

Constraints and challenges of working with the local church in disaster management

1. Low capacity

The local church often lacks the capacity and infrastructure to do relief work. They may be massively affected by the disaster, or be very inexperienced in knowing how to respond. They may be well-meaning and compassionate, but they lack the skills and know-how to provide any form of specialist or technical response.

When local churches do try to respond, they can end up being over-whelmed and pulled away from their other priorities. This can be particularly the case for the church pastors, who in disaster situations may be burying people up to 3-4 days a week in addition to their normal pastoral and preaching duties and yet then become the project manager for relief work too. Delegating these duties to others in the church often goes against the culture and leadership style of the church, even where there are other members of the church who have some literacy and education.

Also the local church does not have the technical skills required to do a lot of relief work, nor the capacity to keep maintaining the work over a longer period of time. Relief work requires basic levels of literacy which are often lacking in local churches. For example, the skill to weigh children and record results is often beyond project staff, let alone local church members, so it is not realistic to involve churches in this way.

2. Lack of willingness to engage in disaster management work

Many churches do not regard it as their role to be involved in disaster risk reduction. They see their role as evangelism and discipleship. Thus they are reluctant to get involved.

3. Mixed motives for involvement in disaster risk reduction

Local churches may have mixed motives for getting involved in disaster risk reduction initiatives. Some may get involved in food distribution, for example, either to look after their own members or to use as a tool of encouraging conversion. Thus, the church is not always seen as a trusted and credible institution within some communities.

4. Disunity within and between churches

Divisions and disunity amongst local churches can make it difficult to work with them in a community. Some local churches may refuse to get involved in an initiative if another church is involved. Churches can be divided along ethnic grounds, or be associated with one side in a conflict, making impartial disaster management work through the churches difficult.

5. Attitudes of governments and NGOs to the church

Governments and NGOs often view the church as being amateurish or having mixed motives and therefore are hesitant to support work that involves them. In some Muslim countries working with the church is made very difficult, as the church is viewed with suspicion. In parts of Indonesia, for example, the local church has been banned from meeting community needs because of fears that it will lead to people converting to Christianity.

6. Local church contributions are often hard to monitor and evaluate

Recent research into the contribution of local churches in the area of HIV and AIDS has shown that church congregations' main contributions tend to be intangibles, and even when tangible, are difficult to monitor and evaluate. For example, it is very difficult to assess the following:

- The drop in anxiety levels once a person living with AIDS is accepted into a group that knows his condition
- The relief of a dying mother who knows her children will be looked after when she dies
- The increase in people's dignity or their willingness to live
- The impact of a gift of food, a word of encouragement, a hug, a smile

It is also difficult to encourage local churches to adopt monitoring and evaluation, given their low skills base and more pressing priorities.

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