

Presentation by Dominic Brain:

“Disaster Resilience and Social Safety in Nigeria”

This presentation was made on 02 March 2022 to a joint meeting with CWDF in the University of Chester Department of Geography and International Development. Gill Miller introduced Dominic, who is the Global Head of Programme Development and Funding at Christian Aid.

Dominic began by noting that Christian Aid had been founded after WWII to support refugees in Europe, and made reference to the unfortunate repetition of a European refugee crisis brought on by the attack on the Ukraine by the Russian Federation.

Nigeria is a very large country, with a population of 300 million across 36 states in a federal system of government. It is Africa’s largest economy, and the continent’s largest exporter of oil. It is also Africa’s largest *importer* of refined petroleum products.

The projects which Dominic described are being delivered by Christian Aid’s (CA) Nigerian staff in two of the states in the northern part of Nigeria – Sokoto & Kaduna – which are in the semi-arid sub-Saharan ‘Sahel’ region. In north-eastern Nigeria, in the areas closest to Lake Chad, there is a serious insurgency by Boko Haram, which has created an unstable security situation. This instability and conflict has set back years of progress. Dominic quoted a figure of 1.8 million internally displaced people in that area, about 80% of whom are being hosted by families and 20% are in camps. Unfortunately, the security situation in the north west is also worsening, to the extent that aid workers and CA staff can not drive around without being at risk of abduction and being held to ransom by insurgents.

Dominic talked a little about the roots of the insurgency. Because of over-extraction of water for irrigation, Lake Chad has shrunk considerably, which has contributed to instability and extremism. Climate change has also contributed to the problem. There are long standing tensions between settled farmers growing crops, and semi-nomadic animal herders. Dominic’s view was that instability and insecurity were the results of a failure of development. With appropriate development in place, there would be effective infrastructure – both physical and of governance – to make the communities resilient and able to remain stable and secure in the face of these pressures. [This view was challenged in one of the questions after the end of Dominic’s presentation.]

In spite of the northern part of Nigeria being semi-arid, flooding is the most prevalent natural disaster. It happens annually, and seems to be worsening (due to climate change?). In 2012, there were massive floods in Nigeria which affected 7 million people: 2 million were displaced by the floods, and the total estimated cost at the time was US\$17 billion.

The Christian Aid projects Dominic described aim to improve community resilience to natural (climatic) disasters. Disasters expose failures of development, and it is always the poorest people who suffer the most. They can’t stop the floods happening but can mitigate against the worst effects of them. Often poverty leads to no coping strategies. Hence one of Christian Aid’s approaches aims to empower poor and vulnerable groups of people to enable them to manage risks themselves and to improve their wellbeing so that they can live with dignity. This is called “Survivor / Community led response” – SCLR. The other is “Disaster Reduction and Social Safety – DraSS.

The basic building blocks underlying the project actions are very simple, aiming to build support systems before disaster strikes:

- Create early warning systems, which can be as simple as having a river level indicator which villagers will check regularly.
- Hold safety drills, especially targeting helping older, more vulnerable and disabled residents to get to higher ground.
- Provide first aid training.
- Create and train local committees who will be responsible for their own communities.
- Encourage enrolment in social support, bringing together neighbours, families, villages.
- Connect with the agencies that exist at state and national level which offer practical, logistical and financial support for disaster (flood) response.

Dominic acknowledged that there are significant gender issues: women and girls may suffer exclusion (from emergency evacuation). Northern Nigeria is mostly muslim, with a rural population that is very traditional and conservative in its outlook. It is essential for development agencies like Christian Aid to work through the local religious organisations, who may have initial suspicions which need to be overcome. It takes time to build the necessary trust which is essential if the project is to succeed.

Dominic was very clear that the measure for success would not be established until a few years after the formal end of a project, after the aid workers had moved on to another area. Were the simple measures put in place – early warnings; preparedness; risk reduction – still being used by the community in question? Data collected so far showed that the expenditure on community resilience has been hugely cost effective: each dollar spent on these preventative measures could result in a saving of as much as \$20 in the event of a flood, depending on the local circumstances. But as ever, there are political considerations which will determine if and where money is spent on preventative measures against natural disasters.

I did not take notes on the audience questions, but don't remember them really bringing new aspects of these projects to the fore. Rather, my impression was that they were probing deeper into some of the issues Dominic had already covered – perhaps reflecting the specific interests of individual members of the audience.

While the presentation was specifically about Christian Aid projects in northern Nigeria, the principles from them are widely applicable. Many parts of the world are liable to suffering what we usually call “natural disasters”, but which in reality are just the hazards of living in that particular place. This might be severe storms, floods, droughts, avalanches, earthquakes or epidemics. Any community that is well prepared, with solid infrastructures and good governance in place, will suffer far less lasting damage. Indeed, Dominic contrasted the effects of recent major earthquakes in Haiti and Japan. In Japan, the recovery has been swift, while in Haiti the situation remains dire many years afterwards.