

Emergency response – engaging the local church

An in-depth case study from North Kenya

1. Summary

Local church leaders can play a key role in addressing life-threatening issues facing their communities if agencies help to mobilise and facilitate them in appropriate ways.

2. What level of intervention is this case study focused on?

- local church level and between churches of different denominations
- local community leaders
- government level.

3. Who could be prospective users of the approach modelled in this case study?

NGOs, International NGOs and other third parties who believe local churches have a contribution to make in addressing the critical issues facing their communities.

4. Problem addressed

The problem was that local evangelical churches had no understanding, vision or skills to deal with issues of drought, HIV and AIDS and conflict which their people faced.

5. Purpose of the intervention

The purpose of the intervention was to ensure that local evangelical churches, through envisioned leaders, made their distinctive contribution to addressing pressing issues that faced their people in a drought situation, and encouraging the churches to work with other agencies and institutions in the process.

6. Context

Marsabit is in the Eastern Province of Kenya. It is the second largest district in the country with an area of 66,000 sq km and an estimated population of 125,000. Approximately 75 per cent of the area is classified as Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASAL). It is vulnerable to droughts and it suffered particularly severely in 2004-5. This resulted in malnutrition levels exceeding emergency thresholds and livestock losses of up to 70 per cent. Marsabit has three categories of livelihood: pastoral, agro-pastoral and formal employment/business. The majority of people, however, are pastoralists keeping mixed herds of goats, camel and cattle. Scarcity of resources, especially water and pasture, has caused disputes between tribes, in particular the Rendille and Gabbra, concerning the water source called Yel at Beleisa Bura. Each tribe claims that Yel is in its territory. Marsabit has high levels of poverty and insecurity and low levels of education. HIV incidence in the district stands at 2.1 per cent (2004-5).

There is a small Christian population and it is spread across a number of small churches drawn from different denominations. Government structures exist, with civil servants, a judiciary and the police in place. Elected politicians and traditional tribal elders represent the people. Infrastructure is poor and distances between centres are great. Only a few NGOs work in the area.

7. History and process

Tearfund's Disaster Management Team (DMT) started its North Kenya Programme in June 2006, with ten operational areas in Korr and Loiyangalani Divisions, Marsabit District. It carried out health, nutrition and community mobilisation activities. One of DMT's objectives was to build relationships of trust and understanding with local churches, encouraging them to serve and engage with the issues in their community. To this end, a Church Mobilisation Officer (CMO) was appointed in November 2006, six months after the start of the programme. His instructions were to build the capacity of local churches to be involved in a response to the drought. The CMO's post and the programme ended in September 2007.

Case studies in depth

The CMO worked with 13 local congregations from six church denominations. The denominations were: The African Inland Church (AIC); the Pentecostal Evangelical Fellowship of Africa (PEFA); the Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK); Trinity Baptist (TB); the Roman Catholic Church (RC) and the International Presbyterian Mission (IPM). Generally speaking, the churches understood the focus of DMT's work to be humanitarian aid, whereas their own focus was purely a spiritual one. They assumed that responding to an emergency required significant resources and skills which they did not have. So, as well as having different priorities, they could not see how they could make a relevant contribution to situations facing their communities.

Within DMT, the CMO had access to staff with expertise in DRR (Disaster Risk Reduction) activities and HIV and AIDS. Also, the CMO had access to another division of Tearfund's international work, separate from the DMT management structure – the Christian Community Services wing of the Diocese of Mount Kenya East (CCS-MKE). This was particularly important for peace-building.

The government established Community Peace Committees (CPC) where mediation over disputes in the community now takes place. These committees are made up of tribal elders, elected politicians, officials and religious leaders, among them Muslim and Catholic representatives. These committees had no Protestant representation prior to 2007.

