

Oxfam GB in Partnership

**A Global Strategic Evaluation
2006/07**

Executive Summary

28 September 2007

Acknowledgements

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Executive summary

1) Introduction to the study and debates

Through 2006–2007 Oxfam GB undertook a global strategic evaluation of how it works in partnership. An independent team of evaluators drawn from four continents conducted the review. The objectives of the evaluation were:

- to understand how partners view their relationship with Oxfam GB;
- to identify what is working well and what needs to change in the way Oxfam GB works with all partners;
- to understand how Oxfam GB's approach to partnership is changing and to explore new and emerging approaches to partnership.

For the purpose of the report and study, 'partner' was taken to mean any organisation Oxfam GB was funding between 2005 and 2007. This amounted to almost 1500 organisations. Eleven partnership case studies were chosen to cover a range of types and issues, including one from each region and one each from Oxfam GB's humanitarian and campaign programmes. In addition a survey was sent to 852 of the partners for whom Oxfam GB had email addresses. There was a 47 per cent response rate.

A literature review, staff workshops, and key informant interviews helped establish five key debates that the study attempts to explore:

1. **What is Oxfam GB's added value beyond 'donorship'?** In a globalising world where national NGOs are beginning to access funding directly, what is Oxfam GB's added value to partners beyond being a donor?
2. **How deep should Oxfam GB go?** Growing cynicism in the literature around the use of the term 'partnership' raises the question: what do we mean by partnership and what kind of collaboration is 'best'? Should Oxfam GB always seek 'full' partnership – with the associated costs entailed – or are there other approaches?
3. **How can Oxfam GB reduce the burden of partner accountability?** As concerns about fraud and impact have placed tighter 'results-based management' requirements on partners, how can Oxfam GB ensure accountability demands add value and do not become a burden?
4. **How does Oxfam GB strike a balance between empowerment and compliance?** In an age of risk management and performance control, how does Oxfam GB balance its need to control with its desire to empower?
5. **How can Oxfam GB remain involved without taking the space?** How does Oxfam GB ensure that its relationships are transformational and create lasting, positive changes in the institutions with which it engages, while ensuring that it does not 'take the space' of smaller national organisations?

These questions are considered throughout the evaluation. Insight into the workings of a variety of partnerships drawn from the evaluation results are summarised in Sections **Error! Reference source not found.** to **Error! Reference source not found.** and conclusions are found in Sections **Error! Reference source not found.** and **Error! Reference source not found.**

2) Complementarity and added value

Complementarity is central to Oxfam GB's principles of partnership, and this section focuses on partners' perceptions of Oxfam GB's added value. While funding support is central, 69 per cent of partners feel that Oxfam GB is more than just a donor. Four key areas are identified where Oxfam GB brings added value.

- **Administrative and management capacity** – 60 per cent of partners said they receive dedicated time and resources from Oxfam GB for capacity-building. This is greatly appreciated, but there was a call for more support to help build partners' financial independence and reduce their reliance on Oxfam GB. Building the institutions of civil society (and pro-poor government and private sector) is one of the driving motives for working through partners and is central to Oxfam GB's model of sustainable change. It is therefore suggested that a capacity-building strategy is clearly integrated into all partnership agreements.
- **Advocacy, influencing, and credibility** – Oxfam GB's support with advocacy is highly appreciated and should be continued. Few other international NGOs provide the same degree of assistance as Oxfam GB. Partners also greatly appreciate the credibility that association with Oxfam GB brings. There is sometimes weak cross-over between the development and campaigns work in Oxfam country programmes. There were calls for Oxfam GB to engage more with partner-identified country advocacy priorities rather than international objectives.
- **Information, knowledge, and networking** – Oxfam GB is valued for helping partners to make connections and access information, but more could be done. A systematic approach to relationship management, and the development of thematic newsletters and updates and distribution of key resources and publications would go a long way to improving contact and information flows. Involvement of partners in joint events would also go some way to make partners feel more part of an Oxfam GB family and community. There may be lessons from the way Novib supports its counterparts from a distance.
- **Facilitation, reflection, and moral support** – partners generally identify Oxfam GB as having a facilitative and listening approach to partnership with a strong emphasis on coaching, reflection, and mentoring. Oxfam GB's moral support and encouragement is also greatly valued.

The Project Officer (PO) is key to building strong partnerships, especially those who go beyond an audit and monitoring role. In most situations POs are greatly respected and are doing an excellent and often complex and difficult job. Increasingly they also act as organisational development consultants, advisors, and coaches. Rarely are their 'softer' skills explicitly supported in training or performance review. There is sometimes little to guide the new PO in partnership style, other than observing other staff members around them.

