

Research report

For such a time as this

The local church response to the Covid-19 pandemic



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Tearfund is a Christian charity determined to see an end to extreme poverty and injustice. We mobilise communities and churches worldwide to help ensure that everyone has the opportunity to fulfil their God-given potential.

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 **Front cover photo: Tearfund's local church partner delivers food packages to 500 vulnerable families in Colombia in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.** Credit: Edrei Cueto / Tearfund

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Executive summary

We believe that poverty is not God's plan, and an end to extreme poverty is possible. Over the past 50 years we have worked with local churches and partners in underserved communities in more than 50 countries to tackle complex poverty through three approaches: **community development, advocacy and influencing, and humanitarian response.**

When the Covid-19 pandemic began in early 2020, **thousands of churches around the world were ready to respond to the needs of their community.** The pandemic, the lockdowns that followed and the ensuing economic disruption have left people desperate on a scale rarely seen before, all over the world. But together with the local church we rose to meet this challenge.

We have carried out multiple learning reviews, research studies and evaluations to capture the lessons and impacts of our Covid-19 response. The evidence shows that **our approach to tackling poverty through community development, advocacy and influencing, and humanitarian response positioned the local church to respond quickly, holistically and effectively to the effects of the pandemic.** Church responses to the pandemic were both holistic and inclusive, addressing both physical and spiritual needs, and reaching the most marginalised and vulnerable people in their communities.

Out of this research, we identified three areas where our approach equipped churches during the crisis to respond effectively and develop resilience:



Community development embeds mindsets of social responsibility

Church mobilisation processes and savings groups equipped churches to respond and adapt effectively to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in their communities by embedding mindsets of social responsibility and developing their resilience.

- **Churches that had participated in church mobilisation processes prior to the pandemic responded more quickly and more effectively** than churches that had not participated. The main reasons for this are that those churches had developed a mindset of social responsibility based on their biblical mandate to support their community, and were equipped to investigate and prioritise issues to tackle in the community.
- **Churches designed holistic and inclusive local responses** which blended spiritual and physical support, targeted the most vulnerable and marginalised members of their communities, and partnered with local organisations and governments.
- **Savings groups acted as a buffer against the adverse economic, social and spiritual impacts of the Covid-19 lockdowns** in their communities and provided a rapid and flexible response, particularly for their members but also for the wider community.



Advocacy and influencing leaves no one behind

Churches wove advocacy into their Covid-19 responses, becoming trusted sources of information, by applying lessons from advocacy training in the church mobilisation process and building upon their foundations of trust, respect and visibility in their communities.

- **Mobilised churches applied the skills and knowledge gained through advocacy training to engage in public policy dialogues.** They exerted influence at different levels of decision-making as well as on societal values and norms to advocate for holistic and inclusive responses to the pandemic.
- **By engaging in public policy dialogue, mobilised churches successfully advocated for the local church to be recognised as an essential service provider by governments.** This recognition meant that churches were allowed to implement effective local responses within the Covid-19 regulations and restrictions.



Humanitarian response reaches the most vulnerable

Building on existing partnerships with churches and local partners meant that ongoing complex humanitarian responses could adapt and expand to deliver vital Covid-19 related aid to extremely vulnerable populations.

- **The church holds a unique space as it is embedded in the community;** it is ideally situated to engage in humanitarian response. Building upon a foundation of strong relationships between churches and local communities means that churches become places around which local humanitarian responses coordinate and happen.
- **Humanitarian response is effective when it builds upon a foundation of community development and advocacy and influencing.** This is because churches are equipped with the mindset and skill to respond, as well as having knowledge of the local population and context. Projects were able to pivot to incorporate humanitarian response elements to their existing community development and advocacy and influencing efforts.