8. Steps in implementation

1. (November 2006 - February 2007). The first task of the CMO was to build good relationships with the leaders of the 13 local church congregations in Korr and Loiyanglani Divisions, where DMT worked. He had to correct the view of some who thought that DMT was not a Christian agency, that it had a different plan and that there were no practical ways in which they could support one another. The CMO set out to do this by: (1) visiting the pastors and church leaders in their communities, often travelling long distances to do so; (2) inviting the pastors to lead DMT's morning prayers on a regular basis at its various site locations; and (3) encouraging DMT staff to attend Sunday worship at the pastors' churches and offer to help in whatever way they could. It took over four months to build this foundation of respect and understanding, before they could look at some options for the future.

2. (March 2007) The principal challenge was making pastors aware of the key role they and their churches could play in dealing with the needs of their communities. Once trust had been established, the CMO brought the pastors together to discuss 'the role of the local church in advocacy and disaster risk reduction'. By the end of these meetings, they identified a series of issues including: spreading of early warning messages, animal stocking systems before and after the drought, conflict resolution, female genital mutilation, early marriages and environmental conservation. Of these, the priority was the sharing of early warning systems (EWS) – and it was also felt to be something that the church could do something about. As a result, DMT approached the government department that deals with gathering information on EWS. The department discussed with the pastors how their churches could use the monthly EWS bulletin produced for Marsabit District to share information with their congregations from the pulpit. They also discussed how to encourage their congregations to observe signs from plant and bird life and relay signals back to the department to feed into its information systems.

3. (April 2007) Peace-building was another priority for the church leaders. In July 2006, one person had been shot at a water source in Yel and recently a young girl had disappeared. Tensions were rising between the Rendille and the Gabbra. The CMO organised a workshop on conflict resolution for community leaders and church leaders.

4. (May 2007) The CMO then discussed whether or not it was right to create church-based Peace Committees that could send a nominee to the Government's Community Peace Committees. In the end it was decided that the Protestant churches should join forces and nominate representatives onto the Community Peace Committee (CPC), as the Catholics do with their Catholic Justice and Peace Commission (CJPC).

5. (June 2007) When the church leaders had agreed to this and had chosen representatives, the CMO had to ask the government and the local chiefs to let them be included in the CPC. He met with initial resistance from the chiefs who felt that the existing church representation of four on a committee of 24 was sufficient. They were worried about having to negotiate with a strengthened church powerbase, which eventually increased to ten out of an official number of 30 with Protestant representation.

6. (July 2007) The CMO discovered that, although the matter was not talked about openly, there was increasing concern about HIV and AIDS. He invited DMT staff to carry out basic training on the subject. A follow-up workshop was held in September where church leaders agreed to increase awareness by talking about it at Sunday services. They also urged members of the congregation to visit the Voluntary Counselling and Testing centres at the district headquarters or other satellite locations.

7. (August 2007) It became clear that the dispute at Yel could not be effectively addressed without links with the Gabbra, who lived outside DMT's operational area. The CMO contacted CCS-MKE, a Tearfund partner. CCS had close connections with churches among the Gabbra. It was agreed that DMT would assist CCS in conflict resolution training in July in Maikona District. However, this had to be postponed until August.

Case studies in depth

8. (Sept 2007) Initiated by DMT and CCS, Rendille and Gabbra leaders were brought together, along with government officials and representatives of the Peace Committees. The resolution at the close of the meeting was that, unless clear maps of the disputed areas were drawn up, conflicts would continue. The government pledged to tackle this critical issue.

9. (End of September 2007) The CMO post came to an end.

9. Duration of the CMO-run programme

Ten months: November 2006 to September 2007.

10. Resources required for the programme

Financial • Operational expenses of 56,000 Ks, with an additional 160,000 Ks sanctioned for the September peace talks

Assets • A base from which to hold workshops

Human • Expertise in local conflict resolution approaches
• The willingness of local churches with different denominational and ethnic allegiances to trust one another

11. Indicators for monitoring

1. The length of time set aside at the beginning of the process to build up relationships with local church leaders
2. The degree to which pastors have confidence in the motives and agenda of the NGO
3. The degree to which all parties (churches, local authorities etc) can identify and agree on overriding problems that they need to address.
4. The degree to which church leaders realise that they do have a role to play in solving problems
5. The ease with which churches from different denominations are able to nominate representatives to join wider bodies
6. Attendance at forums and the follow-up of action plans drawn up at these forums.

