Programming in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Countries

Programme Policy Guidelines

Oxfam

There is no single prescriptive approach to working in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. The underlying causes of problems and the dynamics of such contexts are too complex and unpredictable for that. There is a great diversity of underlying causes, actors, needs, opportunities, and responses. Staff are faced with immense challenges and work under greater limitations of resources, in relation to the size of the need, than in other programmes. There is nonetheless room to improve the quality and impact of our programming. We can be imaginative, robust, realistic, and at the same time agile and responsive to changing circumstances.

There is plenty of scope for sharpening the focus and impact of programmes by:

- Using robust, detailed, and continual context analysis to enable more accurate, nuanced, and context-specific understanding of how change actually happens;
- Paying greater attention to how our own organisational characteristics and distinctive competencies can add value to the work of others;
- Strengthening our understanding of the gendered aspects of fragility and conflict, including the factors that create differences in impacts between women and men and the contexts that create these differences;
- Paying greater attention to embedding risk analysis, actively managing risk through high standards of analysis, innovation and creativity, and building resilience into all our work;
- Making sure we work to contribute to positive changes for poor women and men, and do not only support them survive in a difficult context;
- Using frequent monitoring and evaluation to ensure programmes remain well-focused even within a shifting and unpredictable context.

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance to programme managers and decision makers, with guidance on designing and delivering programmes in countries where conflict and fragility are significant factors in poverty and suffering.

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1 Introduction

It is estimated that a third of the world's poorest, most vulnerable, and marginalised people live in the countries that have the least capacity or will at state level to deliver services and public goods for citizens. These countries are also the most chronically-affected by conflicts and their aftermath. These fragile and conflict-affected states are also amongst the most challenging places for development agencies to work.

These guidelines are intended to provide programme managers and decision-makers with guidance on designing and delivering programmes in countries where conflict and fragility are significant factors in poverty and suffering. They provide an overview of Oxfam's learning, without attempting to be a comprehensive guide. This paper has been developed with significant input from staff in countries and regions with experience of fragile and conflict-affected conditions (including the Action Learning Group on Conflict-Affected Countries and the Fragile States Working Group) and also from the Programme Leadership Team. It is anticipated that these guidelines will be reviewed within two to three years' time on the basis of increased experience and learning. They should be read in conjunction with the associated learning companion, 'How to develop programmes in fragile and conflict-affected contexts', which provides greater detail on the underlying theory and on practical 'how to' tools.

Specifically, this paper aims to:

- Enhance the quality of programmes addressing poverty by sharing learning on models of change, programme strategies, and good practice, and through strengthening our ability to deliver appropriate, focused responses to the actual nature of fragility in the countries where we work;
- Encourage innovative and creative approaches to programming;
- Support staff in engaging with external debates with a range of government and non-government actors.

Box 1: The language of 'fragile states'

Much discussion to date around the issues addressed in this document has been framed in the language of 'fragile states' and has been considered primarily from the perspective of donors and bilateral/multilateral institutions. The term has been used loosely to refer to countries where there is a lack of capacity or a lack of will on the part of the state to address poverty and undertake development. Countries labelled 'fragile', 'weak', or 'failed' not surprisingly take offence at such labelling, and such vocabulary is avoided in this document. To talk about 'fragile states' can also be misleading. For example, some of the most challenging environments are ones where the state, or part of the state, is by many definitions strong and may – as, for example, in Uganda or in Israel in relation to the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) – be a significant part of the problem. It is more useful, therefore, to talk in terms of fragility and conflict-affected contexts. A clear distinction is also needed between the state – the organised political community comprising administrative, legal, and other institutions – and government – the particular group of people that control the state at a given time.

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2 Fragility and conflict

2.1 The context

Fragility and conflict are the focus of lively development and policy debates within and outside Oxfam. DFID, along with other major actors, has recently realigned its policies and directed greater resources to addressing the issues of the 'bottom billion', state-building, and conflict, and is addressing the poor progress towards the MDGs in more challenging contexts.[1] It has also increased its emphasis on issues of security and stabilisation.

Fragile and conflict-affected countries are clearly a priority for Oxfam in fulfilling its mandate. In the more fragile contexts, particularly where there is or has been conflict, there is a balancing act to be achieved between a long-term development agenda, reconstruction, and more immediate humanitarian needs. Sometimes the humanitarian needs have become chronic, and in many of these countries the role and capacity of, and space for, civil society are increasingly constrained. Markets and the private sector may function poorly, thereby restricting livelihood options. Though the risks to staff, partners, and the communities with which we work are heightened and tensions between the different elements of programming need active management, positive change can happen quickly and we have the potential to both influence and respond to it. However, these contexts require very different approaches from programmes in more stable operating environments.

