

1. Local influence

Local churches have the ability to exert real power and influence on local issues and local power-brokers. As part of the community, the local church sees and experiences local injustice first-hand, and as a collective group, can be in a position to take action.

The local church leader can exert influence because in many communities they will be respected as someone who exercises moral authority. Even in contexts where the church is in a minority such as Niger, a church leader will be recognised as a religious leader, and therefore someone to be respected and listened to. They will thus often carry more weight and influence at a local level than an NGO, especially as many NGOs come from outside the community.

Examples

A pastor of a church in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, is active in advocacy on behalf of children who are being abused. In one example, the uncle of a young girl was abusing her, and she had become HIV+ and sick. The pastor took the uncle to the police, and despite endemic corruption, managed to make sure the police pressed charges. The uncle ran away and has not been in contact with the girl since. The pastor now acts as an advocate for a number of children. This pattern is being repeated by a number of pastors in the city.

Local churches in Zambia were encouraged to challenge the provision of services at local government level. In one example, roads had not been constructed despite government promises, and so a number of church pastors lobbied their MP until the situation was rectified.

As part of their church mobilisation work, a Christian NGO in Zimbabwe normally encourages local churches to identify and utilise their own resources and the resources of their community. However, due to the current crisis, churches are very poor, and so the NGO now trains and encourages churches to lobby local schemes (whether run by the government, World Food Programme or others) for the distribution of food and educational support for those they are working with.

In Sierra Leone, a Christian agency (EFSL) have brought together church leaders together across the denominations to form District Advocacy Committees (DACs). So far, 120 local churches have formed three main committees (based in 3 separate geographical areas). These committees identify advocacy issues and meet with the local authorities. Significant impact has been achieved.

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