The results of our research show that when Tearfund, local churches and the communities they serve come together they are ready to respond to crises. The church holds a unique space as it is embedded in the community; it is the hands and feet of Jesus and stands ready to respond to emergencies. By working alongside local partners and churches, Tearfund is tackling poverty through community development, advocacy and influencing and humanitarian response. Tearfund is ready to respond through Christ, the church and communities to overcome climate, Covid-19 and conflict related crises.



📷 Tearfund's local church partner in India distributes facemasks in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.
Photo: Tearfund partner, EFICOR

Community development embeds mindsets of social responsibility



Tearfund's approach to community development, namely church mobilisation processes and savings groups, equipped churches to respond and adapt effectively to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in their communities by embedding mindsets of social responsibility and resilience.

Church mobilisation processes

Over the last 30 years, Tearfund has mobilised over 200,000 churches around the world (not including the UK) to actively serve their community. Currently over 23,000 churches are actively embracing a whole-life response to the gospel through Tearfund's church mobilisation processes.

We commissioned a learning review examining how mobilised churches responded to the Covid-19 pandemic in their communities.¹ The evidence showed that churches that had participated in church mobilisation processes prior to the pandemic responded more quickly and more effectively than churches that had not participated. These churches saw the pandemic as an opportunity to outwork their mindset of social responsibility and were motivated to mobilise resources by Bible studies they read. Mobilised churches were motivated by their biblical mandate to respond and operated from the mindset that they could make a difference in their community and had resources at their disposal to do so. These churches recognised the needs and opportunities in their local communities, and designed local responses that were holistic and inclusive of marginalised groups.

¹ Steffie Kemp and Cathy James (2022) Tearfund Learning Review: Church and Community Transformation and Covid-19. This resource is due to be published online, but is not currently available.

The learning review found that the church mobilisation process' emphasis on inclusion encouraged churches to focus on the most marginalised groups in their community. Mobilised churches actively identified and prioritised vulnerable groups in their responses, including children, refugees and migrants, survivors of human trafficking and modern slavery, survivors of violence, and people who were elderly, pregnant, chronically ill, living with disabilities, or those who had lost their jobs. Even when their own income was reduced, many churches continued to prioritise the vulnerable or even gave up their own food allocation to share with others:

'Church members in the list of local governments to receive food relief handed it to the other needy people.'

Church leader in Nepal

Church mobilisation inspires Covid-19 response in Nepal

In 2021 we conducted an evaluation of church mobilisation processes in four communities in Nepal.² Two thirds of the people we spoke to said Covid-19 had a negative impact on their lives in some way, particularly lack of employment opportunities in the lockdowns. However, over three quarters of people we spoke to said that church mobilisation processes, Tearfund's partners or the local church had created a positive change in their lives despite the challenging circumstances.

The evaluation found that the pandemic encouraged churches to work more in their communities, which led to relationships between non-Christian community members and churches improving. People we spoke to referenced many ways that churches supported them during the pandemic, including food rations, livelihoods training to develop new sources of income when jobs were lost, and financial management training and loans.

'I did not face issues in food access before, but during the lockdown, my family faced difficult times as our shop was closed and income had stopped. The savings were being used up and at that time the local church had provided us support by providing rations including rice, oil and lentils.'

Community member in Nepal

As well as the mobilised churches' own local initiatives, Tearfund's Covid-19 response partnered with 427 local churches to reach 52,884 vulnerable people. Churches distributed food relief, hygiene kits and set up public handwashing stations as well as providing cash for work and business recovery support. The response targeted vulnerable groups who were disproportionately affected by the pandemic, including daily wage labourers, people with disabilities, migrant returnees, and children and women from low-income families.

An evaluation of this response found that the church mobilisation process, disaster risk reduction capacity building and strong relationships with partners and the local government were key factors that allowed the local church in Nepal to respond quickly and effectively to the pandemic and reach those most in need.

² Tearfund (2022) [QulP report on Tearfund's church and community transformation in Nepal](#)

Savings groups

Economic empowerment is an important part of Tearfund's strategy to tackle the complex challenges of poverty and injustice. As of 2021, Tearfund had a total of 231 savings groups projects in over 30 countries with 2,055 new groups having started in the last 3 years. These groups now have over 810,000 members.

