Tackling the needs of people affected by conflict and hunger in Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Nigeria

In the past year, we have been able to continue and improve our work with the World Food Programme on food security, nutrition and livelihoods for people in conflict-affected communities in Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Nigeria. The support of the Christian Aid community has been vital to deliver the help that is needed and to give people assistance to rebuild their lives.

Background
Christian Aid has partnered with the World Food Programme (WFP), the world’s leading humanitarian agency addressing hunger and food security, for several years. Our programme is working to tackle the needs of people forced from their homes by conflict.

Bangladesh project update
Around a million people from Myanmar live in overcrowded camps at Ukhiya and Teknaf in Bangladesh. Most families have food shortages and people have no way to earn money. The huts are flimsy and are very hot with no ventilation. Women and girls are at risk of abuse and exploitation. Waste and rainwater in the camps run into drainage ditches and canals that rapidly silt up, leading to dangerous floods. Water reservoirs are damaged and retaining walls have collapsed, land needs to be reforested, and embankments need to be improved. Pathways are slippery and dangerous, and stairs and bridges are needed to help people move around safely.

Previous projects in the camps saw people working together to build access roads, drainage and stairs, as well as retaining walls to stop soil being washed down the hillsides.

Overcoming the odds: Kajol
Kajol* is a 30-year-old transgender person who has been living at camp 26 since 2017. Kajol has been stigmatised and harassed due to being transgender.

In the camps, Kajol was excluded from regular jobs because of being transgender and was forced to beg for money to survive. They often faced taunts and bullying.

Initially, Kajol was engaged in the cash for work scheme as unskilled labour, but they have learned so many skills that they expect to be able to find work as skilled labour.

‘I felt alienated from everyone before I started working in cash for work,’ said Kajol. ‘I gradually became friends with my fellow cash-for-work workers. My time is now well spent, and I no longer have to rely on others’ mercy to meet my livelihood requirements.’

*Name has been changed
Taking the lead: Mohammad Ibrahim

Mohammad Ibrahim* is a 22-year-old Rohingya man living in one of the camps with his wife and child. When they first arrived, Ibrahim

was miserable, and had no way to support his family.

‘I felt hopeless at that time,’ he recalled. ‘I could barely manage food for my family members. My son was very young, and I struggled to arrange the foods that are essential for an infant.’

Life changed for Ibrahim when he joined one of our cash-for-work schemes in December 2020. He has a natural talent for languages and quickly learnt Bangla, becoming an essential link between project staff and the people in the camps.

‘I love to share information among my community people,’ he said.

‘Most of them face challenges in understanding information on available services, so receiving the right information at the right time can help them.’

People now turn to him if they face any difficulties related to the project activities. His role brings him esteem and dignity. The food security of his family is now assured, as he can purchase additional food items for them.

‘People respect me and it is a great achievement for me,’ he added. ‘I am grateful that I got the opportunity to serve my community through engaging with Christian Aid Bangladesh intervention.’

Our current programme is a multi-agency project to improve the crumbling infrastructure and make the camps safer. A WFP engineering team is working jointly with Christian Aid’s technical team, designing bridges, roads, pathways and drainage systems.

Since last year, we have seen significant progress in Bangladesh, with a number of projects now underway.

Through our WFP cash-for-work scheme, women and men living in the camps are paid to work on the infrastructure rehabilitation projects. They generally receive their money on a payment card to use in the camp shops, or via mobile money transfer.

Since November 2021, these activities have reached 3,287 people in 657 households, including 616 women and 53 people with disabilities. About three-quarters of the people are aged 18–35 years; the remainder are 36–59 years. This is a project that is giving real hope to younger people.

The work is open to women, but we know that cultural reasons mean it will be challenging to reach 50% female participation. Based on our previous experience here, we aimed to have 25–30% women at the start. Some projects are easier for women to join the projects too, including breastfeeding areas. Our programmes also involve other traditionally marginalised people, such as people with disabilities and transgender people.

Our projects in the cash-for-work programme so far include:

- constructing reservoirs and dams
- building dams
- installing solar irrigation
- excavating canals
- constructing embankments
- building geotextile bag dams
- installing wells
- constructing bamboo bridges
- making access paths to a market
- planting trees.

We’re working closely with the camps to find out what is needed, and our staff and volunteers make sure that people in the wider community know what is going on. Those working on the cash-for-work scheme also have opportunities for feedback.

The next major part of the project is a forestry plantation. Seedlings and tools will be supplied by the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organisation. Planting will start this month, and care and maintenance (watering, weeding and fencing) will be carried out at the same time.

