



With You in the Storm

Working paper on the role of the local church in building resilience

“When the drought hit our community in Zimbabwe in 2015 and 2016, we thought dependency on handouts was our only way out. However, with the advent of these new Bible studies we have realised that despite the drought, God has already provided us with many resources that we can use to prepare for and overcome the drought.”

This example, taken from a case study of EFZ’s work, illustrates the positive impact that local churches can make in vulnerable communities. However it is important to consider whether such examples are isolated or indicative of a broader picture. **The scale of the global church means that it has the potential to be one of the largest actors in increasing disaster resilience.**

Authors: John Twigg, Bennette Grace, Richard Lister, Innocent Yekeye

📷 Photo: Kopila Aryal, 22, digs for a potato from her field. Kopila is the vice-secretary of the women’s agricultural group in Bhaltar, and was previously the chairperson of the group. She is an active member in the community and is working to support the current chair of the group. ‘Panchakanya Women’s Agricultural Group’, Nepal. Partner: United Mission to Nepal

Credit: Tom Price/Tearfund © Tearfund (2020)

Acronyms and abbreviations

FBO	Faith-based organisation	LFC	Local Faith Community
DFID	Department for International Development	NGO	Non Government Organisation
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction	EFZ	Evangelical Fellowship Zimbabwe
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme	CBO	Community Based Organisation
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees	SHG	Self Help Group
		SFDRR	Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction

Contents

Introduction	3
Local Experience - Churches Global Potential to Strengthen Resilience	4
Scale and therefore potential of the church	4
Influential and important stakeholders	4
Variations	4
Churches' Role in Resilience	5
Christian theology and perspectives	6
Tearfund's Research and Findings	6
Seven ways in which churches contributed significantly to DRR:	7
Social connectedness, conflict resolution and relationships	7
Church networks	7
Popular beliefs and the church's role in perpetuating or challenging them	7
The church as a healing and hope bringing community	8
Role in awareness raising and advocacy	8
Local presence	8
Physical and material resources	9
Fieldwork	10
Zimbabwe	10
Philippines	11
Next steps	12

Working paper

This is a **working paper**; therefore it does not include an executive summary and conclusion. Its purpose is to share our findings and gauge interest, get feedback and encourage engagement between stakeholders.

Introduction

This working paper is part of an ongoing Tearfund programme of research and discussion on the role of churches in resilience and DRR. It aims to highlight the work of local churches as key actors in DRR and resilience building (using existing evidence), and to identify opportunities, gaps and challenges, by collecting further evidence, generating discussion and engagement among peer agencies, informing and influencing different stakeholder groups, and encouraging church engagement with DRR and collaboration with aid and development organisations.

The initiative builds on Tearfund's long experience of supporting local churches in disaster-prone areas to manage disasters. Evidence on the role of the local church in DRR and resilience building often does not inform decision-making by donors, governments, international organisations or other peer non-religious agencies; nor do such organizations encourage the local church to consider itself a key actor in DRR and resilience. This 'application gap' needs to be overcome.

The working paper describes and reviews the key roles played by local churches in strengthening community resilience to disasters. This research will help to reinforce the evidence base of activities carried out by local churches in disaster management and DRR, raise their profile as key actors and make the case for greater inclusion of churches and FBOs in resilience building. A key aim is to use the report to influence international decision makers on disasters and resilience¹.

There is compelling evidence on the roles and impact of the local church in DRR and resilience building. This evidence can inform decision-making by donors, governments, the UN and civil society organisations, encouraging them to partner with local church leaders and faith communities in disaster planning and preparedness. It can also equip and mobilise the local churches to consider themselves as key actors in DRR and resilience.

The findings provide guidance on how to effectively mobilise the world's largest civil society actor to build resilience on a global scale.

¹ Particularly international organizations working on disasters, such as UNDRR, UN OCHA and UNHCR, as well as national Red Cross/Red Crescent societies, development banks, other UN members, governments and humanitarian agencies.

