

**WORKING WITH FAITH-BASED ACTORS FOR  
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

**CASE STUDY OF THE  
PROGRAMME ENGAGING FAITH  
LEADERS AND COMMUNITIES  
IN THE DEMOCRATIC  
REPUBLIC OF CONGO**

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# INTRODUCTION

When asked about the advantages of a faith-based approach to preventing sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), Samuel Musisiva, representing HEAL Africa, a Christian, DRC-based hospital and peacebuilding organisation, provided a sharp answer: “By discussing with them [local faith communities] verses of sacred scriptures regarding gender, they were able to re-examine bad gender norms and change their attitudes.” For HEAL Africa – working alongside the international Christian NGO Tearfund on the project ‘Addressing harmful social and gender norms in humanitarian settings: Engaging Faith Leaders and Communities (EFLC)’ – faith’s capacity to bring about positive change is unambiguous. In this second case study, we focus on the EFLC programme, from inception to implementation, to investigate the role of faith in promoting gender equality and addressing SGBV.

## BOX 1

### WORKING WITH RELIGIOUS ACTORS: A RESEARCH PROJECT

This case study is part of the research project, ‘Working with religious actors for sustainable development’, executed by The Broker and commissioned by Prisma and four of its members: Dorcas, Tearfund, Woord en Daad and World Vision. The project seeks to fill existing knowledge gaps about the role of religion and of faith-based actors – particularly among ‘western’ secular development actors – in sustainable development efforts. The first phase of this project was finalised with an [interactive workshop](#) and resulted in a [synthesis report](#).

The second phase of the research consists of three case studies of faith-based development programmes, aiming to add more colour, depth and nuance to the findings of the synthesis report. By interviewing actors involved in programme inception and implementation, we highlight the role of faith in those actors’ experiences on the ground.

## Addressing harmful social and gender norms in humanitarian settings: Engaging Faith Leaders and Communities (EFLC)

The EFLC model stems from Tearfund's [Transforming Masculinities](#) (TM) approach, which has been widely implemented across post-conflict settings to address harmful gender norms. The faith-based model, spanning 36 months in its original form, was adapted to fit humanitarian crisis contexts and was thereafter implemented in two conflict-affected regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for 21 months from 2019 to 2021. Funded by the Dutch Relief Alliance Innovation Fund (DIF), the programme takes faith leaders and communities as the starting point to tackling the root causes and power structures underpinning violence against women. In line with the TM approach, the EFLC programme undertakes a three-pronged approach: 1) engaging local faith leaders through sacred scriptures to speak out against SGBV and promote gender equality; 2) training community stakeholders, such as teachers, to become gender champions in their communities; and 3) initiating community dialogues with the help of gender champions to address harmful social norms, inspire gender-equitable practices in daily life and equip the community to respond to SGBV.

### BOX 2

#### NORTH AND SOUTH KIVU: THE EFLC'S IMPLEMENTING CONTEXT

Due to the instability that followed the Rwandan genocide, DRC, and in particular the country's eastern regions, have been marred by cycles of [violent conflict](#), perpetrated by more than 100 non-state internal and foreign armed groups. Over the past four decades, the conflict has triggered an unparalleled wave of forced internal migration, displacing a total of [5,265,000](#) people. In 2020, the [UN reported 1,053](#) new cases of conflict-related sexual violence, which showcases SGBV as another unfortunately prominent feature of the conflict. Nadine Stam, DRC country lead for Tearfund NL, explained the factors further complicating the situation with regards to SGBV: "While SGBV remains prevalent, there are few local government structures and services available to support SGBV victims, leaving trauma and wounds unaddressed."

It is in this context that Tearfund along with its local partners implemented the EFLC programme in North and South Kivu.

# The role of faith in the EFLC programme

To better comprehend the role of faith in programme development and implementation as well as the experiences of actors on the ground, this case study focuses on three themes, corresponding with some of the EFLC's key elements: 1) religious sensitivity for context specific programming; 2) working with local churches and faith communities; and 3) reaching and including the most vulnerable. To unpack these themes, we analyse project documents and the invaluable input of staff members of Tearfund NL and UK as well as HEAL Africa, consortium member and implementing partner.

