POWER AND FRAGILITY: GOVERNANCE PROGRAMMING IN FRAGILE CONTEXTS
A programme resource
Introduction

This guide is based on work by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) to bring together power and political economy analysis, and other research, undertaken in four countries – in order to draw broader lessons for Oxfam for work on governance and citizenship in fragile contexts. The guide is written for Oxfam Country Directors and Programme Managers and aims to provide practical support in the design and management of governance programmes. It may also be of interest to staff in other INGOs, and the wider development world.

Power analysis

The research combined two types of analysis to provide a deeper and more useful analysis of power in fragile or ‘hybrid’ states (states displaying elements of both authoritarian and democratic governance):

- **Political economy analysis**, which considers how ‘economic, social, and cultural systems interact with the political system to affect people’s lives ‘on the ground’ and the competing rules of the game in formal and informal institutions.


‘Visible’ power refers here to who is seen to ‘win and lose in [public] arenas’, and may come with a particular formal role, for example being a prime minister or other government minister, and thus being able to control certain decisions or resources. ‘Hidden power’ may be used by vested interests to control decisions or resources ‘backstage’; here power may come from being an influential relative or powerful civil servant close to the prime minister or other power-holder, or from holding business interests. Further, the exercise of power may also be ‘invisible’ even to those over whom power is exercised: women may not participate in meetings or put themselves forward for formal elected roles even if they are legally entitled to — because of their own and others’ deeply-held assumptions about how they should behave.

METHODOLOGY

IDS’s research was conducted in 2011 and focused on Yemen, Angola, Myanmar, and Rwanda. The research methodology included:

- **An assessment of Oxfam’s work in these countries, based on interviews with staff and partners.**
- **Power and political economy analysis conducted around each country context.**
- **Other desk research, including a review of recent academic literature.**

The research was viewed as a starting point to identify entry points to governance work in fragile contexts, and provide guidance for Oxfam’s work. It was not considered exhaustive or definitive, and Oxfam continues to develop its work and thinking in this area.

Working to create accountable governance structures in fragile contexts such as Afghanistan poses many challenges. Photo: Reuters
Background: power within and without the state

The particular strength that detailed power and political economy analysis brings to programme work in fragile contexts is that it allows Oxfam to investigate the nuances of where power lies – and thus to identify opportunities for, and barriers to, change and influence in places where the situation significantly constrains more usual ways of working.

The state – even an authoritarian or hybrid state – will not hold a monolithic grip on power. In most states, political power is distributed unevenly and is held not only by the formal institutions of government (local, provincial, and national), but also by other actors, groups, and institutions – both within and without the state. Sometimes this power will be invisible or hidden, and will only be made visible to Oxfam with rigorous investigation, additional sources of information, and detailed power analysis.

Hybrid states

It is not helpful to see states as entirely ‘authoritarian’ or ‘democratic’, or necessarily in transition between the two; and to consider a state democratic at the moment of first elections may not reflect the reality of its governance. Many formerly authoritarian states will actually be hybrid states, where the population still experiences high levels of state control or repression and where the prospects for substantive democracy are uncertain. Nevertheless, there may be formal or informal opportunities for influence in such countries.

Hybrid states may include countries where there has been a formal transition to democracy but there are still pockets of resistance (for example Myanmar) or where, despite a formal democracy, the state still functions in a highly authoritarian way, for example with strong dominance of the military in government institutions, violations of human rights, and limited consultation with civil society. Visible political power in hybrid states often coincides with hidden power provided by security forces’ support for government, or arising from government control of economic activities such as resource extraction. Study of democratic transitions shows that democratic consolidation is a long-term process, often with setbacks and no clear outcome.

Citizens

Power analysis can also throw light on the relationship between the state and particular groups of citizens. Different citizen groups – based around gender, age, disability, race, ethnicity, class etc – will experience different relationships with the state: some groups may see themselves as ‘clients’ in a patronage relationship, in which anything the state provides is a ‘gift’; or they may perceive themselves as citizens with the right to services provided by the state.

People’s perceptions of the state may also vary dramatically according to their identity and social positioning. For example, gender-based violence (GBV), stigma related to HIV, and police brutality can be mutually-reinforcing if women who experience GBV are unable to seek redress through the formal justice system – leading to a lack of trust in the political system. Civil society has a key role to play in organising citizens around issues of identity, interest, livelihood etc, thereby amplifying the voice and power of ‘ordinary’ people and acting as an intermediary in the relationship between citizen and state.