2.2 What is different about working in fragile and conflict-affected contexts?

At one level, good-quality programming requires surprisingly similar elements in both conflict-affected and fragile contexts and in more stable ones, including:

- Thorough gender and power analyses based on research and local knowledge;
- Strategies and realistic plans shaped by communities and local partners, as well as our own thinking;
- A strategic linking of levels using an appropriate mix of campaigning, development, and humanitarian approaches to maximise impact;
- A good grasp of how change happens and the roles of different actors.

From a programming perspective, the key distinction between a fragile or conflict-affected context and a more stable one is that, in fragile and conflict-affected environments, the consequences of doing any less than an excellent job in any of these elements are much more serious. A badly designed and/or poorly delivered programme exposes poor and vulnerable people, as well as the partners and staff of Oxfam, to unacceptable levels of risk; there is high potential for making damaging mistakes, perhaps inadvertently, that actually make the plight of poor people worse. Managing risk and strengthening resilience both need to be deeply embedded in everything we do in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

Through a broader lens, another distinction between these contexts is the degree to which the state is legitimate and accountable. Where this is lacking, Oxfam needs to identify ways of supporting the construction of accountability from the bottom up, and to support people with their survival strategies as this happens.

The nature of the state and the way that politics is done may be a differentiating feature, but perhaps not so much in its essence as in its degree. Tanzania, for example, often held up as a

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[1] Whilst it is recognised that many of the poorest live in middle-income countries, the fragile and conflict-affected countries still represent the most challenging contexts in which to address poverty.

relatively stable context, has patronage politics underlying its modern state structures and institutions. Sudan also uses patronage politics, but its history – economic, political, and social – has led it to a very different and more fragile present, with very different options for engagement for development agencies, both domestic and international.

Another difference relates to how change happens. A basic change model for developing active citizens and building effective states in order to address poverty is common in some form or other in both contexts. In conflict-affected and fragile contexts, however, this model is valid only if taken with a very long-term perspective. In the shorter term, care is needed not to undermine processes that might lead to the development of accountability and legitimacy over the longer term, and to understand where responsibility and legitimacy currently lie (often, for example, with parts of the state, churches, and traditional governance structures) and in how to work from there.

2.3 How change happens in fragile and conflict-affected contexts

Many of the approaches and solutions to poverty and suffering advocated by Oxfam and other actors rest on a set of assumptions about the nature of state and society. Much long-term development thinking is based on what can/could be achieved in and by a well-functioning, conflict-free state. Oxfam has an understanding of the role of active citizens in holding such states accountable and in ensuring effective delivery of development. Much of our advocacy in countries where we work has this purpose. We often argue, for example, that the state should bear responsibility for delivery of essential services to the people. We do this because we believe that active citizenship and effective and responsive states together provide the fundamental conditions, in conjunction with functioning markets, for ending poverty.

However, a large proportion of the world's poorest people live in countries, many of them conflict-affected, where conditions for effective rule of law, justice, and security are not in place. Governments are not willing or not able to take effective steps to ensure that the needs of the population are met or to deliver protection for its more vulnerable members.

The causal relationships between poverty, conflict, fragility, inequality, social exclusion, and competition over scarce resources are not clear-cut or consistent – poverty, social exclusion, and inequality can be both drivers and consequences of conflict. In these environments, linear (and Western) approaches to bringing about change do not hold.

The dynamics of fragility and conflict are fluid, complex, and volatile. Change emerges in unpredictable ways that are very context-specific. Often 'shocks' (such as large-scale natural hazards) can be a significant factor, as can major 'moments' such as elections and leadership changes. These are often moments of discontinuous change, positive or negative. Sometimes it is during these moments when actors have the opportunity to make 'the impossible' become 'the inevitable', especially if they are well-prepared with ideas and networks.

In the absence of state legitimacy and/or accountability, there may be other kinds of legitimacy and accountability that allow people to function and which provide potential for constructing functional governance at a local level. These tend to be structures and relationships where trust can form; churches, mosques, and other religious organisations, traditional authorities, and tribal structures can provide a hub for change, as can private-sector networks, such as the exchange houses in Somalia or the trader networks in and beyond Senegal. Diaspora populations can be another contributor to constructing new kinds of legitimacy and accountability.

Fragile and conflict-affected countries are not always completely fragile: there may be pockets of stability and functionality – sectoral or geographic – with which to engage (for example, the education sector in DRC). These are something we can seek to strengthen.

