

Annual flooding – the church prepares A brief case study from Assam State, India

Introduction

When the Brahmaputra River floods, which it does from June to September each year, it becomes up to 45 km wide. Tens of thousands of communities that live along its 500km stretch are surrounded by water. When there is particularly heavy rain, it erodes the higher reaches of their land and destroys infrastructure. Scattered Christian communities live throughout this area, a small minority in a predominantly Hindu population. These local congregations became the focal point of a disaster management programme that, for the first time, tried proactively to reduce the destructive power of this mighty river and protect people's lives and property. At the same time, it also had to deal with the power of the Brahmaputra over people's worldview.

Aims

The aim of the programme – the Brahmaputra Valley Disaster Management Programme (BVDMP) – was to argue a biblical mandate for a practical church response to the flooding. It then used local congregations as a base from which to train and organise communities to take proactive steps to protect themselves and their property as best they could.

Steps in the process

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

Since this was to be a church-initiated response to the annual flooding, key leaders of a number of Protestant associations in the area were approached. The concept of preparedness was shared with them and their willingness to engage in the programme was sought. Government authorities were also informed and a concept paper sent to donors.

Year 2 (1994). Laying the foundations.

Once funding was secured, a core team was recruited and trained with a specific biblical frame of reference for responding to disasters. The location of the churches whose associations had agreed to join the project was surveyed. Before the first rains, awareness-raising workshops were held in those communities. Some basic, small-scale relief work was organised. When the floods had receded, large gatherings were held during the Christmas festivities to celebrate what had been achieved, to learn from what had happened and to plan for the coming year.

Year 3 (1995). Moving into preparedness.

Staff numbers were increased and volunteers were trained and organised for rescue operations. Before the rains came, a large seminar was held where government officials and voluntary agencies were introduced to what was happening. The first evaluation of the programme took place and another learning exercise was held over Christmas.

Year 4 (1996). Moving into mitigation.

Volunteer training continued and flood-proof wells were dug. There was a tree planting programme and essential structures were built with food-for-work programmes.

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

Training and practical works continued over the following six years.

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. At a macro level, the state government set up its own Disaster Management Authority after the seminar in Year 3.

Lessons learnt

- **Scale.** Focus efforts on a more manageable area, concentrating on pilot projects. Learn from experiences gained there and then apply learning methodically to new project areas. Match resources to the areas covered.
- **Government commitment.** Engage with government officials in a meaningful way early on and where possible enlist their help with practical resources. Do not allow government to abdicate its responsibilities in what is an essential civic responsibility.
- **Church leaders' training.** Although pastors were exposed to a great deal of awareness-type training, there is a need for a training package aimed at introducing them to the deeper technical and developmental issues of their engagement in this field.
- **Church associations.** Serious engagement with the church association structures offers considerable opportunities for replication at the local church level.
- **The politics of poverty.** It is important to remember that the poor are poor because they lack power. In the long term their situation will not improve markedly unless this underlying issue is addressed.
- **Coordinators versus volunteers.** It is also important to manage the default response of project staff to do the work themselves, rather than put sustained effort into empowering volunteers.
- **Volunteers.** In choosing volunteers, it was crucial to remember that young people move on. Rather, investment should be in those who remain in the community.
- **Backers.** Supportive long-term financial and technical assistance from donors was essential.

Conclusion

Organisations can work with local churches and the vulnerable communities in which they live to equip them to be proactive in their response to annual flooding.

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 engage their churches in disaster preparation and mitigation and be convinced by a biblical mandate to do so.
- A repetitive and predictable disaster takes place.

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

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