and suffering, and to “keep seeking” – in other words, we must not remain paralyzed by despair or indifference in the face of our global challenges, but seize opportunities for renewal and rebirth. CRS urges Congress to respond to this call, confident that the U.S. has what it takes to lead the way toward a “great new chapter in history.”