1. All you need to know about Umoja
What is Umoja?

Umoja is about helping the local church work with its community, sharing a vision to address local needs using their own resources.

Around the world, it is an approach that has brought remarkable transformation to local churches and their communities.

The word Umoja means being of one mind and captures the spirit of people working together. It is from the Swahili language of East Africa. Umoja embodies the unity that must be in the church before it can work with the community.

The five stages of Umoja:

1. **Local church envisioning:** Helping the local church leader and the local church understand that God, through the Bible, calls them to serve their communities. This stage is about building the confidence of the local church by helping them identify and utilise their own resources, so that they come to believe that change is possible.

2. **Local community envisioning:** Working with the local church to bring the whole community together to discuss their situation, their needs and resources, to gather and analyse information, and to decide what they as a community can do.

3. **Dreaming dreams and planning for action:** Once everyone agrees on what needs to change, the church and community work together to develop a vision for the future and planning how they can bring about this change, using their own resources.

4. **Taking action:** Once the community starts taking action, all sorts of advice is provided in helping to ensure that the plans are carried out and positive change happens.

5. **Evaluation:** The last stage is a review of how the church and the community have worked together to plan and run projects to improve the lives of individuals and the community.

Why is Umoja a good approach?

**1. Benefits to the community**

- self-reliance
- self-esteem
- sustainable change
- improved community relationships
- physical changes: such as better health, sanitation, food security and incomes

‘Umoja has made us realise ourselves, we are not poor, we actually have a lot of resources’

Chief of Anona, Mt Kenya East region, Kenya

**2. Benefits to the local church**

Umoja helps local churches to:

- become a positive influence in community life
- build relationships with people outside the church
- identify and utilise their own resources more effectively
- become an attractive and growing community
- empower their church ministers by giving them vision and inspiration, and strengthening their skills, knowledge and confidence
- increase income as church members become wealthier and give more money.

‘After training churches in other development approaches we then used church and community envisioning. The church pastors told us: “Why didn’t you start with this? This is what we want to do. By showing us how to work with the whole community, you are showing us how to share our burden!”’

Cuthbert Gondwe, Eagles, Malawi
Overview of roles and responsibilities

In setting up an Umoja programme it is important to recognise the different roles and responsibilities of the groups directly involved and those supporting it. Below is a diagram showing the different levels of involvement and their responsibilities. (For a more detailed description of roles and responsibilities, see pages 109-111.)

Local church and community leaders
They work closely with the facilitator in envisioning the church and community.

Local community co-ordination group
They work together in overseeing Umoja projects being carried out.

Facilitator
The facilitator is someone who works with a local church and community at grass-roots level in facilitating them through the stages of Umoja.

Co-ordinator
The programme co-ordinator manages the overall Umoja programme that may involve a number of facilitators, churches and communities on behalf of their church denomination or Christian organisation.

Senior church leaders
They promote and support Umoja across the denomination and amongst Christian organisations.

Key principles of Umoja

There are some key principles and values that underpin the Umoja approach:

Facilitative
This approach is not about outsiders coming in and telling communities what to do, but is about helping communities realise their own strengths and resources and act for themselves.

Bible-based
The work of the church should be rooted in the Bible’s teaching on holistic mission.

Church led
The entry point for working in a community should be, where possible, the local church.

Relational
It is important to take time to build good relationships and trust.

Empowering
The local church and community should gain skills and confidence so that they can take responsibility for their own development.

Participatory
All people should be involved in the process and enabled to participate, particularly those who can be marginalised, such as women, children, those with disabilities and the poor.

Open ended and non prescriptive
What the local church and community decide to take on is entirely up to them. The facilitator does not have a pre-set idea of what they will do.

Releasing church and community’s own resources
This process should always start by helping the church and community to identify and use their own resources and help people break free of a dependency mindset.

On-going and sustainable
Local facilitators should always look to enable the process and projects to continue long after the external support has ended.
How long does Umoja take?

Umoja is not a quick process. It takes 21 days for a baby chick to hatch, and 22 months of pregnancy before a baby elephant is born (the longest of any land animal). Umoja is about giving birth to elephants! The time it takes varies, but it is not unusual for a local church and community to take about 18 months to get to the Taking Action stage. As we all know, meaningful change takes time, as it involves changing attitudes and dependency mindsets, as well as starting and completing practical projects. During the early stages, however, and long before the Taking Action stage, changes will become visible and initiatives will start, that will give encouragement to keep the process going.

Challenges of Umoja

Umoja can have a transforming impact on the church and the community. However, there are also costs and challenges to such an approach. These include:

- **Time**
  
  We have mentioned that elephants take a long time to be born. Often churches are impatient for change, and want to see more immediate results or go at a faster speed. Umoja takes time because it is about changing values and mindsets, which ultimately leads to long-term and sustainable change.

- **Challenge to authority**
  
  Umoja empowers churches and communities. It helps them to think for themselves, to ask questions, and to think of new ways of doing things. This can be unsettling for people in leadership.

- **Facilitator demands**
  
  The process asks a lot of facilitators, both in terms of time and energy. It requires a lot of skill and good listening to help keep the process on track and to ensure that all people are participating in the process.

- **Overcoming dependency and loss of confidence**
  
  Some communities have become used to outside development agencies doing things for them. This can make processes such as Umoja more difficult, as initially communities are reluctant to work for things that they have received for free in the past. Also, many communities have lost confidence in believing that they themselves can change their situation.
Questions to reflect on

Here are a few questions that may help you to decide when would be the right time for your church denomination or organisation to start Umoja:

Questions to ask of senior leaders

- Is there a desire amongst senior leaders to see the church acting as a catalyst for sustainable change in their communities?
- Are they prepared to put some of their own time and some of the organisation’s resources into supporting and monitoring an Umoja process?
- Are they willing to accept that such a process may lead to challenging some top-down leadership and development approaches?
- Are they willing to have the patience to measure the success of the programme over a longer period of time (for example, over three years rather than over one year)?

Questions to ask of the local church and community

- Are there local church pastors who would be keen to work in new ways with their communities?
- Are there some communities who would be willing to explore working in collaboration with the local church?
- Are there communities who have not yet had much engagement with development agencies, and so would be more open to resourcing their own initiatives?

If you can answer ‘Yes’ to most of these questions, you are ready to start Umoja. Think and plan carefully how you will address those issues you answered ‘No’ to.

If you answered ‘No’ to most of these questions, think and plan carefully what preparation work you will need to do before you would be ready to start Umoja.

Questions to ask of your denomination or organisation

- Are there people in your denomination or organisation who have the potential and availability to be facilitators?
- Is there someone in your denomination or organisation who can provide training for these facilitators in the process?
- Is there someone in your denomination or organisation who will be able to co-ordinate the programme?
- Will they have sufficient resources to be able to make the process happen?