

## 1.5. LISTENING AS MINISTRY

### HOPE INTERNATIONAL

BURUNDI, HAITI, MALAWI, RWANDA,  
ZAMBIA, ZIMBABWE



How this story represents an international-local faith partnership in MEAL




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#### International element

International non-denominational Christian faith-based poverty alleviation organisation

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#### Local faith element

Involvement of local church partners

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#### Project country

Burundi, Haiti, Malawi, Rwanda, Zambia, Zimbabwe

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#### Website

<https://www.hopeinternational.org/>

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### The organisation and activities

HOPE International is an internationally operating Christian faith-based poverty alleviation organisation. HOPE provides biblically based training, savings services, and microfinance loans that aim to restore dignity and break the cycle of poverty. The organisation has its roots in an US American church initiative, which saw a group of people travel to Ukraine beginning in 1997, transporting containers of food, clothing, and medical supplies to the city of Zaporozhye. The organisers revisited their approach of providing free supplies after

realising they were unintentionally depressing local industry and initiative. Following a phase of research and reflection, the organisation's founder integrated economic development approaches into their work, which was a little-known poverty alleviation strategy at the time. Early observations and internal evaluations showed this approach was effective, and HOPE began expanding its operations to a total of 16 countries in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America.

One of the main models through which HOPE operates is through saving groups. In 2019,

HOPE International and its church partners served and supported more than 41,000 savings groups, with a total of over 700,000 members, across 10 countries. In this model, HOPE International establishes locally registered NGOs that are led by a locally hired team. National offices partner with churches in the country to lead and promote savings groups as a local church ministry. Local church volunteers are the linchpin of the ministry for the church-based savings groups, as they give their time to guide, train, disciple, and monitor savings groups.

### MEAL approach and rationale

#### Development of a new MEAL tool

Across the HOPE network, over 5,700 volunteers support the ministry. Understanding what motivates these volunteers is therefore critical in considering the sustainability and longevity of the organisation's local work. HOPE International's office in Rwanda developed the earliest version of a volunteer engagement survey in 2015. After they shared the results, HOPE and its partners developed an action plan to make improvements to the ministry, which increased the volunteer's engagement and motivation. Seeing the benefit of this locally designed process, HOPE's central office saw the opportunity to support its ongoing use and to expand it to partners in other countries in the network. Since 2018, the organisation has implemented a volunteer engagement survey in six savings group programs across the network. In each country where the survey was administered, a baseline set of questions was reviewed by local staff and partners, contextualized, and translated. HOPE's Listening, Monitoring & Evaluation (LM&E) team also

worked with local partners to develop tailored questions addressing their most pressing areas of interest.

#### MEAL approach

Faith and faith integration played a key role in this work. HOPE considers LM&E as part of the ministry, not just an evaluation of the ministry. This means valuing relationships with partner staff, pastors, and volunteers in addition to valuing the information being gathered. HOPE seeks to listen in a way that honours those they are listening to and deepens relationships. This includes a relational approach, demonstrating care through the ministry of presence, and carefully looking at the type of questions and amount of time being asked of participants. HOPE recognizes part of honouring those they are listening to is ensuring their 'ask' is appropriate both in content and time. Integrating faith when conducting MEAL with local faith actors also means starting with the hypothesis that the faith of participants both impacts and is impacted by the work. Practically this means MEAL approaches seek to understand the two-way relationship between faith and outcomes.

#### Data collection and analysis

In consideration of the value of volunteers' time during the surveying and to minimize the cost of data collection, surveys were administered during one of the previously scheduled monthly mentoring meetings with volunteers, which are hosted and led by the church partner staff. These meetings, which are a time to train, equip, and encourage volunteers, acted as a logical touch point for local HOPE staff to administer the survey. Because the savings groups are a church ministry, not a HOPE program, HOPE's

staff are viewed as trusted external partners to the church's ministry. This allows local HOPE staff to administer the survey while maintaining impartiality, limiting bias, and avoiding suspicion of outsiders due to existing relational connections. HOPE and its partners considered reasonable representation when determining a sample of monthly mentoring meetings to attend, where volunteers were given a paper version of the survey, after ensuring informed consent. The paper survey responses were gathered and entered into an Excel template by a local staff member. A local staff member translated qualitative responses into English in

the same template. Multiple choice responses were analysed in Excel, and qualitative findings were analysed using emergent coding in Excel.

