



With you in the storm

The role of the local church in building resilience

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📷 Photo: Kopila Aryal digs for a potato from her field as part of a women's agricultural group in Bhaltar, Nepal. Potatoes are more able to cope with increasing water scarcity brought on by climate change than other crop staples such as rice or maize. *Credit: Tom Price/Tearfund*

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Foreword

The world has changed greatly over the past few decades with more frequent storms, tropical cyclones, floods, droughts, earthquakes, wildfires and pandemics. Sadly, the vulnerable, including those living in poverty, experience the brunt of the impact of these events. But they have not been forgotten: the church and other faith-based organisations (FBOs) are championing the cause of the vulnerable and stepping in to lend a helping hand.

The gravity of the situation demands a strong, cohesive and collaborative response that will safeguard people's lives and livelihoods. The church and other FBOs have proven themselves to be invaluable in disaster risk reduction (DRR) and resilience building measures, particularly at the community level. They have the respect of communities and, therefore, influence on the need for responding to the growing threats that hazards pose. FBOs also provide important social functions, including spiritual support and counselling to deal with the impact of hazards and disasters. They are also advocates for the needs of people and communities, and can help to bring about awareness of consequential issues such as climate change.

In producing this paper, Tearfund is providing evidence to support the call for greater involvement of FBOs in decision-making processes at all levels. The insights and inroads that FBOs can and do make cannot be overlooked in this new paradigm. I therefore encourage policymakers, governments and anyone involved in DRR to be deliberate and strategic in engaging with and consulting FBOs as primary stakeholders in DRR. To do otherwise is to rob people of the kinds of support that are needed more and more, particularly in the face of the growing climate and environmental crises.

Le-Anne Roper, Co-Chair of the Executive Committee of the Warsaw International Mechanism for Loss and Damage associated with Climate Change and senior technical officer for adaptation with the Climate Change Division (CCD) of Jamaica's Ministry of Economic Growth and Job Creation.

Acronyms and abbreviations

CBO	Community-based organisation
DFID	Department for International Development
DRR	Disaster risk reduction
EFZ	Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe
FBO	Faith-based organisation
LFC	Local faith community
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
SFDRR	Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction
SHG	Self-help group
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Contents

Aims of this paper	6
Local experience – churches’ global potential to strengthen resilience	8
The church's role in resilience	9
Seven ways in which churches contribute significantly to disaster risk reduction	12
Findings from Tearfund's work across the world	15
Next steps	19

Aims of this paper

This paper aims to:

1. Highlight the work of local churches as key actors in disaster risk reduction (DRR) and resilience building.

It does this by:

- using existing evidence to identify opportunities, gaps and challenges
- collecting further evidence
- generating discussion and engagement among peer agencies
- informing and influencing different stakeholder groups
- encouraging church involvement in DRR and collaboration with aid and development organisations

2. Promote research and discussion.

This paper is part of Tearfund's ongoing programme of research and discussion on the role of churches in resilience and DRR. It builds on Tearfund's long experience of supporting local churches to manage shocks and stresses in disaster-prone areas. Unfortunately, evidence on the roles played by the local church in DRR and resilience building is rarely used to inform decision-making by donors, governments, international organisations or other peer non-religious agencies; nor do such organisations necessarily encourage the local church to consider itself a key actor in DRR and resilience. This 'application gap' needs to be overcome.

In response to this, the findings from this work will help to reinforce the existing evidence base of activities carried out by local churches in disaster management and DRR, raise their profile as key DRR actors, and make the case for greater inclusion of churches and other faith-based organisations (FBOs) in resilience building.

3. Influence international decision makers.¹

This compelling evidence demonstrating the roles and impact of the local church in DRR and resilience building has significant potential. Such 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 local churches to consider themselves the world's largest network of civil society actors in DRR and resilience.

¹ Particularly international organisations 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.

The global potential of churches to strengthen resilience

‘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.’

Community member
Rusape, Zimbabwe

This example, taken from a case study of the work of Tearfund partner Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe, illustrates the positive impact that local churches can make in vulnerable communities. While it is important to consider whether such examples are isolated or indicative of a broader picture, one thing is certain: **the scale of the global church means that it has the potential to be one of the largest actors in increasing disaster resilience.**

In many countries, most of the population engages in some form of religious and faith-based practice on a regular basis. 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

The church has range and diversity

Faith-based organisations and local faith communities vary in form, structure and outreach. UNAIDS (2009) distinguished three main types: (1) informal social groups or local faith communities (eg local women’s or youth groups); (2) formal worshipping communities with an organised hierarchy and leadership (eg major religious faith groupings and sub-divisions of organised religions); and (3) independent faith-influenced NGOs (eg Islamic Relief, Christian Aid, Misereor). They also include faith-linked networks.

