

3. Local information gathering

The local church is ideally placed to gather first-hand accounts and information of what is happening at local level and pass these on to church structures that can use them to inform and strengthen their advocacy work. Clearly, this only works where there are good links between the local churches and their church structures/ co-ordinating networks. Where local churches are isolated from, or unconnected to, the wider bodies of the church, it is very difficult for them to play this role.

The church can speak on what they know and experience first hand, not on what they read about through second-hand sources, which makes it less easy for authorities to contradict them.

Example

During the Sudan government's bombing campaign of the South, the New Sudan Council of Churches built the capacity of the bishops and senior church leaders to establish basic communication networks and procedures to ensure that information about the Sudanese government bombing campaigns got reported. Despite the absence of telephones, local priests and parishioners (having been encouraged by the bishops) would find ways of getting information through to regional offices about local bombing (sometimes by word-of-mouth; sometimes by using the NGO radios in the district). The information gathered was regarded as better and more reliable than that of anyone else's, including the CIA! This information provided the basis for concerted lobbying of the UN and other groups, and helped to influence UN resolutions on Sudan, and increase pressure on the Sudan government.

In a similar way, the churches reported on human rights abuses and people displacement occurring as a result of oil exploitation. Often only the church had access to these areas, and no NGOs could get there, so the information they provided was invaluable.

Author: Tulo Raistrick, Tearfund