Partners highly value the support of the POs during their field visits. These provide an opportunity for rich learning and reflection. Most partners want more of these visits and want them to be longer. They feel these visits are being eroded by time spent on internal management and accountability systems, and ask for them to be protected. Related to this, several partners also feel that Oxfam GB staff sometimes lack understanding of poverty on the ground and call on them to spend more time in communities, understanding partners' perceptions of the causes of poverty.

3) Clarity around roles and responsibilities

Results of the survey reveal that 78 per cent of partners agree there is clarity over the roles and responsibilities of each party. Suggestions about how Oxfam GB can improve its clarity around roles and responsibilities include:

- more consistency in its policies and strategies (25 per cent of established partners say that Oxfam GB changes its mind about what it asks of its partners as a result of its own changing priorities;
- stronger internal co-ordination;
- fewer staff changes (re-investing in new relationships when existing Oxfam GB staff leave is a major cost for partners, so longer-term contracts and longer hand-over periods might help).

The section goes on to introduce a range of partnership typologies and a simple framework for considering the breadth of collaboration (i.e. number of functions which are co-operative) and the depth of joint decision-making (i.e. how much autonomy each side has to act independently). It is important to recognise the potential costs and risks of an intense (deep and broad) partnership model while also ensuring key decisions are jointly made. It is also important to clarify what degree of influence each party will have over different decision-making domains early on, in order to reduce the potential for conflict. Several management and organisational structures for partnership are reviewed.

4) Partner accountability to Oxfam GB

Most of the partners involved in the in-depth evaluations feel that Oxfam GB's reporting requirements are less onerous and more reasonable than those of most funders. Most also see them as a necessary and reasonable requirement in our modern 'high accountability' funding environment. A few said they add value to the management of their projects by providing a chance to reflect on their work. Some also mentioned improvements in their own accountability practices from working with Oxfam GB.

However, there is no doubt that reporting requirements feel heavy and are costly, taking approximately 4–5 days per month for each partner staff member. Some partners suggested it takes 30 per cent of their time, and many work long hours to complete them. Reporting also consumes large amounts of Oxfam GB PO time. There was a call for 'decent' requirements and the following suggestions were made:

- **Increase responsiveness and feedback** – reporting without feedback has limited learning value and gives the impression that the time spent reporting is not useful. In the best-case scenario, written reports are a catalyst for verbal dialogue.
- **Use verbal debriefs and field visits** – most partners deemed these to be more valuable than written forms of reflection, particularly those from cultures with a more oral tradition. Field visits were also identified as a useful time to support partners with financial reporting and capacity-building.
- **Improve report usability and consistency** – all partners prefer short, consistent, easy-to-complete formats with clear guidelines on what information is needed, for whom, and why.

- **Integrate financial and narrative reporting** –and ensure programme and finance staff are working in a ‘joined-up’ manner.

In two of the case-study partnerships, Oxfam GB has provided grants for partners to employ dedicated programme or finance accountability staff. Some Oxfam GB offices work through finance outreach staff who provide on-the-job training at the partner’s office. Two offices have also out-sourced capacity-building to specialised organisational development companies. The PINORD partnership provides an example of a centralised capacity-building resource for several partners. Several Oxfam GB finance managers called for a clearer standardisation of accountability levels and systems so that partners know what to aspire to and what targets to hit. Such a model has been piloted in Pakistan and is based around silver, gold, and platinum levels of capacity. This framework highlights the value in discussing capacity-building issues at the beginning of a partnership and is useful as a catalyst for discussion and planning rather than as a rigid set of standards.

5) Oxfam GB’s accountability to partners

Increasing Oxfam GB’s accountability to its partners is one of the main ways of addressing power imbalances in partnerships. Only 54 per cent of respondents agree that Oxfam GB is accountable to them. Partners called for:

- a review of some of the stronger language and clauses in their contracts;
- two-sided agreements (with both partners’ logos);
- clarity over what the partner can expect to receive in addition to funding, and clarity on what behaviours it can expect from Oxfam GB;
- guidance on how to hold Oxfam GB to account.

The following were discussed as ways to improve accountability:

- **Paying on time** – only 66 per cent of respondents agree that Oxfam GB delivers when it says it will. It is important that Oxfam GB fulfils its primary commitment.
- **Mutual accountability charters** – these provide the formal framework for open dialogue about expectations and commitments.
- **360 degree feedback** – 59 per cent of the survey respondents agree that Oxfam GB responds well to constructive criticism, but a regular performance review, similar to those held for staff, would be a useful discipline. The case-study workshops provided this opportunity for the first time for many of the partnerships and were very well-received.
- **Clear commitment and fair termination** – one of partners’ biggest concerns is that they do not know how long their relationships with Oxfam GB will last. This is a particular concern for small organisations (of whom less than half are clear on the duration of their partnership with Oxfam GB). Lack of consultation around exit strategies is also a concern. Developing possible scenarios for partners’ exit and independence at an early stage would allay fears and help them to plan for the future.
- **Complaints procedure and dispute-resolution process** – partners would welcome a formal complaints procedure but feel it is more important to have systems to deal with problems before they escalate. Mechanisms include:

- ensuring partners know how to contact the PO's manager or director independently;
- training internal Oxfam GB mediation 'first-aiders' who can help at an early stage of partnership conflict and provide ongoing support to relationship-building;
- access to external facilitators for more complex projects and conflicts.