Positive and negative change can be related to external factors, regional or global, as well as to local ones. International pressure can contribute to making change at national level, but can also contribute to the maintenance of fragility and conflict. Diasporas can engage on both sides in an

internal conflict, or can bring much needed investment and skills. International diplomacy and the interests of other nations can speed or slow change processes and international investors can build or extract resources. It is important to identify the opportunities where these external dynamics can be engaged with as part of the change process at the local and national level.

Change can also come through strengthening economic development, increasing the pressure from the private sector (informal or formal) for functioning institutions and greater predictability, to support business needs for security, transportation, energy, etc. In some contexts, increasing employment, particularly youth employment, may be a critical factor in reducing conflict. There is a growing interest in so-called 'frontier markets' in some parts of the international private sector. Big increases in foreign direct investment are bringing new opportunities as well as new challenges.

Ongoing analysis of the context including the dynamics of power, the cultural environment, demographics, political and economic realities, and how all of these interact is essential if a plausible theory of change is to be developed for the specific context and moment in history.

Change is often unpredictable and rapid, and that means that continual and careful analysis is needed to make sure that all our work contributes towards improving the status quo, while allowing us to respond to emerging opportunities.

Box 2: The dilemma of the status quo

Looking at the situation as it is, who is benefitting and who is losing out? In whose interests is a perpetuation of the current status quo? When we intervene with a humanitarian response, our motivation is saving lives. The dilemma is whether, by saving or improving lives within the current situation, we are unintentionally contributing to keeping that situation possible. Might we save more lives in the long term by not intervening, or by contributing to other activities that make it harder for people to benefit from the status quo, for example making it much harder to make profit (as was done with the ivory trade, for example) or for profits to be expatriated? What incentives could be introduced to make those that benefit from the status quo see that they could benefit from change? There may be circumstances where supporting the status quo is correct if it prevents something a lot worse.

2.4 Addressing the underlying causes of fragility and conflict: what is the 'big problem' and is it one we can do anything about?

The underlying causes of fragility and conflict are many and varied and it can be difficult to distinguish between causes and effects. The causes do, however, tend to be political in nature. They are often also related to 'horizontal' inequalities between different social, economic, political, ethnic, or cultural identity groups, and a lack of social cohesion. Ineffective and inaccessible security and justice systems often allow such inequalities to dominate political and economic life in ways which lead to active conflict and/or dysfunctional government. Underlying deeply-embedded cultural attitudes and beliefs often hold inequalities in place. There is a substantial body of literature unpacking these issues from many angles, but no definitive 'big explanation' that can be applied in every case. In many contexts, however, there are similar underlying 'big problems' which, if we understand them well enough, can help us in designing our programmes.

One way of categorising the underlying causes is through the nature of the government and the state. For example:[2]
- Ineffective or absent government and state (– Haiti);
- Strong government, but without commitment to active citizenship (– Ethiopia, Myanmar);

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[2] This typology is not intended to be complete, or the only characteristic of the example countries, but to illustrate a range.

- Potentially effective but severely under-resourced government based on customary institutions (– Somaliland);
- Strong government but within a state captured and distorted to benefit particular groups/elites (– Uganda);
- Fragmented state and society reinforced by the absence of infrastructure and communications (– DRC);
- A condition of impunity, where the state declines to govern in some parts of the country (– Guatemala, northern Mexico, north-western Pakistan).

Another useful categorisation could be made regarding the nature of the economy and the dominating characteristics of markets, depending on the resource base, the nature of the private sector, the presence and role of illegal markets, and the role of small producers, as well as the relationship between markets, the political system, and the interests of elites.

2.5   Oxfam's role in conflict-affected and fragile contexts

Given these contexts, are we really able see where we can add value? To be realistic in our goals we need well-informed and well-focused programmes. The choice of focus will depend on a number of factors, including:
- What other actors are present and their competencies compared with our own;
- Whether, in the context, there is a place for us in supporting and strengthening an increasingly responsive and accountable state or in preventing its decline; where there is, this is often at the local level;
- The potential for supporting civil society, social enterprise, and community welfare; the local level will often be the appropriate focus;
- What contribution we can make in linking the local to the district/regional, national, and international levels;
- Building coalitions and 'unlikely partnerships'.

How do we identify and understand the opportunities for Oxfam in these contexts? As in any programme, we draw upon our distinctive competencies:
- Working to join up humanitarian, campaigning, and long-term development ;
- Gender and women's rights;
- Linking local-, national-, and global-level efforts to achieve change;
- Working actively with the private sector and local entrepreneurs;
- Working on both supply and demand sides of governance, and using entry points that have immediate relevance and meaning for local people, such as livelihoods and essential services;
- Shifting the terms of debate towards social justice and human security.

