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CENTRAL AMERICA



Christian Aid's Central America programme covers Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua. They work with around 22 partner organisations, from community-based groups to larger organisations operating across the region and beyond. Local partners include indigenous communities, small farmers' associations, development organisations, research institutions and faith-based organisations. Christian Aid has excellent knowledge of the region and the expertise and capacity to deliver complex projects on climate change adaptation, inclusive markets, tax justice, violence prevention and human rights.

Central America is characterised by high levels of inequality in the social, political, economic and cultural spheres. State institutions are fragile, and many cases of corruption go unpunished. Furthermore, institutional and government organisations have been used to strengthen networks that favour the illicit enrichment of political and business groups, with politicians, civil servants and parts of the private sector colluding to institutionalise tax evasion and corruption. This has all had a significant impact on poverty, perpetuating levels of exploitation and minimising the successful delivery of basic services to the poor.

As such, Christian Aid believes that the promotion of transparency in State, as well as private institutions is paramount to the eradication of poverty. Central

America urgently needs an enabling environment for an active civil society space, that holds government institutions and others to account for their activities and transactions, and is able to campaign and advocate for the needs of the poor. Inequalities must be reduced in Central America if sustainable, long term development is to become a reality for all members of society.

Image: Families in San Carlotta, supported by UNES, petitioning local councils for strengthening of their eroded river banks

BANGLADESH

It would be easy to assume that Morsheda Begum had given up imagining that things would get better in her life. Born in northern Bangladesh, Morsheda was just eight years old when she was married. She now lives alone. With no assets and four children to care for, Morsheda was forced to make a daily three-hour journey to the fields where she earned as little as 74 pence a day harvesting chillis, or digging and carrying earth from the river.

Over the years Morsheda has been flooded out of her home several times. Living on a char (islands created by the constantly moving coastlines of Bangladesh) means that life is precarious. Owing to an everchanging climate and natural tides, communities are faced with the constant threat of flooding. Once, when the floods came, Morsheda bundled up her then young daughter in a cooking pot and floated her down the river to safety. Each time her home flooded, she was reliant on her neighbours for sanctuary.

Christian Aid first visited Morsheda in 2015. Back then she lived with the constant threat of flooding. 'I get scared here when there is heavy rain and a strong wind. When the river rises, I get frightened', she told us.

'This house is very low. If I could raise my house, then I would feel much safer living here with my children. I feel very scared of the river. When I look at it I think 'it

is coming', It reminds me of everything that has happened. I am hopeful. I am confident that one day I can change my life. I know how to survive the disasters. I have what I need for the difficult days, but I am hopeful that there will be better days.'

In the summer of 2015, just weeks after they first met Morsheda, her home was once again flooded. As before, she and her children were offered shelter by her neighbour, but they lived without any sense of safety for their futures. With support from partner GUK, Morsheda's home was moved to higher ground. After the move, the land on which her old home stood was submerged under river water when the next floods came. Morsheda rebuilt her home with help from the community. She and her family also now have a latrine and have been supported with livestock. When asked by our partner how it feels to be safe, Morsheda said:

'Last year when you came to my house we were knee deep in water. Today, despite the flooding, we are standing in a dry place. Last time I had to take shelter in my neighbour's house. Now I am much safer'.

ZIMBABWE

Christian Aid regional co-ordinator for the Isle of Man, Louise Whitelegg, travelled across Zimbabwe in December on a self-funded trip to see for herself several of the projects funded by the charity and the Manx government's International Development Committee. Here she tells a little of the story of the Tonga people.

Traditionally the Tonga people were settled along the banks of the Kariba River surviving on the fertile soil as subsistence farmers. In 1958, the river was dammed so, consequently, the Tonga people lost their traditional homes and were forced to migrate. Many left the area but others were forced to move north, further inland. Families were given plots of land, an acre for a homestead and a couple of acres for their farms. Their homes consist of small round mud huts with thatched roofs. The area is extremely arid. It currently takes 40 minutes of pumping the well to

raise water, and after two years of drought all the river beds are dry. Levels of poverty are grave.

Infrastructure is virtually non-existent and standards of education are far below an acceptable level. With a population of an estimated 200,000 people there are 80 primary school and 40 secondary schools. The whole area currently receives grain and seed from the World Food Programme and the Zimbabwe government's food aid programme. In Binga, as the families have been allocated their land, there are no villages as such. So families face 5-40km journeys on foot to the nearest shop/school/clinic.

Binga has an estimated 6,400 children and young people with multiple disabilities including cerebral palsy and speech and language impairments. They are usually unable to manage their daily lives independently and have no exposure to formal learning, lack relevant health education and encounter stigma and lack of understanding.

Getting general medical assistance is difficult too in an area with such high poverty. Bhekimpilo, an 11-year-old child broke his leg playing football, which is such a normal thing for a child his age to do. But as there was no way to get him any medical attention he developed sepsis. Although the leg eventually healed naturally, it left him with severe trouble walking.

Christian Aid's partner has been working with children with disabilities for the last two years on a Comic Relief-funded project. Children, with disabilities, were often hidden from view as many believed that witchcraft and curses were the cause of the child's ailment. Working with the Christian Aid partner has broken down many of these stigmas and encouraged integration. Louise had many interesting conversations with the parents and asked what their hopes were for the future.

"It is not only one of the most impoverished places I have ever seen but also the most socially isolated. But I did not see apathy or despair. I saw grit and determination in the most desperate of circumstances."

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