A Garden of Eden, Garden of Resilience: The Role of the Local Church in Addressing Cultural Dimensions in Disaster Mitigation

Monica Katherine Verhaeghe
2009

This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfillment of the Master of Arts Degree in Development and Emergency Practice, Oxford Brookes University.

Centre for Development and Emergency Practice (CENDEP)
School of the Built Environment
Abstract

The intersection of church and development in the context of disasters is often overlooked in disaster literature and research. This paper proposes that local churches have key roles to play in disaster management with clear strengths, as well as limitations that necessitate examination. New links are emerging between development institutions and faith institutions. On a practical level the church has engaged in the work of development since its inception; from caring for the sick and assisting disaster victims, to setting up community schools and health clinics. Yet many churches in the West in partnership with churches in developing countries have struggled to strike a balance between evangelism and the practical components of social justice and meeting the needs of at-risk communities. However, as the numbers of people affected by disasters continues to increase annually it is becoming more difficult for the church to ignore this component of vulnerability within communities. This paper presents a new glimpse at the church’s engagement with disaster mitigation and intends to raise awareness of human-made aspects (i.e. cultural assumptions and traditional beliefs) in disasters and the role that the church plays in addressing these aspects.

Building resilience in communities is potentially one of the greatest contributions that the church can bring to development, as there is a growing trend of marginalised people living in vulnerable situations. Barriers to resilience may include a lack of understanding the complexities of cultural responses to disaster. Investigating the cultural context is essential in disaster risk reduction. Because it is an integral part of the community, the local church has a vital role to play in addressing sensitive issues like cultural myths and beliefs. This paper analyses the cultural dimensions of communities affected by disaster. Through relevant case studies, this paper builds the rationale for why the church is a key institution in bringing about resilience within communities that are vulnerable to disaster. Against this backdrop, churches are well positioned within their communities to address cultural aspects that impede disaster risk reduction activities and efforts.
Preface

The first question which the priest and the Levite asked was: "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But... the good Samaritan reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?" - Martin Luther King Jr.

My interests in this topic are anchored in my background in sustainable development and anthropology as well as my experiences on the field. Throughout the course of my postgraduate programme in Development and Emergency Practice at Oxford Brookes University, I cultivated a greater understanding of the links between development and emergency practice. This course built upon my previous field experiences ranging from community development and project management with two NGOs in Mozambique, research and advocacy with the Maori people in New Zealand, and research with the Hopi and Zuni Indians of North America.

Some additional experiences that have shaped me have been the years of professional experience working in the mental health sector, working extensively as a resident counsellor with at-risk youth. From my experience in Mozambique, I first became familiarised with the work of the church in Africa. I worked with a church that envisioned and facilitated numerous development projects in Nampula, Mozambique. I saw the power behind ‘small is beautiful’ in action while I was in Africa. The churches impact was not small in the community. It was this experience in Africa that left profound impact and catalyst for my current work. As I’ve studied development, I have observed that faith and belief are often forgotten about. Yet faith was such an integral part of the community where I worked in Africa. My curiosity and desire to explore cultural and faith dimensions of communities has grown out of my experiences and is the motivation behind this work. There are many questions that are raised in this work without answers. Yet my hope is that this work is a small growth of the large garden of knowledge and insight that is needed to advance this topic further.
Acknowledgements

I am grateful for and indebted on so many levels to many who have inspired me to create and think through this work. I would like to acknowledge the efforts and support of Dr. Mohamed Hamza and Dr. David Sanderson, both of whom supervised this work, believed in me to complete it, and have greatly contributed to my overall professional development. I would like to thank Bob Hansford and Nigel Timmons, from Tearfund UK, for collaborating with me and giving me insights on this work. Also, special thanks to Dr. Ian Davis and Dr. Anthony Oliver-Smith, who encouraged this work with meaningful contributions and conversations. Gratitude abounds to my parents who, over the years, have nurtured in me a love of learning and serving others in the world. Thanks be to God. Finally, thanks forever to my loving husband Ian who spent countless hours working beside me on this, feeding me, bringing me bottomless cups of coffee and who has been my compass through it all.
# Table of Contents

Abstract 2  
Preface 3  
Acknowledgements 4  
List of Acronyms 6  
List of Figures and Tables 7  

| Chapter 1 | Introduction | 8  
|           | 1.1 Background | 8  
|           | 1.2 Aim | 9  
|           | 1.3 Objectives | 9  
|           | 1.4 Methodology | 9  
|           | 1.5 Research Limitations | 10  
| Chapter 2 | Literature Review | 11  
|           | 2.1 Terminology | 11  
|           | 2.2 Background and Strengths of the Church | 12  
|           | 2.3 Shortcomings of the Church | 15  
| Chapter 3 | Understanding Cultural Dimensions | 17  
|           | 3.1 Perceptions of Disasters | 17  
|           | 3.2 Worldviews | 19  
|           | 3.3 Power Relations | 20  
|           | 3.4 Gender and Age | 21  
|           | 3.5 Social Organisation | 23  
|           | 3.6 Cultural Salience of Disasters | 23  
|           | 3.7 Reflection Questions | 25  
| Chapter 4 | Roles of the Church in Addressing the Cultural Dimensions | 26  
|           | 4.1 Next Steps | 26  
|           | 4.2 Recommendations | 28  
|           | 4.3 Practical Applications and Reflection Questions | 33  
| Chapter 5 | Conclusions | 34  

Appendices  
Appendix A: United Nations University Poster 36  
Appendix B: Integral mission 37  

Bibliography 38
List of Acronyms

ARHAP          African Religious Health Assets Programme
CBDRM          Community Based Disaster Risk Management
CBO            Community Based Organisations
CBCR           Church Based Community Resilience
DM             Disaster Management
DRR            Disaster Risk Reduction
FBO            Faith Based Organisation
FGM            Female Genital Mutilation
HFA            Hyogo Framework for Action on Disaster Risk Reduction
ISDR           International Strategy for Disaster Reduction
M&E            Monitoring and Evaluation
NGO            Non Governmental Organisation
PADR           Participatory Assessment of Disaster Risk
UN             United Nations
UNDP           United Nations Development Programme
UNIDSR         United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction
UNUDHR         United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights
List of Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Disaster Management Cycle 11

Figure 2: Worldviews 20

Table 1: Hyogo Framework for Action 31

Cover Photograph by Ben Depp, 2007.
Chapter 1
Introduction

Disasters have a profound affect on communities and livelihoods. It is important to note that disasters are often dormant and unresolved problems rooted in failed development processes. Often disasters can be averted, or made less destructive, by reducing risks in communities. Approximately seventy-five percent of the world’s population lives in regions that have been affected at least once by an earthquake, tropical cyclone, flood or drought between the years of 1980 and 2000.¹ Few would dispute that there is an increasing trend of disasters. Regardless of the size of the disaster, the impact is first felt on a local level. There are a number of factors that contribute to this, ranging from: the lack of financial resources and time to work with each community in its efforts to prepare for disaster, slow communication and non-existence of information infrastructure, local institutions and agencies not receiving the information in time to cope with the disaster, and a failure to put into practice the knowledge that has been gained, as well as a failure to expand upon that knowledge. These factors influence the consequences of any disaster.

Within the biblical traditions of Judaism and Christianity there are abundant examples of disaster stories. Historically, in the Judeo-Christian context, the church has been involved in helping individuals and communities survive and adapt before, during, and after disasters. After all, churches and synagogues were once the central instrument for social change and restoration. These institutions have continued to work with other agencies in order to assist in recovery and reconstruction within communities. Yet many studies of community-based disaster risk management (CBDRM) and disaster recovery tend to overlook the role of the church in disasters.²

1.1 Background
In February of 2009, I was connected with Tearfund, a UK based NGO, which, for decades, has done research and developed projects in partnership with local churches that work in disaster mitigation. My initial conversations with Bob Hansford (DRR Advisor) and Nigel Timmons (Head of Disaster Management Team), both disaster experts at Tearfund, led me to investigate this topic further. Thus, Tearfund presented me with a research option that further explored the roles of the church within the context of disasters. Tearfund’s 10 year vision is to see 50 million people released from material and spiritual poverty through a worldwide network of 100,000 churches. My hope is that this research will be used to update one of Tearfund’s older publications whose premise was the church’s role in disaster, thus furthering Tearfund’s educational purposes. The main questions underlying this research are:

Firstly, what is the impact that cultural beliefs and worldviews have upon people’s ability to prepare and respond to disasters? And, secondly, how does the church address these culturally sensitive conundrums that may impede disaster management while building resilient communities?