Armed actors

Armed actors may also hold significant power in hybrid states, and where the state is shown to be ineffective or repressive local communities may consider them legitimate sources of power and authority. Examples include: defence units in northern Uganda, militias in South Sudan, para-police militias in Rio de Janeiro, community watch groups in Cape Town, and paramilitaries and rebel governance in Colombia. Oxfam may need to consider engaging with armed actors in contexts where they are shown to be significant power-holders.

MYANMAR: POWER IN A HYBRID STATE

Myanmar is undergoing a period of change. The authoritarian government in place since the 1960s has begun to allow some distribution of formal power, with the establishment of a parliament in 2011. There is scepticism about the depth of political reform, given the history of violence and state surveillance which has long been used to maintain control. However, new legislation gives people the right to organise through trade unions, and to conduct election campaigning. And new laws relating to freedom of the press and allowing peaceful assembly have been drafted. Parliamentary processes are now reported in state media and a degree of consultation has started with civil society on some issues. As at Aug 2012.
Using power and political economy analysis in programming

Power analysis (taken here to mean power and political economy analysis) can help Oxfam better understand who holds power, at both local and national level and across various spaces – and what opportunities there are to influence them to achieve change.

As discussed above, power analysis can reveal how political power is actually distributed in a country, held not only by different functions, departments, and levels of the state – but also by groups and actors ‘without’ the state. And it can enable Oxfam to understand, for example, where those who wield formal institutional power are there as ‘window-dressing’ for those making decisions from behind the scenes; where those who exercise formal power are doing so jointly with less visible, informal actors; and where actors outside the formal state structure are significant power-holders. Power analysis should be conducted on the basis of information from a wide variety of sources, and must consider the particular needs and experiences of different groups such as women, youth, and minority groups.

After conducting a power analysis, the next stage will be to consider how to work with, and influence, targeted power-holders at different levels (those identified as being most able to achieve the change that Oxfam seeks). Each form of power will need to be targeted in the way most likely to influence the power-holder – for example, providing technical advice, citizen mobilisation, using media to promote messages, international advocacy etc. Working at all levels of governance (local, provincial, and national) is more likely to lead to sustainable change than working only at one level: this is particularly true as different levels of governance may be able to act as levers to put pressure on other levels.

In order to influence a variety of different types of power-holder at different levels of governance, Oxfam needs to maintain a presence in the formal and ‘invited’ spaces created and controlled by government, while also building relationships with a variety of informal power-holders outside government – and convening spaces for such power-holders to engage with communities. There are clearly risks associated with this approach, for instance being considered by local communities to collaborate with a repressive government, being seen as anti-government by the government, or being associated with factions who lose or abuse power. It is important for Oxfam to assess and manage these risks appropriately.
Incorporate citizens’ understanding of power and security

It is important for Oxfam to understand how insecurity, power, and the legitimacy of power-holders, are actually perceived by citizens – and take this into consideration in the design of governance programmes. People accustomed to insecurity and conflict may value stability and lack of violence above all else, and where the state fails to provide basic services, non-formal actors who are able to meet their needs (for food and protection) may have a legitimacy in their eyes which the state lacks. Without this detailed understanding of power, Oxfam will fail to understand the important role of shadow players and ‘twilight’ institutions (such as representatives of powerful tribes in Yemen, gangs in urban areas, militias, rebel groups etc).

Identifying power-holders considered legitimate by citizens raises opportunities and risks for Oxfam. On the one hand, it creates entry points to influence governance structures or build structures that are more responsive to citizens’ needs and participation. On the other hand, should Oxfam work with such informal power-holders, even when they are armed and predatory? Collaboration with such actors may compromise values, involve real security risks, and bolster non-accountable power structures – and ultimately present a challenge to Oxfam’s long-term development aim of contributing towards the building of an accountable state. However, overall, developing programmes in relation to citizens’ experiences of insecurity would help to sharpen assumptions about how change happens, and help to develop more precise strategies to address governance in transition contexts.

