

# Churches unite against local disasters

## Learning from successes in Cambodia

Cambodia has large areas of land that are flooded annually by the Mekong and Tonle Sap rivers. People who live in these areas are accustomed to seasonal floods, and depend on them for their livelihoods. However, exceptional flooding events, when they occur, can cause significant disruption to people's livelihoods and well-being. Communities are also frequently affected by small, household-scale disasters, such as wind damage, house fires and lightning strikes. Many households have to absorb such shocks without any assistance.

The Relief and Disaster Management Programme (RDMP), a programme of the Evangelical Fellowship of Cambodia (EFC), has been operational – and supported by Tearfund – since 2010. The latest phase of RDMP (2016–2019) was implemented in Kampong Chhnang Province, designed to strengthen the capacity of local churches to support disaster preparedness and response (DPR) in their communities. In keeping with earlier successful phases of RDMP, churches in the province were organised into a provincial network. *Acting as a network* they could then work together, and with their local authorities, to prepare for and act as first responders to local disasters.

### Relief and Disaster Management Programme (RDMP) since 2016

**Location:** Kampong Chhnang Province, Cambodia

**Period of implementation:** 2016–2019

**Implemented by:** Evangelical Fellowship of Cambodia (EFC)

**Funded by:** Tearfund and ERIKS Development Partner

**Evaluated:** In September 2019 by an evaluation team made up of network members, project staff and donor staff, and led by independent consultants, Mariam and Phil Smith of Learning Loop

## What impact are we celebrating?

An evaluation of the past three years' of RDMP has offered us an opportunity to celebrate, with EFC, the programme's accomplishments:

*'EFC has successfully catalysed the formation of a locally owned church network for disaster relief and response. The network is beginning to take meaningful action in disaster preparedness and response [...] There is [also] increased cooperation among churches, inclusion of the vulnerable and those*

*outside the church, new relationships between churches and other actors, and communities gaining hope through the action of the church.*<sup>1</sup>

The evaluation team identified 46 instances in which members of the network had demonstrated their ability to act corporately: to identify issues, agree on action, raise funds, and provide support to one another. In three years the network had also strengthened its relationships with a large number of outside actors, including children, women, churches not in the network, people affected by disasters, and school teachers. The most significant improvement in the network's relationships was, however, with local authorities. Nineteen instances were identified in which network members had made contact with local authorities. Those members believe they would not have behaved in such a way prior to the programme. Meanwhile, 11 outcomes referred to local authorities changing their *own* behaviour in response to engagement with the network.

On the strength of these relationships and behavioural changes, the network has taken meaningful action. At the time of the evaluation, though the network had yet to be tested by any major emergency situation, 13 responses to small- or household-scale disasters had taken place. These responses were significant because:

- Such small-scale disasters fall through the gaps of the response of larger humanitarian agencies.
- Local knowledge and relationships enabled the network to give highly relevant support.
- In several cases, the network mobilised support for affected people within 24 hours.
- Those who received support were some of the most in need and/or marginalised, including widows and older people.
- The physical presence and emotional support offered by pastors, as well as church members, helped affected people to cope with their losses and gave them hope.



📷 Man working in a pond with waterlilies, in Siem Reap Province, Cambodia. Photo: Karen Shaw/Tearfund

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, Mariam and Phil Smith (2019) *Evaluation of EFC's Relief and Disaster Management Programme (RDMP), Kampong Chhnang Province*, UK/Sweden: Tearfund/Learning Loop, p vi.

## How has the Kampong Chhnang provincial network responded to the Covid-19 pandemic?

In September 2019, at the time of evaluation, the network in Kampong Chhnang Province had yet to be tested by any major emergency situation. In contrast, by the time of writing this case study in February 2021, the network has participated in responding to a major emergency affecting Cambodia and the rest of the world – the Covid-19 pandemic.

