

The distinctive role of the Catholic Church in development and humanitarian response



7 ways the Church makes a difference

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Cover photo: Sister Jacinta Njeru, from the Matercare Hospital, Isiolo with a community member in Kenya.
(Source: David Mutua)

Executive summary

Faith and religious practice are central to most people's lives in the global South. Religious institutions are at the heart of society, the cornerstones of the community, with a long reach into even the most remote communities. Religious leaders hold people's trust and often have authority and influence where state and local officials do not.

Understanding the role of faith and faith-based organisations is therefore central to effective development and humanitarian response, and to building mutually beneficial partnership across a wide range of issues and actors.

In the UK, meaningful engagement with faith actors will be core to the work of the newly formed Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, as well as the development of a new strategic framework for ODA. There is no more important time to do this as we collectively seek to respond to the current pandemic in the most effective way.

The Catholic Church is making a distinctive contribution to development and humanitarian response in many different contexts, from sheltering Syrian refugees in Lebanon to peacebuilding in Sri Lanka, from upholding indigenous people's rights in Guatemala to helping facilitate free and fair elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Its long-term relationships, commitment to communities and acceptance by the local population mean that the Church is often the only institution that stays put when conflict erupts, as it did in South Sudan. And, as it has done in Colombia's civil war, the Church has borne witness to people's pain and shared in their suffering. When disasters strike it is already on the scene, ready and willing to respond as seen in Bangladesh and the Philippines. The Church has used its presence and role in communities to tackle the spread of diseases such as Ebola and the Coronavirus.

The involvement of faith groups in the response to the threat of Ebola remains among the best weapons for convincing the people to adopt good practices and attitudes to put an end to this deadly outbreak.

Théophile Kaboy Ruboneka Catholic Bishop of Goma, DRC

Its scope, reach and influence mean the Church is already a valued partner for governments, business and international organisations.

However, its potential as a development and humanitarian partner remains largely untapped. This is in part due to a misunderstanding of its structures, mission and ways of working, as well as an instrumentalised approach by development actors that wants the Church to implement projects and programmes that have already been designed without their involvement. This paper should go some way to addressing those misunderstandings.

Its potential has also been compromised due to the Church's own failings and inconsistencies. The Catholic Church has not always got things right and, in some cases, it has been on the side of the oppressor or has taught and behaved in ways that stigmatise or restrict human rights. It is no secret that there have been controversies and conflicts between Church organisations and other development actors. These issues have been well documented elsewhere. We do not address them here but recognise that they form part of the backdrop of engagement and partnerships.

Reach and scope

The Catholic Church has a global presence, with around 1.2 billion adherents globally.¹ The diocesan and parish structures give the Church a national and local presence in nearly every country and community.

The Church includes the formal structures of bishops and priests, with the Holy See as the governing body in Rome. The Pope appoints bishops who are accountable to Rome and have responsibility for overseeing the work in their dioceses. The Church also includes the local congregations and religious orders, development organisations and service organisations, base communities and solidarity groups. Each of these can play a specific role in development and emergency response.

Development and humanitarian professionals will encounter these different faces or expressions of the Church in distinct ways and it is important to understand how they work, the added value they bring and the best ways to build effective partnerships.

Mission and vision

What unites these diverse expressions of Church is the mission of the Church and its vision of development.

The **vision of development** is for the whole person and all people, rooted in the inherent dignity of all people as being made in the image and likeness of God, having equal value and worth. It is a vision of a world transformed to reflect the Kingdom of God, where all people, communities and the earth may flourish and where all people and institutions work for the common good. It is both individual and collective, personal and structural.

The **mission and nature of the Church** is dedicated to bringing about this vision:

- The Church is called to serve all people, and to have a “preferential option for the poor”, for those people and communities that others may have overlooked, those who suffer discrimination, injustice or oppression. It serves people based on need, regardless of race, gender and religion.
- It is rooted in local communities, sharing in people’s lives, suffering, hopes and dreams, often where few other institutions are present, building a deep understanding and trust.
- The Church is also called to transform society and has a profoundly hopeful outlook on what change is possible, while continuing in the prophetic tradition of denouncing injustice and oppression and speaking truth to power.



In the 20 years I have been a priest in Colombia, I have lived with armed conflict. I have had to deal with all the armed groups... and feared for my life many times. If you're a priest who is committed to the people, you have to make yourself a target of the armed groups. I was singled out and threatened many times as I stood alongside people forced to flee their homes, remained with those who stayed and endured, and picked up dead bodies, even when armed groups forbade us.

