

Pontifical Council for the Laity

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Caritas in the age of eSolidarity

Caritas Internationalis, as you know, is at the same time a central entity of the Church in the Holy See, with a public juridical personality, as well as a confederation of 164 Catholic organisations working for integral human development and social justice as part of the mission of the Church. Caritas understands that it is not enough to simply give out charity to the poor and accompany them on their way to more dignity, but also to ask the question why are they poor and what can we do collectively to change that. Advocacy and public education are therefore an important element of the work of the Caritas family

The internet has had a huge impact on the way we live our lives in almost every aspect since the early 1990's. Politics, the media and community interaction have all gone online. Civil society actors like Caritas Internationalis and its members have sought to utilize the new potential of the internet to communicate with its supporters, to mobilize and to organise them.

Caritas members use the internet to make possible internal communications, to help explain its mission and values to a wider audience general public via their websites, to fundraise, and to lobby government, businesses and others in leadership positions.

Caritas Internationalis aims to build capacity of its membership online, improving their services, by providing national members with a greater amount of information, to be able to facilitate quick communications more cheaply, especially in emergencies.

Changing landscape

The mass media and Catholic media has traditionally been an important tool for Caritas member organisations in that it allows Caritas to reach a very large audience. This is key for both fundraising and advocacy. However, journalists have always been the gatekeeper, deciding which story they cover.

The internet has changed this dynamic and has made civil society organisations like Caritas much less dependent on the media. The internet has empowered us to reach to be able to give a wide audience exactly the information we want and for our supporters to interact with us much more easily.

Social networking or Web 2.0 has had a huge impact, both for information and identity management, and on improving relationships with supporters and stakeholders. People can participate actively in the work of Caritas and reproduce our content or comment on it, providing a multiplier effect.

By social networking, we mean blogs, content sharing platforms such as Facebook and Pinterest, micro-blogging messenger services like Twitter, photo and video sharing sites like YouTube, Vimeo, Flickr and Instagram, and crowd sourcing sites, for example crowd funding sites like Kickstarter.

These services allow people to connect more easily and manage information faster. They are more fun to use. By being able to recommend and share information, the message goes further and creates a sense of belonging. All these tools can be interconnected, so Caritas can Tweet some new piece of information and refer users back to its website or where films and photos are displayed.

But the Internet and Web 2.0 also brings with it challenges.

At Caritas, we are trying to build a world in which everyone has a say. The digital divide means that people without access to computers, such as in many parts of the developing world, or people without technical skills such as the elderly or the poor, are excluded.

Translating online action into offline action is often difficult. “Liking” something on Facebook is easy, but does it translate into greater activism such as volunteering? The debate can also be superficial online or lead to polarisation.

Caritas Members have also come under attack themselves from individuals or small groups of individuals who invent or repeat falsehoods via the web. These libels can be very damaging, and mean Caritas members devote staff time and money countering what frequently amounts to misinformation.

Points to consider: 11

- The biggest challenges for Caritas and other organisations is how to attract people to your website/social network. How to get them interested and involved once they're there. How to get them to take some form of action.
- The presence of Caritas MOs in social networks varies according to staff numbers, budget and internet expertise.
- Caritas Internationalis relies heavily on content sharing sites such as flickr, youtube and wordpress to share photos, videos and text in a quick and simple way.
- Our very nature of being the charity arm of the Church means that we can speak directly with Catholics across the world on issues such as poverty, migration and climate change.
- Caritas has just opened a new website where social networks are an integral part of each page.
- CI uses Twitter daily to put out information and follow what its members and other important parties are doing. We follow nearly 400 people – many of whom are local and national Caritas members – and we have nearly 7000 followers.
- Internet campaigns are generally much cheaper than traditional methods such as TV. It enables us to reach out to more people using a modest amount of money.
- The world of web 2 requires a certain amount of professional expertise. It is a learning curve but we use our network to learn from our members and also to pass on information to inform our members.
- The world of web 2 requires a constant presence and involvement and a readiness to interact with people.
- Our Confederation speaks many different languages and translating contents is time consuming and expensive.
- Our coming global campaign on the right to food which will be launched on this coming Tuesday 10th December will have a strong element of social networking to encourage direct involvement from everyone. A special website has been opened.

Examples of Caritas eSolidarity

Nearly 70 members of Caritas Internationalis have **Facebook** pages. They share stories, appeals, messages from Church leadership, campaigns and more with their supporters.

