

Advocacy case studies

CHURCHES UNITE THEIR VOICES TO PROTECT THE VULNERABLE DURING COVID-19 IN WEST AFRICA

COUNTRY:	Chad, Burkina Faso and Ivory Coast
THEMES:	Health; governance; water, sanitation and hygiene
ADVOCACY APPROACHES:	Church and community mobilisation; educating community members; government officials: lobbying; government officials: meeting with; demonstrating good practice; direct action; working in alliances and coalitions; using the media; social accountability

West Africa is a region suffering with poor healthcare facilities, government corruption and state fragility. Therefore, when Covid-19 began spreading around the world, the churches throughout this region came together to pray and prepare their congregations. Tearfund has spent many years envisioning these churches through Church and Community Transformation (CCT). So, the churches also began to form a strategy about how they would respond to this virus in their communities. This strategy included local and national advocacy.

When Covid-19 first arrived in West Africa, there were many rumours circulating about the virus, and it became a political issue which caused confusion and tension for many people. However, churches in Chad had been raising awareness in their congregations about prevention of Covid-19 and saw the need for further awareness in their communities. Therefore, the churches petitioned the government to provide information about preventing Covid-19 in local languages that people could understand, which the government agreed to.

When the governments of Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast and Chad began setting up sanitation measures, the churches in these countries encouraged their local communities to follow these guidelines. Yet the restrictive social distancing guidelines and requirements of PPE were extremely difficult for the most vulnerable members of communities to maintain. Many in this region didn't have enough food or money to sustain themselves during a lockdown without daily labour and visiting the markets. Therefore, the churches used their own resources to meet their communities' needs and united with other religious leaders to petition the governments to provide free food and sanitation kits to the most vulnerable.

The governments fulfilled these requests in the cities and rural communities, and the churches ensured the governments were held accountable to the most vulnerable so that these resources weren't corruptly being given to family members or friends of politicians.

Further complicating factors for the most vulnerable in Chad are the prohibitive costs of water, electricity and healthcare. The churches in Chad united to urge the government to provide these necessities for free to the most vulnerable community members. They collectively signed a petition, and when their leaders met with government officials all of the members would pray, regardless of denomination. The government agreed to provide these necessary services for free for several months, so that everyone was able to have water to wash their hands, medical care to combat Covid-19 and other diseases, and electricity to work from home and for health clinics to be able to provide continuous care.

However, churches in Chad and Burkina Faso realised that many health workers on the frontline against Covid-19 were becoming ill due to lack of PPE. Therefore, church leaders went to the media to raise awareness of this issue and pressure the governments to ensure these key workers were being protected as they served everyone. Fortunately, the governments accepted responsibility for providing PPE to the health workers, and many are now protected against Covid-19.

Finally, churches across West Africa became concerned when community members reported that police officers and government soldiers, tasked by their respective governments to enforce social distancing measures, were beating, extorting and raping vulnerable people who didn't wear masks when going to the markets. The church leaders collaboratively lobbied their respective country's president and other high-level government officials to ensure the police and soldiers would act professionally, and the ones who harmed the citizens would be prosecuted and jailed. They also went to the media to raise awareness and public pressure about this issue. The governments complied with this request and enacted policies and practices to prevent such abuse in their own countries.

West African churches are realising the strength of their unity across denominational lines, as they came together to petition the government, raise awareness through the media and advocate face to face with government officials. The churches were living what they had been preaching and they saw opportunities flourish for their communities' good in the dark season of Covid-19.