# HOW THE CHURCH CONTRIBUTES TO WELL-BEING IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED FRAGILE STATES: VOICES FROM THE LOCAL CHURCH

Summary report

CAMBRIDGE CENTRE FOR
CHRISTIANITY
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tearfund

# Acknowledgements

Funded by:

# Subject

This study analyses the multidimensional roles local churches play in responding to protracted crisis in conflict-affected fragile states. It also provides an important and little-documented church perspective on faith-based organisations' distinctive contribution to holistic well-being. This piece of research is intended to be a key formative study helping to shape Tearfund's recently formulated corporate priority on Fragile States and, by extension, that of Church and Community Transformation. It seeks to establish local perspectives on emerging themes in the context of protracted crises and offers insights on how local churches might be supported.

# Method

The study explores four major research questions:

1. What are the impacts of conflict on the local church?
2. What roles does the local church take on in responding to conflict?
3. What is the church's motivation for responding in these ways?
4. What are the church's own perspectives on barriers, constraints and opportunities as it seeks to improve holistic well-being?

A literature review was undertaken for two purposes: firstly, to establish the significance of the local church in these settings and, secondly, to seek an initial perspective on answers to the four questions above in seven diverse, conflict-affected fragile states. These countries are:

- Iraq
- Syria
- Myanmar
- Burundi
- Central African Republic (CAR)
- Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)
- South Sudan

In addition, fieldwork was conducted in the form of semi-structured interviews and focus groups in two case study countries: South Sudan (Juba, Nyamlel and Aweil) and Syria (Damascus), with supplementary data collection in Lebanon (Beirut, Antelias and Rmeileh). Participants included:

- representatives of local churches
- denominational and parish leaders
- church-based relief, development and reconciliation projects
- Tearfund national staff.



📷 Inside a church in Rwisabi village, Burundi, as it hosts a food security and nutrition project. Participants wait to be seen. Photo: Tom Price/Tearfund

## Limitations

Limitations in this study include: the prioritisation of breadth of scope over depth, as it covers seven fragile states with short field trips undertaken in only two of the focus countries; limitations in budget; the limited availability of accessible published literature presenting local church voices; and the emphasis on the church's own perspectives, which necessarily presents a bias in the data in emphasising the positive aspects of church action. Security requirements and the unpredictability of the political situation impeded fieldwork, as did the limitations on the time available and the timing of the visits.

## Findings

This study makes clear that the experience of the local church in protracted crisis settings varies significantly and is influenced by the particularities of the context. Any attempt to draw out shared themes is therefore problematic and risks portraying the church in any one context as a homogeneous entity with the same experience, and perspectives. So, for example, churches can suffer intense persecution from state actors or be considered key partners; it may be financial constraints that prevent engagement – or their own theology. In conflict-affected fragile states the church is sometimes intensely occupied with trying to stabilise the context (as identified in Tearfund's LIGHT Wheel framework for holistic well-being[1]). It may also be influenced by its relationship with the state. In both scenarios, efforts in working towards the well-being of communities may be hampered.

Given that 'anything that concerns a human being is of interest to the church', conflict affects the church as a community in all the same ways it affects society more broadly. Strikingly, interviews reveal that the church is taking care of those suffering in their communities with enormous dedication but is also traumatised itself, asking: 'Who is taking care of the church?'



📷 **A workshop for young people run in Saida, Lebanon, by one of the participants of this research. The workshops create opportunities for young people from different communities to overcome the divisions between them.** Photo: Kieran Dodds/Tearfund

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1   See Tearfund (2016) *LIGHT Wheel toolkit:* https://learn.tearfund.org/resources/impact_and_effectiveness/the_light_wheel/

