

Leaving and learning



Two activists embrace in KwaMashu, an informal settlement north of Durban, South Africa. The Church Land Programme, works closely with the shack-dweller movement (Abahlali baseMjondolo) so that people in KwaMashu can live without fear of being evicted from their shack homes. Photo Credit: Simon Hutchinson, Irish Methodist World Development & Relief

Introduction

In 2019 Christian Aid made the decision to close twelve of its country programmes and commissioned a series of six 'learning reviews' to deepen understanding and capture insights from our experiences in six of the countries that Christian Aid was exiting. The learning reviews were carried out during 2020, and these were some of the questions we set out to explore:

- What can we learn by looking back over the long-term?
- How does the role of a partnership organisation adapt and respond to different national civil society contexts?
- How has Christian Aid worked with partners in different contexts to foster innovation and what can be learnt from this?
- How can our partnership approach and collaboration be best adapted to the needs of different civil society contexts so that we are facilitating the development of national and local organisations?

Reflections from that learning are summarised in this briefing and in a series of six in-depth country reports.



Key learnings

The reviews identify important issues for international NGOs to consider. Developing a partnership approach that supports and strengthens national civil society partners requires us to:

- Meet partners at their point of need
- Broker new relationships, ideas and approaches and encourage linkages
- Use our unrestricted funds strategically, to enable innovation, managed risk and as leverage.

Looking forward we should further explore:

- How to transfer learning across contexts, especially where civil society is radically different in different countries?
- What roles and contributions we should make as global actors to national civil society?
- How to ensure that the localisation agenda really shifts power?

The learning reviews

The learning reviews were not evaluations or impact assessments, but instead focused on understanding key elements of our legacy in different contexts. In each country we reviewed a range of documents, conducted semi-structured interviews, and occasional focus group discussions. Three reviews (Angola, Ghana and the Philippines) involved country visits, which included 'community level' engagement and direct interaction with programme participants. Interviews for three other reviews (Brazil, Guatemala and South Africa) were conducted online as they took place after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, and it was not possible to incorporate programme participant perspectives.

Each country review focuses on a theme relevant to that particular context, while also addressing the wider cross-cutting question of how Christian Aid adapts its partnership approach to different contexts. Christian Aid had been working in these countries for a long time, some for as many as 60 years. Reflecting over the long-term allowed us to understand more about the dynamic nature of the process of developing, and sustaining partnerships.

Through exploring the different trajectories of Christian Aid's programmes in diverse national environments, each of which had experienced their own political, economic and social changes, we have been able to learn more about our role in and contribution to different development processes. This has helped us to identify key questions to inform our thinking and practice looking forward. Such learning is particularly important as we consider our particular strengths and efforts to shift power in the development sector to local or national organisations. We have always emphasised the importance of working with and building the capacity of local and national civil society partners. Such action becomes even more important to us, and the wider development sector, as we reflect on the impact of Covid-19 on our ability to collaborate globally to respond to the pandemic and to ensure any Covid-19 recovery has justice and equality at its heart.

What we learnt

We have long recognised that poverty and inequality look different in different contexts, and our programmatic approach and ambition needs to be responsive as a result. Different civil society traditions, strengths and challenges also emerge differently in different contexts, and partners and partner needs change as this context evolves. But the nature of civil society in any given context determines the type(s) of organisation we can partner with, the focus of the partnership, including any capacity development interventions, and the dynamics of the relationship. The reviews suggested key themes to consider and understand, which are discussed on the following pages.