---

1.2 **Aim**

This dissertation is aimed at those who are a part of the church’s work in communities, and who want to help transform their churches and surrounding communities into safer and less disaster prone areas. This study is also intended for church leaders in countries that may have little access to financial resources, and who may feel that, due to lack of funds, their church may not be able to affect substantial and lasting change in terms of the affects of disaster within their communities. This research will allow for church leaders and NGOs to conceptualise the church’s role in disasters and work more effectively with the church in disaster contexts. Regardless of a church leader’s denominational background, theological training or political convictions, the aim of this guide is to equip the leadership of any church to engage with their communities in meaningful and practical ways, with the issue of disaster, and the underlying manmade aspects that inhibit positive change in disaster-prone communities.

1.3 **Objectives**

This publication will outline the following:

1. Analysis and literature review of the church’s engagement with disasters.

2. Exploration of cultural worldviews and beliefs that affect perceptions of disasters and disaster mitigation efforts.

3. Investigation of ways the church can play a part of communities’ resilience to disasters.

4. Analyse literature review, case studies in order to inform conclusions.

1.4 **Methodology**

The research in this study was gathered in the summer of 2009, primarily through desk-based research, a collection of case studies from Tearfund, a UK based NGO, as well as various peer reviewed sources and web journals. A review of relevant sources was intended to provide context and history to the topic, while the findings from the case studies assisted with further critiques of the research. Personal correspondence with culture and disaster experts is also another method utilised in this research. Together, these methods allow the researcher to survey the various roles of the local church’s engagement with disasters.

It is to be noted that there are parts of this dissertation, which are unconventional in their approach. Within this paper, there are multiple sections, which make use of questions for reflection as well as practical applications as to how the information can be applied in real-world scenarios. These alternative methods are the deliberate intention of the researcher who, in addition to serving as a knowledge base, desired for this research to be used as a guide, and to that end, was designed to provide a space for the reader’s reflection throughout. Thus, local churches, church leaders, and NGOs working in communities and with churches are encouraged to use this guide as a reflection diary before springing into action. As stated in the aim, this paper will potentially be used as an educational tool for Tearfund. Thus, the research methods used stress the value of local churches, as well as their ethos, both of which are often overlooked by international stakeholders and academic structures.
The initial research idea began after conversations with Dr. Ian Davis on the need for more literature on the church’s role in disaster, and the need for this research to be linked to Tearfund’s Disaster Management Team. Between 2007 and 2008, disaster experts at Tearfund began conducting research through 12 case studies involving at least one or more local churches and a NGO in partnership to prepare for, and respond to a disaster. However, Tearfund expressed the need for a researcher to give a more academically rigorous approach when discussing and analysing the case studies and additional research material on the subject. The research process started slow initially, until I narrowed my search more to the cultural dimensions of disasters, which brought in literature from an anthropological lens. My interests in the anthropological perspective helped me reframe and shape the research questions. The questions in this paper are not intended to be the solution, but rather they are to promote further questioning on this area that is not easily understood.

1.5 Research Limitations
Because a majority of the research is based on secondary data, there are some limitations to this study, and its application. There also lies the rather obvious issue of the subjectivity of the topic of the local church’s involvement in disaster management. Because of this, it may prove difficult to approach this topic without interpretation based on personal views and bias. However, the author’s goal is to address the subjective nature of this topic and alleviate as much bias as possible through critical views of theory, and interpretation of the case narratives that are interwoven throughout the paper.

Additionally, there is a limited amount of current research on the church’s involvement in disaster mitigation. A review of the relevant literature and documents was intended to conceptually frame the relationship between churches and disasters. I found there were also literature gaps in reviewing the cultural beliefs and narratives of disaster and the church’s involvement in addressing this area. As I began my desk research I had a difficult time finding documents on the work of churches in disasters. It appears that much of the work of the church in this area is undocumented. Due to the culturally sensitive nature of the topic, it was also difficult to research and access a large amount of quantitative data. Other obstacles include the cultural barriers, as the language of disaster practitioners differs from the language and understanding of local communities. While it is important to discuss definitions of terms like local church and disaster risk reduction this paper is not directed in defining terms, although these are still important to wrestle with. Measuring the impact of institutions, like churches, proves to be a challenge to quantify. Continuing the knowledge base is essential in this area of understanding the strengths and limitations for local churches and communities that face disasters.
Chapter 2
Literature Review

2.1 Terminology
While this dissertation does not focus on typologies, it is important to clarify the meanings of certain words used with various forms of interpretation. To avoid any confusion the following section will provide meanings of the terms used within this dissertation.

Disaster Management Cycle (DM)
The DM cycle can be interrupted in various ways. This model represents the DM cycle by displaying various phases in disaster management, and it is important to note that each phase should not occur in isolation from the others. The phases involved in this cycle are pre-disaster, disaster response, and post-disaster. Though many questions and discussions posed in this dissertation can apply to most levels of the DM process, the primary focus of the author’s attention is at the disaster preparedness and mitigation level, which falls in the pre-disaster phase of the DM cycle.

Figure 1 Disaster Management Cycle, reproduced from Carter, W.N., 1992, xxiv.

Church
The meaning of church is often disputed and can be interpreted in a number of ways depending on the context and the intended audience. For the purposes of this paper, the church, at its most basic level, is a social institution as it is an establishment, for people and by people who have a common-held belief in the Judeo-Christian God. Blackman (2007) states that a local church is “a sustainable community of local Christian believers, accessible to all, where worship, discipleship, nurture and mission take place.” The researcher has no intent of excluding other understandings of church

\(^3\) pp.7
or drawing conclusions upon any particular belief systems. However, the scope and audience of this paper is intended for development practitioners who may be intrigued at the thought of partnering with the church, or NGOs whose primary work involves Christian communities, churches and the larger church network.

Aspects of religion, beliefs, and tradition remain a part of every human community. Yet little attention is drawn to the interplay between disasters and the church, and the subsequent connection of religion, beliefs and tradition. Within the past fifty years, churches in the West in dialogue with churches in the developing world have struggled to find a balance between the spiritual component of evangelism and the practical components of poverty reduction and development. The global Christian movement that has come out of this debate is called ‘integral mission’\(^4\), and has become more galvanized in recent years. Interestingly, the movement that led churches to place an even greater emphasis on social concern and responsibility has coincided with a shift in global society in which civilians have lost faith in governments’ ability to address issues of poverty, inequality and appropriate responses to disaster.\(^5\) Composed of ordinary men and women, a stronger, better informed and more resilient civil society has emerged. The church is one of the few networks that are both global and local. It is my contention that churches are key civil society institutions that have a strong presence in various cultures and an ability to assist with disaster mitigation and preparedness on the local level. It is also my contention that helping to reduce communities’ risk of disaster and facilitating greater community resilience falls within the boundaries of the church’s ‘integral mission.’

2.2  **Background & Strengths of the Church**

Historically, the church has been involved in helping individuals and communities survive, cope, and adapt after disasters. Churches were once the central instrument for social restoration and action and have since continued to work with other rescue, health and welfare agencies to assist the recovery and reconstruction of communities after disaster. Generally, the role of the church in disasters and church participation in disaster largely has been hidden and undocumented.

More recently, the church’s role in meeting practical human needs has been found in its emphasis on emergency humanitarian aid, in which the church and church-related institutions have mobilised resources for the relief of disaster victims occasioned by large scale emergencies in home countries as well as abroad. From the mid 1970’s and on, churches have partnered with various emergency organisations, placing chaplains in police, ambulance and fire departments, hospitals and even within the military and armed forces.\(^6\) There are wide and varied historical examples of the church’s response to disasters and can be seen in case studies ranging from the church’s response to the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, where the relief efforts were undertaken largely by local priests and nuns, and the 1906 San Francisco earthquake\(^7\) as well as the French Protestant response to the Algerian War. It is also important to note that in 1942, a group of Quakers – a particular church denomination – as well as other activists, formed what is now the international humanitarian NGO we know as Oxfam.

\(^4\) See Appendix B.
\(^7\) Davis, I. & Wall, M., 1992.
**Emergency Case Study**

The disaster brought about by hurricane Katrina in the southern United States in August of 2005 highlights a recent case study in which local churches respond to disasters. This case study specifically emphasises one theme; the church’s ability to gather volunteer assistance rapidly. In speaking of resilience, Twigg (2004) outlines in his ‘Thematic Area 5: Disaster Preparedness and Response’, that the components of resilience which spring naturally from the church are namely that of participation, voluntarism and accountability.\(^8\) Within the church, there are a large number of volunteers that are ready and willing to engage with human need in disaster contexts, because, for many people, a large part of the actual practice of Christianity is the act of serving others in meaningful ways.