There will be opportunities in fragile and conflict-affected contexts that would not be necessary or appropriate in other environments – such as opportunities in relation to security, justice, and the judiciary, as in the example of women's rights in Yemen (see Box 2). This requires a broader view of potential partnerships, intimate knowledge of the cultural context and real power relations, and a link to and understanding of the work of organisations engaging more directly on conflict and peace-building than we do ourselves. Where the state is absent, we may contribute to mitigating its absence – but ultimately we would want any temporary structures to create space for the state to move into, and would encourage its role as duty-bearer in relation to the rights of citizens.

In assessing and making decisions about Oxfam's role in a particular context we need to make choices framed within the basic ethical positions of a 'do no harm' approach and a sensitivity to the conflict. We need to ensure that our presence and actions do not contribute in any way, however unintentional, to maintaining a negative status quo.

Box 3: Reaching for women's rights in Yemen

Yemen has long been regarded as a fragile and conflict-affected state: ongoing civil war, an emerging terrorist threat, weak governance, and rising poverty levels have left the country in an unstable situation. Women are particularly vulnerable within Yemen's fragile democracy. Each year, hundreds of women are imprisoned for 'moral crimes'. There is little free legal support for female prisoners, and many are mistreated and stigmatised.

Oxfam and its partner, the Yemeni Women's Union (YWU), are working in turbulent circumstances to ensure that the legal system protects the rights of vulnerable women, by raising awareness about legal rights, providing legal aid, and supporting female prisoners. YWU's female lawyers are playing a growing role in empowering women and advocating for women's rights. Since the legal protection programme began, a record number of cases have been taken on – more than 360 new cases have been adopted into the legal protection project and there are plans to extend the service.

For 20-year-old Najwa, who was imprisoned for six months after running away from her husband, Oxfam's legal protection programme was a lifeline. Without the support of YWU's female lawyers, Najwa and many other women would most likely face long or indefinite prison terms. This work ensures they are not forgotten.

3 Developing programmes in fragile and conflict-affected contexts

3.1 Programme approaches

When programmes are based on a good understanding of the underlying causes of fragility and conflict, they can be targeted effectively, in a strategic manner, to make a positive contribution to change. These causes will be beyond the capacity of Oxfam alone to resolve, so choices will need to be made, often with allies and partners, which enable the available resources to be focused in ways that make strategic contributions to change.

Each context is, in practice, unique, and there is great diversity in the underlying causes, actors, needs, opportunities, and responses. Staff designing and implementing programmes in these environments are faced with immense challenges and work under greater limitations of resources, in relation to the size of the need, than programmes in more stable contexts. Oxfam needs to support staff in making judgements about focus, strategies, and approaches that use those resources to maximum positive effect. Country strategies and plans need to be imaginative, robust, realistic, and, at the same time, responsive to changing circumstances. These contexts require flexibility and agility of approach.

'Transition' periods are complex programming environments and can be lengthy. Humanitarian response and longer-term development need to co-exist; they should be seen as neither a linear progression nor as separate entities, even if 'survival' work and 'transformation' work require different approaches. In a 'transition programming' approach,[3] clear and careful negotiation between the needs of the humanitarian response and long-term development programming is required. In extreme circumstances, where in the short-term the transformation agenda looks impossible, there will still be opportunities to train the next generation ready for when opportunities do arise.

Box 4: The Territorial Rights Programme in the Nariño region, Colombia

In order to increase the capacities of ethnic organisations (indigenous and Afro-Colombians) to cope with armed actors and economic interests threatening their territorial rights, Oxfam identified two key strategies to strengthen the voice of community organisations, and in particular the political leadership of women within them, and to advocate for effective public policies to increase protection, combined with self-protection strategies.

Adapting to the fragile situation in the region, Oxfam's relations with stakeholders had to be very cautious, with every step carefully measured and a search made for progressive local elected governments where the programmes could be implemented. Every relation with the state required analysis of the risk to the Oxfam brand and to the security of partners and staff. This included an implicit evaluation of hidden power structures and their relations with economic and armed interests.

The programme was built up over 12–18 months, slowly gaining recognition from communities, their organisations, and from armed actors in the region. Before implementing 'political' activities, Oxfam used tangible entry points such as food security, the provision of water filters, and public health awareness. Such impartial humanitarian activities allowed it to build up operations and relationships, before beginning the more political work of basic communal strengthening. Through highlighting Oxfam's humanitarian profile, it was possible to gain acceptance from watchful armed actors.

