

## Key principles for Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and relief agencies when working with local churches in disaster management

### No 1 Understand how you are perceived - *Make sure you understand what others expect of you.*

Take nothing for granted! Church leaders will expect you to act or deliver certain things, either based on what they see others do or what has been done before! Make sure they know who takes the ultimate decisions and what decisions are delegated to whom. Some may be cautious of you and suspect your intentions.

### No 2 Know your churches - *Not every church or group of churches have things to offer!*

First of all do not assume that a local church is local; it can be made up of outsiders or 'perceived' outsiders. Churches can have a strong ethnic bias and it is important to know what implications this may have on the work. Capacity and leadership may be impressive or it may not. Find out!

### No 3 Identify and persuade those who are respected - *These people will have influence.*

Church members are usually very loyal to their leaders – they know their shepherd's voice. These leaders have both moral and spiritual authority over them and can either block proposals or persuade members to engage in community action. Leaders occupy different positions: some are denominational heads, others are local priests or pastors and others are influential among a peer network. Groups within churches, such as women's committees, can also have a significant influence on the course of action.

### No 4 Prepare to exit - *If you do this you will think sustainably.*

One of the distinctions of the NGO, which is both a strength and a weakness, is that, in contrast to the local church, it comes and it goes. So think about how today's planned intervention not only builds up the capacity of the local church to cope with the future but also how the intervention – or modification of it - can be sustained when you leave. Search out more permanent institutions in the locality that you can work with early on.

### No 5 Use each others' strengths - *This means complementing the strengths of the local church with those of the NGO.*

Look at the list of strengths of both organisational types in Appendix 3. This is what they are formed to do, what comes naturally to them and what they possess. The challenge is for each organisational type to play to others' strengths. The local church, doing what it is good at, has much to offer to disaster response, even though this is often seen to be the work of NGOs and government.

### No 6 Be realistic - *The local church has its limitations - know them.*

Look at the list of constraints for both organisational types in Appendix 3. The church is a voluntary body and has limited time to give, especially when affected by the disaster itself. It may be cautious about engaging in issues because it is not confident to work with government and NGOs or it may have mixed or sometimes harmful motivations. Church leaders may find it difficult to work together to deliver a comprehensive response.

### No 7 Do no harm! - *Danger areas to avoid*

It is very easy for large, professional NGOs to unintentionally overwhelm local churches with resources and expectations. This can lead to churches being side-tracked from the holistic nature of their purpose which includes worship, the nurture of faith and pastoral care. This can also lead to large temptations being put in the way of church leaders and members. So:

- Do not overpower!**
- Do not over-expect!**
- Do not tempt!**

Author: Andrew Bulmer