

Bridging the gap: the role of local churches in fostering local-level social accountability and governance

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Faith-based organisations in many contexts have an important role in mobilising citizens to engage with local government actors on accountability issues.

International NGO Tearfund supports partner churches to use a process known as ‘Church and Community Mobilisation’ (CCM), through which churches inspire and empower citizens to identify issues in their communities and mobilise their own resources to address these issues together. They then build on this by introducing a local-level advocacy component, whereby churches empower communities to also draw down local government resources to meet community needs, hold local government accountable and see enhanced service delivery.

In this action research, Tearfund set out to learn from and enhance the CCM advocacy programme in Uganda, in order to effectively extend CCM advocacy to other communities and contexts. It carried out research in 18 communities in the Teso region of east Uganda where the CCM advocacy process was being implemented by a partner church, providing new insights into the strengths and weakness of conducting local-level advocacy through churches.

Churches as accountability intermediaries: trust, confidence and relationships

The trust that congregations and most community members place in the church was a key driver in motivating participation in governance. This trust derives from the embedded Christian values shared by many community members, and the good historical reputation of well-established churches.

Another key to successful engagement was the volunteerism encouraged by the church. Many groups explained that in contrast with NGO programmes, where participants would expect handouts and only engage in the short term, people already commit themselves to supporting their church and therefore expect to volunteer their time there.

As well as having the trust of communities, churches are trusted by government actors, which is a key to ensuring increased good governance and accountability. Local government actors perceive the church as having important influence in encouraging the community to obey the government, and in maintaining social cohesion and harmonious living. They are therefore willing to share government information through the church, both about government programmes, and via sensitisation meetings where government workers share learning on a particular topic, such as HIV prevention.

A particular strength of CCM advocacy is that it has led to an increase in individual and collective confidence among citizens. This has been a crucial driver of improvements in citizen empowerment, government responsiveness and more equal power dynamics. In some places, it has enabled citizens to overcome a fear of engaging with government.

This new-found confidence was also improved by the new knowledge and skills gained through the CCM advocacy training. Many people had come to understand their rights and gained skills to enact them, and this provided the motivation and empowerment to begin to advocate for change.

Another essential driver to positive change in

governance was the relationship built between community and government. An essential component of this was face-to-face dialogue between decision-makers and the community. The church played a key role in facilitating this relationship; church leaders used their own connections with sub-county and district decision-makers, encouraged the community to respect government, and allayed the government's fears of engaging.

Churches and communities engaging for accountable governance: key findings

Transparency – Although churches provided some information on government programmes, access to freely available information on government plans, policies and budgets still needs strengthening. 80% of respondents said that the type of information they had access to was about government programmes and announcements of meetings. Only 20% said they had access to government plans.

Citizen empowerment – Where the CCM advocacy process was running, citizen engagement in local governance decisions was markedly improved. Generally, people who had never participated before were attending dialogues and influencing some decisions. It was however proving difficult to encourage more people to be involved when the CCM process had finished.

Inclusion – Although inclusion of marginalised groups was a feature of CCM, it was difficult to know if everyone outside the community felt able to attend. The church can play a role in

advocating on behalf of the marginalised who struggle to be at meetings, but it should also include them from the start.

Government responsiveness – increased in many places where CCM advocacy took place, with response times decreasing from over five years to just one year in many cases. However, there were still delays and funding problems, which had a negative effect on community engagement and relationships with government.

Power dynamics – The CCM advocacy process created positive change in power dynamics, enabling any internalised sense of inferiority to be overturned as people saw their identity differently and understood their potential to explore new initiatives. For this to be enhanced, there needs to be more training in understanding government programmes, policies and plans, so that community members can hold government to account.

Local churches bring distinctive strengths to community engagement in advocacy for accountable government, particularly in empowering citizens through biblical values, establishing a unified community and encouraging partnership with local government. The research demonstrated the importance of mobilising local churches to engage both the community and the government, bridging the gap between them to facilitate participatory development. This will be vital in scaling up the programme to more areas and countries in the future.

Download the full report [here](#), and go the Making All Voices Count website for all our other [research publications](#).

About Making All Voices Count

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