

## Earthquake strikes – a church sends volunteers

### An in-depth case study from Gujarat State, India

#### 1. Summary

A church working with other Christian agencies in its locality and with a specialised Christian relief organisation can combine skills and resources to launch an effective relief response.

#### 2. What level of intervention is this case study focused on?

The level of intervention focused on is the level of the local church, and its engagement with other churches in its locality and with a national relief agency.

#### 3. Who could be prospective users of the approach modelled in this case study?

Churches and their development wings; a group of local churches; and Christian NGOs specialised in responding to disaster situations that want to use volunteers sent by churches in their response to a disaster.

#### 4. Problem addressed

On Friday 26 January 2001, at 08:46 local time, an earthquake measuring 7.9 on the Richter Scale struck Gujarat State, north-west India. The epicentre was a small town called Bhuj. It turned out to be one of the two most deadly earthquakes in the recorded history of India, with almost 20,000 people confirmed dead and another 166,000 injured. Some 600,000 people were left homeless and almost 350,000 homes were destroyed, with another 844,000 damaged. The Indian government has calculated that, in one way or another, the earthquake affected 15.9 million people.

#### 5. Purpose of the intervention

The purpose of the intervention was to engage members of a city church, 800km away from the disaster zone, in an effective and appropriate response that met the practical needs of disaster victims as well as the hopes of those wanting to help.

#### 6. Context

Gujarat State is located in the north-west corner of India, with Pakistan to its north and the Arabian Sea to the south-west. The small town of Bhuj was at the epicentre of the earthquake and is located south of the Kachchh Desert. There had been no serious earthquake in the area before 2001. Gujarat, is socially conservative: the Hindu caste structure is strong and there is a significant Hindu and Muslim divide. The Christian community is small, accounting for less than 1 per cent of the population.

#### 7. History and process

EFICOR (Evangelical Fellowship of India Commission on Relief) is a national relief and development agency based in the capital Delhi, which lies about 1,400km north-east of Gandhidham, the nearest sizeable town from Bhuj. EFICOR has significant experience in responding to disaster situations throughout the country and has formal links with evangelical churches and Christian NGOs nationwide. It raised support for its operations in Gujarat from both national and international sources. EFICOR based its Gujarat operations at the Church of Gandhidham, where the staff and volunteers stayed, and used a large open-site at Maharashtra Mandal to stock the relief materials. The Church of Gandhidham also contributed volunteers to the relief effort throughout the three-month operation.

At the time of the earthquake, the Bombay Baptist group of Churches (BBC) had a membership of about 1,000 and was based in Mumbai, approximately 800km south of Gandhidham. It was the mother church of 24 church plants in other parts of Mumbai and elsewhere in India. It has a development wing called Sahaara Charitable Trust that has been engaged in community development work in Mumbai since 1994. In response to the Gujarat earthquake, BBC worked with a task force of churches in Mumbai, which selected and sent volunteers to work with EFICOR. It was the means through which BBC responded to the needs of the earthquake victims.

## 8. Steps in implementation

### i. The earthquake

A BBC church meeting was being held in Mumbai as the earthquake struck. Members felt the tremors and, although not at risk themselves, decided to monitor the situation and respond as a community if the consequences were severe.

### ii. Visit of an advance party to the earthquake zone

It soon became evident through media reports that the devastation was greatest in Gujarat State to the north of Mumbai. The elders therefore chose a representative to accompany a reconnaissance team organised by Oasis, an NGO working in Mumbai that planned to visit the earthquake zone. Some BBC church members also worked for Oasis. The elder visited the earthquake zone and, within a week, he reported back on what he saw. Everyone agreed that the church should respond to the crisis. The question was: how? Direct contact was made with EFICOR, which was selected because of its experience in responding to disasters.

### iii. A task force created

No network of charismatic evangelical churches had met previously to organise a collective response to a national disaster. However, leaders did know each other and a key figure from among them called a meeting to decide what the Mumbai churches should be doing to respond to the disaster. Seventeen representatives from 12 churches and international ministries were invited, BBC among them. The agenda for the meeting was as follows:

- Summary of the disaster situation
- Discussion of ways in which churches could offer manpower assistance towards the relief effort, prayer and other forms of support
- Decisions about how this would be financed
- Decisions about accountability mechanisms for the response

A core group of representatives from four of the 12 organisations continued to meet on a weekly basis to make decisions and monitor progress until operations came to an end in April, three months after the earthquake struck.

### iv. Relief phase: sending volunteers

**Composition.** It was decided that each church or organisation should recruit its own volunteers and that they would be sent as a team under the authority of two leaders. There would be different leaders for every team of volunteers. These leaders were appointed with the consent of the task force. Volunteers could be of any age and profession and both male and female participation was encouraged.

**Format.** The volunteers left Mumbai on the Monday, arriving in Gandhidham the following morning. They then returned after four days, arriving back in Mumbai on Saturday morning. The first team of 27 volunteers from the task force left on 23 February, followed by 19 volunteers on 26 February, eight on 5 March and 16 on 6 March. The number of volunteers sent out in teams came to more than 70.