We conducted a study exploring how savings groups in Burkina Faso, Burundi, Ethiopia, Malawi and Rwanda responded to the pandemic. The evidence shows that savings groups were able to act as a buffer against the adverse economic, social and spiritual impacts of the Covid-19 lockdowns in their communities and provide a rapid and flexible response, particularly for their members but also for the wider community.

Although members still struggled with decreased income and livelihood activities due to the lockdown, savings groups were able to respond to the needs of their members through financial assistance, information dissemination, solidarity and hope. Nine out of ten of the savings groups members we spoke to said that their savings group increased their level of hope during the pandemic. By offering widespread social and spiritual support through group prayers and setting up phone meetings to connect and pray, groups were able to help each other weather the challenging months of lockdown. Activities that built a sense of solidarity included: visits, calls and texts of encouragement, a safe space to discuss the effects of Covid-19 with peers, in-kind support such as cooking at funeral ceremonies or weeding gardens when people fell ill, offering business advice, and counselling and psychosocial support.

'During the Covid-19 pandemic, I had fallen ill, and the savings group came to pray for me. Personally, I received spiritual support during this period and the group gave me some money for my prescriptions.'

Savings group member in Burkina Faso

Savings groups were also able to provide support to their communities, through information dissemination, food supplies, personal protective equipment (PPE) supplies and financial assistance. The study also found that the savings groups were able to innovate and adapt their way of working, such as adjusting loan repayments, changing meeting structures, diversifying incomes, implementing collective business activities and increasing their use of mobile technology for communication and use of mobile money.

'My small business was at its end and had fallen into bankruptcy when I approached the savings group for a loan. They gave me a loan which helped me to resume selling small agricultural products on the local market. The profit gained helped my family survive and because the group waived the interest on the loan, I was able to pay it back comfortably. Without this loan from the savings group, I would have become a thief.'

Savings group member in Rwanda



📷 A CCT facilitator in Burkina Faso prepares a CCT session at home during the pandemic. Photo: Jonas Yameogo / Tearfund

Advocacy and Influencing leaves no one behind



Churches wove advocacy into their Covid-19 responses, becoming trusted sources of information, by applying lessons from advocacy training in church mobilisation processes and building upon their foundations of trust, respect and visibility in their communities.

Learning from our Ebola Response in 2015, we knew that faith leaders would be a significant ally in slowing down the spread of Covid-19 and mobilising and influencing the response. By sharing clear, evidence-based steps to prevent the spread of Covid-19, churches and faith-based organisations promoted good practices and provided reassurance to their communities. The World Health Organisation recognised that religious leaders, faith-based organisations and faith communities have played a major role in saving lives and reducing illness in the pandemic as well as sharing information about health and hygiene, challenging information and overcoming vaccine hesitancy.³

Many of Tearfund's church partners wove advocacy into their church mobilisation approach and Covid-19 response, demonstrating the distinctive role the church can play in the public policy sphere by speaking up. A learning review⁴ of church mobilisation advocacy during the pandemic found that local churches and denominations who had already been involved in church mobilisation advocacy have:

- modelled compliance with government restrictions
- adopted innovative digital platforms for their advocacy

³ Tearfund (2020) [Covid-19: Learning from Ebola](#)

⁴ Tearfund (2021) [Sustaining advocacy through the church during the Covid-19 pandemic](#)

- influenced by having a united voice
- ensured no one was left behind
- made best use of existing relationships to strengthen their advocacy
- used existing relationships to influence governments to provide a humanitarian response meeting the needs of the most vulnerable

When local churches, denominations and networks are strengthened with advocacy and social accountability skills and knowledge, they are able to sustain advocacy throughout a pandemic. With the onset of Covid-19, for most of Tearfund's partners the pre-existence of relationships developed through church mobilisation advocacy proved to be an easy gateway to influencing governments on the emerging needs for the vulnerable in their communities. Tearfund produced [practical resources](#) to support churches' advocacy on Covid-19.

