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## Advocacy case studies

# INFLUENCING LOCAL GOVERNMENT THROUGH THE CHURCH IN BRAZIL

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<b>COUNTRY:</b>	<b>Brazil</b>
<b>THEME:</b>	<b>Children and education; governance; land and property</b>
<b>ADVOCACY APPROACHES:</b>	<b>Church and community mobilisation; government officials: lobbying</b>

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In middle-income countries with democratically elected governments, such as Brazil, it is very important that local civil society is organised and united, so that communities are empowered to put pressure on local government to provide support, services, health care, education and so on.

Sometimes it is ignorance of existing rights that prevents communities from approaching their local government, but more often it is a lack of unity, organisation and leadership. The role of the local church is potentially very significant in this area. It has the ability to raise awareness about rights and to organise communities to speak with a single voice – which is difficult to ignore. This is what has happened in Caroá, a rural community situated outside Manaíra in the semi-arid north-east region of Brazil. Much of the community's transformation over the last 15 years is down to effective local advocacy.

With the support of Tearfund partner Ação Evangélica (ACEV), a local church set up a community organisation to put pressure on the municipal government to supply electricity to the village. This was the first association of its kind in the area. It took three years, but electricity arrived in Caroá. In the years that followed, this small community organisation put pressure on the local government to set up a primary school for the village and to improve the quality of roads and local housing. 'They were embarrassed by what we were doing on our own,' said the local pastor, Valdemy. 'They felt they had to help.' Now there is a primary school and improved roads, and almost all of the 47 families live in solid and safe homes, thanks to substantial funding accessed from the local government.

There are clear processes in place in Brazil for civil society to shape local public policy, and Pastor Valdemy found himself getting involved with this work. He stood for election on the municipal council and was successful (in spite of efforts by other political parties to buy him off).

At the centre of all this activism, organisation, unity and advocacy is a local church. Pastor Valdemy was clear about this involvement: 'The local church has been central to the whole process these last 15 to 20 years. It has raised awareness, instilled values, influenced behaviours, built unity and social cohesion, raised collective consciousness. It is the glue that binds us.' He went on, 'Where there is an "integral mission" local church active, transformation happens. In other communities there is fighting, disagreements, disunity – not here. We cannot imagine gospel faith and social action being divided.' The local church was the first evangelical church in the region, and from this first congregation ten further local churches have been established.