Some, like Caritas Germany, Caritas Mexico or Caritas Spain will have diocesan members with Facebook accounts that republish stories from the national Caritas, or have their stories republished at a national level in turn.

Many have active **YouTube channels** like CRS, CAFOD, Caritas Egypt and Caritas Lebanon. There they publish short films, mainly about their work, or adverts for their programmes. CRS has 634 subscribers with 719,889 video views. Their films are varied, and include for instance Cardinal Robert Sarah on the New Evangelization.

Caritas Czech Republic have two profiles on Facebook for Caritas CR and for Three Kings Collection that takes place every January. Many of their diocesan and regional Caritas organisations have also their own profiles. Caritas Czech has its own YouTube channel. Staff and volunteers at the Caritas Greece Refugee Centre in Athens have now a group in Facebook, called Caritas Athens Refugee Programme with more than 80 friends.

Caritas Jordan works through 1000 volunteers, providing services to poor Jordanians and refugees from Iraq and Syria. The volunteers mostly come to Caritas Jordan through parishes and university groups. They are predominately young adults in their 20s and 30s. Caritas Jordan has set up a Facebook page for them, where they can share information on upcoming events and training, important information regarding their work and connect volunteer with volunteer.

Caritas Latin America and the Caribbean has a network of communications officers for the region. They have set up their own Facebook page, where they share challenges and successes of work. The Facebook site helps them build a common plan and improves team spirits as they share their daily struggles and their good news.

Many of our members have **Twitter** accounts. They use them to engage with supporters, journalists and the general public. For example, CRS has

different communication officers working around the world. They are followed by journalists, so amplifying their messages.

Caritas built an internal web platform called the **Caritas Baobab** for staff of member organisations. There they can share information, find detailed reports, engage in conversations, and find people who work on similar topics.

CI's **Peacebuilding Manual** has become a seminal text for practitioners, notably in the Philippines, Colombia and Africa. Caritas launched its web-based peacebuilding toolkit in 2009. The attractive, easy-to-use, interactive website – peacebuilding.caritas.org – was described as an innovative, unique and excellent resource. Users can upload new resources, or translations, build online manuals, and even create their own books for lesson plans. The English version has received 300,000 visitors. It's also available in French and Spanish.

The online version has provided a valuable extension of the community of peacebuilders, researchers and students. It is primarily a teaching and playing resource for the staff and members of the Catholic peacebuilding network, which is strengthened and sustained in its mission through the support of Caritas experts from the confederation.

Caritas and CIDSE ran an **online Grow Climate Justice E-Action**. A widget was developed that could be used by Caritas members on their own websites. It was an imaginary field. Supporters were asked to plant a symbolic plant to the field online and it generated an email to their national government urging action on climate justice. You could also see you plant and others as the field grew.

eCampaigning case study

In the run up to the UK general election, Cafod ran a campaign with prospective parliamentary candidates to raise awareness of the following issues: aid, climate change, and making business work for the poor. Cafod also supported the 'Ask the Climate Question' coalition- hustings/ electoral platforms were set up in marginal constituencies around the country with CAFOD leading in the constituencies of 'York Outer' and 'Redditch'.

A key objective was to use the election to recruit a fresh intake of supporters for Cafod's MP Correspondent Scheme, which encourages

campaigners to write to their MP three times a year, at critical moments on our three core issues, and to visit their MP at least once a year when more pressure is needed.

Cafod produced a “Have a hand in history” flyer in 2009, so supporters could order an online election guide nearer the time. This guide contained key facts about the issues and top tips on how to engage with candidates.

Cafod wrote election blogs and news stories, including blogs before and after the hustings and promoted them on the Cafod Facebook page.

Cafod also produced an online election forum and feedback form for supporters to submit comments, questions and report back on any activity with their candidates.

Two email actions were sent out one month before the election and, adopting a strategy used by “Ask the Climate Question”, Cafod automatically redirected supporters to a message that was relevant to their constituency. Supporters living in marginal seats emailed their candidates with a focus around the ‘asks’ on climate change. For the remaining supporters, the message was broader. All actions were followed up with thank you emails that pointed to an online map with details of local events and further resources.

In the run up to the second live TV leaders’ debate, which focused on international development, they sent a further e-action with a request to submit a question on climate change.

Finally, Cafod sent out an email one week after the election to thank supporters, report back, and crucially to ask supporters to become a long-term MP Correspondent.