Fr Sterlin, priest in Diocese of Quibdó², Colombia



1 <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/02/13/the-global-catholic-population/>

2. <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/blogs/1/1207/peace-must-be-more-than-just-a-declaration-in-colombia->

Distinctive contribution

The nature of the Church has enabled it to have a distinctive role in development and humanitarian response in different contexts.

We have grouped these distinctive roles of the Church in seven broad categories, while recognising that the Church will often be fulfilling many, if not all, of these roles at any one time.

- 1 **Rapid, local and inclusive humanitarian response**
- 2 **Influencing social norms and behaviour**
- 3 **Peacebuilding, mediation and reconciliation**
- 4 **Strengthening democratic governance through citizen participation**
- 5 **Speaking truth to power, witnessing and accompanying suffering**
- 6 **Providing quality and inclusive healthcare and education**
- 7 **Supporting sustainable livelihoods**

Below we offer snapshots of how the way the Church has worked on these issues in different contexts, and the impacts in people's lives. The main report goes into greater detail for all of the examples.

1 Rapid, local and inclusive humanitarian response

Church agencies can often act immediately in any humanitarian response due to their presence in the communities. The Church's rootedness in communities and ongoing work with vulnerable populations means that church institutions are often already aware of those in most need and can target their response, as they have during Covid-19. In **Bolivia**, the Church provided food and hygiene kits for men and women in prisons and for migrants left in a precarious situation due to lockdowns. In **South Sudan** and **Kenya**, the Church has used local



Photo: Inmanuel Chayan Biswas/Caritas Bangladesh

Saba shows a member of Caritas staff the damage her shelter suffered in the recent monsoon season. Providing safe shelter and responding to coronavirus in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

radio to reach the most remote areas, including indigenous communities, providing accurate public health information in local languages.

The global Caritas network is the second largest provider of humanitarian support and is capable of a global, coordinated technical and financial response. It works across borders, such as providing food, shelter, legal advice and even long-term family homes for Venezuelan refugees in **Colombia**, **Brazil** and **Peru**. Church agencies can often reach people within the first 24 hours by drawing on local resources and volunteer capacity, such as in the **Philippines** where Caritas mobilised hundreds of volunteers to support 650,000 people affected by Typhoon Haiyan in 2013.

The Catholic Church response is rooted in the commitment to serve all people, regardless of religious beliefs and affiliation, such as in the Rohingya response in **Bangladesh**. In the Rohingya refugee camps, Caritas has provided 275,000 people with safe, dignified shelter, with lighting, toilets and bathing areas, as well as women and child-friendly spaces.



We are there as [an] expression of love to the people. The gospel says, 'When I was hungry, you gave me food; when I was shelter-less, you gave me shelter.'

Atul Sarker, Caritas Bangladesh Executive Director³



3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WoVKNjAoK-Y>

2 Influencing social norms and behaviour

Being rooted in communities and an integral part of people's lives, the Church has often been able to influence social norms and behaviour in a positive way to change the way that communities treat people. This applies particularly to the treatment of vulnerable people or those who have been stigmatised, excluded or regarded as second-class citizens. Due to their trusted role and presence, the Church's leadership and service ministries have been successful in addressing many previously taboo subjects. This has led to a reduction in early child marriage in **Malawi** and sexual exploitation being tackled in **Guatemala**.

In **West Africa** and the **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**, church and other faith leaders were able to help stem the spread of Ebola by leading by example in getting vaccinated and by teaching how the newly required safer burial practices were compatible with religious traditions and beliefs. In Zambia church development organisations have supported communities in changing land-tenure laws to allow women to own land.

In **Mozambique** the Church has spoken out against the previously taboo subject of trafficking in human organs for witchcraft. This was in a context where people have been afraid to speak out for fear of retaliation for themselves or their families and of becoming victims of witchcraft themselves. The detailed research into the extent of trafficking and teaching around human dignity changed the debate on what is seen as culturally acceptable in terms of trafficking human organs for witchcraft.



Photo: Tommy Trenchard/ Caritas Internationalis

Caritas has trained priests and other faith leaders to spread Ebola prevention messages and instigate handwashing at all ceremonies in DRC.