6) Equity and shared decision-making

Decision-making is generally quicker and easier when there are fewer people involved. However, it is important that those decisions that have a significant bearing on partners are made jointly, or at least with clear influence from the partner. The existence of joint decision-making processes is a key indicator of partnership relationship quality.

Twenty per cent of partners think that Oxfam GB is in the driving seat of their partnership and that they have little decision-making control. Twenty-eight per cent feel that they have to conform to Oxfam GB's working style. Fourteen per cent said that Oxfam GB asks them to do things they do not agree with. The case studies also revealed two partnerships – one a humanitarian project and the other a UK campaigns partnership – where partners are very bitter about skewed decision-making processes and Oxfam GB's level of dominance. Several areas were identified to help equalise power:

- **Softening dominant cultures and attitudes** – Oxfam GB is a powerful organisation staffed by well-educated, confident people, and in joint operational work it can easily slip into a dominant role, particularly in campaigns work and sometimes in humanitarian work. There is little excuse for being defeatist over the power-inequality issue. Oxfam GB may have a lot of money and influence, but working in a joint way – if that is what it decides it wants to do – is as much an attitude and choice as it is about balance of resources.
- **Transparency and information-sharing** – 26 per cent of partners think that Oxfam GB does not consult them before making big changes to their strategy and ways of working. In particular there was a big call to demystify Oxfam GB's structures and decision-making processes – particularly around funding.
- **Sharing risks and rewards** – several comments were made by partners about Oxfam's perceived self-interest in media work (and occasionally taking centre stage in humanitarian work). One case-study partner felt the risks and dangers in their advocacy work were not shared by Oxfam GB;
- **Sharing and recognising real costs** – several partners incur unpaid organisational costs as a result of delivering Oxfam GB projects. Sometimes these costs are borne personally by partner staff in unpaid overtime and sometimes the costs are borne by the organisations. While a degree of partner co-financing is not a bad thing, it should at least be fully acknowledged. Oxfam GB should encourage partner organisations to develop good practices such as full cost accounting, and recognising the hidden costs they incur. If not, there is a risk that organisations will struggle so much that their capacity and resilience never develops.

7) Shared values, cultures, rapport, and trust

Seventy-four per cent of survey respondents agree that Oxfam GB shares and respects their values and beliefs, and 86 per cent of partners feel a strong sense of solidarity with Oxfam GB. Several partners commented that this has contributed to the strength of their relationship. Fifty-six per cent of respondents feel that Oxfam GB has been positively influenced by their values.

Out of the 11 partnerships explored through the case studies, Oxfam GB's organisational rapport was found to be particularly strong with two medium-sized church organisations in Honduras and Malawi in which there was a strong, shared culture of personal commitment and clear, equitable (or 'horizontal') relations. Differences in organisational culture between Oxfam GB and its partners tend to revolve around:

- different or unexplored theories and models of development, such as how to work with the government or the private sector;
- different expectations around partnership styles, particularly around how decisions are made and the levels of influence of each party;
- differences in professional styles, particularly bureaucratic 'clashes' with other large organisations (Oxfam GB is sometimes seen, particularly by smaller organisations, to be very document-driven and British in culture).

Over 47 comments were received in the survey on the importance of high-quality relationships. Trust is seen as the pillar of good communication and the 'soil' or social capital of successful partnership – increasing the benefits of co-operative work and reducing its costs.

In some cases trust has been built on the basis of existing personal relations and mutual respect, but generally trust has to be earned and time is the key investment: time spent planning, working together, reviewing and reflecting together. The following are also useful:

- **Being polite, timely, and choosing words carefully** – especially in correspondence;
- **Sharing problems** – 79 per cent of survey respondents agree that they find it easy to share their problems with Oxfam GB and several said they could have frank exchanges without fear. Honduras offered an open forum where solutions could be found jointly;
- **Talking about values, vision, and approach** – few Oxfam GB partnerships have had an explicit discussion about their values. However, where it has been tried, it has been worthwhile. Often the definitions of particular words need to be fully explored as they can seem nebulous. There is often greater synergy around higher-level values and vision than around lower-level issues such as theories of change or cultures of working.