Country contexts and focus

The six country studies cover the following themes and countries:

- **Angola:** strengthening civil society in a context where 'simply staying alive as a civil society organization is a victory' through engagement with faith-based organisations and human rights organisations.
- **Brazil:** challenging governments' restrictions on civil society and growing social and religious ultra-conservatism by working with social and progressive ecumenical movements.
- **Ghana:** working long-term on tax justice by supporting government capacity to improve revenue collection systems and with civil society to scrutinise budgets and monitor expenditure. More recently it has also focused on developing more inclusive markets so that people living in poverty can access new markets.
- **Guatemala:** bringing together six of the eight sister agencies of the ACT Alliance family to form a joint programme ACTuando Juntos (Jotay), which seeks to support people to organise and empower themselves, and demand their rights for sustainable development, justice and equality.
- **South Africa:** providing financial support and acting in solidarity, including mobilising in the UK during the apartheid era and, more recently, collaborating to challenge economic injustice and redefining north-south power relations through developing ACT Ubumbano, a network of Southern African and European organisations, working for economic, gender and environmental justice.
- **The Philippines:** building climate resilience working with its strong and vocal civil society, in collaboration with government, the private sector and scientists. Due to the frequency, extent and range of natural disasters, this evolved into a focus on building the capacity of local organisations to respond to humanitarian disasters and strengthening the coordination capacity of the sector to enable a locally led humanitarian response.

The vibrancy, scale and maturity of civil society

Civil society organisations are plentiful in some countries, including in Brazil, South Africa and the Philippines, which all have long traditions of organising and mobilising at the grassroots and engaging at the national level on policy influencing. In these contexts, Christian Aid was able to partner with a wide range of organisations working at local, national and regional/global levels. We added value by brokering new and different relationships, engaging in systems change and enabling innovation and experimentation by encouraging knowledge exchange and co-creation.

Building partnerships in the Philippines to adapt to climate change meant developing new ways of understanding, thinking and acting across sectors, actors, discourses and geographies. It involved working with unlikely allies, to create a 'whole of society' approach to climate resilience. Key to Christian Aid Philippines' (CAPHL) success was its ability to stay in the background and broker new relationships between scientists and grassroots communities, private sector and people's organisations, and between government

and climate activists. By working in this way CAPHL was able to gain different perspectives, support and enhance partners' agendas and work leading to concrete changes in disaster risk management and adaptation to climate change.

In other contexts, such as Angola, civil society is more constrained. There are fewer and less diverse organisations and the organisations themselves are less well connected to each other. This encouraged Christian Aid to adopt a different strategic approach focused on working with churches and ecumenical organisations, and human rights organisations (see Angola box).

The relationship between civil society and government

The country programmes we closed had evolved working under a number of different governments with different approaches to civil society ranging from participatory and inclusive policymaking, to controlling legislative space and limiting civil society activity. The focus and potential for national economic growth and development was also variable. Country teams and partners adapted their programmes and the way they

Philippines: developing a locally led humanitarian agenda

It is the humble way you [Christian Aid] work. You are not seeking profile or visibility, you work quietly in the background, convening, influencing and taking on risk.

Head of United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in the Philippines

The localisation agenda, a term used to refer to the process of shifting humanitarian response resources from international actors to local and national actors, became a buzzword in the humanitarian system following the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. Since then, much of the focus at the global level has been on increasing the direct flow of humanitarian funding to national non-governmental organisations (NGOs), with some attention on promoting and strengthening the capacity of local actors.

For Christian Aid localisation was very much an extension of our approach to partnership working. In the Philippines the country programme expressed concerns about an approach that had emerged globally and asked what the national implications were and how it could become meaningful in practice?

The international response to the devastation caused by Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 brought in countless international actors new to the Philippines, crowding out the national space, and undermining local partners' ability to set the humanitarian response agenda. CAPHL recognised therefore that shifting power in humanitarian response needed to move beyond simply involving local actors, who might be just implementing and delivering priorities set globally.

CAPHL felt it needed to engage with the politics of emergency response and adopt a 'whole-of-society' approach. This approach included: building the capacity of individual civil society partners to undertake humanitarian assessments and respond, while also ensuring that they had a voice at the table to influence operational decision making and resource allocation. CAPHL helped develop three platforms: a national platform of civil society organisations (CSOs) with representation at UN humanitarian coordination meetings; an advocacy platform, which advocated for the implementation of Grand Bargain commitments; and a legally constituted network that directly received humanitarian funds.