Hurricane Katrina displayed the US government’s inability to respond adequately to the vast human need and suffering caused by the disaster. The death toll was one of the highest hurricane induced that the US has had in decades. Approximately, 80% of the city of New Orleans was underwater. Therefore, due to the church’s rapid and appropriate response, as well as the strong and inherent local ties with the communities affected, people turned to, and were helped tremendously by churches. And, because the church is both global and local, Christians and church groups outside of the affected areas – nationally and internationally - provided funding, volunteers and other resources to help. Relief workers estimate that churches and religious groups provided at least 500,000 people with emergency shelter during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Churches also provided spiritual comfort to hurricane survivors and aid workers alike.\(^9\) This case study not only showcases the church’s access to a massive volunteer base, but also displays the high organisational flexibility that allows churches to circumnavigate the prohibitive red tape that other institutions freely dispense. This case study also highlights the fact that the church also has the ability to use its worldwide influence to mobilise emergency funds and resources. However, one of the greatest strengths of the church’s role in disaster is its proximity to the community. Often, churches are the first to respond as evidenced by the case of Hurricane Katrina.

‘The church… does not drive in to places of strife in the morning and leave before the lights go down. The church remains as part of the community, and where there is hurt, the church shares that hurt, is part of it and is hence uniquely placed to be part of the solution.’\(^10\)

Local churches have a stable infrastructure within the community and unlike most relief agencies do not come and go depending on the situation. One of the many assets of church’s involvement in disaster efforts is not only their established influence in communities but also their reach. In Zimbabwe 20,000 local churches run at least one type of HIV and AIDS programme each programming.\(^11\) Another instance is found in the Myanmar cyclone of 2008, where one single church was able to activate a network of 4,500 churches, with volunteers, from within the region to assist the dispatch of emergency supplies to people in need. In some places in Myanmar, it took

---

\(^{8}\) pp. 19.
\(^{9}\) Brunsma et al., 2007.
\(^{10}\) Boyd, S., 2009, pp.7.
\(^{11}\) Bowerman, A., 2009.
weeks for foreign aid workers to reach the worst impacted areas. The church’s
network of local knowledge, context and histories allows for a rapid response to
disasters\(^\text{12}\) and the number of volunteers that it can mobilise is one of the church’s
greatest assets.

Documentation and statistical evidence of the church’s involvement in communities is
limited. However, there is statistical evidence of the church’s involvement in
healthcare and education within communities. The histories and cultures that make up
the church remain a vital part of its foundation. With its roots in local history and
cultural mores the church is at the epicentre of the community. The church can also
influence values and local beliefs held within the community. The education of girls
and women is one such value that the church has largely engaged with and it has
positively impacted and transformed many communities Africa.\(^\text{13}\) Examples of the
church’s engagement with these issues is that faith groups generally provide 70% of
health services in sub-Saharan Africa and provides over 65% of primary education is
in Lesotho (90%), DRC (80%), and Sierra Leone (70%).\(^\text{14}\) One case illustration is that
in Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian government has mandated that one church, named
Kale Heywet Church, provide services throughout the region that prevent parent to-
child transmissions (PPTCT) of HIV. The Kale Heywet Church was charged with the
task of not only providing healthcare training but also to supply antiretroviral drugs
and test kits to government facilities. By 2007, the church was supplying 50 out of
171 PPTCT sites nationally, including remote areas often not reached by state
services.\(^\text{15}\)

**Community-Based**

In many communities, the most visible hubs are schools, youth centres, community
centres, to hospitals and the like. Schools are often useful platforms to educate youth
about disaster risk reduction methods, and the church can adapt techniques used by
schools in its work within disaster prone communities. However, as the nature of
communities themselves become increasingly dynamic in an upwardly mobile and
globalised world, there is greater need for community hubs to be anchored to the
fabric of society, maintaining the ability to move and shift with the local fluctuations
and the movements of society in the broader sense. One of the greatest strengths of
the church is that it is anchored to the fabric of the local community, and can move
with the dynamic nature of society at large. In Twigg’s (2007) DRR [Disaster Risk
Reduction] field test manual, the forward asserts that, ‘community-based DRR is
fundamental to reducing risk and the impact of disasters.’\(^\text{16}\) While no one disputes the
fact community-based DRR is certainly one answer to the growing frequency of
disasters that threaten the health of communities, the question becomes which part of
the community is the most affective in preparing and helping to mitigate disaster risk.

Before moving forward, it is beneficial to gain a basic understanding of community.
According to Twigg (2007), community is broadly defined as, ‘groups of people
living in the same area or close to the same risks. This overlooks other significant
dimensions of community which are to do with common interests, values, activities

\(^{12}\) Boyd, S., 2009.
\(^{13}\) Ibid.
\(^{14}\) Ibid.
\(^{15}\) African Religious Health Assets Programme (ARHAP), 2008.
\(^{16}\) Boyd, S., 2009.
\(^{16}\) pp. 2.
and structures. The local church is a group that has the ability to organise itself and facilitate wider community action at multiple levels. Case in point, churches in Puno, Peru with the help of the surrounding community have mapped out miles of water drainage systems, and have improved existing drainage channels in order to divert excess water, thus preventing the erosion of soil and land. Also, another part key part of the community is the elders and leaders. Local church leaders and elders are often the few individuals in communities that are trusted. In many regions of the world like Sub-Saharan Africa the church displays the only credibility that encourages the community to take action. Churches have the ability to influence and shape values in their communities and wider societies. This influence can be viewed as both a strength and a weakness depending on how the church communicates culturally sensitive ideas and information within the community.

2.3 Shortcomings of the Church in Disasters

However poignant the strengths of local churches in disaster contexts, it has notable weaknesses. As communities face risk of disaster, churches themselves face their own set of risks when endeavouring to respond to the needs of their communities. Anthropologist and priest Aylward Shorter states that many of the obstacles faced by the church do not come outside the church but from inside. Many churches in hazard and disaster-prone areas are perhaps unwilling or wholly unprepared to educate, mobilise and respond within pre and post disaster situations. Churches can also over-exert themselves, resulting in alienation by their own communities. Pastors and other church leaders who are involved in so many areas of church life may simply lack the energy to add one more component to their ministry. Exhausted and lacking perspective, it is easy to see how even members of the congregation might be wary of engaging in one more activity.

In addition, it is easy for churches to over-estimate their ability to help. Many churches can be filled to capacity, then struggle to find enough usable shelter space, provide shower facilities, communication lines, and basic personal items they may not have received through donations. Also, technical knowledge may not be present within the church. Thus, the church’s actions could have a negative impact on the community.

Another short-coming is that local churches may potentially carry out initiatives which may not be relevant to the community’s context. This could present itself as church biases that could include social exclusion and prejudice to particular areas as well as particular members of the community. Because of this, there is a risk that churches may only serve their immediate members. Church initiatives may also carry a danger of establishing a welfare mentality within a community. This may create an unhealthy dependence on the church while simultaneously disempowering the greater community. This connects to a similar issue of relief dependency. The dependency upon relief and aid organisations has great potential to develop in communities where high levels of relief aid services have been distributed after a disaster. The danger

---

17 pp. 4.  
22 Ibid.
here is that local churches, communities, NGOs and CBOs may perceive beneficiaries as victims only, rather than perceiving them as they truly are – individuals with the ability to survive, cope, adapt and build upon existing capacities. Thus, churches can easily fall prey to the habit of paternalism within a community.

One of the core issues that perhaps present greater hurdles than solutions is the hierarchical structure the church, Church decision-making often rests in the hands of the pastor and a few key members, giving little regard to the rest of the church and community. This connects with issues with power. Who is holding the power? Who participates? Who is left out? The key church members usually represent to, and have dialogue with, local elite in the community. This highlights the observation that community participation is frequently misapplied in local contexts because issues of power have not been dealt with.

Additionally, roles within the church may potentially be blurred when engaging in disaster risk reduction projects, resulting in such questions as who is the project head, the development staff or the pastor? This can certainly cause friction within relationships and seriously damage the sense of unity that churches strive for. Another related issue is what Ian Wallace (2002) labels as the ‘development tail wags church dog’ syndrome. This issue manifests when the church’s core remains small with few resources, while its development branch is much larger and abundantly resourced. These dangers are specifically related to situations in which large amounts of funding is being pumped into the church and is being misapplied within programmes. Major issues of accountability arise from these situations and can often create more problems than solutions.

While church initiatives may work effectively in partnership with NGOs, CBOs other organisations as well as various members of the community, they may have weak cross-denominational links, thereby failing to unite with other churches in order to address root issues that may be adversely affecting their communities. There are noticeable human-made aspects to disaster risk which impede disaster mitigation. One such aspect can be found in traditional beliefs and worldviews. Cultural myths and assumptions and issues related to these cultural aspects are key areas that the church should address further. Furthermore, there is the possibility that some of the same traditional indigenous beliefs and cultural superstitions found outside of the church are just as prevalent within the church. These issues are explored in greater detail in the following chapters.

