

The role of the local church in disaster management – where the church can give greatest value

1. Facilitator of community action

The local church is a group that is able to organise itself and has the potential to organise the wider community. In many communities, especially in rural sub-Saharan Africa, the church is often the only civic group with the credibility or the ability to call the community together to think about disaster related issues, to encourage discussion, and stimulate action. The local church may not have technical specialism in disaster management, but through its relationships in the community, its credibility and respected status, and its experience of bringing people together, it can play a very strong role in community facilitation and organisation.

Even in a context such as northern Uganda, where more than 90% of the population have been displaced, the local church remains one of the few functioning community structures. The local churches moved with the displaced communities and continue to operate even within the displaced people's camps.

Some of the opportunities for relief and development agencies to engage with the local church in this potential role are as follows:

- The local church, where it exists and is a respected part of the community, provides the natural entry point for doing participatory processes that enable communities to assess risk and identify actions they can take. The church is able to validate such processes and introduce them to local government structures, provide the organisational capacity to bring the community together and ensure there is local ownership of the process.
- The local church can help to draw the community together for meetings with relief workers, and ensure that the poorest and most marginalised as well as key community leaders and influencers are present.
- The local church can play an important role in initiating the formation of community committees to oversee, for example, food distribution or grain banks. It would rarely be appropriate for such committees to be church-run, but local church involvement at the formation stage can help to ensure that such committees are established with Christian values.

2. Connector with the wider world

The local church is often one of the few structures at community level that has natural links to the wider world. It may be in touch with a district co-ordinating body (a diocese office, a network co-ordinator, etc), and through these, it may have access to and contact with NGOs and INGOs. It also will be recognised by, and often have contact with, local government.

Relief and development agencies can maximise this strength by:

- Relating to the local church as an introduction agency and gate-keeper between the NGOs and INGOs on the one hand and the local government and communities on the other. The local church can help to ease levels of suspicion towards an external agency's involvement in a community.
- Encouraging and enabling the local church to pass basic information back up through its networks to national level. The local church does not have the technical expertise to inform sophisticated early warning systems, but local church members do have access to basic information such as the price of food and the amount of rain in the last month, and how this compares with previous years, and their views on food reserves. This information can be fed to the church pastor, who in turn can pass it on to district and national levels, and can help to trigger the need for a more specialist needs assessment. Local churches played an important role in providing information about the Southern Africa crisis of 2002-3, and in Zimbabwe, the government's suppression of information means that the church is one of the few institutions capable of gathering and passing on information to national levels. Agencies should not expect of local churches, or train them to deliver, highly sophisticated early warning information. However, encouraging the local churches to use the church communication networks to pass up to national level basic information can be of great value in certain slow-onset disaster contexts.

3. Advocate on behalf of the poor and marginalised

An important role that the church can play in disaster risk reduction is as an advocate on behalf of the poor and marginalised. Local churches, because of their relationships in the community, and because of values of care, compassion, fairness and justice, can play a natural role in holding others, whether NGOS, INGOS, community committees or local governments, to account for their treatment of the most vulnerable, who can otherwise be easily overlooked. For example, the local church can play an important role in ensuring that the most vulnerable receive a fair share of food distributions and health care. In many communities church leaders carry a degree of respect and influence, giving weight to their advocacy.

An additional strength of the church is because of its wider networks it can do advocacy at a number of levels. For example, a group of local churches in Bulawayo in Zimbabwe has done both individual advocacy and wider advocacy on the issue of access to anti-retroviral treatment. Church leaders or church volunteers go with a family to hospital to help identify them and speak on their behalf so as to ensure they get treatment. This is particularly important for those families that have been displaced by the government's slum clearance programme. As church leaders discovered that this was a common issue, they then got together to speak as one voice arguing for better access to anti-retroviral drugs at a national level. As their national lobbying was informed by their direct experiences on the ground they were able to make a powerful case.

Another example is that of the local church in Niger, who, working with a Tearfund partner, were able to challenge the government's early warning information that had inaccurately assessed the needs of the marginalised pastoralist Tuareg. As a result, they were able to ensure that adequate aid did reach these communities.

Relief and development agencies can maximise this potential role of the local church by:

- Envisioning the local church to be an advocate on behalf of the marginalised and vulnerable. This may involve discussions with the church pastor, providing Bible studies that explore the importance of advocacy, and preaching in church services. Tearfund has produced a number of publications to help inform such work (such as Footsteps 45 about advocacy; ROOTS book 2 about Practical action in advocacy).
- Providing guidance on how to do basic advocacy. This may involve giving some basic pointers to the local church as to how they would like the local church members to hold their own programmes to account, as well as those of other government and NGO initiatives. Again, Tearfund publications can be of great practical use. In the Bulawayo example, Tearfund gave advice to the church pastors on how best to communicate their issues at a national level to make maximum impact.