- The online election guide was sent to 686 supporters.
- 118 emails were sent to candidates living in marginal seats and 1,780 emails were sent from supporters in non-marginal constituencies.
- There were 365 clicks from their e-action to supporters asking them to submit a question to Sky News for the live TV debate. A question was asked, but it’s impossible to say if this was linked to the email.
- As a result of the post-election email, they had 101 people sign up to become an MP Correspondent – an excellent result given the deep level of engagement associated with this type of supporter.

The only specific activity to fall short was the election forum and feedback form; it was only really staff that engaged to try and get the debate going. This points towards lack of promotion but also perhaps the fact that supporters were using existing forums instead, such as Facebook.

eLearning case study

CRS iNeighbor website provides schools with the tools needed to understand the challenges that global neighbors face. These tools include: videos, prayers, activities, lesson plans, and more. All are focused around important global issues that we all face. Schools are encouraged to take part in activity weeks.

Morris Catholic High School had been doing CRS Rice Bowl for years. They wanted to do more with their whole school involved in living the Gospel call to love our neighbor. The teachers conducted many activities in their classroom, tying what they had learned during the CRS Global Neighbor Workshop into what they were already doing in the classroom:

- The Latin teacher created a version of the Wailing Wall and had students place prayers written in Latin on the wall.
- A religion teacher also created a wall, and put it up in the middle of his classroom and had the students discuss the walls in their lives and how Jesus' message responds to these walls.;

The school closed their Global Neighbor Week with an all-school assembly where they put up the "Peace Mural," created by the whole school community, as the backdrop to a whole-school mass which the bishop presided over!

eFundraising / ePhilanthropy

ePhilanthropy is extremely important to Caritas Internationalis and Caritas Members. At Caritas Internationalis we drive donors and prospective donors to our website via blogs, twitter and facebook. These tools are invaluable when there is a major disaster receiving significant media coverage. For example, CI has received so far just under €70,000 from 663 separate donations for the victims of the Phillipines Typhoon HAIYAN. Many of these donors are new donors, and we now have the opportunity to contact those donors in the future cultivating them for further donations.

In the past, donors were typically older people with secure jobs and some disposable income who were approached through traditional fundraising techniques such as direct mail. Today, ePhilanthropy is becoming increasingly more relevant as a fundraising technique. As we all know, young people are very connected to Social Media and are engaged when it comes to humanitarian emergencies and relief. They like to be engaged and involved and they like to do things together. They are able to actively contribute through Walkathons and Bikeathons, for example, by setting up a website page offering people the opportunity to make pledges. Some of our Caritas members are using Crowd Funding techniques where people can collectively support a specific project by pooling donations or organising small fundraising events in their communities. Due to ePhilanthropy the average age of a donor is dropping and these new younger donors are becoming committed as lifetime donors.

Meanwhile, older donors who initially were sceptical about donating on line and worried about security are becoming much more comfortable with social media as they now do banking on line, purchasing on line from places like Amazon and EBay, and communicating with their grandchildren on line and through facebook. This is a Godsend for fundraisers as it is far more cost effective and efficient to communicate with donors on line rather than costly and cumbersome mail. As people become more comfortable with this form of donating they are donating larger amounts. We have some donors who send just €10 but we also have other donors who will donate as much as \$5,000 on line. When they make the donation if they request a receipt it is automatically processed and sent to them by return email which is a significant labour saving device for us.

At CI, it is our intention to maximise the opportunities that social media provides us to increase our fundraising returns while at the same time minimising the cost of raising those funds so more money benefits those we serve.

Carpe Deum is a free application in French to help people on a social and spiritual level day by day. It's a network which creates a link between the faithful, it provides them with mass times across the world, answers questions of faith and provides the user with prayers.

Some member organisations are taking advantage of this technology too. For example Secours Catholique/Caritas France has launched a free application which allows iphone users to become “bringers of light”. Users can support causes by lighting a candle, donate, keep up to date on humanitarian news and contribute their prayers.

Conclusion

The internet has huge potential for organisations like Caritas to improve our ways of working, to make them more cost effective and efficient, to improve public understanding of our mission and values, and to be used as a tool to mobilize supporters to campaign on certain issues.

But we must develop effective ways of linking on-line and off-line participation, and tackling the digital divide .We need to create focused and sustainable e-participation projects and cement their role as e-participation facilitators.

Finally we need to successfully manage our e-participation resources. Many of our members say they don't have the resources to engage in social media. We need to build up a catalogue of professional skills in on-line engagement.

CI's aims in the long term are to continue building up an audience whose virtual support will be transformed into real activism, volunteership and donations.