*Name has been changed
DRC project update

Christian Aid has taken on distribution in an additional region, South Kivu, this year, as well as continuing our existing work in other provinces. Despite the precarious security situation in eastern DRC, the work has continued as planned and large numbers of people are being reached each month.

Key achievements in 2021:

- We continued to support food insecure women, men and children affected by conflict and displacement in Kasai, Kwilu and Kwango, through distribution of cash to 133,714 people.
- In these territories, 4,094 women participated in 88 cooking demonstration sessions.
- The nutrition situation has improved significantly in the target households.
- Members of the beneficiary committees (36%) were trained on how to manage complaints and on the methods for cash distributions and protection at the distribution sites.
- Vulnerable households received cash to buy food. Children under two years old and pregnant and breastfeeding women benefitted from nutrition monitoring.

We are fighting malnutrition:

- We screened 3,501 children under the age of five years last year; 47.6% had moderate malnutrition and 11.5% had severe malnutrition and were referred for treatment. We also checked their mothers and pregnant women and referred them for healthcare.

- 1,195 breastfeeding women and 940 pregnant women had moderate malnutrition.
- 141 breastfeeding women and 77 pregnant women had severe malnutrition.

In 2022, the work continues:

- In February, we gave cash assistance to 11,395 households, reaching 46,372 people in Kasai.
- Since March we have targeted displaced, returned and vulnerable host community members in South Kivu, aiming to assist up to 55,000 people with cash for food.
- In addition, we aim to strengthen the knowledge in the communities on topics such as food insecurity, resilient livelihoods, nutrition and health.

These distribution sites are all in hard-to-reach areas that are often affected by conflict. Terrible roads have seen vehicles stuck for a week at a time and staff members have had to use motorbikes to reach some areas. While a number of challenges remain in reaching the most remote places, the first distribution has been managed well by our experienced team in DRC.

Being lifted up: Ngyoa Beti Nkanku

Ngoya Beti Nkanku and her husband Joseph Mukenda have been struggling to provide for their children, despite both having jobs. ‘My husband is a miner in the diamond mines. I am a seller of small items such as sugar, coffee and matches. My job and my husband’s job are not enough to cover all the basic needs in our family,’ she said.

Conflict affected the part of Kasai where the family lives, and pushed them into poverty. A lack of money meant they were only able to eat one meal a day.

When our local staff went door to door to invite eligible people to register for distributions, they arrived just in time.

Ngoya had a sick child in need of medical care, but had no money to pay for a doctor. She received CDF192,500 (£77), and plans to buy livestock to raise. She will also be able to pay for food and her children’s healthcare, school fees and clothing.

‘I say greatly thank you to Christian Aid and WFP for thinking of us, said Ngoya. ‘May the Almighty God bless them abundantly.’
Sewing hope: Nana Mohammed

After Nana Mohammed and her family fled conflict, she started sewing Nigerian caps to earn money. But Nana's dream was always to become a dressmaker – but for that she needed a sewing machine and she couldn't afford one.

Her dream came true when she was offered a sewing machine through Christian Aid’s programme. At first, a lack of cash flow affected her ability to grow the business, but everyone in the project is enrolled in a village savings and loan group, which has enabled Nana not only to save but also borrow money to expand.

Nana’s business model relies on the extravagant celebration culture of Nigerian weddings. Weddings are held almost every weekend and women put on glamorous dresses to mingle. Whenever there is an occasion, women in the community will bring fabric to Nana for her to sew a beautiful gown or a blouse and wrapper.

She is grateful to have had the support she needed to establish her business. ‘Even if Christian Aid has to leave the community and help other people in need in different areas, I still have my business and am able to sustain it on my own,’ she said.

Nigeria project update

We started a new livelihoods and sustainability project in Mafra, Borno state, in April. This will build on our previous work in this area and will focus on increasing incomes by helping people start raising livestock, set up fish farming, grow vegetables and start other small businesses. Village savings and loan groups are also being established.

While the start of the project missed the first growing season, it aims to adapt to the planting seasons remaining over the rest of the year. Ongoing conflict and violence in the area will be challenging as the work continues this year.

Conclusion

It has been an exciting few months for Christian Aid’s work with the WFP. We are already seeing how the cash-for-work scheme in Bangladesh is starting to make a real difference to people’s lives. New areas of work in the DRC and Nigeria have started strongly, despite the ongoing violence. Covid-19 remains a significant challenge, but the work is designed to be as safe as possible and we continuously educate people about hygiene practices.

Thank you again for standing in solidarity with communities affected by conflict across the world.