Local churches can influence society significantly

Faith and religion are central to DRR and sustainable development. 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.⁴ They are often able to:

² [Pew Research Center \(2012\). The global religious landscape](#)

³ The World Bank defines faith-based organisations (FBOs) as ‘entities dedicated to specific religious identities, often including a social or moral component’ [Faith Based and Religious Organizations \(worldbank.org\)](#). The Bank recognises 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 UNDP guidelines on engaging with faith-based organisations and religious leaders (UNDP, 2014).

- deliver services and mobilise support because they are often already integrated into their communities and have the respect of local and national authorities
- reach the most vulnerable with assistance and information, and to identify those most in need
- 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
- help to strengthen resilience and reinforce the social fabric of communities disrupted by disasters

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030 (SFDRR), endorsed by the UN General Assembly in 2015, calls for an inclusive and accessible 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.⁵

The church's role in resilience

Facilitating community action

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, materials and practical guidance
- advocacy
- peacemaking
- carrying out risk, vulnerability and capacity assessments

Church and community buildings often provide important refuges, shelters and places to store emergency supplies.⁶

⁵ 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.

⁶ Crooks B, Mouradian J, 2011. *Disasters and the local church: guidelines for church leaders in disaster-prone areas*. Teddington: Tearfund.

Collaborating during health crises

The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated the significant efforts of churches, local faith communities (LFCs) and faith-based organisations (FBOs) in responding to health crises. By sharing clear, evidence-based steps to prevent Covid-19, churches and FBOs promote good practices and reassure 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, including sharing information about health and hygiene practices, challenging misinformation and overcoming vaccine hesitancy. 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.⁷

Shifting power toward the local

The 'localisation agenda' to shift power in the humanitarian system should include national and local faith actors and affiliated groups, which are often first responders in emergencies 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 also challenging their own assumptions about who local faith actors are (Wilkinson et al. 2022).

Partnering with faith-based actors

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 FBOs and LFCs, to support disaster preparedness, response and recovery. For example, the United Nations Development Programme (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.⁸

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has produced guidance on engaging with, reaching out to and partnering with FBOs, local faith communities and faith leaders.⁹ 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.

Providing a Christian theological perspective

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 to human flourishing. Indeed, the Christian faith comes with a biblical mandate to help people living in poverty and to tackle inequality and injustice.

⁷ WHO strategy for engaging religious leaders, faith-based organisations and faith communities in health emergencies. Geneva: World Health Organization (2021)

⁸ UNDP (2014). *UNDP guidelines on engaging with faith-based organizations and religious leaders*.

⁹ UNHCR (2014). *Partnership note on faith-based organizations, local faith communities and faith leaders*.

Christian theology and faith groups endorse and contribute to several of the Sustainable Development Goals (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 earth.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

Tearfund's research and findings

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

A global literature review in 2019¹² 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

The review described how churches support their members and wider communities, and how they connect with other actors (eg local governments, NGOs, other faith communities, civil society and the private sector) in accessing goods and services, and advocating on behalf of those vulnerable to hazards.

[Findings from work among communities and local faith actors in Zimbabwe and the Philippines](#) in 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.

¹⁰ See Nordstokke K, *The Sustainability Book: a Christian faith perspective on the Sustainable Development Goals* (sdgbook.com)

¹¹ sdgs.un.org/2030agenda

¹² [Twigg, J. \(2019\). The role of local churches in resilience building: A review of published evidence of the roles played by churches across the different phases of the disaster cycle. Tearfund](#)



Seven ways in which churches contribute significantly to disaster risk reduction

1

Churches help strengthen social connections and resolve conflicts

Churches and church leaders often have strong relationships within communities (bonding), between communities (bridging) and with outside actors (linking). This enables them to mitigate and respond to hazards, shocks and stresses.

‘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, Zimbabwe

2

Churches access resources from a range of networks

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.’

Community member
Rusape, Zimbabwe

3

Churches challenge unhelpful beliefs about disasters

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.'

Church member
Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe

4

Churches bring hope in times of stress

The church is a healing community. Churches and clergy provide psychosocial support, meeting emotional and spiritual, as well as practical, needs. 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 provide a structure to this work but it has always been the role of the church to address these.'

Community member
Rusape, Zimbabwe

5

Churches raise awareness of risks and advocate for change

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 can make communities more aware of weather related hazards, such as approaching storms or the onset of drought.

6

Churches are present before, during and after disasters

The church is a community asset, a permanent presence in communities, and has a 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, Zimbabwe

7

Churches have resources that can help in times of crisis

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.’