Staff engaged with customary authorities as a way to reinforce their own capacity and credibility among the community, thereby strengthening local networks that could cope better with armed actors. In

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[3] See section 4

Nariño, a public health programme worked with both local health institutions and traditional healers. Alongside other organisations, the programme promoted a permanent presence in villages where indigenous communities had their administrative centres and where armed actors tended to be present. Here Oxfam's presence had a clear protective impact.

In order to reduce the risks surrounding the programme, staff informed the military authorities of their presence in rural areas, providing the minimum information necessary as a way to minimise the authorities' suspicions about their work. At all times, staff wore clothes bearing the Oxfam logo and travelled in pairs.

3.2   Understanding the gender dimensions of fragility

The violation of women's rights is often at its most extreme in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. A common component and driver of fragility that has not yet been widely explored is the gender dimension, and, in particular, the nature of masculinities and their relationship with conflict. There are many variations on what it is to be a man in different contexts and times, and men are constantly negotiating these variations in daily life. How men are meant to be and behave, as men, affects their social relations, with both women and other men, and the way power is played out in the home, the workplace and in their community. In programming, it is critical both to understand the various existing ways masculinity is expressed and to engage with them so that they contribute to rather than hinder efforts towards more just communities and societies. Gender identities affect other drivers of conflict and fragility, and contribute to destabilising dynamics in some contexts in ways we need to understand better. Analysis generally ignores this element and, as yet, there is no picture of how its inclusion might open up the range of strategies and programme possibilities available.

While fragility and conflict affect everyone, they are not gender-neutral in their impacts. They magnify existing inequalities, reinforcing the disparity between women and men in their vulnerability to the effects of fragility and conflict and in their capability to cope. Men may face the greatest threat of death by direct violence, and this insecurity often transmits into abuse of women.

Women are likely to be affected by fragility and conflict in the following ways:
- Women face particular abuse through sexual violence and rape, which are increasingly understood as weapons;
- Women, as the majority of poor people and because of their role in the family, are more vulnerable to the consequences of fragility and conflict and are more likely to become direct victims (of death, injuries, and abuse) ;
- Women are being affected in their multiple roles as food producers and providers, as guardians of health, as care-givers, and as economic actors. As access becomes hampered to basic needs and natural resources such as shelter, food, fertile land, water, and fuel, women's workloads increase;
- Poor households often live in more precarious situations, causing women to work harder to secure resources and livelihoods. In such situations, women and girls have less time to earn income, get an education or training, or to participate in governing bodies or community level/societal decision-making processes.

These negative aspects of gender in fragile and conflict-affected contexts are significant. Equally significant are the potential positive gender roles. It is increasingly understood that women have played important roles in peace-building in a number of longstanding conflicts, including Northern Ireland and the Middle East. Women have to be part of any process to find solutions in fragile contexts, building on their capabilities to build cohesiveness and to construct or re-construct state/citizen relationships at the local or national level.

Oxfam's distinctive contribution on gender, building on our experience of gender in humanitarian interventions, provides an opportunity for innovation in developing programmes that take account of gendered aspects of fragility and conflict, including the factors that create differences in impacts between women and men, and the contexts that create these differences.

Box 5: A 'safe age of marriage' in Yemen

From its inception in 2004, Oxfam GB in Yemen's campaign to improve women's legal rights involved an attempt to raise the legal age of marriage to 18 in Yemen. However, this campaign faced two key problems: the fractious Yemeni parliamentary system and strong traditional conventions, which many Yemenis deferred to over Yemeni law.

The campaign involved lobbying the Yemeni Parliament to change the law relating to the age of marriage, raising it to 18; however, the issue had been taken up by various political groups and turned into an item of propaganda, which threatened to turn this tangible humanitarian problem into a political issue. At a wider level, there was a real concern as to whether the problem of early-marriage could actually be dealt with through a legal process, when Yemeni communities place far greater value on traditional mores and religious scripture than on acts of parliament.

It was decided that a new direction was required if Oxfam were to have an impact on what people accepted as an appropriate age for marriage. They chose to re-focus the debate around the idea of a 'safe age of marriage'. A research report was commissioned into the beliefs of religious leaders about early-marriage and found that a majority support a 'safe age of marriage'. This lent the re-focused campaign legitimacy within local communities and, by framing the campaign as a health issue, they were able to de-politicise it and bring it down to community level. Health was something that many more people in the community were able to support, as a 'safe age' made no statement or principle beyond the health and well-being of young women. As an additional benefit, a health concern could be seen as an indigenous problem, rather than a Western ideal being imposed by foreign NGOs. To further promote this, activities were arranged with schools and local radio stations, which could spread the message of a 'safe age of marriage' using stories taken from the local communities themselves.