---

Chapter 3
Understanding the Cultural Dimensions

3.1 Perceptions of Disasters
This chapter examines the ways in which traditional beliefs and worldviews, and other cultural aspects impact people’s ability to prepare for and respond to disaster. However, before the cultural dimensions well be examined at length, it is important to view how communities perceive disasters. When conceptualizing disasters, it is vital to discuss human perceptions of the role people have within nature. 

Christian theology often depicts nature, though beautiful and glorious, as fallen and in need of redemption, thus setting the stage for the constructions of hazards as violations or interruptions of order. The relationship between human beings and their environment is couched in the notion that human reason can realign nature to meet human needs.

Therefore, humans can justify their need to remodel and reconstruct all things in their environment. Hoffman and Oliver-Smith (2002) states, ‘In the case of disasters, such a conceptualization may lead to policies and practices that address symptoms but not causes, condemning us to repeat constantly the exercise as both causes and symptoms evolve with our attempts to address them.’ 

The challenge in this deeply embedded ideology is found in the task of developing ways to properly connect with the environment where all people to become stewards of creation, rather than pillagers of it. Thus, the backdrop is set in that humans construct their own makings of disasters as destruction occurs within the environments we produce. Humans have molded and shaped their environment in such drastic ways that have caused others to migrate to more uncertain and less stable landscapes. Relationships between cultural interpretations of nature and the impact of disasters must be explored and addressed by the church.

‘Disasters have a past, present, and future.’ Historically, communities throughout the world created cultural constructions in order to explain real and potential disasters.

Some disaster scholars go so far as to suggest that disasters are simply socio-cultural constructions, in which the occurrence of a disaster does not necessitate the presence or impact of a hazard upon vulnerability. According to these scholars, all that is necessary for a disaster to occur is the social perception of an existing hazard and the perceived threat and implication for the community. In non-literate or semi-literate societies, oral history is the one of the more important means by which important rules and historical events can be passed down to the younger generations, which allows for these events to be kept in for the present generations.

Disasters are sometimes described in myths and legends and are usually attributed to demons or spirits who wish to punish a deviation of social and cultural norms.

Disasters are commonly portrayed in narrative form. For instance, Torrence and Grattan (2002) describe the narrative of the volcanic eruption, (volcanoes often seen as mythic icons), and subsequent disaster on the Shumagin Islands. One prominent disaster narrative involves a quarrel between the two volcanoes of the Unalaka and

26 Oliver-Smith, A., 2009. [Personal communication].
27 pp.32.
29 Ibid.
Umnak Islands, in which, by displaying who was more powerful than the other, ended in the explosion of both, complete with the raining of rocks and fire at one another. Such is the mythic nature of disaster within cultural narratives.

Even though the origins of globalisation is contested, before its advent many societies had existing strategies and knowledge that helped them adapt to ‘disasters’ – to the extent that they were established patterns of survival and part of their ways of life. For centuries, Sahelian nomads adapted to periods of drought through interethnic links with farmers by altering their migration routes. Yet in recent times, government policies, region politics, land tenure issues, and ethnic boundaries have altered these strategies. These lead to what is known as maladaptation. The way societies deal and cope with hazards and disasters over lengths of time, bring about cultural adaptations ranging from ‘innovation and persistence in memory, cultural history, worldview, symbolism, religion, and the cautionary nature of folklore and folk tales’.

However, with the change of the global climate system and the unpredictability of its affects on humanity, it has become increasingly difficult for people to prepare for and mitigate the risks of disaster. With a future in which unprecedented disaster cycles could begin to occur, long-established community coping mechanisms may no longer be enough. After all, how does one prepare for the unknown?

In disaster scenarios people are commonly so dislocated they are unable to utilize their survival patterns and strategies. There are many stories from the 2005 tsunami in which local beliefs and taboos collided with the shock of disaster. One woman commented through her cries in Tamil, ‘I have lost my children. How can I call myself mother any more? I am cursed.’ Regardless of whether this woman who lost her children actually believes that she is cursed, or whether this is just a figure of speech, the point here is that the concept of the curse is so deeply rooted in the cultural composition that it undermines her ability to cope with the disaster. The church’s primary role in disaster has been to address this issue, to show the suffering mother that her role has not changed – that she can still be a mother to children. Though it may be difficult for her to believe, and though the disaster claimed her own biological children, it has not destroyed ‘her identity, her humanity, or her role.’

Additionally, ‘disasters provide a unique view of a society’s resistance or resilience in the face of disruption.’ Disasters can unveil the society’s social structure, such kinship and other alliances. People create meanings for what has happened and interpretations of these stories are then passed around the community for generations. Ceremonies and rituals, both traditional and modern, as well as myths and legends, are often created to remember the disaster events, which impacted and changed the culture. Also, other aspects arise, ranging from disaster scenarios to nostalgia. To illustrate disaster scenarios, some communities believe that storms are the wishes of the dead upon those in the village that deserve punishment. After the perceptions of disasters have been investigated it is important to elaborate on the cultural currents that the church must acknowledge and address. This next section will explore these cultural dimensions.

---

3.2 **Worldviews**

The concept of worldview contains ambiguity and is easily misunderstood. For the purposes of this paper, the meaning of worldview is the given realities for people in communities and how they use those realities to live. Culture is the concept that generated and birthed the idea of worldview. While, generally, churches strive to be counter-cultural in nature, many churches reflect the very culture and communities in which they exist. Culture is the soft and fertile soil within which people build narratives and sow connections between one another and their environment. When church’s development efforts centre on community participation, issues relating to the community’s traditional culture and spiritual perspective are raised. Because culture is part-and-parcel of one’s worldview, the culture often shapes how people interpret the world in which they live. Unlike Western culture, where there is a premium placed on the physical, tangible realm, in many places throughout the world, the worldview is both physical and spiritual, with an emphasis placed on the spiritual. It is important not to dismiss the impact that a spiritual world has on communities, because these are the realities in which people live and work (see Figure 2 for levels of community worldviews).

While Western society may operate within, and struggle with materialism, secularism, and ‘obsessions with health, wealth, and power,’ the context of traditional beliefs and spiritual worldviews in many developing countries is quite different, and may include witchcraft, curses, ancestral spirits and rituals. A current example of these worldviews is demonstrated in a remote village in Nepal. Recently, a malformed baby has been born in this Nepali community and many in the village are worried about the spiritual impact the baby has on their community. Some villagers are worshipping the baby as a god, while others see the baby as a curse and the reason why the monsoon rains are late. One of local Hindu priests comments that he believes the baby is a curse. He states, ‘farmers cannot do agriculture because of that baby. It is a curse from God because of a past life.’

This story exemplifies the need to carefully examine beliefs and how they prevent people from preparing and developing ways to respond to future disasters, such as flooding in this instance. This story demonstrates how important the views of the local priests are to the community as well. If a local priest perceives something as a curse, many in the community may be particularly influenced by this perception.

Because a worldview shapes responses to disaster risks and could possibly impede efforts to prepare for future disasters, if the church simply ignores people’s spiritual worldview in an effort to provide more tangible or ‘relevant’ solutions to the problems surrounding disaster, it seriously undermines its own ability to build people’s capacities in the face of disaster. It is equally important to look at people’s understandings of the origins of disasters as this may potentially contribute to social vulnerabilities in the affected areas. Given these varied realities, one must ask how can churches best respond, and what are the potential barriers to these responses?

---

35 Myers, B, 1999.
37 Lang, Olivia, 2009, pp.1.
While many churches focus primarily on addressing spiritual issues and worldviews through evangelism, depicted on the left part of the figure above, most development agencies focus on the worldview, depicted on the right side of the figure. This is where most development activities take place, in the natural or material world. Therein lies the problem when only a fraction of a community’s worldview is recognised, there cannot be a holistic answer to the problems faced by the community. There certainly cannot be a sustainable solution to the issue of disaster, and the suffering and loss caused by it. Of course, traditional spiritual worldviews are not just hindrances to disaster management. In fact, both formal and traditional religions are helpful in that they contain a wealth of information about a community. Myers (1999) articulates it well when he suggests,

‘Whether we agree or not, these domains of the unseen spiritual world are where the community will tend to locate the cause of its problems and the hope for their solutions. If we are unwilling to view the world from the community’s perspective, and begin from there, then we are top-down development practitioners after all.’

