

## Annual flooding – the church prepares

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

#### 1. Summary of practice

Vulnerable communities on a flood plain are equipped to be proactive in their response to annual disasters.

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

1. Association of churches and local church
2. State and local government.
3. Town and village communities.

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

The prospective users of this practice could be Christian relief and development agencies wishing to engage the church in disaster management activities, as well as the development departments of church denominations.

#### 4. Problem addressed

The Brahmaputra River drains the catchment area of the Himalaya mountains and the neighbouring hills in north-east India. During the monsoon rains (June to September), flooding covers areas of up to 45km wide along a 500km stretch within Assam. It causes significant damage to infrastructure and livelihoods, estimated at three billion Indian Rupees (US\$ 74,000,000) annually. Those most affected by this recurring disaster are the poor people who live on islands or on the banks of the river.

#### 5. Purpose of the programme

The purpose of the Brahmaputra Valley Disaster Management Programme (BVDMP) is to help the most vulnerable people in these communities to cope more effectively with an annual flood, making strategic use of small, scattered and isolated church communities to influence this process.

#### 6. Context

The Brahmaputra has its source in the Himalaya mountains and passes through the Indian state of Assam on its way to Bangladesh and into the Bay of Bengal. An estimated 11 million people live in Assam, of whom only 2% are Christian. The rest are Hindu and Muslim. Flooding is an annual phenomenon, as are the consequences and the need for both the government and NGOs to provide relief and repair the damage. In many ways contractors, politicians and people alike gain from this repetitive cycle of response: hand-outs are given to stranded communities, bridges are repaired and food-for-work programmes provide the worst-affected with a source of income. People living in these communities tend to have a fatalistic attitude, as nature is so powerful and their situation so vulnerable.

#### 7. History and process

The North East India Committee on Relief and Development (NEICORD) was started in 1981 to respond to the plight of the poor in the eight states of north-east India, Assam being one of them. The Board of NEICORD is made up of representatives of the Protestant churches in north-east India. Emergency relief has always been one of its key responses, along with longer-term development interventions. NEICORD's main office is in Shillong, which lies in Meghalaya Hills, and is some four to five hours' drive from the Brahmaputra River. There are 15 staff stationed in their headquarters in the hills and 40 in the field; a branch office in the Brahmaputra Valley was given responsibility for running the BVDMP programme.

The Government of India has a well-defined administrative structure in Assam, from state level, through to district and then local levels. It also has a disaster response unit that manages the annual responses to the floods and a state-level flood relief manual. However, its ethos is bureaucratic and reactive, rather than participative and proactive.

## Case studies in depth

The church associations that were engaged in the BVDMP with NEICORD were:

- Assam Baptist Convention and related associations
- The North Bank Christian Association
- The Rabha Baptist Christian Union
- Gosner Evangelical Lutheran Church

Senior management at NEICORD had for some time questioned the traditional annual response of its relief aid to communities along the river. They began to think of how their involvement could change people's way of thinking – to give them more hope, as well as introduce sustainable responses. They also wanted to put any involvement within a biblical framework and use local churches to promote disaster management interventions in the community, especially as local churches were the community institutions they had most experience of working with. Eventually, in 1993, the BVDMP programme was set up.

## 8. Steps in implementation

### **Year 1 (1993). Introducing the concept of disaster management to key stakeholders**

It took about a year to introduce the concept of disaster management to key stakeholders. The NEICORD team had first to obtain their Board's approval for this new initiative. They then approached potential donors with a concept paper. Meetings were held with key leaders from among the associations of Protestant denominations, whose churches were scattered along the Brahmaputra River. Government officials were also introduced to the idea of disaster management. Literature, especially on a Christian approach to disasters, was gathered to lay the conceptual foundations with which to orientate staff and deliver future workshops.

### **Year 2 (1994). Laying the foundations**

**1. Recruiting the core team.** Office premises were leased on the compound of the Convention of Baptist Churches of North East India (CBCNEI) in Guwahati, Assam. A manager and three programme co-ordinators were appointed. Before taking up their posts they were sent on a 15-day training course on Christian Ministries and Lifestyles.