A second phase in the campaign, which began in 2009 and which will run until 2013, has been to find alternative means of protection for girls (and boys) from early marriage. This will include the creation of local social protection networks to ensure the prevention of early marriage in the future. These networks will be created through supporting women's groups within the communities.

As Duncan Green, Head of Research at Oxfam GB, describes it:

'Language matters: focusing on health and education impacts and turning the campaign into one to promote a "safe age of marriage" was a more acceptable concept that resonated with many men, women, and children, religious and community leaders much better than the more normative language on women's rights used earlier in the campaign. Be respectful of institutions, learn their language and understand their beliefs. Work within faiths (quoting scripture, identifying allies, etc.), not against them, and through partners. Know when to go slow and when to push – it's like catching a fish!'

4 Programme policy guidance on programming in fragile and conflict-affected contexts

Conflict-affected and fragile contexts need an approach that is distinct from existing humanitarian and long-term development approaches (though drawing on both). We might call this 'transition programming'. This is characterised by:

- A particular, deliberate attention to understanding and planning for risk;
- Managing risk through achieving very-high standards of analysis to underpin programmes which innovate and creatively address both the causes and consequences of conflict;
- Dedicating sufficient resources, skills, and experience over a sufficiently long timeframe.

Transition programmes draw on the most useful tools we have from both humanitarian and long-term programming, adapting them as required to the specific context. The learning companion that accompanies this programme policy guidance goes into detail about how to incorporate this guidance in practice, with links to many useful tools and resources.

4.1 Programme Design

4.1.1 Good practice: what we do and should do

- Build on what is working, and develop indigenous models and local capacities where possible;
- Undertake strong context analysis to underpin programming. This needs to be ongoing, since the context is constantly shifting, and must draw on a range of perspectives and data sources to enable the complexity of the context and dynamics to be well understood. Anthropological and cultural perspectives should be included, as well as the usual political and economic ones;
- Build legitimacy at local level – this needs to rest on accountability to local stakeholders and quality relationships with a wide range of actors;
- Maintain a strong focus on *how* work is done, which can be at least as important as *what* is done. For example, in a rapidly changing context, the quality and range of relationships that have been built will determine what is possible and what can be kept going if security issues require a short-notice withdrawal from an area;
- Take a rights-based approach to programming, even where legal structures and clear duty bearers may not be in place;
- Use our financial resources strategically to leverage other inputs and investments;
- Take calculated risks in speaking out;
- Look for opportunities to both collaborate with and challenge private-sector actors.

4.1.2 Good practice: what we should do more

- Take leadership on transformative change, making vertical linkages at regional, cross border, international levels. Every piece of local-level work should be connected to work on national agendas; humanitarian work, however focused on saving lives, should be seen as part of a longer-term change process;
- Be more agile: there are frequent decision points; be alert and ready to use opportunities as they arise;
- Undertake a robust, iterated power analysis, which looks at the range of forms power takes, including the less obvious, less visible ones; it should include all levels, from household and local through to global, and a better understanding of incentives for different actors; it should be integrated into the country analysis and the implementation plans;

- Work in an iterative way that allows programming to evolve and develop;
- Build frequent and agile monitoring and evaluation to dig deeper into what is changing in the context and in people's lives. The model of Real-Time Evaluation used in humanitarian contexts may be adaptable to this purpose;
- Improve the management of staff turnover – as well as losing knowledge and experience, there is a huge emotional toll on staff;
- Support staff in striking a balance between short-term response and long-term change objectives;
- Build a strong focus on convening and connecting people. This requires a broader range of relationships, and may include talking with 'the enemy' – people we or others may normally avoid engaging with;
- Engage more with youth as a key population group;
- Enable and support the leadership of others;
- Engage with the economic aspects of change, looking for the elements where economic interventions can drive change forward and where economic incentives can support behaviour change;
- Use our technical competencies as a source of legitimacy and an entry point for creating spaces to engage people across dividing lines (through common agendas such as children), creating opportunities for dialogue, and ensuring marginalised voices are heard;
- Use Oxfam's capacity to bring influence to bear at a global level to contribute external pressure for change at national/local level and strengthen external drivers of change;
- Work with coalitions of local organisations to challenge unhelpful laws and regulations, acting as a shield where possible;
- Provide greater clarity on the minimum standards or 'red lines' for the country context, for example the frequency of explicit reflection on the issue of whether we contribute to a perpetuation of the status quo.

