



Evaluation of Promoting Food Security Project in the Occupied Palestinian Territories

Executive Summary

Oxfam GB Programme Evaluation

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Executive Summary

Background

The oPt has been in turmoil since the outbreak of the second Intifada in September 2000, with poverty and unemployment levels steadily increasing, and livelihoods deteriorating as a result of, inter alia, the stringent closure measures taken by the Israeli authorities and the financial crises faced by the Palestinian Authority (PA). As a result of the dire economic situation and the constricting purchasing power of Palestinian households, food security became an area of concern for many development and humanitarian organizations. The overall situation worsened quite significantly in 2006 and 2007. The Palestinians have been experiencing reduced purchasing power due to a number of economic and political problems, including border closings, an increased number of checkpoints, the loss of Palestinian National Authority employee salaries among other factors.

These economic hardships and their humanitarian consequences are increasing household vulnerability and causing spiraling instability and reduced employment. The already vulnerable households are facing increased malnutrition, and loss of economic opportunity. Dietary diversity is incontestably being negatively affected by rising poverty levels, and changes to diet in terms of micronutrient content could have long-term consequences on the nutritional well-being of the population. Palestinians furthermore are facing reduced (physical and economic) access to needed inputs for agricultural production, and are lacking necessary commodities for household consumption as a result of economic access constraints. The result is reduced livelihoods that increase food insecurity and force Palestinian households to resort to unsustainable coping mechanisms.

Oxfam-GB received a 500,000 euro grant from ECHO to address the food security needs of vulnerable households in the West Bank and Gaza. The Project –Promoting Food Security in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (oPt)- was executed by Oxfam-GB in partnership with three local NGOs over the period August 2006-2007. The Project was designed with the principal objective of contributing to reducing poverty and food insecurity in the oPt, while its specific objective was to decrease household food insecurity for vulnerable families in Western Hebron Governorate and Gaza. The results envisaged from the Project were better access to food (in terms of quality and quantity) as well as an increased affordability of food by the beneficiary households. In pursuit of these objectives, the Project distributed the inputs needed for goat and rabbit rearing, honey production and home gardening to 445 households selected by Oxfam-GB, the three implementing partners, village councils, women's groups and other grassroots organizations using criteria that identified those most in need. Women heads of households, large families, and families whose assets have been destroyed during the crisis were prioritized.

Evaluation Objective and Methodology

An external evaluation of the Project was conducted by Al-Sahel Company for Institutional Development through a team of experts in the fields of agricultural development, food security, and monitoring and evaluation. The evaluation focused on assessing aspects of relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability, and impact. It involved: a comprehensive review of literature on the status of food security in the oPt as well as documents generated by the Project; meetings and interviews with Project staff, the three implementing partners, and Project beneficiaries; and, a survey of 168

beneficiaries (37 percent of the total number of beneficiaries) as an input into the effectiveness and impact analysis. The evaluation team conducted field visits in all the communities where the Project was implemented to observe the results on the ground.

Evaluation Findings

Relevance

The Project design is indeed relevant to its external context as it has clear linkages with the relevant national priorities and plans; and is evidently informed by the experience and recommendations of other similar projects as well as a solid understanding of the context for which it was designed. It is also relevant to both several of Oxfam-GB's organizational goals and work objectives for the oPt, and the strategic objectives of the three implementing partners and their capacity.

The general impression of the evaluation team from the interviews held with beneficiaries is that the Project activities were relevant to their needs. All interviewed beneficiaries expressed that the Project provided them with an opportunity to improve their ability to secure some of their families' subsistence needs at a time when such opportunity was urgently needed. Several of them explained that the Project enabled them to implement ideas they already had, but could not due to the financial limitations they have.

Effectiveness

In general the Project has been highly effective. The results envisaged in the Project proposal have been achieved. Most interviewed beneficiary households highlighted their high satisfaction with the services they received and indicated that they have been able to diversify their food intake and generate additional income as a result. The following points summarize the survey results, and show the achievement of objectives:

- 88.1% and 79.8% of the beneficiary households have improved availability and affordability of food respectively as a result of the Project.
- 95.2% percent of the home garden beneficiaries reported a general reduction in their vegetable purchases, while 85.7% indicated increased vegetable consumption. Additionally, 50.8% of the home garden beneficiaries were able to generate extra income as a result of the sale of vegetables produced from the home garden.
- 25% of the beneficiary households that received goats reported an increase in meat consumption; compared to 52.9% of the households that received rabbits. At the same time, 61.1% of the beneficiary households that received goats have increased their consumption of milk and dairy products.