**2. Surveying potential areas.** During the flooding season, between June and September, a survey was made of the worst-affected areas where there were participating churches and three locations identified for future work: Sonitpur, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji Districts.

**3. Relief Operations.** During the rains, relief operations were carried out, but on a small scale as the emphasis was on monitoring and reporting on the communities' traditional coping mechanisms. This enabled the team to use these examples for to raise awareness in subsequent training and workshops.

**4. Holding the first workshops.** In September, October and November, workshops were held in the three districts, where a total of 660 church, community and government participants attended a three-day workshop. The programme covered: 1) The Bible: the causes and responses to disasters; 2) The church: its mandate to respond in the event of disasters; and 3) The disaster cycle and what can be done during it.

**5. Christmas celebration programme organised.** The aim was to bring people together, share learning and celebrate successes in the context of a major Christian festival. Two thousand people from all religious backgrounds attended three events, each lasting three days. The association compounds were offered as venues.

### **Year 3 (1995). Moving into preparedness**

**1. Increase in core staff.** An additional five staff were appointed and trained.

**2. Churches visited and volunteers organised.** In the above three districts, and to a lesser extent in another two, 50 churches were visited and introduced to the idea of disaster preparedness. Committees of church, community and government representatives were formed; relief teams were identified and given initial training.

**3. Government seminar sponsored.** This was held in May at the Assam Administrative Staff College in Guwahati and some specialists from the UK and Bangladesh were invited to attend. The purpose was to promote the importance of disaster management within the Assam state government. The Chief Minister of Assam gave the opening address. At the end, a resolution was passed to have a Disaster Management Centre established in Guwahati.

**4. Relief carried out.** During the flooding months, NEICORD with the respective committees and volunteer teams, carried out relief work in the communities.

**5. Evaluation of programme.** An external evaluation was carried out. The findings are listed in Section 14 Critical issues and lessons learnt below.

**6. Christmas celebration programme organised.** Again, the aim was to bring people together, to share what had been learnt and to celebrate successes in the context of a major Christian festival. Two thousand people from all religious backgrounds attended three events, each lasting three days. The association compounds were offered as venues.

### **Year 4 (1996). Moving into mitigation**

**1. Training continues.** Throughout the dry months, training continued. The theme was having a proactive biblical response to disasters, as well as equipping people in a practical way. Training involved key church and community leaders, as well as government officials.

**2. Well programme.** Wells were built with a heightened rim so that river water would not flood them. Tube wells were also installed with platforms raised to above the flood heights.

## Case studies in depth

**3. Food for work.** On the committees' advice, appropriate work was carried out, such as repairing embankments, clearing drainage channels, making escape paths and building raised places of refuge.

**4. Tree planting.** Teak and coconut trees were planted in all three districts.

### **Year 5-9 (1997-2003). Consolidating the work.**

Training and practical works continued over the following six years.

## 9. Duration

Ten years, between 1993 and 2003

## 10. Resources required for the practice

Budget of £20,000 per year

## 11. Indicators for monitoring

- Key stakeholder engagement:
- Commitment of church leadership. The extent to which they promote the programme and the number of churches engaged with it.
- Government ownership. The degree to which government contributes to the costs of the programme.
- Volunteers' capacity. The number of volunteers, the time they give to working with the community, their skill level and an assessment of what work could be done by volunteers that is currently done by a paid member of staff.
- Perceptions of the church. The change in the communities' perception of the role of the church and the Christian faith.
- Donor support. The length of time for which donor funding is guaranteed.
- Changes in the most vulnerable people:
- Worldview. Changes in their perception of the future and their ability to influence it; changes in attitudes to money away from a "get today, spend today" mentality.
- Losses. Year-on-year net losses (property, income, livestock, lives, etc).