Integrate power analysis into the programme cycle

‘Who holds power’ can change rapidly in fragile contexts. To be used effectively in programming, power analysis needs to be undertaken not only as part of strategic planning at the start of a programme, but on an on-going basis. Analysis should be integrated into programme planning, design, and on-going management – as well as into monitoring, evaluation and learning systems. For further information about how to conduct power and political economy analysis, and a list of useful resources and toolkits, please see back page.

POWER IN PRACTICE

In Angola the president and his inner circles form a formidable block of formal and informal power, reinforced by control of the oil industry. The government is not supportive towards CSOs, INGOs and the media. At local and provincial level, there are opportunities to work with the formal spaces of government in the context of decentralisation, but government capacity is weak. At this level it is important to work also with informal power-holders. In Rwanda, although the Rwandan Patriotic Front is dominant, new leaders – some of whom previously worked in CSOs – may be more reformist, whilst the women’s caucus and parliamentary ombudsman may provide opportunities for positive collaboration and influence.
Entry points and approaches to strengthen governance and citizen participation

Research in the four countries studied revealed a number of possible entry points and approaches for programme work, as discussed below. There is, however, significant diversity between different fragile contexts and hybrid states – depending on the degree of authoritarianism of the government, and the particular relationship between state and society. The situation in such states can also change rapidly and in unexpected ways. It is therefore vital that plans are made, and approaches chosen, that are appropriate to the specific analysis of the country context – and that these are reviewed and revised as necessary.

Indirect approaches may be more effective in fragile contexts

Governance work can be approached directly through programmes overtly designed to influence governance structures, or indirectly by incorporating governance into other programming, including work on livelihoods, infrastructure, or humanitarian aid.

The approach taken will affect how the state responds to the work; the risks to those involved in the programme, including Oxfam staff, partners, and beneficiaries; and the effectiveness of the

Positions of formal power for women may not address exclusion

In Rwanda, there is a relatively high number of women in positions of formal political authority, but power is often exercised informally even in government, and women are excluded from decision-making. Socio-cultural norms prevent women from having real influence, particularly at sub-national level, even if they are in political office. In Myanmar, the 2008 Constitution states that women have the right to stand for election to the People’s Assembly, and the National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women 2012–2021 identifies women’s participation in public life as a priority – but in reality women are very often unable to realise these rights.

The limitations of formal power in achieving female empowerment and the implementation gap it points to between policy and reality therefore need to be recognised, as does the potential of alternative empowerment strategies which aim to capture informal power.
Power in practice

In Yemen there has been a deep politicisation of the urban youth in Sanaa, Taiz and other key cities, who have struggled to claim rights and to demand a system of governance that is transparent and democratic. It is unclear whether their action has had a ripple effect on the rest of the population.

Work itself. In authoritarian or hybrid states, it may often be more appropriate to use ‘neutral’ entry points such as livelihoods or service delivery to build citizenship skills and capacities, as this is less likely than a direct approach to trigger a repressive response.

In Rwanda, for example, Oxfam has built experience around livelihoods and is able to advise government and provide opportunities for citizen action in district development planning, emphasising gender justice and women’s economic leadership through this work. In Myanmar, where the government prefers INGOs to work on service delivery, Oxfam has worked through networks to strengthen ability to engage with the authorities.

Enhancing democratic governance and citizen participation through working on other issues needs to be made explicit as an objective of a programme or there is a risk that it will be overshadowed by other, more easily quantifiable, objectives. In indirect governance programmes, it is vital to see participants as political agents – looking at how these groups understand their ideas about the state, themselves as citizens, and their citizen and leadership capacities. The capacities and skills required to engage with (local) state institutions can thus be built incrementally around concrete issues.

Identify the included and excluded groups and encourage citizen engagement/mobilisation

Power analysis will help to identify which groups (women, youth, ethnic groups etc) are best able to influence governance arrangements, what they can bring to Oxfam’s approach in a particular country, and how Oxfam can work with them.

Whilst direct national-level advocacy and citizen mobilisation may be too risky in authoritarian states, evidence shows that local-level forms of citizen mobilisation (through farmers’ groups, community organisations, religious groups etc) can help to build the citizenship capacities of marginalised individuals and groups. This is unlikely to achieve a radical shift in the balance of power, but can build skills and experience which may then be channelled into national-level advocacy when political space opens up.