4. Provider of relational care and support

One of the local church's greatest strengths is in its relationships and its relational nature. This, along with its values of compassion and care for others, makes it well placed to provide the relational support – prayer, pastoral care, hospitality, acknowledgement and care of people's inner hurt and grief – that is often lacking in NGO and INGO interventions. NGOs and INGOS often don't have the time to meet the pastoral and social needs of beneficiaries, and thus, the local church can play a very important complementary role in helping to make situations 'more human', softening much of the inevitably harsh aspects of relief responses. This humane touch should not be regarded as a luxury, but as being a critical element in the physical as well as emotional and spiritual well-being of beneficiaries.

Examples of how the local church can play this complementary role are:

- Providing care to families so that parents can accompany one of their children identified as severely malnourished to hospital for extensive treatment. Often, parents are left in a terrible dilemma of sending their vulnerable child to hospital alone, or leaving their other children to fend for themselves. The church can help to look after the children, or at least be a regular message carrier between home and hospital.
- Building relationships with those in IDP camps in their locality, talking with people, making them feel welcome, praying for those in distress, and building relationships.
- Providing emotional and practical support to those returning to communities after times of conflict, helping to bring about reconciliation, and re-build trust within the community, and providing simple pastoral support for those suffering trauma.
- Enabling the dying to receive a 'better death' through prayer and support, and through taking funerals, and giving support to the bereaved.

In addition, the local church plays an important role in providing pastoral support to those Christians within its congregation involved in responding to the crisis situation, and those who are part of NGOs and INGOS. Prayer is a key contribution, and many of these workers, experiencing high levels of stress and trauma themselves, may appreciate the spiritual support and counselling that the local church is able to provide.

Roles of the local church in disaster management

Christian relief and development agencies should look to maximise this complementary role of the local church in disaster situations by:

- Pro-actively building relationships with local churches. For example, the first thing one Christian relief agency will do when responding to disasters is to make contact with local pastors and bring churches together to discuss how the churches can get involved in the situation. For many Christian agencies, building relationships with the local churches is of low priority and not one that all staff would feel skilled to do. To address this, encouraging the complementary role of the local church needs to be given greater strategic priority within programmes, and the appointment of a dedicated church liaison officer whose main focus is building relationships with the local church and helping them to fulfil a complementary role should be considered in each programme.
- Giving greater strategic priority to encouraging this complementary role. At present, such an approach is low on the agenda of most disaster management work, and in busy and demanding contexts is often given only small attention. Programme strategies need to be written to reflect this important work, and staff should be asked on a regular basis how they are building links with the local church, and facilitating their complementary role, through assessment and reporting forms.

5. Community peace-builder and force for cohesion

The church, in many communities, naturally sees its role as one of reconciliation and peace-building. In complex emergencies, the local church could have a role in preventing future outbreaks of violence by helping people to address issues of resentment, forgiveness of past atrocities, exclusion and alienation; and by enabling the appropriate resolution of disputes at a local level before they escalate onto a regional level by setting up and running disputes commissions. In natural disaster scenarios (e.g. the drought in northern Kenya), the same principles could apply, with the church playing a role in challenging favouritism and competition over scarce resources. Justice, impartiality and forgiveness are important principles in such contexts and the church could be in a position to offer these.

Research has found that where communities are disintegrating, vulnerabilities are massively increased.¹ A key factor in preventing this disintegration is strong community and church leadership. In a Participatory Assessment of Disaster Risk process in Malawi, a community identified a 'lack of love' as a key factor in their vulnerability, and went on to affirm the crucial role of the local church as a force for cohesion, love and reconciliation.

Christian relief and development agencies can maximise the potential role of the local church in peace-building and community cohesion through:

- Providing training for church leaders in basic conflict transformation skills and making resources available such as Footsteps 36 about Conflict management.
- Monitoring any interventions in the community to ensure that the local church is strengthened and not weakened, corrupted or devalued by the nature of Tearfund's Disaster Management Team or partner intervention.