Local Experience - Churches Global Potential to Strengthen Resilience

Scale and therefore potential of the church

Faith and religion are central to DRR and sustainable development. In many countries, most of the population engages in some form of religious and faith-based practice on a regular basis (DFID 2012). In 2010, a major study of more than 230 countries and territories estimated that there were 5.8 billion religiously affiliated adults and children worldwide, representing 84% of the world's population of 6.9 billion.²

Influential and important stakeholders

Faith-based organisations (FBOs)³, including churches, and religious leaders, are influential and important stakeholders in society, engaging with a range of development, humanitarian and DRR activities (UNDP 2014). They are often integrated into their communities and have the respect of local and national authorities, enabling them to deliver services and mobilize support. They are able to reach the most vulnerable with assistance and information, and to identify those most in need. They link formal development and DRR actors with communities: their capacities and activities are particularly important in contexts of weak governance structures and limited basic services. FBOs can also help to strengthen resilience and reinforce the social fabric of communities disrupted by disasters (Refugee Studies Programme 2011).

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 (SFDRR) calls for an inclusive and accessible, all-of-society approach in reducing risk and building resilience in the rapidly changing global risk landscape. One of the SFDRR's guiding principles is 'engagement from all of society', although it does not directly address the roles and potential of FBOs and other faith groups.⁴

Variations

FBOs and local faith communities (LFCs) vary in form, structure and outreach. UNAIDS (2009) distinguished three main types: (1) Informal social groups or local faith communities (e.g. local women's or youth groups); (2) Formal worshipping communities with an organized hierarchy and leadership (e.g. major religious faith groupings and sub-divisions of organized religion); and (3) independent faith-influenced NGOs (e.g. Islamic Relief, Christian Aid, Misereor). They also include faith-linked networks.

² [The Global Religious Landscape | Pew Research Center](#)

³ The World Bank defines faith-based organizations (FBOs) as 'entities dedicated to specific religious identities, often including a social or moral component' [Faith Based and Religious Organizations \(worldbank.org\)](#). The Bank recognizes their distinct strategic value given their unique attributes, including the fact that more than 80% of the world's population claims religious affiliation. FBOs are found in every country and offer opportunities for partnership and advocacy on a broad range of key development issues.

⁴ SFDRR 30(d) does call for the protection and support of sites of historical, cultural heritage and religious interest and makes other references to religious sites.

Churches' Role in Resilience

Local churches are active in community development and disaster preparedness, response and recovery. Churches and church leaders facilitate community action and can play a wide range of roles in resilience building and DRR, in particular by: providing leadership, mobilising and managing volunteers and community members; giving spiritual and emotional support and counselling; networking and sharing information; providing skills and materials; providing practical guidance; advocacy; peace-making; and carrying out risk, vulnerability and capacity assessments. Church and community buildings often provide important refuges, shelters and places to store emergency supplies.⁵

FBOs and LFCs play an important and essential role in providing healthcare and prevention services, as well as community education and health promotion, in many countries. They share health information to protect communities, provide pastoral and spiritual support during public health emergencies, and advocate for vulnerable populations' needs. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the significance of churches, LFCs and FBOs in responding to health crises. By sharing clear, evidence-based steps to prevent COVID-19, churches and FBOs promote good practices and provide reassurance to their communities. Religious leaders, FBOs and faith communities have played a major role in saving lives and reducing illness during the pandemic, providing comfort, guidance, health care, social services and other forms of support (WHO 2019, 2020), including sharing information about health and hygiene practices, challenging misinformation and overcoming vaccine hesitancy (World Vision 2021). WHO has developed a strategy and guidance for engaging religious leaders, FBOs and LFCs in collaborative efforts to fight the pandemic and to strengthen collaborations to respond to future health emergencies (WHO 2021).

The 'localisation agenda' to shift power in the humanitarian system should include national and local faith actors and affiliated groups that are often first responders, and work in parallel to humanitarian coordination mechanisms. Local faith actors can feel distanced from the international humanitarian system, but they can be supported through training and networking to build greater confidence and legitimacy to participate in humanitarian coordination. International DRR and humanitarian agencies can help by understanding and connecting with a wide range of local faith actors, thereby bridging and challenging their own assumptions about who local faith actors are (Wilkinson et al. 2022).

Disaster management guidance and planning still pays relatively little attention to the value and roles of religion and churches. Religious belief systems, value frameworks and associated institutions and social networks remain an under-utilised resource for DRR. However, aid and development agencies are showing growing interest in the capacities and potential of churches, as well as other faith-based organisations (FBOs) and local faith communities (LFCs), to support disaster preparedness, response and recovery. For example, UNDP has made the case for greater consultation with FBOs, LFCs and religious leaders, in order to ensure their meaningful participation in policy dialogue, as well as in programme design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation (M&E): this can be achieved through partnerships based on shared values, objectives and commitments (UNDP 2014). UNHCR has produced guidance on engaging with, reaching out to and partnering with FBOs, local faith communities and faith leaders (UNHCR 2014). The Charter for Faith-based Humanitarian Action, agreed at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, commits FBOs and other humanitarian actors to uphold the principles of compassion, humanity and impartiality when providing humanitarian assistance and protection, in alignment with basic humanitarian principles.