Approached by the provincial government and invited to cooperate in implementing the Cambodian ‘National Master Plan for Covid-19’, the network has participated in sharing key prevention messages and debunking myths regarding the Covid-19 virus. Together with other networks and groups embedded in communities, they have been tasked with ensuring that messages relating to Covid-19 are accessible and reach all groups of people, including Muslims and others who are particularly marginalised or excluded in the Cambodian context.

The network continues to be supported by EFC, with funding from ERIKS Development Partner.



 The distribution of posters depicting key Covid-19 messages. April 2020. Photo: Evangelical Fellowship of Cambodia

## What lessons are we learning?

The evaluation of RDMP has also helped us to understand the *specific* ways in which the programme's accomplishments came about. This supports ongoing learning and reflection in EFC and Tearfund.

*'The evaluation shows that there is a lot which could be taken from this program and, with appropriate reflection, applied to EFC's wider work, and even other organisations: the approach to building locally owned networks [...] for social action.'*<sup>2</sup>

The most significant contribution made by EFC through the programme has been to convene churches across denominational boundaries, providing opportunities and encouraging them to meet. In 2018, EFC established a coordinating committee for the Kampong Chhnang network. This coordinating committee was tasked with creating and clarifying roles for the members who, meanwhile, became very caring and supportive of one another. Both of these factors empowered network members to new behaviours in their working with one another and with external actors.

Regarding technical capacity building, EFC carefully contextualised concepts related to DPR, making them accessible and applicable. This included the use of parables, stories and metaphors rooted in the Cambodian culture and Christian faith, which the network members often credited with improving their understanding and changing their mindset.<sup>3</sup> Simulation was also employed, whereby network members were asked to imagine and enact their response to a simulated disaster.

Finally, EFC provided continuous support to network members as they took action, 'walking with' them in their response, and accompanying them as they made initial contact with local authorities.

## What connections are we making?

Each year, we analyse a representative sample of Tearfund and partners' project evaluations. We then synthesise the key learning and evidence of impact from these evaluations. The evaluation of RDMP was one of 33 that we synthesised in 2020.<sup>4</sup> We found that it had the following findings in common with other evaluations of similar projects:

- The local church is reported to be effective and efficient at responding to basic, immediate needs in the hours and days after a disaster.
- The local church offers emotional and spiritual support in the aftermath of a crisis, which helps people to cope with their loss and find reason to hope. The physical presence of church members and leaders in communities enables them to accompany those who have been affected.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p 45

<sup>3</sup> This approach to building the network has much in common with the church and community mobilisation process (CCMP), which is promoted and supported by Tearfund and has been taken up by thousands of churches around the world, including in Cambodia (read more about CCMP [here](#)). The similarities include the aim of supporting churches to be 'salt and light' to their communities; and the means of achieving this aim, which is through Bible-based teaching to bring about mindset change. Notwithstanding the similarities, this programme was distinct from CCMP in two ways. Firstly, a few church representatives from each district are members of the provincial network, whereas CCMP engages whole congregations in responding to community needs. Secondly, the network focuses on disaster preparedness and response, whereas in CCMP the initiatives of church and community tend not to be predetermined, but rather are based on needs assessment(s) carried out by the church.

<sup>4</sup> The evaluation of RDMP was selected for this case study, from among the sample of 33, because it was one of the most high-scoring against the Bond Evidence Principles of voice and inclusion, appropriateness, triangulation, contribution, and transparency. Read more about the Bond Evidence Principles [here](#).

- Mentorship, or Tearfund and partner staff ‘walking closely with’ participants, is a characteristic of many of our projects and programmes, and contributes to their success.

Author: Rachel Paton, Research and Learning Analyst (Tearfund)

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Tearfund, 100 Church Road, Teddington, TW11 8QE, United Kingdom

☎ UK +44 (0)20 3906 3906 ✉ [publications@tearfund.org](mailto:publications@tearfund.org) [learn.tearfund.org](http://learn.tearfund.org)

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