

## Emergency response – engaging the local church

### A brief case study from North Kenya

#### 1. Introduction

Marsabit is in the Eastern Province of Kenya and is the second largest district in the country. It is classified as arid and semi-arid and is vulnerable to droughts. The area suffered particularly severely in the droughts of 2004-5. The people are mainly pastoralists with mixed herds of cattle, camels and goats. During the recent drought, malnutrition levels exceeded emergency thresholds and livestock losses were up to 70 per cent.

There is a small Christian population in the district. It is scattered across a number of small churches drawn from different denominations. Government structures exist, with civil servants, a judiciary and the police in place. Elected politicians and traditional tribal elders represent the people. Infrastructure is poor and distances between centres are great. Only a few NGOs work in the area.

Tearfund's Disaster Management Team (DMT) started its North Kenya Programme in June 2006 in response to the continuing drought, carrying out health, nutrition and community mobilisation activities. It appointed a Church Mobilisation Officer (CMO) to mobilise local churches to also respond to the situation. The CMO worked with churches for the last ten months of DMT's 18 month programme in the area.

#### 2. Aims of the church programme

The purpose of the church programme run by the CMO was to ensure that local evangelical churches, through envisioned leaders, made their distinctive contribution to addressing pressing issues that faced their people in a drought situation. The programme also encouraged the churches to work with other agencies and institutions in the process.

#### 3. Steps in the process

- (November 2006 - February 2007). The first task of the CMO was to establish good relationships with the leaders of 13 local churches. This was tackled over a four-month period.
- (March - April 2007) Once confidence in DMT was established, the CMO explored the issues that churches wanted to address. After a series of workshops, they settled on two priorities: (1) Early warning systems to anticipate and prepare for droughts; and (2) Peace-building activities. Peace-building activities were necessary because there was a dispute over a water source between two tribes in the district, the Rendille and Gabbra.
- (May - June 2007) Facilitated by the CMO, the church leaders worked with the relevant government office to use Sunday services to spread information on early warning messages. The CMO also helped them nominate and send a representative to the Peace Committee, a government-sponsored conflict mediation body that operated in the district.
- (July 2007) In parallel with these activities, the CMO discovered that there was concern about HIV and AIDS. He invited DMT staff to conduct training on the subject.
- (August - September, 2007) The CMO linked up with another church agency based in a neighbouring district. Together with the church leaders, they initiated a high-level consultation to address the problem of the water source disputed between the Rendille and Gabbra.

#### 4. Impact

- The pastors now have a new understanding, and greater commitment and confidence to play an active part in addressing community issues
- They have established good relationships with pastors of churches belonging to other denominations
- They have engaged the government in helping them address issues that affect them
- The evangelical churches now have representatives on the Community Peace Committee (CPC)
- A local Tearfund partner organisation, CCS-MKE, can continue to pursue the peace-building agenda (DMT no longer operates in the area).

## 5. Lessons Learnt

- Expectations that local churches might have about engaging with the agency must be clear from the beginning. An initial baseline survey of churches should be carried out to clarify expectations.
- Time 'wasted' establishing good relationships between the agency and the churches is actually time well spent. Relationships should be established when the programme first enters the area.
- The most successful interventions result from working to the pastors' priorities, not those of the agency.
- A ten-month placement for a CMO is too short to bring lasting change in the attitudes of the church leaders.
- The agency must have a clear exit strategy before committing to interventions that are expected to continue after it has left.
- Because they are small and fragmented, evangelical churches will be left out of civil society forums unless they collaborate with one another and, as one body, ask to be included.

## 6. Conclusion

Local church leaders can play a key role in addressing life-threatening issues facing their communities if agencies help to mobilise and facilitate them in appropriate ways.

## 7. Potential for replication

The approach outlined in this case study can best be replicated in contexts where:

- there is a specialised International NGO or local NGO committed to engaging with local evangelical churches to enable them to respond to a disaster situation
- the agency has an appropriate budget and the necessary expertise on hand to pursue this objective
- there is commitment at the highest level of the agency to allow this engagement with local church the 'space' to develop at its own pace. Churches must not be forced to adopt the agency's agenda either
- the churches in question are willing to work with others that do not hold to the same values and doctrine as themselves
- the churches identify an issue which is of great importance to them all
- the churches are accompanied by the agency for a minimum of two years.

[Click here for a more detailed version of this case study.](#)

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