

How CRS supported the Catholic Church in Ethiopia to develop its first ever church-wide strategic plan



At the April 2024 First Strategy Execution Workshop, a small group discussion is led by the Secretary-General (center) regarding options to address Church governance issues, with participants from the national office, dioceses and congregations. *Beza Assefa/ECC-GS*

BACKGROUND

In 2022, the Catholic Church in Ethiopia launched a first-ever institution-wide strategy development process, building upon individual, social, pastoral, sectoral and congregational plans. A key impetus was the recognition that humanitarian needs were rising around the country and that the Church needed to strengthen institutional capacities in order satisfy growing internal and donor requirements. The Vatican had set the stage with its worldwide Synod process, serving as an excellent model of listening, communicating, reflecting and moving forward in a consensual manner.

The context surrounding these efforts was challenging. Ethiopia was at war in the north, with conflicts emerging and reemerging throughout the process, while multi-year drought continued in the south, adding urgency to plan and move forward. Internal challenges included acute governance issues, a lack of accountability within and across structures, poor monitoring and evaluation, little learning and organizational improvement, Catholic identity issues, a lack of coordination between previous plans, and a split between pastoral and social operations.

CRS SUPPORT

In June 2022, CRS assigned a staff member to assist Caritas Ethiopia with humanitarian response and institutional strengthening of its national office and two northern dioceses. He was soon asked to also guide a Church-wide strategic planning process. Starting in July 2022, the process took 14 months and was modeled after the four-phase approach used by CRS country programs: planning, landscaping, analysis and articulation, although the final document followed Caritas Internationalis' format. Two events were held: a landscaping workshop in December 2022 and an analysis workshop in April 2023. Three sets of diocesan tours by the National Steering Committee were conducted to solicit information, strengthen buy-in, confirm findings, receive feedback and inputs, and validate the plan, which proved crucial to the cohesiveness of the process. Once the plan was approved and finalized, strategy working groups (SWGs) were established for each major element. Members were solicited from both within the Church

and outside—including from CRS—to advise and assist the Church in formulating more detailed work plans. Draft SWG plans were finalized and presented at the first strategy execution workshop in April 2024, with feedback received and plans subsequently updated.



A ceremony at the First Strategy Execution Workshop in April 2024 to thank CRS for its support. *Beza Assefa/Ethiopian Catholic Church-General Secretariat (ECC-GS)*

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE PLANNING PROCESS

The approach to developing the plan was deemed successful by the Church and CRS, with valuable lessons learned along the way:

- Building relationships and ensuring strong social capital before starting the process were key factors in the ability to guide, provide suggestions and overcome challenges, as was understanding the Ethiopian Catholic Church's social structure, group dynamics and time management.
- Taking time to become familiar with the history and current trends of the Church was important. Often referred to as a "minority church" but being part of the Universal Catholic Church, as well as having major social programs, mean it has an impact that goes beyond the scope of its representation.
- Addressing hurdles in cultural differences and preferred communication was critical. Communicating in person and individually is a strong part of Ethiopian culture, and Church culture in particular, as a form of respect. Because staff and structures preferred using in-person and cell communications to engage, meet and commit, it was essential to start off the process with a tour of the dioceses to explain the process, build internal social capacity and more. Improving digital communications was not critical to the strategy development process but was identified as essential in the execution phase.
- Balancing language consultatively and cautiously; in this case, while staff members could read English, most conversations were in Amharic. The CRS staff member learned the basics of Amharic, which brought stronger team integration.
- As this was the first time the Church had been through such an exercise, building an understanding of "strategy" as well as consensus for change at key levels of the Church was crucial.
- The added value of the CRS staff member was to engage key actors and build relationships, accompany and guide the National Steering Committee on strategy development and facilitate key discussions. Seconding a CRS staff member who possessed an understanding of the Catholic Church and Caritas Internationalis and their strategies and processes was important, as were his knowledge and experience in strategic planning.
- Regularly reviewing how the eventual strategy would be executed ensured that the planning would not be seen as the final step. Considering those essential elements during planning helped ensure a seamless transition to execution, especially regarding key aspects of leadership.
- It was often noted that this process likely would not have happened without CRS assistance, as the seconded staff member was influential in providing technical guidance, ensuring quality control and accelerating the process. Nonetheless, the staff member felt at times that he was more central than was comfortable. As a result, pauses for discussion were held at key moments to help reaffirm local leadership in the process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to the lessons learned above, CRS recommends the following measures:

- Share lessons learned from similar experiences before a process begins in a new country.
- Establish a Memorandum of Understanding to ensure agreement about what each side will contribute in terms of human resources.
- Involve other Caritas Internationalis Member Organizations (CIMOs) early on so they participate in events and other key moments, provide input as is appropriate, buy in to the process and outcomes as much as possible, and support the plan.

LOOKING AHEAD

Implementation is the next step. The newly formed National Strategy Execution Committee (NSEC) has established working groups to build out the strategy into manageable sets of approaches and activities. The ten-year period has been divided into three implementation periods followed by an evaluation/re-planning year to prepare for the next strategic

plan. Efforts are being made to engage bishops regularly, have CIMOs participate in working groups, technically support strategy implementation, finance some of the basic strategy activities, and engage outside technical expertise. Finally, a strategy manager is to be hired to assume the responsibilities of the seconded CRS staff member.



Ethiopian Bishops and Apostolic Administrators along with the Apostolic Nuncio and Orthodox leaders at the launch event in December 2023 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. *Beza Assefa/ECC-GS*