⁵ Crooks B, Mouradian J, 2011. *Disasters and the local church: guidelines for church leaders in disaster-prone areas*. Teddington: Tearfund.

Christian theology and perspectives

The church has a unique, holistic understanding of poverty and development. The Bible teaches the need to engage with all areas of a person's life in order to see deep, sustainable transformation from poverty and human flourishing. Indeed, the Christian faith comes with a biblical mandate to help people living in poverty, to tackle inequality and injustice.

Christian theology and faith groups endorse and contribute to several of the SDGs through their commitment to poverty and hunger alleviation, wellbeing, education and learning, equality and inclusiveness, justice and peace, access to water and stewardship of the earth⁶. This aligns with the SDG aims of protecting the planet through sustainable consumption, production and management of natural resources; economic, social and technological progress in harmony with nature; just and inclusive societies, and sustainable development; and global solidarity focused on the poor and vulnerable and participation of all stakeholders.⁷

Tearfund's Research and Findings

Recent field- and desk-based research by Tearfund and its local partners has added to knowledge and understanding of church-based disaster risk reduction

A global literature review (2019) sought to: identify and summarise published evidence on the roles played by churches across the disaster cycle; analyse the enabling environment that can influence the role of the church in different contexts, identify gaps in the evidence and provide suggestions for further research. It covered how churches support their members and wider communities, and how they connect with other actors (e.g. local governments, NGOs, other faith communities, civil society and the private sector) in accessing goods and services, and advocating for those vulnerable to hazards.

Fieldwork among communities and local faith actors in Zimbabwe and the Philippines (2020) aimed to identify and assess the roles that local churches play in DRR, through local case studies. Both field studies were restricted by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the Philippines, some interviews had to be conducted online.

⁶ See Nordstokke K, *The Sustainability Book: a Christian faith perspective on the Sustainable Development Goals* (sdgbook.com)

⁷ sdgs.un.org/2030agenda



Seven ways in which churches contributed significantly to DRR:

1

Social connectedness, conflict resolution and relationships

Churches and church leaders often have strong relationships within communities (bonding), between communities (bridging) and with outside actors (linking).

“I am part of the Village Development Committee in this area. Despite the animosity I had with my predecessor, we teamed up and pursued the project. Now we have water. Our relationship is now good and we both realised that there are more benefits in working together rather than having an antagonistic relationship”

Village Development Committee Member, St Peter’s

2

Church networks

Can be local, national and even international, with resources available in times of need, although in some countries they may have limited and/or prior relationships and coordination with agencies working on DRR.

“Cyclone Idai did not hit this area as hard as it did the other areas. However, people lost crops and livestock while some houses were destroyed. The Church assisted in sourcing and providing food especially for the most affected households”

Key Informant, Rusape.

3

Popular beliefs and the church’s role in perpetuating or challenging them

People’s beliefs underpin how they interpret disasters, how they see their ability to influence a positive future and to recover. Church leaders and Biblical texts are often trusted and influential in maintaining or challenging those beliefs.

“The Bible studies helped me realise that it is not God’s intention for us to be hungry or for us to be ‘victims’ of disaster.”

EFZ Case Study, Steve Collins

4

The church as a healing and hope bringing community

Churches and clergy provide psychosocial support, meeting emotional and spiritual, as well as practical, needs. The church is a healing community and provides emotional support in times of crisis – church leaders are used to giving ‘pastoral support’, listening, sitting with people and praying with them. This helps congregations and communities to face and recover from trauma.

“The Church has always been there to provide direction to society and in times of individual and collective strife it provided hope. The projects such as CCMP provides a structure to this work but it has always been the role of the Church to address these”

Key Informant, Rusape

5

Role in awareness raising and advocacy

Church leaders and members are trusted and listened to; they are able to get messages across. They know who in their communities may be vulnerable and need support. Churches contribute to public awareness and debate on disasters, vulnerability and DRR.

Creating links between the communities and meteorological services so that the communities can be more aware of weather related hazards, such as approaching storms or the onset of drought.