#### **Finance.**

- The volunteers paid for their own rail ticket and took their own money for other expenses. Church members contributed towards anyone who could not afford to buy a ticket. The volunteers were accommodated at the Church of Gandhidham and food was provided by EFICOR.
- BBC did not formally ask for contributions from their congregation towards the relief effort. However, voluntary sums were donated to a total of Rs 100,000<sup>1</sup>. The agreement was that this would be sent to EFICOR to buy tents at the cost of Rs 3,500 each.
- One of the agencies represented in the group took responsibility for tracking the financial contributions made towards the relief effort and the accounts were closed when the relief phase ended in April.

#### **Orientation.**

- Before departing from Mumbai, the leaders would give a talk about the 'dos and don'ts' of working in Gujarat. Apart from cultural points, the main message was that team members should be culturally sensitive and not be proactive in evangelism. The Gujarat government was particularly sensitive about the number of agencies entering the state at that time.
- On arrival in Gandhidham, EFICOR staff introduced the volunteers to the premises and the core staff. They also outlined the relief operations they were engaged in, allocated tasks to the volunteers and explained how to do them.

**Volunteers' role.** Although they came from a variety of professions, the task force agreed, on the advice of EFICOR, that the volunteers would be put to use as needed by the relief effort. This entailed stacking, sorting, recording and distributing relief supplies, as well as survey work, when needed. The teams from BBC were not used in trauma counselling.

**Communication.** On their return, there was no formal debriefing process. However, volunteers were encouraged to share their experiences in as many forums as possible.

**Reflection.** To mark the first anniversary of the earthquake, between 24-26 January 2002, 120 volunteers came together again to give thanks for the work that had been done, as well as to reflect on and learn from their experiences.

### v. Rehabilitation phase: seconding an administrator

- Once the relief phase finished in April, the task force decided to end its co-ordinating role. However, BBC wanted to extend its involvement and therefore negotiated a Memorandum of Understanding with EFICOR and seconded a

<sup>1</sup> \$1=Rs 46

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member of its church to work in Gandhidham as an administrator. This secondment lasted until December 2002. The administrator decided to settle in Gujarat at the end of the project, and EFICOR continued to use this person as a consultant in the area for a further four years.

- BBC also identified a school and other community facilities that it agreed to support financially as part of a housing project for which EFICOR had negotiated with the Government of Gujarat. In total Rs 2,900,000 was raised for this phase.

### 9. Duration of the churches' response

Relief response: February to April 2001

Rehabilitation response: May 2001 to December 2002

### 10. Resources required for the churches' response

#### Relief phase

##### Finance

- A return train ticket from Mumbai to Gandhidham costing approximately Rs 1,000

##### People/organisations

- Volunteers willing to give a week of their time and leaders willing to take responsibility for overseeing the safety of the teams
- Representatives from among the task force agencies willing to meet weekly
- A member agency of the task force willing to take responsibility for accounting for monies spent
- A specialised relief organisation with whom churches and others could work.

#### Rehabilitation phase

##### Finance

- A church with enough financial resources to contribute and account for costs of constructing buildings, in this case Rs 2,900,000

##### People/organisations

- The ability to negotiate a Memorandum of Understanding with a relief agency
- Members of the church willing to make a long-term commitment to the disaster response effort

### 11. Indicators for monitoring

#### Task force

- The quality of the relationship between the churches and agencies in the task force over the period of the operation
- The quality of the relationship between the task force and the specialised relief agency

#### Participation

- The number of volunteers coming forward
- The finance raised from within the churches
- The levels of enthusiasm for the work that is being done and people's particular contribution towards it, expressed on their return, and whether or not their expectations have been met
- The support that church pastors and other members of the congregation give to the initiative in terms of prayer, understanding the complexity of a relief and rehabilitation response, and their overall awareness of the churches' need to respond to the poor and vulnerable

#### Operations

- Levels of satisfaction about the contribution of volunteers by the local church (the Church of Gandhidham), the relief agency (EFICOR) and the disaster victims themselves

### 12. Impact

#### On the churches

- The experience of working together over the short time of the response was a very good one and it gave the churches the confidence to be able to launch another inter-church response to a disaster. As a result of the link with EFICOR in Gujarat, and the congregations being more aware of human need, BBC managed a response to the floods that struck Maharashtra State near Mumbai in 2006. EFICOR lent BBC its technical support where required.
- The impact of the Gujarat experience was to give a church the confidence to conduct a relief response itself and to call upon help from a specialist relief agency as required.

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- Volunteers joining teams met up and worked with members of other churches in Mumbai. This was a positive experience for all.
- Personal involvement and exposure to the relief effort had an impact on the volunteers' lives. One volunteer was quoted as saying, 'One very important thing I learnt in going to Gandhidham: that was to live the gospel!'
- As well as providing volunteers to the relief effort itself, the Gandhidham Church became the logistical centre for a three-month relief response involving hundreds of people from different parts of India. This had a significant impact on members' understanding of the church being a servant to the community. The role it played over this period also raised its own credibility in the community as a caring institution.

