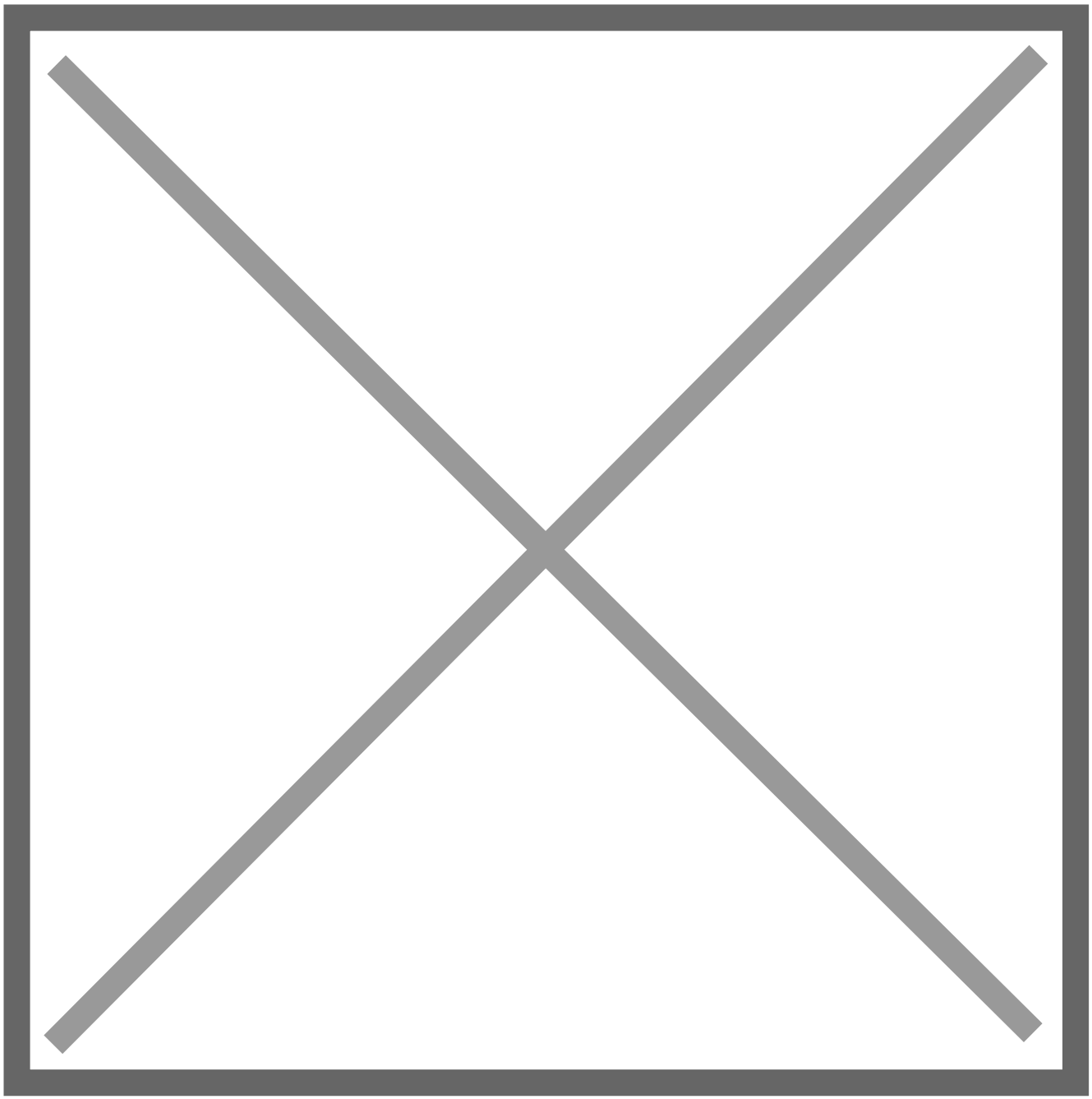
News



Maribel shares a healthy and delicious lunch with her daughter after participating in a nutrition education project with Catholic Relief Services in Guatemala Nov. 11, 2024. CRS nutrition classes in Guatemala educate families about the types of nutrients found in different foods and how they affect the body and provide parents support and recipes to replace sodas and processed foods with healthy and delicious alternatives made from vitamin-enriched ingredients and locally available fruits like lemons, papaya, guava and oranges. (OSV News/Cony Cardona for CRS)



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"Are you leaving, too?"

The question, said Abena Amedormey — country representative for Catholic Relief Services in the west African nation of Ghana — came to CRS workers as they visited communities they serve after a January 2025 freeze on all U.S. foreign aid, ordered by the Trump administration.

By July 2025, the U.S. Agency for International Development — established in 1961, and which in 2024 provided $187 million in humanitarian funding to Ghana — effectively ceased to exist, with 85% of its programs cut. The result was that many in-country aid organizations also ceased operations.

But not CRS.

They're surviving — yet the deep slashes to USAID funding have now made their annual Rice Bowl collection more essential than ever.

A familiar Lenten program of Catholic Relief Services — the official relief and development agency of the Catholic Church in the U.S. — CRS Rice Bowl offers faith communities in every diocese throughout the United States the opportunity to put their faith into action.

Since 1975, the titular rice bowl — a brightly colored, cardboard almsgiving box that's a familiar annual Lenten sight in parishes nationwide — has invited Catholics to pray, fast, and give in solidarity with the world's poor.

"We're very much known across Ghana," Amedormey told OSV News. "People know that we bring relief and we work with the most vulnerable people, where nobody wants to go. It's the remotest parts of the country — the most hard to reach areas; the most vulnerable people — that we work with."