## ***Religious sensitivity for context specific programming***

The EFLC programme is accompanied by three phases of research – a baseline (phase 1), a longitudinal (phase 2) and an endline study. The baseline study was conducted before the start of implementing activities to gain a deeper contextual understanding of social and gender norms among the Kivus' population and religion's role in shaping these attitudes. Among other findings, the baseline study affirmed three crucial elements: 1) the presence and adherence to traditional and often harmful gender norms, which partly explain the prevalence of SGBV and intimate partner violence (IPV); 2) the wide influence and moral authority of faith leaders and communities among the local population; and 3) the latter's key role in shaping and informing people's ideas about gender and SGBV. By considering how religion is embedded in and shapes the implementing context, the EFLC programme was able to recognise the importance of faith for programme beneficiaries and thus the potential of faith communities and leaders to induce positive transformational change. Uwezo Lele, TM technical advisor for Tearfund UK, explained how these findings pushed them to: "[...] choose church communities and local congregations as the entry point for this programme. We [Tearfund and implementing partners] train faith leaders who are influential in their communities and play a key role there."

Mr Lele's words and Tearfund's selection of local congregations as an entry point to the programme support the findings delineated in our synthesis report: religious sensitivity enables the design of interventions that match and respect the local context as well as the values espoused by programme beneficiaries[1]. Though it cannot be said that non-secular NGOs would not have conducted a similar baseline study and reached the same conclusions, it is likely that Tearfund's religious sensitivity enabled them to discern specific entry points to implement the programme and helped establish collaboration with local religious actors.

## ***Working with local churches and faith communities***

As local faith communities and leaders are so instrumental to programme implementation, this section takes a closer look at how Tearfund and its consortium partners train local stakeholders to become gender champions and facilitate community dialogues. As the aim of the community dialogues is to foster open, peer-to-peer conversations around harmful gender norms, gender champions do not usually include faith leaders, but rather consist of community members and stakeholders. Uwezo Lele provided some more clarity on how the EFLC programme reaches and trains local community stakeholders to become gender champions: "First, a faith leader is selected through the local church and the church has to agree to the provision of training. After being trained, faith leaders help us select gender champions from the local community."

While giving local churches the capacity to select faith leaders and gender champions for training seems in line with a bottom-up approach, this might also result in power imbalances, as churches have control over who assumes a leading role in the programme. In line with this, by focussing on the local church as entry point, non-Christian leaders and communities do not have the same decision making power at this phase of the programme.

Once congregations agree to join the EFLC programme, Tearfund's local implementing partner, HEAL Africa, starts engaging faith leaders from various religions and training community stakeholders to become gender champions. According to Nadine Stam, entrusting local partners with training provision ensures greater alignment with the localisation agenda: "Tearfund NL is not involved in this process to ensure it is not white people based in the global North that don't live in the DRC coming in to 'educate' people on the scripture. This way, we [Tearfund NL] can avoid power imbalances." Despite that, HEAL Africa's trainers still faced some challenges in engaging both Christian and Muslim faith leaders on issues of gender and theology. Uwezo Lele elaborated: "Most local churches have a poor interpretation of the Bible regarding gender. It is hard to make them accept the idea of gender equality." Samuel Musisiva referenced another challenge, which in the end proved easier to tackle: "When we [HEAL Africa] started implementing activities, some congregations, especially mosques, were worried that we were trying to change their beliefs. That quickly stopped being a problem, because we use both Quran and Bible verses [...]." Obstacles notwithstanding, our interviews and Tearfund's endline study showcase the positive impact working with local faith communities, both Christian and Muslim, yielded for the EFLC programme. Participation in the EFLC programme cultivated more gender equal values and practices among communities of faith: women are now able to both play a larger role and participate more widely in their respective community's public life. Samuel Musisiva's words reaffirm the above: "Before implementing the programme, there was a row of resentful women and a row of resentful men in the church. Nowadays, each one can sit wherever they are comfortable during the mass." These findings confirm the conclusion of our synthesis report: FBOs can and do play a positive role in sensitive thematic issues, such as, in this case, promoting gender equality[2].



