‘Church members might be economically poor, but through community action they gain a deep confidence inside their hearts and work together to bring about positive change.’

ANTHEA, FORMER CCM COORDINATOR, MYANMAR BAPTIST CONVENTION
FLOURISHING COMMUNITIES: EMPOWERING THE CHURCH TO BE THE CHANGE IN MYANMAR

Despite being small in number, the grassroots presence of the local church in Myanmar makes it uniquely placed to respond quickly and appropriately to the needs of the local community. Tearfund has been empowering churches in Myanmar to respond when disasters strike, to build resilience for the future and to catalyse sustainable development for flourishing and thriving communities.

REASONS FOR OUR RESPONSE

In the last 10 years, Myanmar has experienced many rapid and significant changes which have set the country on a promising path of development and change. After 60 years of isolation and military rule, the country started to open up and transition to democracy in 2010. Since then, political, economic and legal reforms have led to improved foreign relations, new employment opportunities, and an influx of new, affordable technologies.17

An example of this is the dramatic decrease in the price of a mobile SIM card, which dropped from over £1,200 (US$1,500) in 2006 to just £0.80 (US$1) in 2016, resulting in a more connected and globalised population.18

Despite these advances, many people in Myanmar still face insecurities that threaten their safety and stability on a daily basis. Sectarian and ethnic conflict continues to affect communities in many parts of the country, displacing large numbers of people from their homes.19

The country is also one of the most disaster-prone in the world, with large and small-scale natural disasters frequently causing devastation to people’s homes and livelihoods, undermining their ability to flourish and thrive. The negative impact of conflict and natural disasters is particularly felt in rural areas where poverty is high and access to healthcare and education low.

In 2008, Myanmar was hit by the world’s third deadliest storm on record. Overnight, the extreme winds and storm surges of Cyclone Nargis caused catastrophic destruction to the densely populated Ayeyarwady Delta of lower Myanmar. The cyclone claimed 140,000 lives, and communities were torn apart by the loss of family members, livelihoods, shelter, clean water and resources.20

It was almost impossible for the international community to respond quickly due to the restrictions of the military rule and the destruction of infrastructure caused by the storm. However, Tearfund’s partnership with the Myanmar Baptist Convention meant that Tearfund was linked with an established network through which to channel resources and deliver assistance, quickly and appropriately, to those most in need.

Over the last decade, Tearfund has continued to build the capacity of the local church in Myanmar to respond to the poverty and insecurity on its doorstep. This has involved helping the church to deliver emergency relief and rehabilitation in the wake of further natural disasters; to instigate longer-term development and resilience building through introducing the church and community mobilisation process (CCM); and to start speaking up and acting to prevent hidden issues, such as sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

Looking back at the journey of Tearfund’s work in Myanmar over the last 10 years we see how the grassroots presence of the local church gives it enormous potential to bring transformation and hope to the local community.
1. DISASTER RESPONSE THROUGH THE LOCAL CHURCH
When Cyclone Nargis struck Myanmar in May 2008, Tearfund was quickly able to deliver emergency aid, to meet people’s basic needs, through a network of international and local partners. This included food, clean water, bed mats and blankets.

One of our local partners was the Myanmar Baptist Convention (MBC), a network of 5,000 local churches. Tearfund shared its knowledge and experience gained from responding to disasters in other contexts in order to support MBC’s Nargis Relief and Rehabilitation Committee to effectively deliver emergency assistance and disaster risk reduction (DRR) training throughout its network.

Although Christians are a minority in Myanmar, they are present in some of the poorest communities, meaning that MBC was ideally placed to respond where the need was greatest and help people to start rebuilding their lives.

2. RESILIENCE RESEARCH
After the cyclone, Tearfund commissioned a research project to assess local churches’ effectiveness in helping communities recover. Village A, where the church was very outward-looking and inclusive of the wider community, had recovered well, with improved infrastructure and strong social connections. In contrast, Village B, where the church had remained insular, showed few signs of recovery, resilience or community cohesion.

This demonstrates that when the church engages outwardly in its community it can play an instrumental role in building resilience, trust and support networks between different groups.

3. CYCLONE GIRI
In October 2010, Cyclone Giri landed on the western coast of Myanmar, causing severe damage to infrastructure, food, water and shelter. Thanks to Tearfund’s long-term capacity-building work and DRR training, local churches were actively preparing their response before the
cyclone had even hit. With Tearfund’s funding they were able to deliver emergency relief to help affected communities survive.

4. **CCM INTRODUCED**

In 2011, Tearfund worked with MBC to introduce the church and community mobilisation (CCM) process in Myanmar, to equip local churches to resource and lead their own ongoing development, along with the wider community. CCM (known locally as Eden) catalysed change throughout community life: new income-generating activities, improved education opportunities, better care for the environment, and support for vulnerable people.

