

## Advocacy case studies

# CHANGED PRACTICE THROUGH COLLABORATIONS IN COVID-19 PREVENTION AND RESPONSE IN ETHIOPIA

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<b>COUNTRY:</b>	<b>Ethiopia</b>
<b>THEMES:</b>	<b>Health</b>
<b>ADVOCACY APPROACHES:</b>	<b>Building relationships; church and community mobilisation; demonstrating good practice; educating community members; using the media</b>

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Historically in Ethiopia, NGOs were prohibited from participating in advocacy, and faith was kept separate from the main media channels. However, church leaders play a critical role in shaping opinions and behaviours in their communities throughout Ethiopia. Government officials acknowledge that in order to influence the community it is important to secure the support of these church leaders. Recently, civil society space has begun to reopen for NGOs and faith leaders, especially in the face of Covid-19.

Tearfund partner, Evangelical Churches Fellowship of Ethiopia (ECFE), works on peacebuilding with church leaders. When Covid-19 came to Ethiopia, it was highly politicised. Therefore, Ethiopians were left vulnerable to the virus due to misinformation, and the tension around the pandemic deepened existing political divisions. ECFE initially responded to this crisis with humanitarian activities at a local level, which helped further secure good relationships with government officials.

When ECFE considered their advocacy response to Covid-19, they collaborated with the Inter-Religious Council of Ethiopia, which included Islamic, Orthodox and Protestant faith leaders. This council met with national government officials to discuss the role of faith leaders in the response to Covid-19 throughout Ethiopia. In response, the faith leaders supported the government's preventative measures against Covid-19 in their places of worship and were therefore allowed to continue to meet. This compliance from the faith leaders has further strengthened relationships with national government officials.

Following the support from the faith leaders, the government then allowed them to broadcast prayers on the national television channels during primetime – which had previously been prohibited. For the first time, church leaders were able to reach a majority of Ethiopians with prayers and services in response to the pandemic. Furthermore, the President publicly supported the faith leaders' response to Covid-19. Communities across Ethiopia also responded well to their faith leaders' example to prevent Covid-19.

Through this experience, there has been a glimmer of hope that Ethiopia's political and religious divisions can unite against Covid-19. The government has realised that the church is closer to the community than other organisations. Therefore, when the church engages in dialogue both with their communities and with the government, people's practices change and the government's policies shift due to relationships. The Ethiopian church's resilience in reaching their communities through creative responses during Covid-19 has been respected, and this experience with the government lays the foundation for future successful advocacy by church leaders in Ethiopia.

#### Lessons learnt:

- The church in this context was in a powerful position to influence their communities' practices as well as the national government's policies, due to long-term strategic relationship building.
- Creativity in crises can overcome barriers.