### **Accountability and learning**

Surveys completed in six countries (Burundi, Haiti, Malawi, Rwanda, Zambia, Zimbabwe) in the HOPE International network that gathered feedback from 1,068 volunteers provided fresh insight into the experience of volunteers. HOPE learned that faith is a key motivation to volunteer, and opportunities to preach and grow spiritually are key drivers of enjoyment in the ministry. For example, in Rwanda, 75%



of surveyed volunteers shared they decided to volunteer in response to a calling from God, or to serve God or the church. In Malawi, 56% of volunteers shared that what they enjoyed most was preaching the Gospel or growing spiritually.

The team summarised results into reports, which were progressively shared with different audiences and updated based on discussion and feedback. For example, in Burundi, the local HOPE team engaged church partner staff in a meeting to review findings. The team used participatory methods to facilitate discussions of findings and asking staff what resonated, surprised, encouraged, or challenged them. They also discussed opportunities to refine the process in the future. After identifying key themes, and developing an action plan the team shared them with volunteers in their monthly mentoring meetings. Following review with local staff and partners, HOPE Central Service staff reviewed the findings. The findings brought the realities of volunteers to the forefront, and the data has informed new initiatives, grant proposals, donor communication, and industry discussions. Finally, the survey itself was shared with other programs in the network to be adapted and administered locally.

### **Pandemic adjustments**

HOPE paused existing listening, monitoring, and evaluation activities at the beginning of the pandemic to focus on the most relevant questions during this time and adapt the means of gathering information, both of which shifted significantly in light of COVID-19. With most field visits cancelled, HOPE designed an entirely new monitoring system. Rather than hiring third-party enumerators for independent listening, HOPE leveraged existing relationships with staff

and volunteers engaged in the savings group ministry and used listening as an opportunity to reinforce and deepen relationships. Details for the monitoring system were determined in partnership between program leaders, local staff, and the listening, monitoring, and evaluation team. This included sampling considerations, translation, and any adaptations or additions to core questions.

### **Pandemic data collection and analysis**

HOPE uses existing ministry structures to understand the realities on the ground, and that did not change during the pandemic. What did change was the use of telephones to gather information rather than in-person meetings. Sampling considerations varied by program, taking into account the logistical challenges of limited in-person gatherings and, at times, limited signal for phone calls. Local staff and church partners analysed quantitative data using dashboards automatically populated and updated in Microsoft Forms. Local staff were trained to segment findings via further analysis in Excel, and staff at the head office analysed this information at a network-level to track trends over time, document key findings, and respond.

### **Pandemic accountability and learning**

Results were first reviewed by local program teams, and then shared with regional and network leaders of the savings group ministry. Local teams shared results with church partners to inform responses locally. Results were also shared externally with supporters, and sector networks. Through these listening exercises, the HOPE International team learned that a large majority of savings groups continued meeting throughout the pandemic, many adapting to abide by social distancing guidelines. In



response, HOPE developed and rolled out a toolkit to help groups adhere to best practices for social distancing and hygiene during the pandemic.

### Lessons learned

#### Learning from pandemic listening

Through the pandemic listening process, ministry leaders were equipped as listeners to gather systematic feedback, the church was equipped with a better understanding of the lived realities of groups in light of the pandemic, and HOPE staff were equipped with information to use to respond. Through Microsoft Forms, the feedback loop for entering findings and accessing summary graphs was instant. In addition, deeper analysis of both quantitative and qualitative feedback provided rich insight. These factors

led to listening more quickly and on a larger scale than ever before within the savings group ministry. Program leaders shared how this turnaround time led to a deeper sense of connection and real-time awareness. Challenges included standardisation across diverse contexts and balancing the desire for streamlined training and analysis while honouring different realities.

#### Impartiality

Many of the suggested best practices for conducting MEAL recommend finding impartial enumerators or evaluators to gather information. While this is important, it can often lead organisations to undervalue what can be learned when those with the closest relationships are engaged in listening. Depending on the questions being studied or researched, engaging those with trusted relationships may be more cost effective and provide for a better overall experience without sacrificing the quality of learning. In both examples above, the importance of impartiality and trust were considered together when determining who should be engaged in gathering the information.