## Impact of conflict on the churches

Major themes emerging in this study highlight displacement as the primary impact of conflict, leading to high expectations being placed on the church in terms of its emergency response (particularly evident in the South Sudan case study). Another theme that emerged is the suffering churches themselves face in its various expressions, such as: loss of members and leadership; community disintegration and disunity among churches; trauma; loss of trust; and xenophobia. A third key issue facing the church is demographic change (as evidenced in the Syria/Lebanon case study). All of this contributes to a sense people have of no longer belonging, even those who have not been displaced. Additional impacts include: increased health problems; high numbers of vulnerable people, especially widows-turned-breadwinners, orphans and elderly people whose families have scattered and left them behind; increased crime; fewer education and employment opportunities; and a sense of hopelessness among the youth. For the church, these factors exacerbate economic difficulties and put extra strain on existing resources. There are also theological implications for the churches as they try to find a theology that is robust enough for protracted crisis settings. Local churches have to grapple with establishing their place in a constantly changing environment that tests them in every respect, as both case studies attest.

## Churches' roles in crisis settings

The church in protracted crisis settings takes on varied, multidimensional roles in responding to people's diverse needs, both in their immediate communities and further afield. These go far beyond the delivery of regular church services and spiritual teaching. A key role identified in the course of this study is the pursuit of strategic neutrality. In many contexts the churches make efforts to avoid politicisation; where they do achieve this, they appear to have greater ability to act. Local churches are active in offering hospitality to displaced people, doing relief and development work, mediation, reconciliation and peacebuilding, and youth work, and offering solidarity in suffering. This last is particularly true in the many places where the church is also displaced and its leadership with it. The church continues to offer teaching and hope through spiritual ritual or prayer, even in displaced communities, and often provides clinics or practical support for the sick or vulnerable, usually through denominational projects rather than local churches themselves. The research also offers many examples of the church engaging in psychosocial support for trauma relief. Another important area of work is providing education and other practical support for communities affected by conflict. Some churches also have a 'prophetic voice', speaking out against injustice in society and advocating for persecuted minorities, as it does, for example, in Myanmar. This, however, is more possible in some contexts than others. In the Middle East, for example, the role of the church is often more pastoral as speaking out and challenging norms may be too risky or dangerous. As mentioned above, another role of churches is to develop theology pertinent to the evolving context of the particular protracted crisis they are in. This tends to come from denominational theologians and colleges, but can influence the wider church and development organisations in their responses and approaches. One example of this is the emerging theology and practice of hospitality to refugees in Lebanon that underpins the unconditional nature and impartiality of the churches' relief efforts.

## Motivation of churches during protracted crisis

The churches in this study say they are inspired and sustained by faith in a God who gives them courage and perseverance to serve their communities despite adversity and fatigue. They report that they are encouraged by the biblical 'great commission' (Matthew 28:18–20) and a sense of calling. Many say they are strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit and a sense of God's presence with them. Church members draw from their own suffering and trauma, but also from their experiences of healing, transformation and hope, and want to share these among their people. In some places, where church leadership is very influential in the political landscape and church is political in itself (as it is, for example, in South Sudan and DRC), the church can be motivated politically. This illustrates the complexity and risk of involvement in the political sphere, although political motivations did not feature prominently in interviews.

📷 **An icon featuring Syria in the hand of Christ, in a church in Damascus.** Photo: Marjorie Gourlay/CCCW and Tearfund

## Challenges and opportunities for local churches

The church in conflict-affected fragile states is severely restricted in many respects. Yet, often, in fieldwork interviews, the challenges facing the church were also seen as opportunities for the church to grow. Ecumenical division, for example, is a challenge but also an opportunity for cooperation; the church being taken out of its comfort zone is a challenge but also an opportunity for capacity building. The main limitations and obstacles to responding were identified at denominational level as:

- lack of funding and resources
- lack of genuine partnership and a lack of skills necessary to provide services that are new to the church such as humanitarian relief, as well as the additional challenge of providing such services to an international standard and meeting donor requirements
- tensions arising from the strain of taking on such new roles
- disunity
- mindsets of dependency among their communities
- poor interfaith relations
- debilitating fear
- trauma and exhaustion among leadership.