*Closing meeting of Community Dialogue in a meeting hall in Kitshanga. Image credit: Samuel Musisiva*

### ***Including the most vulnerable***

By working closely with local communities of faith, the EFLC programme did not just manage to promote gender equal values and practices, but also to extend its reach and incorporate the most vulnerable, which in DRC's humanitarian crisis context includes internally displaced people (IDPs). Samuel Musisiva explained how intimate collaboration with local faith communities led to such an outcome: "Churches and faith communities are also present in IDP camps. Through the churches in camps, we were able to access IDPs and motivate them to join the programme and community dialogues." According to Uwezo Lele, the inclusion of IDPs in community dialogues led to an unexpected outcome: "After the [EFLC] programme, we saw that IDPs were able to go to church at the host communities and also to go to markets in the host community. This shows a sense of acceptance of IDPs by the host community members. Their [IDPs' and host community's] relations improved and became better than they were before the programme."

Despite the programme's ability to reach and include IDPs, the latter's capacity and willingness to participate in community dialogues and to practice more positive gender norms were severely limited by the precarity of their situation. Uwezo Lele explained in greater detail: "IDPs have a lot of needs, and sometimes their interest was not there [community dialogues]. Even though SGBV is a really big problem for them, I think they had other priorities in terms of addressing these primary needs like food and clothes." To ensure that IDPs benefit as much as possible, Uwezo Lele suggested that: "It will be good that TM becomes part of a larger humanitarian response focused on IDPs."

# CONCLUSIONS

Firmly grounded in the experiences of key stakeholders on the ground, this case study sheds light on the development of the EFLC programme from design to implementation. Our synthesis report provided evidence to show that not all FBOs necessarily play a negative or even repressive role when it comes to sensitive topics, such as gender equality. This certainly seems true for EFLC, which engages with local faith leaders to change interpretations of sacred scriptures that hinder gender equality. It seems that EFLC incites a real change in how religious leaders and communities view traditional gender norms and that it ultimately **induces gender equal values and practices**. However, open and independent dialogue with local faith leaders and communities is needed to confirm such a rapid departure from traditional interpretations of scripture.

Secondly, Tearfund and its consortium partners worked closely with local faith communities and leaders, in recognition of the importance local populations attribute to faith and the latter's moral authority. In alignment with the synthesis report, this case study illustrates how **religious sensitivity** – or put differently, being aware of and sensitive to local religious beliefs – **can enhance the match between programme and context** and, by extent, **improve the effectiveness of an intervention**.

In addition, the fact that EFLC manages to reach IDPs through camp churches and faith communities supports another key finding of our synthesis report: intimate **collaboration with local faith actors**, especially communities of faith and religious leaders, **can enhance the reach of development programmes** and their **capacity to include the most vulnerable**[3]. It is however recommended that the distribution of decision-making power within the programme is re-examined to confirm equal inclusion of non-Christian actors.

Looking toward the future, as Tearfund aims to replicate the EFLC approach beyond North and South Kivu to other humanitarian crisis contexts, Uwezo Lele's advice seems highly pertinent: "I think that EFLC is a good approach to be complementary to other components of a larger humanitarian response. A humanitarian response programme that addresses other needs of IDPs and touches on SGBV would be a great approach."

## **References**

[1]Yannicke Goris and Martha Kapazoglou, "A Synthesis Report: Working with Faith-Based Actors for Sustainable Development" (The Broker, December 2021), 26.

[2] Yannicke Goris and Martha Kapazoglou, "A Synthesis Report: Working with Faith-Based Actors for Sustainable Development" (The Broker, December 2021), 31.

[3]Yannicke Goris and Martha Kapazoglou, "A Synthesis Report: Working with Faith-Based Actors for Sustainable Development" (The Broker, December 2021), 8.



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