4.1.3 Areas to avoid

- Situations where the risks weighed against benefits are excessive;
- Direct state-building at the national level, which is a role best played by bilateral and multilateral organisations;
- Attempts at direct conflict resolution, which is best left to specialist agencies (though Oxfam's programming must be conflict-sensitive);
- Programmes that work directly on security issues or partner with the military;
- Work that makes it easier for people to survive in a negative status quo, but without contributing to changing it;
- Popular mobilisation or mass campaigning, unless we are very specific about the likely consequences and we have the explicit support and encouragement of diverse partners on the ground;
- Doing too much: do one or two things well, rather than several things less well or complex programmes that cannot be realistically implemented.

4.2   Managing programmes

4.2.1 Staffing Issues

- **Numbers**: It makes sense to err on the side of over-staffing and long-term perspectives on change processes, so as to avoid dangerous shortcuts and omissions at all stages of the programme cycle (though this may be a challenge to fund);
- **Competencies**: Where national staff competencies are low, the basics of project and programme cycle management will need extra support and prioritisation – in particular, building capacity for understanding and managing risk in projects and programmes. Highly-skilled staff from outside the immediate contextual dynamics (whether expatriate or

sometimes from diaspora communities) can cover gaps and build the capacity of staff who need it;

- **Cultural and ethnic balance**: An appropriate balance of staff backgrounds/affiliations is needed (and an appropriate location for the office) to ensure that Oxfam can remain impartial and be perceived as such by others;
- **Self-awareness**: The local culture and dynamics of the conflict-affected context can play out within a team and spill over unhelpfully into external relations. HR management must actively address such issues (which may not be immediately visible to non-national staff). Staff need to develop an active awareness of conflict and fragility issues and of any cultural norms (such as gender roles) that may be in conflict with Oxfam's values and analyses of change. Unaddressed internal tensions and conflict dynamics and staff unease with aspects of the programme can affect delivery and perceptions of staff/Oxfam by communities;
- **Cross-team working:** Teamwork is needed across and between the 'internal boundaries' of humanitarian, transitional, and longer-term development programming. Deliberate and flexible engagement with each other's perspectives and skills, and a mutual understanding of needs and priorities, are required.

4.2.2 Awareness of unintended impacts

- **Logistics and procurement**: Oxfam is often in the position of having a substantial impact on the local economy and local power relations through the practical delivery of its work. This must be factored into key choices regarding suppliers and the relationships that surround logistics, such that we are aware of and intentional in our impacts on the local political economy;
- **Partnerships and external relations**: How Oxfam is perceived is strongly influenced by the decisions made about who to partner with and how to engage with government, state institutions, and other major players. These decisions should be informed by detailed analysis so that likely impacts can be anticipated;
- **Monitoring, evaluation, and learning**: Mechanisms are needed for constant feedback on achievements and progress, as well as to provide early warning of problems and changes in the environment, especially where unintended. Where things are working correctly (our own or others), it is important to invest in understanding exactly why this is so.

4.2.3 Policy positions

Oxfam needs clear positions on key areas at country level so that, when decisions need to be taken quickly, the foundations are already in place. Similarly, policy positions on issues beyond the remit of the country team should also be ready, so that there is support in place if the country team needs to move quickly. The discipline to apply these positions in practice is also needed.

4.2.4 Security and risk

The analysis and management of risk, the risks posed to Oxfam, to its staff and their families, to partners, and to the communities and individuals we work with and for, needs to be considered. On occasion, Oxfam may be more risk-averse than partners and communities. Country teams need to look for ways in which innovative approaches and partnerships can reduce risk, and need to be alert to any tendency to avoid risk by working on 'safe' (probably more traditional and tangible) results without addressing the wider contextual issues.

4.2.5 Fundraising

The current mechanisms for humanitarian funding are too short-term for fragile or conflict-affected contexts, and long-term funding mechanisms make too many calls that are framed in ways that limit the potential for successful applications. Advocacy at all levels is needed with donors for

longer-term transitional funding, and for recognition that, in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, process results (such as alliance and coalition building or consultation) are as important as more tangible ones. Senior programme staff have a key role to play in building and maintaining donor relationships to support dialogue about the kinds of programmes and funding required in these contexts; similar engagement at regional and global level with funders is also required.

4.2.6 Protection

Protection analysis is essential, in conjunction with risk analysis, to minimise inadvertent risks and avoid worsening the conflict dynamics. In conflict, people will always want to find ways of benefitting from Oxfam's resources. Protection analysis will help identify the risks that come from not understanding the political associations of the people we work with. Partners and the people on whose behalf we work should be involved in undertaking this analysis, so we can include the risks they understand but we perhaps do not.