Present in the country from 1958 onwards — just one year after Ghana gained independence from Great Britain — Catholic Relief Services Ghana works to tackle poverty with a holistic approach, operating projects to improve child and maternal health, increase access to clean water and sanitation, scale up farm production, and enhance community level savings and lending.

"We strongly believe in sustainability — because we don't want to come in, support you and then we're gone," said Amedormey. "It's like the saying, 'Teach a man to fish' — we don't want to provide fish and leave. We want them to go out to fish."

But with the shuttering of USAID, that mission is threatened.

"The (Ghanian) government suffered a huge shortfall of financing in the health sector," shared Amedormey, "and this was also in education, where there were school feeding programs and teacher training programs."

Those additional disruptions struck the work of other non-governmental organizations.

"A lot of organizations had to close shop overnight, had to lay off people, had to stop programming. These layoffs affected health care workers, agriculture extension officers, social workers and administrative staff," Amedormey said. "And so names and faces that were known in a lot of communities as bringing support, overnight had to pack up and leave."

Farmers lost subsidized fertilizer, improved seeds and training — which had all aimed to increase their crop yields.

Specialized teacher training was suspended, and children who looked forward to school meals could no longer be sure they'd have them.

All of it, said Amedormey, "had a huge impact."

Yet, she remains committedly optimistic.

"One of the things that CRS has been faithful to is trying as much as possible to fill the gaps," she said.

The Lancet, a peer-reviewed British medical journal published since 1823, estimated USAID assistance has saved more than 91 million lives, including that of 30 million children, over the past two decades.

The journal's July 2025 prediction, however, was grim.

"Our estimates show that, unless the abrupt funding cuts announced and implemented in the first half of 2025 are reversed, a staggering number of avoidable deaths could occur by 2030," the Lancet forecast. The study noted that almost 14.1 million people could die by that year, with over 4.5 million deaths being children younger than 5.

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Estimates of as many as 300,000 deaths in the less than six months since USAID funding stopped began to circulate from academic demographers, while philanthropist and Microsoft founder Bill Gates accused billionaire tech titan Elon Musk — who for less than a year headed President Trump's Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, and bragged about "feeding USAID into the woodchipper" — of callous negligence.

"The picture of the world's richest man killing the world's poorest children is not a pretty one," Gates observed, while Musk struck back by daring Gates "to show us any evidence."

While the two billionaires argued in the media, aid workers worldwide wrestled with providing the help they had previously.

"The big thing that has changed is our ability to deliver aid to the people that we are called to serve around the world," said Beth Knobbe, CRS advisor on church mobilization. "It's been limited in certain ways, given the dramatic cuts to U.S. humanitarian aid. Those cuts are just absolutely devastating to the people that CRS serves."

Knobbe told OSV News that "the rise in hunger that has been happening because of things like inflation, tariffs, continual natural disasters and violence around the world."

"Hunger is not going away," she warned. "There was a time when we were actually making tremendous strides in the fight against global hunger. And what we have seen — really since the start of COVID — is just a complete reversal."

According to the Global Report on Food Crises 2025, published by the Food Security Information Network in support of the Global Network against Food Crises, "In 2024, more than 295 million people across 53 countries and territories experienced acute levels of hunger — an increase of 13.7 million from 2023."

"It's even more important than ever that Catholics take seriously that call to live Lent," Knobbe said. "CRS Rice Bowl gives people a chance to truly grow in solidarity with our global neighbors through their prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

"And that almsgiving is so critical," she added, "because the needs are so great — both at home and around the world."

Some 11,000 Catholic parishes and schools will participate in 2026, Knobbe said.

In Honduras — where CRS has been since 1959, and programs primarily focus on agriculture, education, emergencies, and clean water — the challenges are also multiplying, and with it, the critical assistance from this year's Rice Bowl collection.

"It's a huge loss," Haydee Diaz, CRS country manager for Honduras, told OSV News of the USAID cuts. "Because the government here doesn't really have the resources to do the kind of improvements that tend to really change a school system over time, and lead to a better- educated population. More jobs, people are better off. They're able to stay, and not be so desperate to migrate."

Meanwhile, the Central American nation is braced for the next natural disaster it will experience without USAID assistance, which totaled $152 million in 2024.

"One of the things that really worries us is what's going to happen if a major hurricane hits," Diaz said. "Because it's been the U.S. government that's really been providing Honduras with the resources to improve hurricane response. What does a poor country like Honduras do?"

The cutting of U.S. aid in combination with increased U.S. immigration restrictions is, it seems, an ironic paradox.

"As Americans, we say that we want people to stay home and not migrate to the US," observed Diaz. "But we've cut the programs that give people a chance to really stay in their communities and thrive there."

In chain-like fashion, that also impacts other outcomes.

"Nobody wins when children don't get an education — and the country stays poor and doesn't have the ability to draw jobs or investments from other countries, because they don't have a well-educated workforce," she said.

"It doesn't benefit the U.S. to have neighbors to the South that are poor, where people feel like they don't have a future," Diaz added. "And that's what USAID programs used to do. USAID used to really give people that hope that they could make it here — that they had some support, and that they could thrive."

Nonetheless — like Amedormey in Ghana — she hasn't dimmed her outlook, particularly with the CRS Rice Bowl collection just around the corner.

"It's been very inspiring to see the generosity of individuals in the middle of such a dark, difficult time, where so much international aid has been cut and international aid programs have really been dismantled," Dia said. "It's been wonderful to see how individuals have stepped up, and really started to contribute."