

Oxfam in Jamaica

Oxfam set up an office in Jamaica in 1985. Before that, although Oxfam supported some projects in the country, there was no permanent presence and the programme was administered from offices elsewhere in the region, with staff making periodic visits to keep in touch with project partners.

The emphasis before 1985 was on support to intermediate non-governmental organisations (NGOs) based in Kingston. Some of these NGOs sought to tackle urban poverty, while others targeted the poor in rural areas. Oxfam also supported legal aid needs through the Jamaica Council for Human Rights, and worked with people with disabilities through Deeds Industries Limited.

Since 1985, the programme has sharpened its focus, based on Oxfam's understanding of the causes of poverty in Jamaica and identification of the areas of most acute need. Economic and social policies of successive governments in response to IMF/World Bank prescriptions have resulted in a decline of government services to farmers in rural areas. Small farmers have problems in getting access to credit, and face fierce competition from imported food items; they also find difficulty in marketing their produce. Oxfam supports NGOs working in rural areas, such as the Social Action Centre and the Roman Catholic Human Development and Social Justice Commission, who help rural community-building projects and farmers' organisations and provide agricultural extension services.

Oxfam has also provided material inputs through farmers' organisations. The Hillside Farmers' Association is one such group, for which Oxfam provided piping for improved irrigation systems. Seeds and fertilisers have been provided for farmers in

Balaclava and St Elizabeth, and advice and assistance with food crops and fish-farming for other co-operatives.

Economic liberalisation policies have led to high interest rates and changes in legislation which make it possible for individual Credit Unions to set their own rates of interest. Farmers and other people running small businesses have very little access to cheap credit. Oxfam has made a contribution to establishing alternative credit facilities for small farmers in the hope that even the limited funds available will make a significant difference in enabling farmers to improve their situation.

It has been estimated that about one in three Jamaican households are headed by women; but women have a higher rate of unemployment than men, and the jobs available to women tend to be poorly paid and insecure. Oxfam has recognised the special needs of women and given grants to women's organisations, such as the Sistren Theatre Collective and the Association of Women's Organisations of Jamaica, which seek to empower women by building their self-esteem and awareness, and providing skills training and continuing education.

In 1988 Oxfam provided immediate disaster relief in the aftermath of Hurricane Gilbert, which caused widespread destruction. Oxfam also provided help with reconstruction, and trained community builders in hurricane-resistant building practices.

Although small projects can transform individual lives, their impact is of necessity limited. Oxfam is also involved in initiatives to encourage NGOs to undertake research to deepen their understanding of effective strategies to help poor people, and to foster networking and collaboration between NGOs to increase the effectiveness of their development programmes.

More recently, Oxfam has supported a project in which government and NGOs work together. Government-funded sanitation and immunisation programmes are combined with NGO projects to promote community participation, so that poor people in marginalised urban communities can play a part themselves in improving their health and living conditions.