One of the most important ways in which local churches helped their community during the pandemic was by being a trusted source of information and to advocate for access to information. Churches provided trustworthy information about Covid-19 and how to reduce the spread of the disease, including vaccine options, and what economic and social support was available. This was done in lots of different ways, from podcasts in Bolivia, television shows in Ethiopia, radio broadcasts and braille leaflets in Malawi, community mobilisers in Yemen, to sign languages in Mozambique.⁵ In modelling compliance with Covid-19 regulations, churches influenced how communities behaved, as communities trusted the churches as a source of information. This strengthened trust with governments, opening opportunities for dialogue.

'Our biggest strength is our wide presence in the region. We have our churches in every village and neighbourhood. They are all part of our network. People in the communities are members of the churches so we can easily spread messages. There is respect towards the churches and people accept what is said by the church. For example if I now pass a message to 20 church fellowships, it can easily be transmitted to 1,400 local churches'

Tearfund partner in Ethiopia

The church promoting Covid-19 prevention in Tanzania⁶

In **Tanzania**, though the Government had not officially declared Covid-19 a pandemic, Tearfund's partner, the Christian Council of Tanzania, provided guidelines for their local and national level churches on how to conduct services and ensure Covid-19 protection measures were followed, to curb the spread of the virus.

Some of the guidelines included promoting precautions such as handwashing stations at churches, wearing face masks at church, physical distancing in church services and limiting numbers of people at funerals. The Christian Council of Tanzania also mobilised the church leaders to advocate for dignified burials for Covid-19 deaths. The pastors developed an appeal letter to the President and in response, the President denounced on national television the practice of night burials of those who had died of Covid-19 and promoted health precautions against the disease. The Government invited the church's input into the national response to Covid-19, called for Tanzanian Christians to pray for three days, and saw that the church's involvement helped calm public fears.

⁵ Tearfund (2022) [Covid-19: Footsteps Special Edition](#)

⁶ Tearfund (2021) [Sustaining advocacy through the church during the Covid-19 pandemic](#)

Many governments created categories of ‘essential service providers’ who were the only organisations allowed to work and engage with communities, as long as they followed clearly laid out procedures. This initially created a barrier to church responses in some countries where we work, such as Malawi and Zimbabwe, where the church was not classified as an ‘essential service provider’. In many of the communities where Tearfund church partners are working, the training on mindsets of social responsibility and, more specifically, the role of the church in advocacy, equipped churches with the knowledge and skills to engage in public policy dialogue and advocate for the church to be recognised as an ‘essential service provider’.

Though governments responded differently, it was only when the churches had succeeded in influencing their government that they were allowed to respond to the humanitarian and psychosocial needs more fully within their communities. This was possible as governments reviewed their guidelines to include the church as an ‘essential service provider’, with stipulated clear regulations and guidelines on conduct. As such, Covid-19 has underlined the fact that advocacy can play a powerful role in enabling church engagement in humanitarian response.

The church advocating to provide essential services in Malawi and Zimbabwe⁷

In **Malawi**, churches submitted joint letters to the government’s Covid-19 task force, calling for active engagement for local faith actors, provision of PPE for frontline medical staff, and accountability for Covid-19 resource spending. This led to a revision of the new National Covid-19 Preparedness and Response Plan, which had initially failed to recognise the role of local faith actors in the country’s Covid-19 response. Tearfund’s partner, the Evangelical Alliance of Malawi (EAM) supported churches to lobby the government to get this changed and the plan was updated to include reference to local faith actors, and churches worked to ensure the plan was implemented.