In interviews, beneficiary households confirmed that their expenses on food have indeed decreased and that they have been able to generate some income from the Project activities, albeit –naturally- to varying degrees. Survey results confirmed this anecdotal evidence further. 74.3% of the surveyed beneficiaries indicated the proportion of their income dedicated to food expenditures has generally increased. Moreover, 58.7% of the beneficiaries reported continued production from the activities, which is indicative of their ability to generate income from the project activities.

Efficiency

- Despite some identified weaknesses in the training approach, monitoring and evaluation processes, involvement in the local communities, and beneficiary selection, the evaluation team is of the opinion that the Project was able to achieve its results with a relatively high degree of efficiency. The following points summarize the main findings in this regard:
- Despite the very difficult security situation and the closure imposed on the Gaza Strip which delayed some activities, the Project was able to achieve all planned targets for all activities within the original time frame specified in the cooperative agreement with ECHO.
- About 60% of the total Project expenditures have gone directly to the target beneficiaries in the form of productive agricultural assets and training. The percentage of total expenditures spent on salaries of Project staff is relatively low at 12.4%, while the percentage of expenditures spent on support staff is quite high at almost 20%, which is largely attributed to the support and management cost provided by Oxfam-GB.
- The implementing partners have maintained a remarkably tight control over their personnel and administrative cost, which is to be commended. Maintaining such low administrative cost while at the same time maintaining a good level of effectiveness does not only indicate to high cost effectiveness of the implementing partners, but also to a high level of commitment to the Project and its beneficiaries.
- All activities are cost effective in terms of the net financial benefit they bring to beneficiaries and the cost of activity per household. When taking into consideration the income transfer effect of the implemented activities (especially, home garden, rabbits, and goats), and the growth potential of the productive assets provided to the beneficiaries (especially, rabbits, beehives, and goats) the cost-effectiveness of the Project activities becomes more evident.
- The Project's management structure is believed to be both efficient and suitable for the scope and scale of activities. The main weakness in this regard is the lack of clear job descriptions for the Project staff, particularly implementing partners staff.
- The purchase and contracting procedures of Oxfam-GB and the EC have been respected. The evaluation team did not carry out an audit but received clear answers to all questions it asked for in the financial field. The format and content of the Interim Reports as far as the financial and staff management aspects are concerned, are of a good quality; and budget reallocations seem to have been duly communicated by Oxfam-GB and approved by ECHO.
- Field interviews with beneficiaries revealed that the beneficiary selection criteria was more attentive to the poverty dimensions than to factors that can guarantee effectiveness.

- The overall performance of local committees has been weak for several reasons, of which the most important are: the short time given to establishing and orienting local committees to the Project and its intended results; the lack of a common understanding on the role of local committees among implementing partners on the one hand, and between Oxfam-GB and the implementing partners on the other; the modest capacity of some of the selected local committee members; and, lack of a formal agreement stipulating the role of the local committees in implementing the Project.
- The overall Project monitoring activities were effective in monitoring progress in general and in detecting implementation problems in particular. However, there were some weaknesses in both the design and the implementation of the monitoring and reporting system, which made the overall monitoring, evaluation and reporting system less effective than originally envisaged in the Project proposal. Namely: weak baseline data collection/survey process; lack of a monitoring plan, standard data collection guidelines and reporting formats; irregular reporting by implementing partners; and, weak monitoring and reporting capacity among implementing partners staff.
- ECHO was clearly identified as the source of support for the community and Oxfam on all Project documents as well as on signs posted at project sites. Despite this, very few of the interviewed beneficiaries with whom the evaluation team met could properly identify ECHO as the donor or the source of assistance provided. On the other hand, Oxfam has been quite successful in providing visibility to ECHO through publishing several human-interest stories on the main Oxfam-GB communication tools.

Impact

The Project has clearly protected the livelihoods of beneficiary households by reducing the pressure they face in meeting their sustenance needs. All interviewed beneficiary households confirmed that the productive assets they received have been a major source of livelihood for them. Several of the beneficiary households interviewed explained that the production from these assets have constituted the largest proportion of the food they consume. The Project also strengthened the beneficiary households' resilience and ability to cope with future shocks. Through the provision of productive assets, the Project has increased the beneficiary households' access to physical and natural capitals, thus increasing their income generation capacities and allowing them to diversify their livelihood strategies and improve their coping strategies.