Raising awareness of the power dynamics which affect particular groups and their rights and entitlements may also be a form of citizen engagement/mobilisation appropriate to more repressive states (for example, raising awareness with groups of women around the power dynamics of gender, and women’s rights and needs as women). Building such awareness can help develop the understanding and skills needed to challenge power dynamics and engage in governance in the long term. However, it is a slow and resource-intensive process that involves confronting many forms of invisible and hidden power.

Use power analysis to identify and build alliances and networks

Power analysis which rigorously examines formal, informal, and hidden power structures should reveal those actors and groups where collaboration is most likely to bring about positive change. This may involve looking beyond the partner networks of conventional CSOs and other ‘usual suspects’, and identifying potential partners with whom Oxfam is less accustomed to working.

In Yemen, bloggers were identified as a way to touch base with a young political elite; in Angola, independent universities and famous artists and musicians might be catalysts with the potential to mobilise community groups. Again, it is important to work with partners, alliances, and networks at all levels, in order to achieve sustainable change. The four principal levels of governance (developing citizen identities, strengthening citizen participation, strengthening responsive and accountable states, and developing inclusive and cohesive societies) are interrelated and interdependent – and change cannot be achieved by working at only one level.
Guidance on how Oxfam can work on governance in fragile contexts

Programming should be informed by varied types and sources of information

Good programme planning should always be based on information from many different sources, but this is particularly important in fragile contexts. Oxfam should prioritise gaining access to information of different types (research, statistics, government documents, media reports) and from a variety of actors and institutions (official and unofficial). Oxfam should continue to consult, review, and update this information at all stages of the programme cycle.

Information sources should also include the ‘word on the street’, which can enable Oxfam to understand how people and communities really feel about a situation and provide information not available in the public arena. Such information can allow Oxfam to understand and to navigate formal and informal political power structures; it is also vital in ensuring that the voices and experience of marginalised groups, such as women, are heard and integrated into Oxfam’s analysis. It is important that such information is shared across all staff in country programmes, and is not seen only as the preserve of those dealing with governance.

Identify and respond to windows of opportunity

Change in fragile contexts will not necessarily be linear or predictable; there may be windows of opportunity to achieve change, but these windows are often short and can actually lead to more authoritarian outcomes. Some windows of opportunity may be predictable (elections), but others less so (death of a dictator, financial crises, floods and droughts) or completely unpredictable (Arab Spring). To take advantage of such windows, Oxfam needs to maximise its ability to identify and possibly prepare for opportunities as and when they emerge, and to respond quickly and appropriately. This will require flexibility in programme planning and delivery, and adaptability from managers and staff.

To best identify opportunities for change, and understand how change can happen in fragile contexts, Oxfam should consider past experiences in which transitions opened up opportunities for more democratic or participative governance, as well as those where transition has led to more authoritarian outcomes. What factors led to the opening? What

Oxfam should thus pursue alliances and networks that are able to link these dimensions, prioritising partners that connect different levels of governance (from local to global) and different forms of power (visible, invisible, and hidden). For example, working at national level for legal frameworks that enable access to information is not enough to achieve change without grassroots movements that demand such information of government, and are able to work with the media to communicate it. Attempts to increase women’s political participation show that quotas are important (guaranteeing women a degree of formal power), but that changing the ‘rules of the game’ in terms of how decisions are made and agendas are set (i.e. challenging informal power) is also needed – as is support for the development of women’s leadership capacities and networks. It is useful to look for an agenda (or set of demands) which can attract a broad range of allies, and ideally can achieve easy wins in order to engage and motivate the network.

Another possible distinction in the approach to governance programming is to work with partners and alliances both inside and outside the country. In many hybrid states there is scope for using international watchdogs and advocacy campaigns to put pressure on governments. However, the decision to lobby international institutions, rather than achieve change working only with domestic actors, has to be made very carefully. In Myanmar, there has been significant debate around the contribution of sanctions to the current political opening, but some analysis concludes that external advocacy has actually hindered progress.

CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

In Rwanda, Oxfam works on livelihoods activities with women and youth in rural and peri-urban areas. This work operates from a mainly economic perspective, but is a good space in which active citizenship and leadership skills can be learnt. In Myanmar, recent civil society activity focused on the Darwei deep sea port and the Myitsone dam have demonstrated the importance of supporting community-based organisations to network with each other, articulate their concerns, and identify points of influence. In Yemen, many citizens form part of the ‘silent masses’ and have not mobilised, but cannot be assumed to lack political agency. For these citizens, political reform is important – but they want to see tangible change in their living standards.