It is important to remember that partnerships are based on a team of individuals who work with each other across organisations. Personal relationships are central to Oxfam GB's inter-organisational partnerships. It may be that management mechanisms in Oxfam GB should give more emphasis to facilitating personal relations between organisations while seeking to mitigate the vulnerabilities this might cause (particularly problems with institutionalising partnerships).

While Oxfam GB POs do an exceptionally difficult and diverse job very well, there seems to be no clear framework of professional development for supporting the interpersonal skills on which they so rely. There is room for a more systematic approach, perhaps including a set of relationship competencies, training resources, and a guidance series. Secondments were also mentioned as a way to build organisational collaboration.

8) Emerging partnership models

Insights into opportunities for new forms of partnership emerged through this study:

- **Facilitating multiple partnerships** – more and more, Oxfam GB is finding itself in multi-pronged partnerships of community, NGO, government, and other international NGOs. The model of PINORD shows how Oxfam GB can begin to support groups of partners – thus reducing individual transaction costs – while also building associations and alliances. This creates economies of scale for support and capacity-building, and ensures Oxfam GB is facilitating co-operation not competition.
- **Building smaller organisations** – Oxfam GB is highly respected in the development sector for the intensive capacity-building and mentoring it gives to building nascent organisations and supporting emerging civil-society leaders. However, there are questions about how it safeguards the investments that it makes. Models of social venture capitalism may be useful for the future.
- **Working with government** – Oxfam GB has been working with local-level government for decades, and opportunities are emerging to work with national government as advisors. This is very much about working towards attitudinal behaviour change – using organisational consulting and coaching skills.
- **Private-sector partnerships** – Oxfam GB is already advanced in its facilitation of market access for small-scale producers. On a larger scale, there are opportunities to support businesses indirectly, through business associations, services, and trade links, such as Fairtrade.

9) Making strategic choices for partnership

In conclusion the study returns to some of the key debates:

Beyond donorship

- Partners appreciate Oxfam GB's support in advocacy and want Oxfam GB to act with them, putting its credibility and influence behind their issues – particularly at a national level.
- Partners see Oxfam GB as a connector: linking them to knowledge, ideas, and networks of organisations across the world.
- Partners want Oxfam GB to commit to long-term strategic partnerships and to help them become independent.

How deep to go

- Oxfam GB's relationships with partners are complex as they include multiple forms of collaboration. For example, a partnership may be based on a sub-

contracting model, but have joint venture elements (e.g. around brand ownership) and network elements too (e.g. around advocacy).

- Shared decision-making can take many forms, and an approach based on complete consensus and full participation on every issue is not always cost-effective or useful. Key to managing expectations and avoiding conflict is early clarification of decision-making domains.
- It is important that partnerships do not 'run before they can walk' and that appropriate time and energy is put into building the 'relationship capital' on which partnerships depend.
- Management costs of collaboration can be reduced by a creating a pool of trust, respect, and mutual personal commitment.

Reducing the burden of accountability

- Partners emphasise the value of face-to-face reflection, review, and dialogue but gain less value from written processes. They ask that PO time spent in the field reflecting and listening with partners be preserved.
- Reporting only becomes useful as a learning experience when it catalyses feedback and ideally dialogue.
- Time spent building relationships and understanding between Oxfam GB and its partners is critical to enabling mutual accountability.

Empowering rather than controlling

- Upward accountability mechanisms – such as 360 degree feedback and mutual accountability charters – balance downward accountability and increase the value and sense of fairness in the whole accountability system.
- Oxfam GB is perceived as dominant in certain settings and there are calls for it to co-operate rather than compete.
- Being dominant is more about attitude than about actual power. Developing 'horizontal' relationships is mainly a choice and managers need to take the lead.
- A wide variety of best practice exists in Oxfam GB for equalising relationships. They include softening dominant cultures and attitudes, demystifying Oxfam GB's structures and funding processes, sharing the media limelight, and recognising the hidden financial contributions partners often make to projects by not practising full-cost accounting.

Leading from behind and not taking the space

- Partners are calling for Oxfam GB to remain in the field, working as a facilitator, coach, and supporter, but taking care not to dominate, compete, or take their space.
- Oxfam GB has an excellent track-record of supporting others to become leaders in development. At the heart of this process lie Oxfam GB's Project Officers. They are able contract managers but are also adept as facilitators: e.g. leading participatory organisational assessments, facilitating strategic advocacy reviews, mentoring local leaders, and advising organisations.
- Even if funds drop, Oxfam GB's influence can continue, based less on how rich Oxfam GB is, but on how respected it has become.
- Continuing to build a participatory partnership culture requires committed leadership, rewards for partnership performance, investment in skills, and most of all: staff time.