The tangible impact of the Project on the communities in which it was implemented is believed to be relatively modest, and could be summarized in four main points: Promoted self-help and cooperative work; created local knowledge and expertise in the field of beekeeping; circumvented the effect of market fragmentation on the food security in the targeted communities in the West Bank by increasing these communities food production capacity and reducing their dependence on external markets for some of the staple food items; and contributed to empowering women within their communities.

Sustainability

The sustainability of the project is a function of several factors, the most important of which are the attitudes of the beneficiaries, and the vulnerability context to which beneficiary households are subject after the project is finished, including, inter alia,

availability and affordability of veterinary services, extension, animal feed, water, and seedlings. Neither of these could be objectively assessed by the evaluation team. However, there are four main sustainability assurance factors that lead the evaluation to believe that prospects of sustainability are relatively high, namely: strong sense of ownership of assets provided; good level of knowledge and skills among the beneficiaries to maintain assets; relatively low maintenance and operational cost; and, commitment by implementing partners to provide follow-up services.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the evaluation and the feedback from the beneficiaries and implementing partners, the evaluation team believes that in order for Oxfam-GB to be able to build on the achievements of the this project and overcome its weaknesses in future programs, it should:

- Pay special attention to beneficiary selection by putting processes in place to ensure that a comprehensive evaluation of the beneficiaries livelihoods takes place before the final selection is made.
- Improve the engagement of the target communities in the project design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
- Improve project monitoring, evaluation and reporting system through considering needed improvements in systems, human resources capacity building, and linkage with the in-country and corporate strategies.
- Improve communication with partners and coordination and experience sharing among them.
- Improve scheduling of activities, especially when engaging in agricultural input distribution.
- Improve the design and delivery methods for beneficiary training programs.
- Improve visibility to its donors at the local level through issuing press releases on key project events and improving donor visibility at the targeted community level.

Finally, Oxfam-GB is strongly encouraged to replicate the beekeeping and goat and rabbit distribution activities in either the same communities or in new communities given their high productivity, income-generation potential and relatively low establishment and operation cost. Home Gardens, while still an effective intervention, are too costly of an activity when low-budget projects are being implemented.

Lessons Learned

The following key conclusions and lessons learned have emerged from the evaluation process:

- The food security situation in the oPt is becoming quite alarming, with some 34% or the population estimated to be food insecure, and an additional 12% believed to be vulnerable to food insecurity. This puts great pressure on humanitarian, relief and development organizations to intervene quickly and in concert to prevent the collapse of Palestinian livelihoods.
- Despite the fact that the underlying cause of food insecurity in the oPt is politically induced, household- and community-level relief and recovery interventions remain among the best options for tackling the food insecurity problem in the oPt. Recovery interventions that aim at preserving and/or creating

productive assets and employable skills are the most effective and needed in addressing the food security problem.

- Poverty indicators often drive the selection of beneficiaries in food security programs. While this targeting approach makes sense in relief operations, it is less valid in recovery and development operations. The main criteria for selecting beneficiaries in the latter programs should focus on assessing the ability of beneficiary to contribute to realizing recovery and development objectives, rather than on poverty levels. The poorest are not necessarily the best targets for recovery interventions, as their poverty might undermine the effectiveness of these interventions.
- It is necessary to take into consideration available physical and natural resources within communities being targeted by different activities. It is the availability and reliability of these resources that often make one activity succeed in one community and fail in another. For example, goat rearing may not be suitable for a community that does not have water resources other than (relatively expensive) tankered water, if the project does not have a component to improve water resources.
- Projects that provide food insecure households with productive agricultural assets such as home gardens, beehives, poultry, livestock, and rabbits have been and remain suitable to improve these households' food intake and future coping strategies. With certain kinds of assets, like beekeeping, getting beneficiaries to work together in informal groups or cooperatives may be the best way to guarantee effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability.
- In general, the sustainability of projects that provide agricultural assets and food inputs to food insecure households with the aim of improving their food security conditions is largely a function of beneficiary selection, since the Project does not have much control or guarantee on the results after the inputs have been provided. In any case, beneficiary training, both theoretical and practical, is a necessary prerequisite to achievement of results.
- The involvement of communities targeted by food security projects is not only important, but essential to the success of these projects. To engage communities effectively, however, equal representation should be ensured (women, families/clans, and community organizations), and clear roles and responsibilities delineated. Local representatives and community volunteers engaged in the implementation of the projects should be given incentives to strengthen their accountability structure of the project being implemented.

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