3.3 **Power Relations**
Disasters have an uncanny knack for revealing the power dimensions – who has power, who does not have power, and who wants power – that are present within, community, regional and global scales. Because disasters leave people vulnerable,
power distribution is quite often unmasked within a society. Quite often, there are disempowering themes within the worldviews of citizens living in both developed and developing countries. Walter Wink suggests that there are often ‘delusional assumptions’, which are accepted by the poor in developing countries and are often associated with their beliefs in power structures. For instance, because there is so much power associated with traditional healers, witchdoctors and other authorities, as well as a fear of doing anything that might cross these them, money will often be spent on charms for spiritual protection in an attempt to avoid curses, bad luck, and in some cases, sickness or death. In certain places in the developing world, any sign of innovation or improvement, especially if they ‘emanate from a source outside the community, are refused for fear of any backlash from the ancestral spirit world.’

When working in disaster prone areas, where there is a fear of the spiritual, and even physical, ramifications of any change wrought by Christians working in the area, it is important to consider authority figures in the community. Though a controversial subject among Christians and church leaders, it is vital to the success of a church-led project to inform and invite everyone who holds any clout within the community, such as: witchdoctors, shamans, spiritual healers, leaders of other faiths; imams, clerics, indigenous priests, etc. to engage in the process of disaster risk reduction. One community health worker working in Colombia Latin America commented that nothing could be done in the community until he worked with the local leaders.

If these other authority figures within the community are not co-opted into the church-led project, their lack of support could negatively influence others within the community, thus damaging the prospect of positive change. DRR projects are often sustainable if there is a strong sense of community cohesion, and if there are people who are left out, or are not invited to engage with the project, regardless of their status in that particular society, the chances of the project succeeding over time is substantially diminished. On the other hand, local elites and powerful leaders can misuse their power and even sabotage disaster reduction efforts in order to gain an advantage over others. Churches may even have local community elites within its leadership, and must be aware of the possibility of conflicting interests or intentions within the Christian community.

Because of strong cultural and lifestyle taboos, the church may not be prepared to work with certain individuals or groups, even as it tries to effectively implement disaster management methods and techniques in order to minimise destruction or suffering in the effected community. Some of the groups that churches may be unprepared or unwilling to work with include, but are not limited to: women, children, prisoners, sex workers, and people with disabilities. Questions like; who participates? Whose agenda? need to be key questions asked and understood within the church.

### 3.4 Gender and Age

Within the context of disasters, the role that gender relations play in how they contribute to shaping human interactions with the environment are often overlooked, not given priority and sometimes entirely missed. In disaster contexts, women have

---

40 Myers, B, 1999, p. 78; Wink, W., 1992.
41 Myers, B, 1999, p. 86.
differing and contrasting constraints from men. Because of these contrasts and others, the subject of gender dynamics in disaster is gaining ground. In many places around the world there is a correlation between disasters and religious interactions, which are especially gender-weighted, as different disaster situations produce varied gender responses. For instance, following a disaster in Honduras, it was reported that women were more commonly interactive with local churches. One particular church in this instance helped provide women with unique ways of achieving greater social status and greater participation within the community than their usual domestic activities allowed for. For these reasons, it may greatly benefit marginalised community members if the church is made more aware of gender power and privilege issues. The illustrative study found below is a sobering example of how the church can abuse its power and misuse its credibility within communities while overlooking vulnerability and root causes of disaster.

**Case Study: Hurricane Mitch in Morolica, Honduras**

Investigations into a culture or community’s religious beliefs are often left out of disaster reconstruction efforts, and this makes sense because addressing the ‘tangibles’ is pre-eminent – the suffering, physical, economic and environmental devastation. After all, it is quite difficult, not to mention time consuming, to investigate the underlying cultural views and religious structures that are explicitly connected to the disaster. However, this particular study found that the local church played an essential role in how communities interpret and cope with disasters. Hurricane Mitch, which swept across Honduras in 1998, caused massive flooding in the area of Morolica, and vast losses of all kinds for one particular village. On one hand, the local church assisted this community in reconstruction efforts, while on the other it tried to offer reasons for the cause of the disaster. In this instance, the local church often pointed out the community’s sins as the main reason for the disaster. However, the church completely neglecting to mention that the village was located in a floodplain, between two rivers. The village’s geographical location had contributed to the destruction of the village but was completely overlooked and unaddressed by the church. Thus, a majority of the people within the village, interpreted the disaster as ‘God’s will’ and took the view that if God sent another disaster in the future, then it too, will be His will. Therefore, the thought of rebuilding in a lower risk area was not considered, nor necessarily understood by the community, as a way to reduce their vulnerability. The absence of disaster mitigation activities can potentially reduce communities’ resilience to future hazards. The church is central to the ideologies and realities within a community and thus, religion has clear implications for populations – it can exacerbate vulnerability or contribute to resilience.

Other issues related to power are often embedded in cultural attitudes toward individuals who are excluded from decision-making processes within the community. Children are frequently excluded in communities and are not viewed as local stakeholders, even though children and young people (the age of 18 and below) account for nearly fifty percent of the world’s population. Findings from one study on children’s involvement in DRR suggests that in communities where children are involved in DRR education, processes and international frameworks, such as the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) the community is more likely to become more resilient.

---

44 Ibid.
resilient in a shorter amount of time, than in communities where cultural attitudes towards children will not allow for their interaction.

The findings from this study done by Plan UK, where based on child focus groups and surveys from various countries in Asia (Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines), Africa and the Middle East (Egypt, Ghana, Lebanon, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Swaziland) as well as Latin America and the Caribbean (El Salvador, Bolivia, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Nicaragua). These studies involved over 1000 respondents from the 17 countries; 854 of who were children and young people (44% girls and 56% boys), and made use of the results of questionnaires given to local government (LG) officials, civil society organisations (CSOs) and community representatives. This survey shows that opinions and attitudes about children’s involvement within community decisions vary considerably according to local, cultural, social and political circumstances. Also, in societies where children and young people do not have access to quality education and pertinent information, nor are encouraged to become responsible citizens, it is expected that HFA and DRR goals will not be met. Thus, the charge to the church is to not over exert power over, or alienate others but rather to create a meaningful dialogue and engagement with all individuals within the community regardless of their class, gender, age, and ethnicity.

3.5 Social Organisation
The church is both a central institution and a vital symbol that provides focus and organisation within the community. In one community in the Andes region of Peru, many churches united to help reorganise community organisations in the aftermath of an earthquake. Even the church-affiliated organisations and Christian groups extended their scope to include the distribution of aid to those who needed it most; orphans, widows, and the poor. Prior to the disaster the churches served only a small portion of the population, however, after the disaster occurred, the groups reorganised and were directly involved in serving others within the population in practical ways, which broadened their scope of community service. Because many churches are able to organise beyond formal hierarchical structures and to care for the community and larger society, this links churches not just to local needs, but also to national and global movements for positive transformation.

3.6 Cultural Salience of Disasters
In many areas, the church lacks a deep understanding of local contexts in which disasters occur. It is difficult for the church to take even the most basic community assets into account when addressing the issue of disaster in an area; local knowledge, prior experience, food storage and communication networks must all be understood. However, even the most culturally relevant churches can still experience unpredicted cultural clashes when working with communities. The question remains; how can the church be aware of the vast cultural undercurrents that they are simply not aware of? In terms of culture, it is important to state that the goal is not for local churches throughout the developing world to level the cultural playing field, as it were, or to become replicas of European and American churches in the West, but to rather to

---

46 Oliver-Smith, A., 1986.
emphasise that ‘there is no culturally neutral Gospel, no culture-free knowledge of Christ.’

In order for the church to fully engage with a community to reduce its risk of disaster, it needs to be aware of the community’s cultural dimensions and be willing to accept the discomfort, which may come when cultural conflicts are discovered. There can be no set way of addressing these; each situation is unique. The key here is to expect the unexpected, and this may require that churches expand or redefine their mandate within a particular community in order to more readily serve that community. The need to understand underlying cultural currents that inform perspectives on disaster is indelibly linked to the success of efforts that seek to prevent or prepare at-risk populations for disaster. In disaster, how can the church transform itself to not just provide relief for survival, but into an effective instrument for DRR?

With regards to people’s perceptions that disasters are in fact ‘acts of God’, John Twigg (2004) asserts that, despite repeated experience to the contrary and the findings of social science research’ these perceptions are no more than ‘disaster myths’ perpetuated by superstition and media coverage. Additionally, the assumption that people are fatalistic about disasters and catastrophic events, and thus unable or unwilling to take protective and proactive measures against them, is an equally pervasive ‘myth’, which Twigg (2004) also believes undermines and shapes the ways in which agencies approach their work with communities affected by disaster.