Additional difficulties identified were donor fatigue when the need is still great, the political status of Christianity, and secular providers' perception that faith institutions and churches would struggle to be impartial and neutral. Ecumenical divisions challenge access to resources as competition arises between churches for available financial support and can lead to duplication of activities.

# Conclusions and key insights

The church is remarkably strong in many of these fragile contexts, despite loss of members, surveillance, persecution, and many other challenges relating to lack of funding and resources, trauma and weariness among leadership. It is evident from fieldwork that, despite contextual variations, local churches would welcome the support of genuine long-term partnership. This would enhance their own capacity to respond and contribute further to the holistic well-being of their suffering communities. It was not apparent in this research if there are certain situations the church believes it should not contribute to; this would be an interesting and important line of follow-up enquiry. The churches in both South Sudan and Syria are taking on varied and multidimensional roles that stretch their capacity. The picture in these contexts is one of a church that is reduced in capacity due to war but increasingly expected by its communities or governments to provide humanitarian or development services that it has not previously been equipped to deliver.

In conclusion, important insights emerging from the churches whose voices are captured in this study are: the vital importance of long-term partnership; the need for ecumenical unity and creativity in responding together to enable community healing and transformation; long-term peacebuilding; and a focus on the youth to bring hope to new generations. The partnership churches desired would offer capacity building to improve churches' financial accountability and project management, to better support the delivery of services. Partnerships would also seek to support the church in maintaining its reputation and enable it to grow. Both case studies make clear that 'visits of encouragement' are considered crucial to supporting the leadership of a traumatised church.

It was recommended that the churches themselves become more ecumenical in their approaches and that working together would help counter sectarian fragmentation, duplication of projects, and competition for resources. This would improve capacity and efficiency, as well as demonstrating the unity necessary for post-conflict community restoration.

Establishing peace was seen as the most urgent need for their context. To this end, they underlined the importance of working towards forgiveness and reconciliation; they also stressed the need for continued humanitarian aid projects spanning different ethnic and religious communities, and development programmes that bring people together. The arrival of peace would help to bring increased stability and would encourage people to stay in the country and help rebuild society. In the Syria case study, the reduction in displacement would also contribute towards maintaining a Christian presence (which participants expressed as a concern). Fieldwork in Lebanon provided some suggestions for how the church might be involved in this, by for example creating places of collective memory to catalyse community trauma healing. A focus on children and young people could bring a sense of hope to these fragile states where hope has been lost. Likewise, there was repeated emphasis on the need to support teenagers and young adults who have never known a time without conflict. It was said that youth programmes must be ecumenical and creative to provide an alternative to gang violence, drink and drugs. This would help shape future leaders committed to peace. This was particularly evident in South Sudan but also in Lebanon where historical sectarianism has discouraged most young people from engaging with religion.

In listening to the voice of local churches, it becomes evident that there is a vital role for establishing and strengthening balanced partnership with agencies such as Tearfund, which is seen as key to maintaining the efforts of the churches in these fragile contexts. Ensuring funds reach the local churches at the grass roots not only ensures that aid reaches those in greatest need but also maintains a strategic role for the churches. Both of these are critical to helping maintain a Christian presence in places where this is under threat (particularly in the Middle East). Relationship building in contexts where fear has damaged trust is crucial but slow work, particularly in vulnerable contexts such as Syria. Any efforts must take guidance from the churches themselves in order to know how best to proceed. Finally, the most significant observation was that a strong, empowered, and united church that engages the youth and is not paralysed by fear has the potential to bring about positive transformation on all levels of society. For, as one respondent put it,

*'Where the church is, there is hope.'*[2]

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2   An extract from the comments of a research respondent in South Sudan who said: 'The church is the body of Christ. There are individuals who subscribe to Christ everywhere in South Sudan, therefore the church is the people. South Sudan is predominantly Christian therefore there is hope.'

📷 **Esther and her child, in Maar, South Sudan.** Photo: Tom Price/Tearfund

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