These initiatives were supported by ongoing capacity development to better enable CSOs to assert their perspective in these national-level debates. CAPHL's ability to take such a strategic approach to localisation was due to its historic approach to partnership and previous learning on power, and working across sectors, discourse and levels to encourage greater collaboration and impact.

Angola: linking faith and rights

We believe that there would be no peace in Angola without the churches, and that there would have been no democracy – understood as freedom of expression, association and participation – without human rights organisations.

Christian Aid Angola Country Manager

Churches have a presence at community level across Angola. During Angola's long civil war they were instrumental in carrying out humanitarian relief, peace building and community development. However, as democratic spaces opened up in the country they were not always well positioned or able to challenge inequality or national governance issues.

Human rights organisations are relatively new in Angola. They often struggle with wider public acceptance and have limited presence outside the capital. By working with both types of organisations Christian Aid Angola was able to bridge both worlds: building from the widespread base of the church to build trust locally, and working with human rights organisations to bring the political analysis. It was able to link local to national level work, and work collectively with faith and human rights organisations to shift policy and practice, as each organisation strengthened each other's legitimacy, narratives and actions.

Ghana: strategic implementation

When Christian Aid Ghana (CAG) developed its Growing Economic Opportunities for Sustainable Development consortium (GEOP), it recognised that being the invisible partner within a programme of work can limit funding opportunities and reduce its impact.

Reflecting on this, CAG became a strategic implementer within the consortium, providing leadership and coordination. It directly implemented programmes in areas where CAG had geographical expertise and access, and led on tax justice work (an area of thematic expertise).

CAG also coordinated high-level national activities to support partner advocacy. The approach enabled CA to build profile and visibility within Ghana, while also strengthening technical expertise and links between local and national organisations within the consortium and ensuring partner space was protected. This hybrid approach was seen as important for both CAG and partner sustainability.

worked in partnership with civil society organisations depending on the nature and possibilities presented by the government of the day, and the wider system of governance. For example, the Ghana programme (see box) adapted its work to focus on private sector development and inclusive markets as a response to the growing potential of the private sector as a development actor in the country. It also continued its tax justice work, working on 'both sides' of the tax equation both to support the government to develop systems of revenue collection while also monitoring public expenditure.

The important role of faith-based organisations

As a faith-based organisation Christian Aid partnered with faith actors in different ways in different contexts. In Angola, the 26-year-long civil war destroyed political and social institutions, and repressive regimes stifled debate, with the country's governance systems remaining one of the most centralised in Africa. There is also extreme inequality. In this context, during and

after the war we partnered with the church, which had widespread reach and citizen support throughout the country (see box).

In Brazil, engagement with faith organisations was based on progressive ecumenical movements which could challenge and engage with regressive interpretations of religion which constrained human (especially women's) rights (see box).

Across the different contexts it appears that ecumenical engagement was more straightforward in majority Catholic countries, whereas in Protestant contexts engagement was more focused on individual faith actors, or the church as an institution. The different roles and vision of faith require different types of relationships, theories of change and expectations of the church as a development actor. It requires a dynamic analysis as context shifts and if conservative pressures take hold nationally.

Theology was also important in many contexts, especially in South Africa, where partners such as the School of Religion and Theology at the University

Brazil: progressive ecumenical movements

Christian Aid helped us have a stronger relationship with the more protestant ecumenical movement. This complemented the relationship that we already had with liberation theology since the 1970s.