6

Local presence

The church is a community asset, a permanent presence in communities and role in community life, with buildings, organisational capacities, groups of volunteers and financial resources able to help in times of crisis. Churches contribute to the creation and reinforcement of social capital and networking within and between congregations.

“The programmes we were doing really helped us a lot. Some were involved in nutritional gardens, livestock rearing, home based bakeries and poultry projects. At the same time we encouraged each other to work hard, we shared resources like water as a community and we prayed together/for each other during times of troubles”

Female FGD Participant, Dora.

7

Physical and material resources

Churches have physical and material resources and facilities, for example, church buildings as emergency shelters and safe spaces, stores for distribution of relief goods. Establishing emergency funds as part of the routine activities of self-help groups.

“When the drought hit in 2015 and 2016, we thought dependency on handouts was our only way out; however, with the advent of these new bible studies we have realised that despite the drought, God has already provided us with many resources that we can use to prepare for and overcome the drought.”

The literature review of published, peer review literature also identified evidence gaps. Most writing on churches and disasters focuses on preparedness and response; less is known about long-term recovery. Drought and famine mitigation receive much less attention than rapid-onset disasters. There is very little case study material from Africa compared to other regions of the world. Important issues that deserve further study include:

- differences in approaches to DRR between different Christian denominations and congregations around the world;
- how gender and inclusion attitudes and practices are addressed by churches and FBOs when managing disaster risk;
- and the influence of different enabling environments on church involvement in DRR.

Fieldwork



📷 Zimbabwe: sustainable food security and livelihoods in rural areas near Bulawayo. Photo: Eleanor Bentall

Zimbabwe

The Zimbabwe study (5 sites) showed that churches have helped to mobilise communities, with pastors and fellow congregants supporting each other in coping with shocks and stresses – in this case, a drought. Local churches are involved in a range of mutually reinforcing support activities in their communities: disaster relief in particular, but also disaster planning, psychosocial support (an important role, based on prayer and fellowship), community mobilisation and activities to improve livelihoods and nutrition.

These had led to a shift in community perceptions of the church's role in resilience building: it is recognised as an institution of material relief and spiritual salvation, and hence to greater community cohesion – a key outcome of the resilience building activities. The church has support from community leaders and village development committees. Improved income from activities has contributed to household-level improvements especially in nutrition. Respondents reported improved capacity to meet basic expenses such as paying school fees. Resilience building activities prioritised vulnerable groups (people with disabilities, women and the elderly) and were contributing to empowering women in their communities.

However, churches can also be affected by so-called 'sheep stealing' (where successful churches seek to lure congregants from other churches) and in some cases by exclusion of marginal groups (in particular, older people, youth, child-headed households). The study also identified the need for the church to scale up its activities, engage with national-level actors, and develop partnerships with other development stakeholders.



📷 A church in the Philippines. Photo: Tim Goodman/Tearfund

Philippines

In the Philippines, which is very exposed and vulnerable to a variety of major hazards and risks, churches showed a commitment to assist those who are most vulnerable or in need, and to give them a voice. Churches are close to their communities and are seen as partners and facilitators. They were engaged in livelihood support, disaster preparedness and building DRR capacity, with an ongoing shift in emphasis from response to preparedness. Churches' response roles included: visiting households to provide food, spiritual support and prayer (the church appeared to have a distinct role in providing psychosocial support and giving people hope); capacity building, including training in DRR and first aid; and awareness raising and advocacy. NGOs and individuals went to churches for assistance because they were seen as dependable. Church buildings are used as evacuation centres.

Churches and pastors are very active and engaged in disaster preparedness, response and relief, as well as DRR more broadly, which reflects the wider commitment of local government, civil society and community-based organisations (CBOs) to addressing these issues. There is considerable collaboration between a range of local actors (local governments, NGOs, civil society organisations, churches), which is influenced by Bayanihan: the Filipino tradition of mutual support by communities and local actors.

Next steps

Keep up to date with our research journey - learn.tearfund.org/reschurch

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

☎ +44 (0)20 3906 3906 ✉ publications@tearfund.org learn.tearfund.org

Registered office: Tearfund, 100 Church Road, Teddington, TW11 8QE, United Kingdom.
Registered in England: 994339. A company limited by guarantee. Registered Charity No. 265464
(England & Wales) Registered Charity No. SC037624 (Scotland)

The logo for Tearfund, featuring the word "tearfund" in white lowercase letters on a teal rectangular background.