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The challenges of responding to COVID-19 in rural communities in southern Africa

Caritas Australia's partners are on the ground responding to the impacts of COVID-19 in eastern and southern Africa, where communities that rely on small-scale agriculture for their food and livelihoods have been severely impacted by government restrictions on gatherings.

Sister Ivy Khoury, Africa Program Coordinator at Caritas Australia, works alongside local partners in Mozambique and Zimbabwe on long-term development projects, and has seen how the COVID-19 pandemic has brought challenges in implementing programs.

"We were in the middle of everything — digging boreholes, fencing the gardens to protect people's livelihoods and making bricks for the construction of latrines. We were lucky to get permission to continue work from the government, so that we could continue our programs while other organisations were in lockdown."

"Sometimes only ten people are allowed at a time in the gardens, but it's necessary so that households can continue to grow enough food for everybody to eat or sell at the markets."

In a region that has been hit by extended drought, frequent flooding and rapidly increasing inflation in recent decades, long-term development programs are crucial to help communities survive these challenges and to become self-reliant after these crises.

As a Franciscan Missionary of Mary, Sr Ivy has seen parts of the world that few Australians visit. After the devastating floods in Mozambique in 2013, over 140,00 people were forced from their homes, and Sr Ivy worked with communities to rebuild.

"The makeshift camps in Mozambique were huge, and I remember visiting a camp and celebrating the Eucharist with the priest there, and that there were hundreds of people just praying — Catholics and non-Catholics all together."

"To see people lose everything, and I mean everything — that's when organisations like Caritas Australia and other international Caritas members come in and help pick up the pieces."

Prior to starting at Caritas Australia, Sr Ivy worked as a nurse and midwife in Ethiopia for seven years, at her Congregation's hospital and then at a HIV and AIDS Counselling and Social Service nursing people in their homes.

"When I was first told that I was going to Ethiopia, leaving my mum was the hardest thing. My family, who come from a Lebanese background, is so close, and nobody goes away like that. But the only way I could give my whole life to God was to leave my family."

"Standing in solidarity with people in Ethiopia, especially some of the most vulnerable, really taught me how to work with communities on their own development long-term," said Sr Ivy.

Caritas Australia is a member of one of the world's largest humanitarian networks with 162 agencies operating in 200 countries and territories.

Media contact: Jessica Stone on 0490 684 867 / jessica.stone@caritas.org.au or caritasmedia@caritas.org.au.

The Catholic agency for international aid and development

Address: 24-32 O'Riordan St, Alexandria NSW 2015

Phone: 1800 024 413 **Fax:** +61 2 8306 3401

Email: questions@caritas.org.au **ABN:** 90 970 605 069

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