Indeed, according to Handmer and Dovers (2007), ‘thinking has shifted in emergency management from being dominated by a passive, accepting approach – disasters as ‘acts of God’ – with the resulting attitude that little can be done, to a more proactive approach that accepts the role of humans in creating the conditions for disasters.’ In more traditional cultures, the likelihood of ingrained perspectives that link disasters with divine punishment is perhaps lessening more now than ever due to the growing body of knowledge that clearly points to socially constructed hazards. Cultural differences can cause misunderstandings and mistrust between response agency workers and minority victims.

Because disasters symbolise various things to various cultures, and because common challenges in church-community partnerships often hinge on the cultural dimension, the church should endeavour to build relationships with the surrounding community in order to encourage mutual trust and respect. Though not all examples apply to every church’s partnership with communities, it could perhaps learn from some of the most common pitfalls inherent in partnerships between individuals or groups from differing cultures. These pitfalls include but are not limited to; language barriers, varying motivations and goals, gender/age issues, cultural intolerance, power issues, hidden agendas, assumptions, time management, and differences in resource contributions. However, it is important to note that the church itself has culture of its own, and the community could stand to learn about the undercurrents of their local church institution as well. When the church becomes aware of these prevailing cultural currents, it can respond. The next section focuses on how the church can

\[49\] pp. 19.
\[50\] pp. 11.
respond through addressing some of these cultural currents in order to be able build resilient communities.

3.7 Reflection Questions for the Church to consider:
1. What are some of the local worldviews and values? How are these expressed?
2. What does the community consider as a disaster? What are the disaster risks in within the community and how can they be reduced?
3. Who are those most at-risk in the community and how is the church reaching them? Who are the most vulnerable?
4. How can disaster risk reduction fit within the local social structure? Can local communication and media tools be used to promote DRR? Local aesthetics? Celebrations? DRR can be affordable, so how can it fit within the local economic resources?
5. How can the local church strike a balance between social service and spiritual mentorship?
6. Examine current and past experiences and involvement in community outreaches. Are there any similarities or striking differences?
7. How does local belief expressed within the church affect project implementation?
Chapter 4
Roles of the Church in Addressing the Cultural Dimensions

4.1 Next Steps
After exploring the influence that culture and local beliefs have within disaster contexts, it is important to investigate next steps forward for the church. In order for the church to be truly effective in engaging with communities in order to prevent, prepare for and reduce the risk of disaster, it must play an active role in the communities’ vulnerabilities, while viewing a community’s hazard exposure through the lens of culture and traditional beliefs. Now that the church has acknowledged the deeply rooted cultural threads within communities, this chapter outlines the way forward for churches to bridge the gap between knowledge and practise. Is there potential value of the church challenging harmful myths and assumptions?

Values and religion, encompassed in worldview, inform motivation and human behaviour. Religion plays a powerful role in shaping people’s values and ideas about what matters in life, and how life should be lived. Cultural practices and dynamics such as the gender relations within sex and marriage, reproductive health and initiation practices, are deeply ingrained in religious beliefs and play large roles in communities’ decision making processes. Many societies and cultures have strong stigmas against discussions about sex and female reproductive health. One such practice that has been addressed in recent years is the widespread practice of female genital mutilation (FGM). Despite, its sensitive nature, and the need to take much time and care, many churches are working in partnership with others to address the harmful effects of FGM, and to ultimately bring this practice to an end. Cultures that have changed the practice of FGM within their communities have undergone a slow and challenging process of social transformation.52 This next case example investigates the question; how can societies change harmful cultural practices?

Case Study: Church-NGO partnership in challenging traditional beliefs in Senegal
In Senegal, an NGO called Tostan (meaning ‘breakthrough’ in Senegalese) partnered with churches in a community and worked with them to help challenge FGM practices.53 Tostan’s approach is simple; informing communities about health and hygiene, human rights, literacy and problem solving while the community decides and prioritises for itself which changes, if any, it would like to make. Tostan found that lasting change must involve the entire community, and only through collective decision-making can transformation occur. As FGM practices were inevitably abandoned within the community, Tostan stressed that the community itself made a collective decision and that it was not the result of pressure by NGOs or the church partners. The involvement of traditional and religious leaders as well as community institutions was essential, and it actually served to strengthen bonds of trust and build the church’s credibility within the community.

This case study illustrates the importance in the partnership between the NGO and church when challenging harmful cultural dimensions. There are also links between the practice of FGM and the practice of female foot binding in China. Another case study reveals that the practice of female foot-binding in China, a custom that was

53 Tostan, 2009.
exercised as a pre-requisite for marriage, was practiced for 1,000 years, yet was abandoned in just one generation. Dr. Gerry Mackie, who studies this social change in China, found that since the norms in the communities changed, foot binding was no longer compulsory for females.\textsuperscript{54} Though some would fault organisations like Tostan for raising awareness and educating people directly affected by practises such as FGM, community initiatives should not be underestimated as the primary agents of lasting change and social transformation. Partnerships between the community, church, and NGOs are a key ingredient to positive change in communities. When helping to facilitate cultural change within communities that greatly desire it, great care needs to be taken, so as to not cause unwanted disruption within the community, create more vulnerabilities or adversely affect hard-earned relationships between the church and the community.

Now it is important to look at how cultural dimensions can be challenged within a disaster context. One key cause of people’s vulnerability, identified through disaster risk assessments, is often interwoven into cultural values and beliefs. The case study below explores how the church influenced the community’s perspectives and values through using new disaster preparedness measures. This case study also introduces the concept of fatalism, which is a prevalent cultural belief. Fatalism can be defined as ones’ belief in supernatural forces predetermining everything in the world.\textsuperscript{55}

\textbf{Case Study in Assam, India}

The Baptist churches in Assam, India challenged the fatalistic mindset of the communities whose land was flooded every year by the river and was in a state of dependency on relief aid that had arisen as a result of the flooding. The impact of this upon the community was visible throughout the course of a ten-year disaster mitigation project. With the support of a NGO the churches in Assam were able to engage with relevant disaster risk reduction strategies, which not only strengthened the resilience of the people in that area, but also helped to secure credibility and respect for the first time in a predominantly Hindu and Muslim region. The communities began to believe that, instead of continuing to passively – and perhaps subconsciously - uphold strong fatalistic beliefs, they could do something during the dry season to help mitigate the flooding during the wet season. In addition to influencing beliefs that led to passivity, practical benefits became visible as the church and surrounding community partnered; wells, trees and infrastructure were outcomes of this project.\textsuperscript{56}

Where the local church is concerned, some of the most important issues to address are not technical or organisational, but rather theological. Underlying ideologies and philosophies of fatalism and divine punishment, which might adversely influence local Christians to simply do nothing in terms of safe-guarding themselves and the greater community against risk, must be addressed. In brief, there must be a reconciliation of core beliefs with social transformation within the community. Case in point, one of the outcomes in the Caring for the Environment case study in rural Puno, Peru, was the pastors’ change of mindset. Prior to the activities which prompted the case study, evangelical pastors in this particular region in Peru had primarily

\textsuperscript{54} Mackie, G., 1996.
\textsuperscript{55} Myers, B.,1999.
\textsuperscript{56} Bulmer, A. & Hansford, B., 2009.
focused their efforts on growing their churches through evangelism. As a consequence they did not necessarily prioritise finding solutions to social and economic issues. This presented a great challenge to educating the community on environmental hazards and vulnerabilities in their village.\(^{57}\) When the pastor’s mindsets were changed, their priorities shifted as well, which allowed them to place a greater emphasis on mobilising the churches to help meet the needs of the community. Also, The church can also continue to advocate on behalf of the most marginalised and vulnerable within their communities.

**Case Study: Bihar, India**

An illustrative case study from Bihar, India exemplifies the results of effective church advocacy with landowners in areas where there was a high risk of flooding. The village Discipleship Centre in Bihar advocated for the community to plan a safe evacuation route when the floodwaters arrived every year. Due to trespassing issues there had never been a flood evacuation plan. Though it did take commitment and an investment of time and energy, the basic advocacy carried out by the church-community partnership resulted in the decision to construct a raised path across private land for the community to use in case of flooding. Now the community practises flood evacuation with their children on this new raised evacuation route.\(^{58}\) At times, local, regional and international action needs to be taken in order for communities to gain support in disaster management activities. Advocacy is often the only way of challenging factors that are linked to people’s vulnerability, and thus must be taken up by the church as a viable and worthwhile tool.

### 4.2 Recommendations

**Church-Based Community Resilience**

This next part of the paper discusses the possible recommendations for the church. If the church can transform communities by addressing cultural dimensions that impede disaster management then it can also transform communities by facilitating community-wide resilience. As resilience is one of the major goals of DRR, the church can advocate and build community resilience. Thus, the importance here is to examine what church-based community resilience (CBCR) involves.

