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CENTRAL AMERICA

Despite the difficult context existing across Central America, Christian Aid country staff are working closely with partners to build appropriate opportunities. For example, in Guatemala, partner Colectivo Madre Selva, is supporting an initiative to build small hydroelectric plants to help excluded indigenous communities to access energy. The project is aligned with the principles of the Big Shift Campaign and the use of low carbon energy.

Another example of responding to the challenges of climate change can be seen through Christian Aid's partner Soppexcca in Nicaragua. Soppexcca is currently working to diversify agricultural production through the introduction of cocoa. The project is allowing small farmers to build better resilience against the challenges of climate change, through the transition from coffee production to cocoa production.

In Guatemala, Colectivo Madre Selva are working on a hydroelectric power and climate change monitoring project. Partners, Betania and Congcoop have started a climate change monitoring project looking at the impact of climate change on livelihoods

Colectivo Madre Selva, Guatemala

Just three months ago the arrival of electricity in La Taña was a cause for a 4-day fiesta. Music, dance and Mayan ceremonies were the main highlights of the celebration. Electric power came to La Taña when Colectivo Madre Selva and a group of church organisations, including Christian Aid, installed a small community-owned hydroelectric power plant that benefits over fifteen hundred Maya-Kekchi men and women.

The energy autonomy programme proposes an alternative model to populations that have been historically left out by the state and its development policy, which is based on extractive industries oriented to energy exports. In addition to producing environmentally-friendly electric power with

renewable resources, the project is intended for communities to decide on and responsibly manage their own resources and to do it sustainably in the medium and long term. La Taña's 300 families have access to water and lighting at a reasonable cost of US\$4 per household. Payments made by community residents are saved to cover the small electric system maintenance costs and the salaries of four local electricians in charge of technical service for the energy generating equipment.

The community turbine, as they call it, generates electric power for all. It uses some 125 litres of water per second taken from a river headwaters. Building the community-owned hydroelectric power plant and installing electric power in the community has resulted in the unthinkable— providing the community with a four-computer internet service.

Alvaro Hernández, a 45-year-old merchant, went to Uspantán to buy his first freezer ever, and the first one in town. There is an evident novelty in the community: dozens of children eating home-made ice cream. It is the first time La Taña children have eaten ice cream. The power has also enabled the community health clinic to have better equipment such as the use of ultra-sound, and fridges for storing medicines.

BANGLADESH

Christian Aid continues to work with a total of 19 partners across Bangladesh. Their partners range from national level policy and advocacy organisations that focus on climate change, to partners that work in the field dealing with the issue of secure livelihoods and gender. Christian Aid also works on climate change, disaster risk management, gender equality and human rights issues.

As the global climate changes, Bangladesh is likely to experience more than most, making it an 'impact hotspot.' Recent extreme temperatures demonstrated how average temperature rise can also increase the likelihood of dangerous heatwaves. Both average and extreme rainfall is projected to further increase, which will raise flood risks from the large rivers that meet in

the country's floodplains. This combination of increased flooding and moisture stress means that the 80% of Bangladeshis whose lives depend on agriculture must substantially increase their resilience.

The shrinking of civil society space has had a direct impact on aid policy, making it increasingly difficult for civil society organisations to obtain funding approval from the NGO affairs bureau to implement rights based programmes. Simultaneously, international donor agencies are becoming increasingly reluctant to fund tangible, service delivery projects, preferring instead to fund rights based programmes. Hence funding for Bangladesh's programme is becoming increasingly hard to come by, and permission to implement projects, increasingly hard to secure from government bodies.

Within the context of the ever-changing climate mentioned above, livelihoods work has continued to be a focus of Christian Aid's work in Bangladesh over the last six months. Partners have worked on scaling up existing good practices, and implementing projects which have a particular focus on sustainability in light of these climate change challenges. Partners have focused on diversifying income generation options, climate adaptive livelihood and adaptation measures, resulting in enhanced levels of resilience to climate change.

These climate adaptation measures have included floating gardens and hanging vegetables in water logged areas, saline tolerant rice varieties, saline tolerant maize and sunflower varieties in saline prone areas, vermicompost in river basin areas, and diversification into duck rearing and lamb rearing.

ZIMBABWE

Christian Aid's programme in Zimbabwe has faced many challenges over the last year or so. The political, economic and environmental situation has created an extremely difficult set of circumstances for our partners to carry out their work. That said, through sensitively building constructive relationships at the local government and authority level, Christian Aid has been able to continue implementing its programmes largely unimpeded.

Christian Aid's programme has continued to focus on profitable, resilient, drought resistant agriculture, conflict transformation and peace building, and the strengthening of citizens to build capable states. Projects include those focusing on market development, extractives, tax and responsive budgeting accountability, and transparency. The programme has been designed to dovetail with Zimbabwe's national economic development strategy to support the restoration of economic stability and growth. As such, it strikes a balance between responding to the needs of the poor and seeking transformative change through being rooted in policy and advocacy.

Political outlook

Zimbabwe remains politically volatile, particularly as the country approaches general elections in early 2018. Internal conflicts amongst potential opposition parties abound, meaning, yet again there is virtually no meaningful opposition to Robert Mugabe's ongoing, tyrannical regime.

Outside politics however, a new wave of political activism consisting of individuals, churches and spontaneous social movements has emerged as an alternative force to the malaise of political opposition.

During the second half of 2016, these activists and movements spearheaded a wave of violent demonstrations and confrontations against the Mugabe regime. Security forces cracked down heavily in response to these demonstrations, and in late August 2016, in a direct violation of the constitution, a total ban on demonstrations was introduced.

While the momentum of these movements has reduced somewhat in early 2017, there is growing concern that the government is now almost totally preventing and suppressing any alternative or opposing opinions, and as such has ordered the immediate arrests of anyone voicing opposition to the government.

A group of Commitment for Life supporters will be visiting Zimbabwe and will bring back stories and worship materials to share with churches.

Stories for Change is produced by Commitment for Life: it seeks to inform and inspire. Views expressed are not necessarily those of the URC.