In **Zimbabwe**, the government’s Covid-19 regulations did not allow the church to move to the communities to provide any humanitarian and psychosocial support. Tearfund partner Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (the General Secretary and the Board) lobbied the government ministries to seek exemption for church leaders. As a result, they received an exemption letter from the Ministry of Home Affairs allowing church leaders to operate because they were providing psychosocial support, which was deemed an essential service.

⁷ Tearfund (2021) [Sustaining advocacy through the church during the Covid-19 pandemic](#)



📷 Tearfund's CCT coordinator in Rwanda joins a farming cooperative self-help group in worship. Photo: Pete Dawson / Tearfund

Humanitarian response reaches the most vulnerable



Building on existing partnerships with churches and local partners meant that ongoing complex humanitarian responses could adapt and expand to deliver vital Covid-19 related aid to extremely vulnerable populations.

The church holds a unique space as it is embedded in the community; it is ideally situated to engage in humanitarian response. Building upon a foundation of strong relationships between churches and local communities means that churches become places around which local humanitarian responses coordinate and happen. However, in many countries that Tearfund works the local church and partners were already working hard to respond to complex emergencies before the pandemic. When Covid-19 hit, these churches and partners had to contend with a new health emergency on top of the ongoing crises they were facing. Already vulnerable populations were made even more at risk by the threat of Covid-19: with higher health risks from starvation and malnutrition, weak health infrastructure unable to cope with an influx of patients, poor sanitation and living conditions facilitating the spread of the virus, and a drop in remittances and aid from abroad as the whole world battled the pandemic.

Yet, churches and faith leaders were well positioned to rise to this new challenge. They were able to mobilise established networks of partners and relationships in the community and local governments to deliver aid, and they already knew the most vulnerable people in their communities who would need help. In this way, ongoing humanitarian responses were adapted and expanded to deliver vital Covid-19 related aid to extremely vulnerable populations.

For example, in the Central African Republic there are an estimated 2.8 million people in need of humanitarian aid following conflict and displacement.⁸ Alongside our operational programme in the country responding to the immediate needs of people affected by conflict and helping people rebuild their lives through training in sustainable farm and income-generation, our partners trained pastors, imams and community mobilisers on Covid-19 prevention. The pastors and imams decided to include a 15-20 minute community sensitisation message in their weekly Sunday and Friday sermons, so people were getting reliable and consistent Covid-19 updates.

“The Covid-19 response training has opened my eyes and helped me to understand the severity of the pandemic’s potential consequences. I have decided to entirely dedicate myself to mobilising, first of all, people from my own home, church members, and then my community, by sharing this information with them so they can understand this is a serious pandemic and take action.”

Pastor in the Central African Republic

Covid-19 response during a complex emergency in Yemen

Over 24 million need urgent aid in Yemen, including safe water, food and sanitation. In the throes of conflict, the country is on the brink of famine and, with our partners, Tearfund has been working to reach those who are most vulnerable since 2016. The outbreak of Covid-19 in Yemen exacerbated vulnerabilities and created an urgent need to prevent infection while also providing humanitarian aid. In particular, the Covid-19 outbreak in Yemen reduced remittances, a vital source of income, which fell by 80% by April 2020 and half of working households had reduced or no salary.

Tearfund’s partner ran a project, *Enhancing Lifesaving, Livelihood, and Wellbeing Support for Conflict-Affected Yemenis*, and incorporated a Covid-19 response into this complex and multi-sectoral intervention. Over 4,500 food baskets were distributed to the most food insecure households in three communities in Yemen over four months. The food baskets ensured vulnerable households received enough daily calories of food for their survival, and included flour, beans, vegetable oil, sugar and salt.

"During this project, we have never run out of food for the first time since we were displaced from our home. No more tears ran down from our eyes, for we had sufficient food to satisfy our children's hunger who used to sleep on an empty stomach."

Community member in Yemen

Alongside vital food rations, Tearfund’s partner distributed hygiene kits to over 1,200 households. The kits included washable face masks, hand soap, washing powder, disinfectant and water containers as well as institutional awareness brochures about Covid-19 prevention measures. The project also trained community-based hygiene promoters to boost messaging about general hygiene and Covid-19 in the community.