Church member
Zimbabwe

Most writing on churches and disasters focuses on preparedness and response; less is known about long-term recovery. For instance, drought and famine mitigation receive much less attention than rapid-onset disasters. And 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
- the influence of different enabling environments on church involvement in DRR

Local churches may also face challenges and constraints on their DRR activities: for example, interference from local politicians seeking to take the credit for church-driven improvements, and lack of relevant disaster preparedness and response skills among church leaders.

Findings from Tearfund's work across the world



📷 Women from the Marange community weeding their sugar bean crop in the community garden, supported by ARDEZ, the Anglican Relief and Development wing of the church in Zimbabwe. The crop is a short seasoned variety that can thrive well in drought conditions becoming more prevalent with climate change. The farmers use the bean in their field as live mulch. Photo: ARDEZ

Zimbabwe

The Zimbabwe study (covering five villages) 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 church activities have led to a shift in community perceptions of the church's role in resilience building. It is increasingly recognised as an institution of material relief as well as spiritual salvation, and hence leading to greater community cohesion – a key outcome of the resilience building activities. The church also has support from community leaders and village development committees.

Improved income from activities has contributed to household-level improvements, especially in nutrition. Community members 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 could 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. The [Bridge Builder Model](#) developed by Tearfund and partners provides tools and methods to bring together local faith actors and international humanitarian actors to improve understanding, trust, coordination and collaboration.



📷 PHILRADS, the relief and development arm of the Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches, were one of a five member consortium in the Philippines who responded to the Abra Earthquake in August 2022 – help included life-saving kits, as well as psychosocial support, temporary shelter, cash assistance and child protection training – financed by START Fund.

Photo: PHILRADS

Philippines

In the Philippines, which is exposed and vulnerable to a variety of major hazards and risks, churches show 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 are engaged in livelihood support, disaster preparedness and building DRR capacity, with a growing shift in emphasis from response to preparedness.

Churches' roles relating to DRR include:

- 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
- awareness raising and advocacy

NGOs and individuals go to churches for assistance because they are 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.

Conclusions

This paper demonstrates the significant impact that churches can have on DRR and resilience building. The evidence from these findings is powerful when we consider its potential to influence international decision makers and encourage them to partner with local churches and faith communities. This will empower local churches to start mobilising as the world's largest network of civil society actors in building resilience. The potential for church and community transformation is vast.

It is important to bear in mind, though, that knowledge gaps persist. For instance, evidence is not uniformly available across different types of hazard or geography. And different expressions of 'church' and church networks will likely have diverging approaches stemming from distinct histories and theologies. Further study is also needed on the role of gender and inclusion as well as the enabling environments conducive to church engagement. However, despite these limitations, the evidence in support of the church's role in DRR and resilience building is compelling.

Recommendations

Involve faith leaders, faith-based organisations (FBOs) and local faith communities (LFCs) in disaster risk reduction and disaster management, as noted in the Faith Based Organisations' statement to the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction in May 2022.¹³

1. Acknowledge that FBOs and LFCs play an invaluable role in the Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Adaptation dialogue - in strategy development, policy making and implementation.
2. Work with and promote collaborative networks of LFCs and FBOs to engage in resilience strengthening by encouraging local agency and integrating local knowledge in implementation plans, helping to contextualise DRR policy, guidelines and approaches.
3. Collaborate with FBOs and LFCs to promote risk informed development to address climate change, pandemic risk, conflict and other forms of disaster risk, through strengthening social capital and social safety nets and recognizing the role FBOs and LFCs already play in risk communication and community engagement.
4. Involve FBOs and LFCs with their expertise in community mobilisation and capacity building to help governments to bridge the gap between resilience strengthening policies and putting those policies into practice.
5. Share evidence and insights from FBO and LFC learning and practice to stimulate further partnerships, engagement and mobilisation.

Carry out further research. This report has highlighted several evidence gaps for the roles of local churches in DRR, that Tearfund and others should explore through further field study. In particular:

¹³ [7th Session of the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction: Faith Based Organisations' Joint statement, May 2022](#), signed by 34 agencies

6. **In Africa and with slow onset crises.** There is a lack of high quality evidence in Africa for the role of local churches in responding to crises that develop more slowly, such as droughts or changing rainfall patterns brought on by climate change.¹⁴
7. **On differences in approaches to DRR between different Christian denominations and congregations around the world.** Are there particular denominations or faith communities that have done more in DRR and how is this linked to their faith tradition, history and context?
8. **On how gender and inclusion attitudes and practices are addressed by churches and faith-based organisations when managing disaster risk.** How much are at-risk groups recognised and given a voice in managing risk? How much do faith groups explore and address forms of social, economic and political exclusion that give rise to disaster vulnerability?
9. **On the influence of different enabling environments on church involvement in DRR.** What are the factors that make church involvement more likely?

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¹⁴ See [BOND Evidence principles](#) for ways of assessing the quality of evidence