6. Influencer and shaper of values

The underlying causes of people's vulnerability identified through disaster risk assessment work are often connected to the issues of cultural values and beliefs. The local church is well placed to address these issues. As was noted earlier, the local church has experience of wrestling with values, behaviour and world-view issues, and of seeing transformation in these areas. It was pointed out, for example, that two significant changes in values and cultural beliefs in southern Africa – the movement away from polygamy being regarded as a positive virtue, and the appreciation of the value of female education – are both largely the result of the influence of the church. In many communities, people look to the church to provide a moral lead. In other communities, where the church is more marginalised, its stance can be provocatively prophetic, such as its rejection of the caste system in parts of Asia.

The local church can also play an important role in challenging a fatalistic mind-set that can significantly hinder disaster management work in communities. The church is used to having a vision of the future and working towards it. It is less fatalistic, or simply consumed with the present or past.

Christian relief and development agencies can encourage the local church to be an influencer and shaper of values and beliefs within the community by:

- Giving the local church credibility and respect by choosing to relate to it and consult with it when engaging with communities.
- Encouraging local church involvement in community committees. This may need to be done by envisioning the local church for community involvement.

¹Field Visit Findings and Strategic Options for Building Community Resilience in Food security and Livelihoods (Bill Crooks; August 2005)

Roles of the local church in disaster management

- Challenging the local church over non-biblical values it may hold and share with the wider community (e.g. the acceptability of men having extra-marital sex).
- Involving the local church fully in participatory processes assessing disaster risk, so that the church has opportunities to engage with discussions over cultural and religious values and beliefs. For example, such a process in a community in Ethiopia led to one evangelical pastor tackling the problem of funeral expenses (where people spent much of their small remaining assets on funerals of relatives) by encouraging people to put it into their wills that they did not want big parties after their death.

7. Provider of resources

The local church often has low capacity, but in many contexts it still has three key resources to enhance disaster management work: buildings, people and communication structures.

Buildings can often be used for key disaster management purposes. For example, in Bangladesh, church buildings have been turned into flood refuges, and elsewhere, church buildings have been constructed to double-up as cyclone shelters, or evacuation centres. Church buildings can be used as warehouses either temporarily to store food that will be distributed the next day, or longer term, to store tents and other equipment that will be distributed when the next disaster strikes. Church buildings with bells can form part of an early warning system, as is now the case with churches in southern India.

People are a key resource, and local churches can often tap into a willing body of volunteers, motivated by love and compassion. The work of one NGO in Zimbabwe demonstrates the huge potential resource that the local church offers. With a staff of just seven people, through the envisioning of local church volunteers, they provided home-based care and distributed food to over 60,000 orphans and vulnerable children during 2004. NGOs and INGOs should beware of expecting too much of church volunteers, but as a source of labour to perform basic but important tasks such as the fair distribution of food to individuals whose needs have already been assessed, they can be invaluable.

Communication structures. The local church meets and messages are communicated every week to a significant number of people. If done appropriately, the local church can provide excellent structures for sharing disaster management messages. Once again, expectations of NGOs and INGOs need to be realistic. The church cannot become a vehicle for communicating highly specialist or technical information, or large volumes of information. However, basic health and sanitation messages, for example, that can be linked to clear biblical teaching can be very effectively communicated by the church pastor, especially as the information can be linked to moral and spiritual, as well as practical, encouragement to apply the learning.

Christian relief and development agencies can best maximise the role of the church as a provider of resources by:

- Meeting with the local church before intervening in a community so as to determine what resources can most appropriately be used.
- Ensuring that church resources are not exploited or overwhelmed, and that the use of resources is kept for basic services that do not require high levels of technical proficiency.

8. Immediate responder to sudden onset disasters

The local church, being permanently present in a community, is always there when a sudden on-set disaster strikes. The immediate response to a disaster is done by the community itself, and the local church is often a key player in this response. It was the local church that was first to respond in countless communities after the Tsunami struck in December 2004, and it was their intervention that was most crucial in the following 24 hours, before the NGOs and INGOs had the chance to respond. This is not a role the local church chooses. Instead, it is a role that events impose upon it.

Christian relief and development agencies, where working in highly vulnerable and disaster prone contexts, need to recognise this immediate response capacity of the local church and seek to develop it. For example, in Southern India, those churches with bells are now prepared to ring them as a warning to the community of an impending Tsunami. Other churches have set up a communications network of church members to pass information as quickly and efficiently as possible across the whole community.

The most appropriate way for Christian relief and development agencies to develop this capacity may be through participatory processes such as Participatory Assessment of Disaster Risk, but mass communication to church pastors of basic steps to take in the event of a subsequent disaster may also be necessary to reach large numbers.

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