⁸ Tearfund (2023) *Our work in Central African Republic*
www.tearfund.org/about-us/our-impact/where-we-work/central-african-republic

The project evaluation found that hygiene practices improved considerably. At the end of the project, 82 per cent of people surveyed said that they heard about the pandemic for the first time through the food and hygiene baskets or through community-based hygiene awareness promoters. Ninety-five per cent of people surveyed at the end of the project could name three ways to prevent the transition of Covid-19, which shows a high level of knowledge was successfully communicated in a largely illiterate community.

In many cases, Tearfund's partner churches were implementing community development and advocacy and influencing projects in humanitarian contexts when the need suddenly arose to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. In these cases, our partners quickly pivoted their work to support the most vulnerable while building upon their existing community development and advocacy and influencing work. In this way, we see the local church working across Tearfund's three approaches to effectively and quickly respond to a crisis.

Influencing the mobilised church in Nicaragua during Covid-19

Since 2018, Nicaraguans have struggled to cope with the dual challenges of natural disasters, including drought, flood and hurricanes, and socio-political tensions. People were already dealing with increased poverty, loss of family members, job losses and a deterioration in mental and emotional health in the face of all this uncertainty, before Covid-19 hit in 2020 and exacerbated these problems. Tearfund's partner, Centro Inter-Eclesial de Estudios Teológicos y Sociales (CIEETS), identified that the church was not mobilising to meet the needs of their community.

CIEETS' project, *Leadership and Integral Mission Schools*, started in 2017 as an educational project influencing church leaders to recognise and act upon the link between community development and theology. The project had seen the mobilisation of local churches through this initiative and was embarking on the next phase of the project at the start of 2020 to build up a network of regional facilitators to consolidate the training and sustainability of the mobilised church.

With the onset of the pandemic the project had to adapt its approach so it could continue in a safe and appropriate manner, while also responding to the emerging needs. The training of facilitators moved onto Zoom, WhatsApp was used to recruit new participants, and a new module was added to the training on the role of church during pandemics and emergencies. This new module equipped facilitators to analyse a global issue, identify the socio-economic impacts of it on their own community, and mobilise a local response through the church.

Alongside training 95 facilitators in 2020, the project also distributed food and health emergency kits to 100 families and provided training on how to prevent the spread of the virus. Through the training, six churches committed to proclaim and demonstrate the gospel in their communities. Six community projects were managed by churches who participated in the training, including a tree planting campaign, a community pharmacy and livelihoods training.

By pivoting its approach, and building upon a legacy of successful influencing, the project was able to continue equipping the church to contribute towards community development and respond to the humanitarian needs arising during the pandemic.



📷 Faith leaders attend a Covid-19 training in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Photo: Pete Dawson / Tearfund

Conclusion: The full potential of the church

The results of our research show that when Tearfund, local churches and the communities they serve come together they are ready to respond to crises quickly, effectively and inclusively. The church holds a unique space as it is embedded in the community; it is the hands and feet of Jesus and stands ready to respond to emergencies. By working alongside local partners and churches to tackle poverty through community development, advocacy and influencing and community development, Tearfund is ready to respond through the local church to climate, Covid-19 and conflict related crises.

We'd love to tell you more, over the phone or over a coffee. Please get in touch! You can contact us by phone 020 3906 3500 or email partnerships@tearfund.org.

Want to find out more?

- Tearfund (2020) [Covid-19: Learning from Ebola](#)
- Tearfund (2021) [Sustaining advocacy through the church during the Covid-19 pandemic](#)
- Tearfund (2022) [With you in the storm: Working paper on the role of the local church in building resilience](#)
- Tearfund (2022) [Covid-19: Footsteps Special Edition](#)

**‘The church is not only for
the church members, but it
is for the whole community.’**

Nepal

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