Sempreviva Organização Feminista

Brazil has a progressive ecumenical movement rooted in the Latin American social struggles of the 1950s but recently human rights defenders have been under attack and the movement has been rocked by waves of social and religious ultra-conservatism, and the Bolsonaro political agenda. A key dimension of the Christian Aid programme in Brazil was to support partners to create international and ecumenical links, to extend political solidarity and support to national campaigns. The aim was to create space to challenge social norms and behaviour, as well as to confront human rights abuses. For example, faith-based communities, organisations and networks in the Amazon and Ireland, Spain and the UK took action to protect the Amazon and defend human rights – calling for ecumenical organisations to fight fundamentalism in all religions.

South Africa: partners actively influence Christian Aid's analysis and positions

South African partners have been key in forming our positions... [for example] they have been influential in making us think through how illicit financial flows are relevant to communities.

Matti Kohonen, Economic Justice Policy Lead, Christian Aid

Christian Aid's engagement in South Africa was initially shaped in response to the realities of apartheid, supporting Black community groups with 'clandestine' grants, while doing public education work in the UK as part of the anti-apartheid movement. The long history of the programme evolved from an emphasis on anti-apartheid campaigning, including lobbying the UK government, to tackling inequality and economic, environmental and gender injustice as the political situation evolved.

Partnership evolved from 'clandestine' support to Southern African partners actively influencing Christian Aid's own analysis and positions. South African partners were articulate, political, able to hold their own and be influential on the global stage, and expert in theological analysis and practice. This also shaped and guided the relationship with Christian Aid and turned a traditional global partnership relationship on its head. This was clearly illustrated in the emergence of ACT Ubumbano, a network of South African, Southern African and European members, focused on global solidarity, shared analysis, campaigning action and justice, which will carry on even though Christian Aid South Africa has now closed.

of KwaZulu-Natal and the Church Land Programme were influential in how Christian Aid developed its theological thinking. Elsewhere such analysis also underpinned development visions, and the practical application of theological thought across different contexts was important to motivate and connect for social justice action.

The funding environment

Many of the countries Christian Aid has exited from were classed as (lower) middle income countries experiencing an increase in national wealth. This had an impact on donor presence and made it increasingly challenging to secure programme funding. For many of these countries the fundraising challenges had been known for some time and they were exploring alternative approaches.

In the Philippines, for example, there was an ambition to become a regional expert on locally led humanitarian response and to provide regional advice and training on this.

In Guatemala (see box) European members of the ACT Alliance implemented a joint programme with the aim of enabling operational efficiencies and strengthening impact at scale. In Brazil, staff capacity and resources were increasingly used to support national partners to raise their own funds. Across all contexts Christian Aid's core or unrestricted funds were used to provide space to broker and build initial partnerships, to support partners' organisational development and to encourage thematic innovation.

Guatemala: a European partnership in action

A beautiful acrylic painting, with lots of colours marbling but not mixing...

Quote from an ACTuando Juntos interviewee

ACTuando Juntos (Jotay) is a partnership of six of the sister agencies of the ACT Alliance family based in Europe – Bread for the World, Christian Aid, Act Church of Sweden, ICCO Cooperation (now part of CordAid) in the Netherlands, Norwegian Church Aid, and Lutheran World Federation – which aims to unify and strengthen support to Guatemalan civil society, particularly faith-based civil leadership on human rights, while tackling social and ecological injustice. The initial motivation for Jotay was for improved efficiency, scale, and joint fundraising ability. However, there was also a belief that the partnership would enable more joined up advocacy and an ecumenical approach to challenging problems such as gender inequality.

The early years focused on aligning systems, coordination and cooperation, but the focus on organisational systems meant that less attention was focused on delivery.

There remains a tension as to whether Jotay is a partnership of European agencies, or a partnership with Guatemalan civil society, and the extent to which it is, or will, move beyond being a delivery mechanism to become an entity that brings about positive social change. The review suggests that more joint action between partners, collaboration on advocacy and strengthening the faith-based focus of the programme would help the programme move beyond internal operational issues.