12. Impact

1. The pastors have a new understanding and commitment to taking an active part in addressing community issues.
2. They have established good relationships with pastors of other churches.
3. They have engaged and pressed the government to address core issues of concern to them.
4. Government and other representative groups now have to work with a strengthened church presence in the Peace Committees.
5. A local Tearfund partner organisation, CCS-MKE, can pursue the peace-building agenda. (DMT no longer operates in the area).

13. Challenges

1. Large distances between churches in the programme area. It would have been easy for the INGO to give greater attention to churches close to its base.
2. Convincing small churches that they have a role to play in making a difference to significant large-scale and on-going problems.
3. The tendency of churches, especially evangelical ones, to have an exclusive mindset. The challenge is to encourage them to engage and network with others who do not hold the same values or doctrines.
4. The possibility that the people may voice one set of preferences and the agency may have others. Finding activities that satisfy both agendas is a significant challenge.
5. The cost of peace-building. Donors, however, are cautious about approving budgets for such items as travel and accommodation for delegates attending peace forums.
6. The complexity of peace-building. There are many vertical decision-making centres at different levels of the hierarchy of an ethnic group. There are also many decision-making centres that overlap between ethnic groups, government officials and politicians occupying the same territory. Involving all these interest groups in the process at the points where they can assert influence is an extremely complex task.

14. Critical issues and lessons learnt

1. At the start of a programme, the outside agency, such as DMT, must carry out a baseline survey of the churches in its operational area. It cannot be assumed that churches share common approaches and that relationships between them are good. This assessment should be led by the head of the programme.
2. Once it is clear who the agency is to work with and on what conditions, then the CMO can begin the task of building trust into these relationships. The time spent on relationship-building – in this case, four months – may feel a time-consuming luxury, but it is time well spent.
3. The fact that the CMO was a pastor himself was a significant bonus to achieving good trusting relationships with the churches.
4. Interventions based on the church pastors' priorities were the ones most enthusiastically pursued.
5. Church leaders need to be local people. This enables them to have greater credibility in the negotiation forums, as they can speak for their people even though they may belong to one or other group.
6. A ten-month intervention by the CMO is too short to change attitudes. An opportunity to accompany pastors over a longer period in action and reflection is needed. Follow-up on the work done on EWS and HIV and AIDS, for instance, was cut short as a result. The peace-building process has been left in the hands of another agency.
7. The NGO's area of operation may not match the geographical scope of the issue that it is trying to tackle, in this case the dispute around the water source at Yel. The lesson is therefore either for the NGO to address an issue where all relevant parties reside in its area of operation, or, as in this case, to link with a like-minded agency (CCS-MKE) that has the trust of one of the parties located outside its area.
8. It is important for an outside agency responding to an emergency to have a clear exit strategy. Engaging with the local church, in this case, was such a strategy. Linking with CCS-MKE was another. However, when the time comes to leave, after 18 months in this case, it is important that the issues identified are ones that local partners have vision and capacity to take forward. There should also be other local agencies to help them accomplish the task.
9. Evangelical churches, because they are smaller and fragmented, will be left out of peace initiatives unless they collaborate with one another and, as one body, ask to be included.

15. Potential for replication

The approach outlined in this case study can best be replicated in contexts where:

- there is a specialised International NGO or local NGO committed to engaging with local evangelical churches to enable them to respond to a disaster situation
- the agency has an appropriate budget and the necessary expertise to pursue this objective
- there is commitment at the highest level of the agency to allow this engagement with local church the 'space' to develop at its own pace. Churches must not be forced to adopt the agency's agenda
- the churches are willing to work with others that do not hold to the same values and doctrine as themselves
- the churches identify an issue which is of great importance to them all
- the churches are accompanied by the agency for a minimum of two years.

16. Sources of information

Joseph Kiminza (Church Mobilisation Officer, DMT Tearfund North Kenya Programme)
Tearfund North Kenya Programme Monthly Operations Reports (November 2006 - August 2007)
Church Mobilisation Final Report (Tearfund DMT North Kenya Programme November 2006 - October 2007)

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