3 Peacebuilding, mediation and reconciliation

The Church is active in peacebuilding, mediation and reconciliation at all levels, due to its trusted role and presence in communities. It is seen as an impartial actor seeking the common good and speaking out for those whose voices may not be heard. Taking an empathetic approach, the Church has brought warring communities together in **Kenya** and **Ethiopia**, which has led to community reconciliation, protection of land and livestock, and a significant reduction in loss of life.



Archbishop Dieudonné Nzapalainga of Bangui joins Muslims in prayer for an end to the crisis, Central African Republic.

Through peacebuilding programmes with a practical focus, church development agencies have brought together groups that see each other as enemies and helped them work together towards a common goal, overcoming animosity and prejudice. This has been through sports camps and recreational activities in **Lebanon**, seed and tool distributions in **Uganda** for communities who are accepting returnees (including former militants) back into their midst, and tree-planting projects in **Myanmar** involving different religious groups who might previously have seen each other as enemies.

At national level, the impartial role of the Church means that its leaders can play a crucial role in peacebuilding, such as in **Colombia** via the Truth Commission and in **South Sudan** as part of the mediation team brokering peace at national level. The Vatican supported the work in South Sudan by convening a high-level meeting with leaders in Rome in the run up to signing the peace deal in 2019.

We are working with traumatised, war-torn communities on peacebuilding and reconciliation. By bringing together Dinka and Nuer people across the main ethnic divide, and persuading perpetrators and victims to meet face to face, we can address the grievances that are fuelling the conflict, including endemic violence against women.

This is what the Church's Action Plan for Peace is doing, community by community.

Father James Oyet, Secretary General of the South Sudan Council of Churches⁴

4 Strengthening democratic governance through citizen participation

The Church has mobilised citizens to engage in democratic processes to promote government policies and business activities that help communities thrive and protect the environment, such as in **Peru** where they have supported indigenous communities to engage peacefully with companies and local government and gain access to water for agriculture and community livelihoods.

In the **UK**, thousands of Catholic parishes and schools have taken action in support of climate change, meeting their MPs and taking part in marches, as well as changing their lifestyles by switching to renewable energy and finding other ways to reduce their carbon footprint.

The Church has played a significant role in many countries in strengthening democratic governance through training and supporting citizens to engage with government and providing oversight for free and fair elections and the transition to democracy.

In the **DRC**, the Church used its presence and reach within the country to strengthen democratic accountability and to advocate for free and fair elections. It has a presence in all 26 provinces, through the provision of services such as schools

and health centres, and the Church is one of the few institutions that commands wide respect and trust across a big and divided country. The Catholic Bishops' Conference trained 40,000 citizens to act as electoral observers in the 2017 election and played an informal oversight role in judging election results, limiting the opportunities for electoral fraud and contributing to a reduction in violence during the election period.



Livesimply award celebration, St Benedict's Garforth, Leeds diocese, UK.

5 Speaking truth to power, witnessing and accompanying suffering

The Church has a calling to speak truth to power and has used this prophetic voice to call out governments with authoritarian tendencies and companies that are not respecting people's rights. This has led to the Church being targeted with violence and many people losing their lives. In **Nicaragua**, the Catholic Church authorities led a march against a culture of impunity and corruption; the Church was then invited to try and mediate to end the political stalemate.

The role of accompanying and witnessing suffering has meant the Church has often uncovered and exposed human rights abuses, mass killings and abusive treatment of vulnerable populations, which would otherwise have gone unreported. This was the case throughout the internal armed conflict in **Colombia** and with the Gukurahundi massacres of the early 1980s in **Zimbabwe**.

Through speaking up, the Church aims to offer a vision and a hope for the future for citizens in times

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/mar/27/din-over-brexit-us-border-wall-south-sudan>



Photo: Montserrat Fernandez
 Mayan indigenous women participating in a human rights workshop in Guatemala.

of difficulty and despair, and a voice of peace in times of violence. This is seen in the many pastoral letters that national and regional Bishops' Conferences and individual bishops have written, such as at the end of the civil war in **Sri Lanka**, after a thawing of relations between **Ethiopia** and **Eritrea**, and ahead of elections in **Kenya**. These letters are usually read out in churches across the country and often attract national media coverage, influencing the national debate.

Pope Francis has also spoken out on many issues of global importance, including releasing his encyclical *Laudato Si' – on Care for our common home* – just months before the 2015 climate change talks in Paris, seeking to highlight the urgency of climate change and to influence the level of ambition of governments and business.