Learning from the past to look forward

The learning reviews provided further evidence that partnerships need to be dynamic and responsive to local contexts. However, it also suggested that there are key principles that underpin Christian Aid's approach to partnership and guide our ability to adapt as contexts change.

- **Meeting partners at their point of need.** We collaborate to develop work together to ensure that we are supporting and strengthening partners' agendas, and not imposing ours.
- **Supporting innovation to enable new ideas and approaches.** We create space to learn and innovate, to build each other's skills, capacity and understanding, sometimes bringing our technical knowledge, and at other times bringing in actors with different expertise (such as the role of scientists in the Philippines).
- **Encouraging linkages.** We act as brokers between different types of actors in different settings, enabling knowledge exchange and co-creation, encouraging unlikely actors to collaborate and supporting our local and national partners to identify shared objectives.
- **Using unrestricted funds strategically.** We use this funding strategically to build institutional capacity as a way of enabling more effective and impactful programmes based on partners' own agendas. This funding allows them to innovate and to take on managed risk, or as leverage for new funding.

Key recommendations for other international development organisations

The pandemic has exacerbated an already increasingly challenging context for international non-governmental organisations (INGOs). Looking forward, the reviews suggest some important issues for other INGOs to consider.

- **Secure unrestricted funds to help build strong local partners.** Our reviews showed that funding that is not tied to specific activities and projects was instrumental for supporting partners, especially in the early days of our partnerships, to take risks and fund work unlikely to be funded elsewhere, or for leverage to secure further funding. How can we sustain such funding in a time of tighter resources?
- **Strengthen partners to ensure their financial sustainability.** We need to learn from and develop our partnership approach to ensure that our partners have built the skills and capacity to secure long-term financial sustainability prior to us leaving the partnership. This might involve taking a thematic approach, such as in the Philippines where CAPHL focused on building local organisational capacity so they could better respond to future emergencies caused by the frequent storms that hit the country.
- **Deepen our understanding of our faith-based partners.** In different spaces the emphasis was on building in-depth relationships with the Protestant church or working across the ecumenical movement. Different roles require different theories of change. As a next step we aim to better systematise our understanding of faith-based actors and evolve the way we work with the church as a development actor.

Key questions to explore further

- **How do we transfer learning from experiences across contexts?** To what extent and in which ways can we draw on learning from our experiences in specific country contexts and apply them elsewhere? What do we need to understand and know to enable this? Where partners were able to influence and shape our global advocacy analysis and positions, such as in South Africa, can this approach be replicated in other contexts? How do we adapt our global approach to engage in contexts where civil society is weaker or where despotic governments are stifling debate?
- **What does the future hold for global organisations and INGOs?** National Christian Aid programmes are increasingly able to support local and national partners to raise funds nationally. This is clearly necessary for building sustainable national organisations, but what does this mean for global organisations and INGOs such as Christian Aid in terms of our role and our organisational funding models? What should the role and contribution of INGOs be going forward? How can INGOs continue to play distinct and complementary roles to support national organisations, for example by making visible what is happening nationally, taking solidarity action, or by joining national debates to global ones? Or should we be working to make ourselves redundant? Is this an inevitable and positive eventual next step?

- **How can we ensure that the localisation agenda really shifts power?** Five years on from the World Humanitarian Summit there is a concern that not much has changed. The majority of funds still flow to international actors and, where funding is provided directly to local actors, many fear that the initial political vision of shifting power to local organisations has been replaced by a transfer of northern-dominated accountability and compliance structures, further entrenching a northern-led aid agenda. INGOs will need to reflect on how to re-engage with the politics of localisation.

The movement calling to decolonise the international development sector potentially opens up a new space to respond to these questions, by paying closer attention to the range of power dynamics within the system, who the key actors are, whose knowledge dominates processes, and how historic injustices continue to be perpetuated in current day practice. Engaging with these debates and working to build more equal and empowering partnerships will be crucial as the INGO community re-evaluates its place and its role within the sector.



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