CCM also profoundly affected social relationships, helping the church to find its place and purpose in the wider community and to foster new friendships between faith groups (see case study).

5. **CCM SCALE-UP**

The success of the pilot encouraged MBC to roll out CCM throughout their church network, reaching 165 new churches by 2015.

Tearfund also shared the model with the Anglican Church which captured the vision and started CCM training with its network too.

6. **TAKING ACTION AGAINST SGBV**

In 2015, Tearfund began working with the Myanmar church on the issue of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Tearfund conducted the country’s first sexual violence-focused research, supported by faith leaders who were passionate about getting the church to engage with the issue. The subsequent report, *Our Daughters’ Voices*, challenges the church to act and enables survivors, who had previously been stigmatised, silenced and disowned, to share their stories.

Tearfund now works with churches to run community dialogues to address harmful norms that make women vulnerable to sexual violence. Through engaging church leaders, Tearfund is helping the church to be a force for preventing SGBV and providing healing for those affected.
Despite being small in number, the local church in Myanmar is having a big impact on the wider community. Since 2011, Tearfund partner Myanmar Baptist Convention (MBC) has been supported by Tearfund to train local churches in the CCM process, known locally as Eden. Through CCM, churches are given the vision and skills to mobilise their own resources and assets, and work with the wider community, to bring about positive change.

'Local churches are ideally placed to understand the needs of their local contexts', reflects Anthea, who helped to run the CCM pilot. 'Through CCM, churches are encouraged to reconsider their role and realise their calling to serve their communities in many ways, like addressing health, education, clean water and hygiene.'

PASTOR AUNG ZEYA'S STORY
Pastor Aung Zeya’s church, in the Ayeyarwady region of Myanmar, is a great example of what can be achieved when the church and community are mobilised to work together towards a common goal.

'Before CCM only three or four adults and a few children attended church on Sunday,' Pastor Aung Zeya explains. 'The church community was weak and had no understanding of how to work together.

But through CCM the church began to collaborate, to identify resources already at their disposal and to take action.' Literacy levels were incredibly low, so the congregation pooled their resources to run a daycare centre, supplementary tuition programme, and a mini-library for the whole community. This has helped to raise awareness of the importance and value of education.

The congregation were trained by MBC to produce bio-fertilizer and bamboo vinegar (a multi-purpose substance that can be used as pesticide and disinfectant), which enabled them to improve their agricultural productivity and increase their income.

Pastor Aung Zeya says: 'I started producing bamboo vinegar to set an example, and I can sell what I produce for income.' The congregation then branched out into raising chickens and pigs as a cooperative, sharing the profits for the most important needs of the church and the community.

The church members have also been working hard to develop the village’s infrastructure by mobilising community members to build a road. Each family contributed financially and worked in shifts to complete the work in just over a month. This had a huge impact on accessibility to the village throughout the year, especially during the rainy season when previously people would struggle, sometimes waist-deep, from the main road to the village.

ENHANCING SOCIAL CONNECTIONS
Beyond the physical improvements, CCM has also made significant changes to the less tangible, relational aspects of community life. The strength and capability of the local church has increased and congregations have been unified around a common goal as they grow in confidence in what they can achieve. This has led some churches to engage with local institutions and authority figures to campaign for resources and better service delivery.

There has been a lot of spontaneous shared learning and connections made between churches who did not work together before. An ‘Eden Family’ was formed as a learning network for churches at different stages of the CCM process. Neighbouring churches have noticed the positive changes being achieved and have wanted to find out more, often mobilising their own resources to contribute to the projects taking place in their community or observing at training events to learn from others:

'Pastor Thet shared with me all that they are doing - the Bible studies, the technical knowledge, the CCM process. So we decided to start trying to do the same in our church, we are stealing their ideas!' Pastor Saw Kar Aw
Churches, who previously isolated themselves from other faith groups, are now engaging with the wider community and they are working together to fix issues that they had previously not been united enough to solve. This is fostering new friendships and support networks, overcoming previous segregation. As an evaluation conducted in 2014 states:

“In most communities that consist of Christian and other faiths, there has been some distance and isolation that existed for a long time. The design and purpose of the CCM process encourages the people from the church to work not only within the church, but also outside the church... the immediate impact is the reduction of distinguishing among the different groups and the positive changes in relationships among the people.”

At the heart of Tearfund’s approach is the belief that developing strong and healthy social and personal relationships in this way is key to ensuring resilience for the future and building the capacity of communities to dream and initiate their own change.
'If another big drought hit, it wouldn’t be like before, ample food would still be available within the community since some farmers have greatly increased their production and we have savings from previous years...we are much more secure now.'

PARTICIPANT FROM TEARFUND’S DISASTER RISK REDUCTION TRAINING, MALAWI
Following Jesus where the need is greatest