It is said that resilient communities are like bamboo trees. Resilient communities, ‘hit by a hazard (which transforms into a disaster) are able to spring back and resume their original form and readily recover and adjust easily’, and have the ability to cope.\(^{59}\) ISDR (2004) suggest that resilient communities are those that have the capacity to adapt to hazards and disasters, ‘by resisting or changing in order to reach and maintain an acceptable level of functioning and structure. This is determined by the degree to which the social system is capable of organizing itself to increase its capacity for learning from past disasters for better future protection and to improve risk reduction measures.’\(^{60}\) Many churches are in positions within communities to help reduce disaster vulnerability while helping to increase local resilience. Wherever it is present in the community, the church is well positioned to work with local people and to reduce disaster risk and vulnerability. When the church endeavours to help build communities’ resilience while encouraging the further development of

\(^{57}\) Bulmer, A. & Hansford, B., 2009.
\(^{59}\) Delica-Wislon, Z., 2005.
\(^{60}\) ISDR, 2004.
livelihoods, it necessarily plays the role of also reducing communities’ vulnerabilities. One way that churches can pinpoint communities’ various vulnerabilities is by employing ‘community vulnerability and risk’ mapping. In the case of Puno, Peru, the local church pastors invited community members and government officials to carry out risk-mapping exercises within the community.\textsuperscript{61} The question still remains; how does the church carry out its role as an agent of change within the community while using culturally sensitive methods?

Perhaps the only starting point for the church’s involvement in disaster risk reduction is for there to be a clear understanding of what a disaster is and how risk can be reduced within communities. In order for the church to be an effective facilitator of community-based DRR, it must find and amplify the voices that usually go unheard. To remain effective, churches must also be able to assess the impact of their interventions within the community.\textsuperscript{62} Ian Wallace (2002) suggests that church-based programmes need to be ‘the leaven in the development dough.’\textsuperscript{63} Wallace would advocate for churches to widen their development community to include other groups that are active in research, advocacy and policy decisions. Some essential hallmarks for the church’s involvement in DRR programmes must be its ability to act as good stewards of resources while retaining a willingness to learn from past mistakes.

Often, marginalised groups such as women, children, the elderly, as well as people with disabilities are left out of DRR efforts. These groups are doubly marginalised because they are not even given the opportunity to help provide solutions to the communities’ problems. Rather than perpetuating this marginalisation, the church can encourage other central community institutions to create opportunities for ostracised individuals to voice their realities, concerns and solutions during the DRR process. In this way the church can be a place that advocates for all voices to be heard within the community, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity and political affiliations. Building the church’s institutional capacity is an important task when considering how the church might aid DRR initiatives. Children’s involvement in DRR, climate change and adaptation projects are becoming increasingly important in disaster literature. Both children’s capacities and their knowledge of environmental issues and indigenous coping mechanisms have been shown to be essential assets for families in the aftermath of disasters.\textsuperscript{64}

In effort to build resilience, the church can seek creative ways to raise awareness about man-made aspects of disasters, such as cultural perceptions. For an example, if disasters are believed to be caused by supernatural reasons, like God’s punishment, the disaster risk reduction methods should emphasize the church and religious measures like prayers, rituals, and songs. These methods can be used to raise awareness about the affect cultural beliefs have on disaster preparedness. If disaster preparation and recovery efforts see the church as a place where capacities and resilience can be build through religious activities of the church then disaster preparedness can move beyond just providing physical disaster management measures.\textsuperscript{65} Churches also have the responsibility in the community to link spiritual,

\textsuperscript{61} Bulmer, A. \& Hansford, B., 2009.
\textsuperscript{62} Wallace, I, 2002.
\textsuperscript{63} pp. 136.
\textsuperscript{64} Ensor, M, 2008.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
social, physical and ecological dimension within the society they serve. There are also gender differentials of resources access, authority and decision making among others, that the church should consider in disaster mitigation programmes designed to reduce vulnerability and build resilient communities against future disasters.

Other ways of building resilience involve, assisting in ways to open up dialogue about challenging issues and needs between communities and development practitioners. The church’s promotion of community forums in which faith and development can be discussed openly can help bridge the gap between traditional knowledge and professional knowledge utilised by development practitioners and the mutual links with the church can help encourage further partnership while building upon both the church’s and communities’ strengths. Therefore, the church can be a key institution involved in cultivating a culture of resilience in communities.

**Hyogo Framework for Action and PADR**

Another recommendation for the church to investigate is the Hyogo Framework for Action. The decision to mainstream DRR into international development was formalised in January 2005, when the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005 – 2015 was adopted by the World Conference on Disaster Reduction, and signed by representatives from 168 nations and multilateral institutions. The centre of the Hyogo Framework is a set of three principle and I strategic goals, the first of which being, ‘the more effective integration of disaster risk considerations into sustainable development policies, planning and programming at all levels, with a special emphasis on disaster prevention, mitigation, preparedness and vulnerability reduction’.

One of the most important activities within the Hyogo Framework is the need to ‘promote community-based training initiatives, considering the role of volunteers, as appropriate, to enhance local capacities to mitigate and cope with disasters’. DRR can be effective when local people are involved in analysing their vulnerabilities, capacities, as well as the development and implementation of an action plan. This method is known as Participatory Assessment of Disaster Risk (PADR). PADR is a tool that builds upon the activities of the Hyogo Framework, and the church can use PADR to engage the local community in reducing risk and vulnerability within their communities.

The church is one of the main forums for community knowledge sharing and education. The United Nations highlights the importance of indigenous knowledge within Priority number three (3) of the Hyogo Framework for Action, which centres on education and knowledge transfer – it states that it is essential to ‘use knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels’. One of the key activities identified under the priority actions is the importance of information management and exchange, and an emphasis on the use of ‘relevant traditional and indigenous knowledge and cultural heritage,’ which is to be shared with and adopted by communities. Local knowledge should not be underestimated.

---

66 UNISDR, 2005, pp. 3.
67 Ibid, pp. 10.
69 UNISDR, 2005, pp. 9.
70 Ibid, pp. 9.
As a social and local institution, the church can serve as a library full of knowledge from the previous generations that can also serve as an advocate of and caretaker of that knowledge. The church also understands the way the knowledge needs to be communicated into action, as it knows the local languages too. There can be also unforeseen disadvantages of knowledge transfer, which have been discussed in previous chapters on weakness of church and issues surrounding power relations. Because the church is at the forefront of knowledge transfer within a community, it can provide a place and a method for the facilitation of knowledge transfer and community-based knowledge management.

As many communities may not speak the specialised language of disaster practitioners, they may not automatically communicate their knowledge to such outsiders. Some communities may be unable to relate their livelihood concepts to proposed disaster development interventions. However, the church is in a position to influence even at a policy level by mobilising the community and potentially thousands worldwide on issues such as, debt relief or climate change.\textsuperscript{71}

\textbf{Table 1} Hyogo Framework for Action

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The church can adapt the following objectives from the Hyogo Framework\textsuperscript{72}</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Ensuring that disaster risk reduction is prioritised locally with the backing of strong institutions for implementation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Identifying, assessing, and monitoring disaster risks and enhancing early warning systems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Using knowledge, education, and innovations to build a culture of safety and resilience in communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Reducing the risk factors in the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Strengthening disaster preparedness for effective responses in communities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Hyogo Framework for Action suggests that the foundation for reducing disaster risk and for promoting a culture of disaster resilience rests in, the knowledge of the hazards as well as the physical, social, economic and environmental susceptibilities to disasters faced by most societies and taking action based upon what is known to be a community’s short and long term hazards and vulnerabilities.\textsuperscript{73} The church that is engaged with its community on ways of reducing disaster risk can help facilitate the management and exchange of information between generations, especially for those that do not have previous knowledge of disaster. It can also serve as a central community gathering point and information crossroads with a unique storehouse of knowledge.

\textit{Church Mandates: Defining / Expanding}

Additionally recommendations involve churches need to define and expand their mandates. Churches have a spiritual mandate that guides their actions. Sometimes the mandates of churches do not include engagement with individuals or groups outside the church, who may have different faith or religious backgrounds. When working with churches, NGOs must be aware of this issue and understand how their activities and ethos work for or against a particular church’s mandate. However, some church’s

\textsuperscript{71} Boyd, S., 2009. 
\textsuperscript{72} UNISDR, 2005. 
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid, pp. 7.
mandates are entirely informed by the community’s needs, while others simply desire to include the community at some level within their mandate. The church’s ethos of ‘integral mission’ both captures and informs the mandate of the church that wishes to fully engage with the surrounding community.