### Relief agency

- Accessing a large group of like-minded volunteers enabled EFICOR's relief operation to distribute materials to people more speedily.
- Using volunteers meant that EFICOR did not have to employ extra staff, allowing more money to be spent on relief items.
- There is now a body of people in churches throughout the country, and especially in Mumbai, who have been part of a relief effort and who can both encourage churches in their social ministries as well as be available to EFICOR when the next disaster strikes.
- As a result of this experience EFICOR produced an induction and training manual. This has become the framework by which it orientates volunteers in other crises.

## 13. Challenges

### Task force

- Twelve organisations attended the first meeting, but this reduced over time to six. This meant the burden of work fell to those most committed.

### Church

- BBC places an emphasis on spiritual and lifestyle change. However, it knew that its contribution in this case was to help out practically wherever appropriate. BBC accepted this willingly but had to adjust its levels of expectation. BBC had similar expectations of spiritual and lifestyle change when it seconded an administrator to EFICOR during the rehabilitation phase. It felt this secondment did not produce the results it had hoped for. Therefore, the challenge is to select an individual able to fulfil the needs of the organisation managing him or her, as well as those of the sending church.

### Relief agency

- Between 1 February and 30 April, EFICOR managed 27 separate intakes of volunteers from 16 sending organisations, totalling 285 volunteers. On average volunteers spent one week on site though some, like the volunteers from the Church of Gandhidham itself, worked for longer periods. Managing this volunteer workforce was a significant challenge. The main issues were:
  - The volunteers were drawn from churches eager to serve God, so it was important to ensure that they were sensitive to the culture and were not proactive in evangelism.
  - The volunteers were new to disaster situations and relief operations, and therefore needed orientation before they could begin work.
  - The volunteers had to adapt to many new experiences within a short time, as well as work long hours. EFICOR had to keep track on how individuals were managing. It took time to meet the needs of some volunteers in this pressured environment.
  - Volunteers came from all parts of India, spoke different languages and had different food preferences. Uniting people with such cultural differences was a considerable challenge.

## 14. Critical Issues and lessons learnt

### Task force

- A task force functions best when it represents the priority interests of its members. In this case, the need to respond to the situation faced by the victims of the disaster was strongly felt by all members. Member agencies were willing to learn from and contribute towards each other's efforts.
- The coordinating function of a task force allows the specialist relief agency to deal with one body instead of many, and also provides it with a greater pool of human and financial resources from which to draw .
- The task force, though now able to supply volunteers, did not do so in response to the tsunami in December 2004. Instead, it decided to contribute money. (Rs 1,600,000 for eight powered fishing boats). The lesson is not to assume that volunteers will travel anywhere in the country. A number of factors affected their response to this disaster, including the fact that there was an established church in the south of India where the tsunami struck which could supply volunteers itself. Also, it was further away and volunteers would have had to commit to a longer period away from home than in Gujarat.

## Church

- Volunteers could best be mobilised if they were able to satisfy key stakeholders: their employers were happy to agree to their taking a week off work to contribute to a worthy cause, pastors were happy that key members of their congregation would not be absent for a prolonged period, and families were able to manage without a key member of the household for that time.
- The church managed its financial commitments towards the earthquake by:
  - I. Not promoting the need for money and encouraging volunteers to pay and account for their own expenses
  - II. Handing over the responsibility to account for the finances that did come in to a member agency of the task force
  - III. Focusing contributions on providing tents and other essentials with specific prices so that contributions could easily be translated into the number of these items bought. This was a simple and clear way of accounting to donors for their contributions. Likewise, in the rehabilitation phase, the church sponsored the building of community facilities with a clear cost.

## Relief agency

- If a church has the spiritual welfare of people as a high priority, then it is best to link it in with indigenous churches where possible. This allows volunteers to freely support the local church in its situation of need. The members of the Church of Gandhidham, though located in the disaster area, were drawn largely from Kerala and Andhra Pradesh, two states in the south of India. They were either government employees or industrial workers who had found work in Gujarat. As such they were seen as outsiders by the local people.
- As successive teams of volunteers were being orientated by EFICOR, two initiatives were taken to make this task easier. First, an orientation manual was written which has been used for the same purpose in other disaster situations. Secondly, teams overlapped by two days so that the previous team could hand over their work to the incoming team.

## 15. Potential for replication

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

- a disaster can be reached, with comparative ease, by the sending church
- short voluntary contributions fit with the requirements of all key stakeholders: the relief agency conducting operations, the releasing churches, the workplace and the families concerned, and the beneficiaries
- there are good premises from which to organise a relief operation, such as the one provided by the church in Gandhidham.
- there is good communication and clear expectations of roles and responsibilities between the sending and receiving agencies
- there is a task force of cooperating agencies fully committed to respond for a limited period of time.

## 16. Sources of information

- EFICOR
  - Programmes Director, Gujarat earthquake and Manager of Programmes
  - Weekly bulletins
  - Manual on orientating volunteers
- Sahaara Charitable Society, Gateway Ministries International, Mumbai, India

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