## 12. Impact

- Communities began to believe that during the dry season they could do something to mitigate the destructive power of the river.
- Leadership and organisational capacity improved.
- Practical benefits became visible: trees, wells and infrastructure.
- Churches gained credibility in their community.
- Following the government-sponsored seminar in Year 3, the Assam state government called for a Disaster Management Centre to be established in Guwahati. Although this was not followed through, the Assam government initiated a review of its disaster response procedures in the light of what was discussed at the seminar.

## 13. Challenges

### **The church's credibility in disaster management**

- Protestant Christians are a small minority in Assam and their focus is mainly on spiritual issues, so it was a significant challenge and achievement to reach the point where initiatives of good practice in disaster management were coming from churches scattered along the banks of the river. Significantly, other agencies and even the government began to take note.

### **A change in attitude**

- Values needed to be challenged, especially among poor tribal communities where the habit of 'what is earned is spent' is usual. It was hard to encourage the men especially to take seriously the task of preparing for the future.

### **A biblical framework**

- NEICORD's previous responses to disasters were spontaneous and demand driven. However BVDMP consciously sought to have the Bible and the local church define its activities. At the beginning people thought this to be strange. However as material and principles were gathered from the Bible and the potential of the local church to be proactive in its community better understood, this approach gained confidence. The Bible became a source document for discussion and case studies. Staff and church leaders were inspired and they began to believe in this approach and to understand the potential for a longer term impact

### Entry point: church or government?

- For there to be an effective response to disaster management on this scale, a good partnership with government is essential. However, BVDMP had the church as its focus, and the ownership of this response became theirs and not that of the government. The challenge is getting a balance between awakening the church to realise its potential to meet practical needs and ensuring long-term impact and effectiveness by enlisting the full support of government.

## 14. Critical issues and lessons learnt

An evaluation of the programme in 1995 made the following comments. It recognised that the BVDMP was the most ambitious disaster management project undertaken by a Christian NGO. It was commended for the way it challenged a negative attitude and went further than just relief work, to becoming involved in ongoing sustainable development work. The key role of the local church in initiating a response was praised, as was the focus on participation by the affected communities. However, the evaluation made the following comments to improve the programme's long-term effectiveness.

- **Scale.** The programme covered too wide an area for the resources available. The preferred approach would be to concentrate on a pilot project, preferably an area that can be reached from the co-ordinating branch office within two hours rather than a day or more. The learning from the pilot project could then be applied methodically in new project areas further away.
- **Government commitment.** Although the project team made determined efforts to engage government officials at every level, the government never took co-ownership of the work. This was indicated by the lack of financial contributions it made towards workshops or any project costs. Disasters on such a scale require an effective partnership with government to have a lasting impact.
- **Church leaders' training.** Although pastors were exposed to a great deal of awareness raising activities, they would have benefited from a training package to introduce them to the deeper technical and developmental issues of their work in this area.
- **The politics of poverty.** Inevitably when efforts are made to try to empower the poorest people in vulnerable communities, the question arises about why they are poor in the first place. Preparation and mitigation responses have their place, but the BVDMP also needed to address the issue of power as it relates to poverty.
- **Co-ordinators versus volunteers.** The usual response of project staff was to do the work themselves, especially in crisis situations, rather than make a sustained effort to empower committees and their volunteers. The role of staff needs to be focused on training and accompaniment, and management need to check that this happens.
- **Backers.** Supportive long-term financial and technical assistance from donors was essential.

## 15. Potential for replication

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

- Consistent financial and technical backing is available for the programme.
- Church leaders can be persuaded to involve their churches in disaster preparation and mitigation, believing this is what the Bible says they should do.
- A repetitive and predictable disaster takes place.

## 16. Sources of practice and dialogue

### 1. NEICORD

- Kabi Gangmei, Former Executive Director, NEICORD
- Mansang Songate, Executive Director, NEICORD, "Homeleigh", Police Point, Laitumkhrah, Shillong - 793 003, Meghalaya

### 2. NEICORD Report 1993 -1998: Brahamaputra Disaster Mitigation Activities

### 3. Christian Perspectives on Disaster Management (Ian Davis & Michael Wall; Tearfund; 1992)

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