In **Brazil**, where many people have been killed as they have tried to protect their land, the Church's land commission (CPT) has helped communities bring perpetrators to justice and gain titles for their land. They defend the rights of poor families and communities through the justice system when they are threatened with eviction, or when they are seeking compensation for resettlement after being removed from their lands. They work with communities throughout this process, helping them stay organised so that they do not give up on their claim to land or abandon their land due to agricultural production and commercialisation pressures.

6 Providing high-quality and inclusive healthcare and education

Due to its size, reach and parish structure, the Catholic Church has almost global coverage. For decades, the Church institutions have been providers of high-quality and inclusive healthcare and education in

many countries, including in communities where the state has limited resources and limited reach. The healthcare provision is often recognised for its quality and personal approach, such as in **Liberia**, **Eritrea** and **Zimbabwe**. Healthcare services draw on a range of religious orders and volunteers who have the time and the vocation to care for the whole person and who have a commitment to treating everyone with dignity and respect.

The schools tend to be popular due to the quality of education and the values-based teaching. They can have wider impacts in society due to the links to the wider community and issues they face. For example, in **El Salvador**, religious orders work with the children and their families to build self-esteem and provide alternative prospects outside the dominant gang culture. In **Bangladesh**, Catholic schools have provided access to education for the Adivasi population, who would otherwise be excluded from wider educational opportunities.

The infrastructure and reach of these schools and health centres can also complement the development and humanitarian work of the Church. They can act as shelter or distribution centres in times of emergency, as voting stations or electoral oversight offices, as trusted places for dialogue and mediation, and as reception and rehabilitation centres.

In **Eritrea**, the Church has supported the government in delivering healthcare in remote areas which state services struggled to reach. Groups of religious sisters, including the Sisters of Charity and the Comboni Missionary Sisters, traveled long distances by vehicle to remote villages to check on people's health. They also brought midwifery delivery kits, which resulted in reduced maternal and infant mortality rates.



Photo: Ana Manganaro Clinic
 Supporting mother and child health & nutrition in Guarjila, El Salvador

7 Supporting sustainable livelihoods

Church development organisations are present at local level and support many communities, both rural and urban, towards sustainable livelihoods. Their ongoing presence and wide range of interventions enable them to engage in the full spectrum of community activities, including sustainable agriculture, conflict resolution, women's participation, organisational development, and health and sanitation provision. The length of time the Church has served these communities, and its focus on serving each person and promoting the common good, means that it is widely trusted.

This has in turn meant that people are willing to learn new methods of farming and land use practices from the Church, to become more sustainable both economically and environmentally, as seen in climate-resilient agriculture in **Zimbabwe**.

Through its presence on the ground, the Church has also enabled the flourishing of different models of development that protect the environment and put people first, such as its role in supporting legislation to protect water sources in **El Salvador**.

Through Caritas's "family as a development unit approach" to farming in **Zambia**, farmers have seen increased yields through organic farming, as well as better nutrition, which together has enabled communities to send all the children, including orphans, to school. It has also led to improved soil quality, reduced erosion and carbon capture through tree planting, as well as increased participation of women in decision-making and reduced levels of family conflict.



Photo: Thom Flint

Tabeth watering her plants in the Jekesa Fungwa community vegetable garden, Zimbabwe

Ways forward

There is an opportunity for more effective partnerships between donor governments, international organisations and the Church at all levels.

In the UK, meaningful engagement with the Church and other faith actors will be an essential part of the work of the newly formed Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the development of a new strategic framework for ODA.

This paper suggests four ways this can happen:

- 1 Implement an evidence-based learning programme with faith actors**, analysing what has worked and what has not worked in previous partnerships with the UK government. This could start with areas of mutual interest, such as humanitarian intervention, peacebuilding and responding to pandemics including Ebola and Covid-19.
- 2 Ensure deeper and ongoing engagement with faith leaders and faith groups at local and national level** in political analysis, programme design, development and implementation. This should be a key pillar in the work of all UK Missions overseas, engaging with faith actors as valued partners, rooted in local contexts with invaluable social, cultural and political capital and insights.
- 3 Develop a strategic approach to working with faith actors.** The FCDO should develop a cross-departmental strategy to engage with faith actors, seeking input from a faith advisory group. It could start with a focus on issues where there is already strong engagement, such as in humanitarian response, peace-building and democratic accountability.
- 4 Provide long-term support for effective partnerships with faith actors**, especially for issues where they are often the only actors who can intervene effectively, such as in peacebuilding or humanitarian response, and in contexts that other actors struggle to access.



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