

Advocacy case studies

DIGNIFYING BURIALS DURING COVID-19 IN TANZANIA

COUNTRY:	Tanzania
THEMES:	Health; stigma and discrimination
ADVOCACY APPROACHES:	Church and community mobilisation; government officials: lobbying; using the media

In Tanzania during Covid-19, there was no official lockdown mandated by the national government. However, people were dying from the disease and fear started to take root in their communities. Normally when a person dies in Tanzania, their church is notified, they are brought back to their family's village, and the whole community comes together for the funeral. Therefore, when congregants came to their pastors to complain that the bodies of their loved ones who died from Covid-19 were being buried by the government at night without the traditional rites, it was concerning to the community.

Tearfund partner, Christian Council of Tanzania (CCT), decided to bring together all the leaders of the churches in their organisation to address this issue. The pastors developed a message they wanted to send to the people and an appeal letter to the government on conducting dignifying burials. The message was sent to the media, to each member church, and to the national government's Ministry of Health.

Fortunately, the President of Tanzania responded favourably to their appeal and denounced on national television the practice of night burials of Covid-19 victims, and also promoted health precautions against the disease such as handwashing stations at churches, wearing face masks at church, physical distancing in church services and limiting numbers of people at funerals. After this, the churches were able to bury Covid-19 victims in their communities and encourage their congregants to follow the precautionary measures against Covid-19. The government invited the church's input into the national response to Covid-19; called for Tanzanian Christians to pray for three days; and saw that the church's involvement helped calm public fears.

Lessons learnt:

- Relationships: Civil society space is usually limited in Tanzania. Over the years CCT has invested in building relationships with government officials. These relationships have yielded positive engagements with the government on Tanzania's response to Covid-19. These would not have been possible if the partner had not spent years building relationships with church leaders and government officials. When fear of the pandemic began to grip the country, the government recognised the important role the church plays in society.
- Trust: The communities were keen to follow the health precaution measures promoted by their church leaders, and their prayers helped lift their spirits during a difficult time.
- Encouragement: CCT supported their member churches to maintain their communities' social fabric through dignifying burials of Covid-19 victims and keeping churches open for the public's spiritual, social and physical health – by providing prayer support and through pastors encouraging people to take precautions against Covid-19 while still meeting as a church.