As a holistic mandate, integral mission suggests that evangelism and social concern are not mutually exclusive and emphasises that churches should hold those to account whom, whether actively or neglectfully, have allowed their local communities and surrounding society to be victimised by social injustice and inequality. The key is being able to bring the mandate to life. Forces that work against the mandate – both within and outside the church – are important to discuss as well. Churches that are theologically conservative may be suspicious of ‘outside influences’ and may actually only understand their Biblical mandate to consist of ‘remaining separate from the world’, and in-so-doing, disengage from meeting practical needs within their community, or serving anyone who may be outside of their specific church fold. Of course, it may become increasingly tempting for a theologically conservative church to withhold its support and service if it finds that the population in need ascribes to a different religion altogether.

Church and Christian communities must be willing to change from within in order to redefine their mandates in accordance with the physical needs of their communities. The expansion of the mandate also included church advocacy. Some churches may equate the word ‘advocacy’ with politics and assume that it may be too political or confrontational to participate in. However, organisations like Global Campaign and the Micah Challenge place advocacy at the forefront of the Christian conscience, addressing issues as varied as climate change, inequality, and trade justice. Church leaders can also be active in liaising with policymakers within local and regional contexts.

What is needed is for the church to expand its mandate in such a way that there is greater dialogue between it and the surrounding community and larger society. As the church expands its mission and mandate to be closer to the holistic concept of ‘integral mission’, then it avoids the pitfalls of remaining a challenge to, rather than a resource for, disaster management. While, as an institution, the church is flawed and in need of re-envisioning, it holds the keys to deep understandings of community identity and retains credibility and trust that many institutions are unable to gain.

As a word of caution, it should be mentioned that churches have to be careful and sensitive in how they act upon challenging any cultural aspects. Churches who are well established and have good relationships with the community are in the best place to advocate and transform their communities. However, churches could receive community backlash depending on how they handle these cultural aspects to disasters. It is imperative that churches not send the message to the community that all cultural beliefs and aspects to disasters are wrong and need to be changed. Clarity in communication and relationship building in communities are key steps to avoid any further misunderstandings.

Taking into account the next steps forward for the church, information issues remain. The knowledge gaps with this topic are significant. These recommendations are not the solutions to all of the underlying challenges. Issues of cultural beliefs and
traditions are challenging to measure. Faith-inspired work is poorly documented and known. The researcher believes more studies need to examine particularly in the areas of how churches can potentially influence values and beliefs. Overall, more case studies need to be drawn in order to gain insights on the potential value and impacts well as more academically rigorous analysis and research on this subject.

### 4.3 Key Questions for Reflection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is there a desire amongst church pastors, laypersons and leaders to see the church act affect change within their communities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there communities or community members who would be willing to explore the possibility of working in collaboration with the local church?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Practical Applications for Church in understanding the DRR process are:**

- Think creatively how the church can incorporate the entire community into the DRR process?
- Church Education- Refer to it in their teachings/sermons
- Explore areas such as, meetings and workshops for all their local church leaders on DRR practices for brainstorming and understanding the issues
- Observe other churches who are working on DRR practices in their communities and give their support, perhaps even visit those churches
- Have DRR as a agenda topic at senior level committee meetings within the church

**Practical Applications: Ways the church can raise awareness of man-made aspects of disaster**

- Brainstorm ways to handle any manmade/cultural aspects to disasters in a culturally sensitive ways?
- Hold discussions on integral mission worldview and the church mandates. Does your church need to redefine or expand its mandate in order to address the physical needs of the community, especially and specifically needs related to disasters?
- Start focus groups on Beliefs and Disasters in order to address questions like: What local beliefs are associated with the meaning of disasters? Are there any local beliefs and traditions that are preventing our community from taking actions to reducing the risks of disasters? How can the church reduce the risks of disasters and challenge harmful beliefs and assumptions in culturally sensitive ways?

**Action planning and Advocacy**

How can the church build community resilience? How can the local, regional, and international community assist our disaster efforts? Brainstorm ways to help facilitate Church Based Community Resilience (CBCR) by addressing myths, assumptions and traditional beliefs if any areimpeding disaster management.
Chapter 5
Conclusions

The essence of this dissertation highlights the need to further review and research the church’s role in disaster contexts. Throughout the course of this paper, the church’s role in disaster management has been examined in light of the cultural currents and traditional beliefs that it must take into account when working with communities and reducing their vulnerabilities. Exploring the strengths and shortcomings of the church will continue to build a solid foundation for continued work in the future on this topic. Building the church’s capacity to understand the nexus between a community’s cultural dimensions and their ability to prepare for disaster should be seen as a progression, rather than a panacea to disaster management and development.

It is crucial for the church to incorporate cultural understandings in disaster risk reduction programmes. The issues of culture and traditional belief systems are cross cutting issues in disaster management and should be seriously considered by the church as it seeks to achieve greater vision and participation with the community. Drawing continuous conclusions from case studies, it is important to consider the church’s use of participatory methods in order for its interventions to truly be practical, helpful and desired by, and for the vulnerable community facing disaster. In terms of advocacy and raising its voice for the marginalised and voiceless, the church is an essential hub of community communication and awareness raising. Churches are well placed in their communities to help dissipate cultural myths and assumptions that are related to power, gender discrimination, social organisation and traditional – as well as harmful – perceptions of disasters.

While the church itself has proven, and can continue to be a facilitator of change in disaster prone communities – from addressing underlying cultural assumptions and myths that may impede risk reduction measures to influencing practical application of DRR via advocacy campaigns, encouraging community dialogue and cohesion, the church is far from being the ideal facilitator community transformation and partnership. The church’s limitations must also be examined. One of the great challenges will be in translating knowledge into action; in other words, how to incorporate local knowledge into development action. Additionally, there can be cultural barriers to consider within this research that are challenging to measure and predict.

In terms of participatory approaches to disaster management, there are issues of scale to resolve. The church is an institution that is involved in both local and global movements, thus the issue of action and scale rests in the church’s capacities. Questions are brought to mind such as, can the actions of the church in communities be replicated? The types of participatory approaches the church may employ in order to mobilise communities, largely depends on local groups’ and research partners’ willingness and ability to participate. Representation of community interests and local knowledge in the research process is complicated and affected, for example, by struggles over resources and gender discrimination issues. Yet cultural barriers are not impenetrable.

Local churches have a clear presence in communities throughout the world. The church also has local knowledge to make positive, unique and long-lasting
contributions to their communities. Thus the strengths of the church pinpoint its significance and contribution to disaster risk reduction and its ability to help dissipate cultural myths and assumptions that impede disaster mitigation efforts while building a culture of resilience.

Against this backdrop, churches are well positioned in their communities to make unique contributions to prevailing disaster risk reduction approaches whilst challenging myths and assumptions that impede development. Churches should continue to promote dialogue and partnership with practitioners working in disaster risk reduction. While the church may have various strengths and weaknesses in terms of mitigating disasters, it is important that they are not prevented to act but continue to take steps towards building resilient communities.

Bridging the worlds of church and development is crucial. New questions abound within the framework of this proposal. What happens in communities where there is little church engagement? What happens when the church abuses its power? This struggle within communities presents a challenge for churches, leaders, educators, and community development and disaster management practitioners currently and in the future.
Appendix A: United Nations University Concept Poster

**Garden of Eden, Garden of Resilience: The role of church in disasters.**

Monica Katherine Verhaeghe

Disasters have a profound affect on communities and livelihoods. It is my contention that churches are key civil society institutions that have a strong presence in various cultures and can assist with disaster mitigation and preparedness in local contexts. Helping to reduce communities’ risk of disaster and facilitating greater community resilience falls within the boundaries of the church’s integral mission.

---

**How can you build the church’s capacities to include disaster risk reduction as part of their greater vision?**

**Can the church mobilise a community to move towards greater resilience?**

**How can you be aware of cultural assumptions?**

---

**How the church can challenge harmful myths and assumptions that impede development.**

Churches can influence and shape values in their communities and wider societies. People’s vulnerabilities are interwoven with the complexities of cultural values and belief systems. In fact, the whole concept of what disasters symbolise can mean different things to, and across various cultures. For instance, the church can address common cultural beliefs such as fatalism. Churches are well placed, and in some societies, the only existing institutions that can help dissipate harmful cultural myths and assumptions that inhibit progress in disaster mitigation.
Appendix B: Integral mission

The Micah Network defines as ‘Integral Mission’ as:

‘The proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ. If we ignore the world we betray the word of God which sends us out to serve the world. If we ignore the word of God we have nothing to bring to the world. Justice and justification by faith, worship and political action, the spiritual and the material, personal change and structural change belong together. As in the life of Jesus, being, doing and saying are at the heart of our integral task.’ (Micah Challenge International, 2009)
Bibliography

*All websites accessed from March – August 2009