4.3 Programme content

4.3.1 Gender programming

- **Women's rights**: Our programmes should not only consider women's practical needs to support their sustainable coping strategies and to avoid or recover from violence or other vulnerabilities, but should also address the more strategic need to build equality and strengthen women's voice in change processes and support their role in conflict resolution, peace-building, and governance. This is likely to require Oxfam to engage actively with men in building support for women's rights, and to work creatively with a range of actors to address underlying attitudes and beliefs (see Box 4);
- **Masculinity**: Oxfam should look for opportunities to incorporate an understanding of masculinities into programming in order to strengthen gender work. This will need to be done in ways which are very sensitive to the context.

4.3.2 Change models

- **Analysis**: Conflict analysis and sensitivity, and detailed power analysis are fundamental to effective programming in conflict-affected and fragile contexts. Analysis needs frequent updating, drawing on diverse perspectives and learning from others;
- **Modest (realistic) ambition**: These contexts are characterised by long-term, often intractable and highly-political issues. We can make a contribution to positive change, but ultimately it is the people of the country who will make the changes that will resolve conflicts and strengthen the society and political economy. Our aspirations should be realistic: to always make the status quo less not more comfortable (even if in a modest way) and to make a supportive contribution towards positive change, over a reasonable timeframe, with outcomes and intended impacts to match;
- **Impartial entry points**: We should choose entry points that allow us to operate in the context without compromising our ability to engage with a wide range of partners, including state institutions where appropriate. Impartial entry points are likely to include essential services, such as water, sanitation and hygeine, education, literacy, livelihoods, and disaster risk reduction/preparedness. The methods used to deliver these should contribute to strengthening civil-society organisations, empowerment, and effective local governance;
- **Robust design**: Programming should be planned in anticipation of the possibility of conditions deteriorating. For example, livelihoods work should avoid products with a short shelf-life;
- **Micro–macro connections**: Ensure effective strategic linking of levels and build a strategic connection between even the smallest, local-level intervention on the ground and higher-level advocacy and communications. This can help us manage the issue of limited access at any of the levels, as well as increasing the scale of impact within challenging operating conditions.

Box 5: 'Peace Vehicles' in Karamoja, Uganda

The 'Amotoka ka' Ekisil', known in English as the 'Peace Vehicles', represent an innovative approach adopted by Oxfam in Uganda to improve community cohesion and promote peace in a region blighted by tribal conflict and poor infrastructure resulting from decades of marginalisation. Karamoja is predominantly a pastoralist area where poverty and violence are widespread. As the Oxfam Livelihoods Officer comments: 'young men would openly move with weapons like the AK47 rifles, like others move with cell phones'.

Many actors have tried to support peace processes in the area, but the means of communicating to audiences amongst a dispersed and mobile population, particularly in the more remote areas of the district, and for collecting their feedback has always been a challenge. The whole of northern Karamoja lacks a radio station and mobile telephone coverage remains patchy.

An Oxfam 2007 report noted that 'pastoralists suffer from poverty of the voice'. As a strategy to provide the local population with the opportunity to voice their concerns and participate in peace education, a simple innovation was developed by the Oxfam programme team to bridge the communication gaps in the region.

Two of Oxfam's land cruiser wagon vehicles were modified and fitted with public-address systems, video projectors, a hydraulic stage, and recording facilities. The vans are commonly referred to as 'Peace Vehicles'. As Mark Adams, Deputy Country Director of Oxfam GB in Uganda says, 'The vans are part of an integrated communications initiative around governance, peace, livelihoods, gender, disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation. They allow us to be mobile, taking different messages to where people are… encouraging discussion. It is now planned that people's own discussions and messages will be documented, and conveyed back to a wider audience as part of advocacy and influencing.'

5   Summary

This paper makes it clear that there is no such thing as a single prescriptive 'answer' for how to work in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. The underlying causes of problems and the dynamics of such contexts are too complex and unpredictable for that. There is, however, plenty of scope for sharpening the focus and impact of programmes by:

- Using robust, detailed, and continual context analysis to enable a more accurate, nuanced, and context-specific understanding of how change actually happens;
- Paying greater attention to how our own organisational characteristics and distinctive competencies can add value to the work of others;
- Strengthening our understanding of the gendered aspects of fragility and conflict, including the factors that create differences in impacts between women and men and the contexts that create these differences;
- Paying greater attention to embedding risk analysis, actively managing risk through high standards of analysis, innovation and creativity, and building resilience into all our work;
- Making sure we work to contribute towards positive changes for poor women and men, giving them more than just the support to survive in a difficult context;
- Using frequent monitoring and evaluation to ensure programmes remain well-focused, even within a shifting and unpredictable context.

6   Where to learn more?

Key references and online resources

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For more information on this programme and work on fragile and conflict-affected contexts in Oxfam, please contact:

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