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Citizen engagement
were the factors that led to change (good or bad)? Oxfam should also be aware that change can affect different groups in different ways. How were women affected in relation to men – or rural communities in relation to urban communities?

Given the difficult and unpredictable nature of change in fragile contexts, it is important for Oxfam to be aware of the possibility of reversals and setbacks. Where analysis of risks and power dynamics shows that reversals are likely, this should be communicated to staff, partners and colleagues in the wider organisation, who may otherwise be frustrated by the slow pace of change.

**Form trusting relationships with varied partners**

Partnership is often key to successful programme work, but the quality of relationships with partners is particularly important in fragile contexts. Oxfam should prioritise building strong, trusting relationships with partners, whether these are CSOs, citizen groups, part of local or national government, or less traditional partners such as religious groups. Partners should represent both formal and informal power-holders, and operate at all levels of governance. In transition contexts, the people/groups which are able to travel between different governance spaces can be critical to Oxfam’s potential influence. The need for local knowledge and relationships of trust with key partners is especially acute in transition contexts, which means that high staff turnover can have extremely negative effects. Documentation of learning (rather than relying only on staff memories and personal relationships) should therefore be emphasised.

Given that the state is not a monolith, it may be possible to find progressive people within the state apparatus and build relationships with them. Private-sector partners should be scrutinised with the same kind of power analysis as other potential partners in order to identify how different groups will benefit or lose through such partnerships. In working with the private sector, there is evidence from Rwanda and other countries to show that purely economically-driven interventions do NOT lead to a greater awareness of rights, sense of citizenship, or stronger political participation – and these must be clearly built into the activities and partnership agreement.

In some cases, Oxfam should focus on issue-led networks. These may or may not be long-lasting groups, but they develop the practice of identifying power-holders and opportunities for advocacy. In other cases, it may be important to focus on identity-based groups, especially if these groups are able to represent marginalised and excluded perspectives such as those of women or ethnic minorities.

**Consider how Oxfam may replicate the existing political culture and power in society**

In transition contexts, Oxfam needs to be very aware of how it can inadvertently replicate the existing political culture, both within the staff team and in relation to partners and local communities. Oxfam should consider to what extent it is using informal power: how does its alignment with particular groups or agendas affect their (and Oxfam’s) legitimacy? How it is working with and involving marginalised groups such as women or particular minorities? Raising staff awareness about these issues, and consciously addressing them, will help Oxfam reflect the democratic principles it is trying to promote in its own work.
Take a creative approach to monitoring, evaluation and learning

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) of governance programmes in fragile contexts invariably needs to be speedy, safe and highly practical for making management decisions, including risk assessment, in often unsafe and difficult-to-access environments where impacts may be difficult to predict and trace.

MEL may need to be able to assess programmes with ‘soft’ objectives; for example trust-building approaches which emphasise collaborative analysis, action-learning and empowerment are well suited to fragile contexts. It is advisable to take a creative approach to monitoring, which includes collecting both qualitative and quantitative information from a variety of sources, and strives to capture the unplanned outcomes of activities – as change may come in unexpected ways.

Qualitative data may include stories, personal experiences, and word-of-mouth information. Quantitative data may be collected by participatory methods where groups are able to generate numbers through estimating, calculating, measuring, comparing, valuing and scoring, even if hard statistics are not available. It may be necessary to undertake remote monitoring where it is not possible to access sensitive areas, relying on information collected through second-hand sources.

Management of Governance Programmes in Fragile Contexts: An Overview

1. Create a programme steering group, including external stakeholders, to guide decisions, extend networks, and ensure good flows of information.

2. Conduct a political economy and power analysis at country level, involving partners, from local to national levels of governance and including those representing formal and informal power.

3. Agree theories of change with partners, which are appropriate to the analysis of this context.

4. Maintain awareness of Oxfam’s own role as a power-holder (and that of individual staff) to ensure that Oxfam does not inadvertently reinforce existing power imbalances.

5. Build in periodic points in the programme cycle to reflect on the assumptions in the theory of change and revisit the power analysis.

6. Document experiences and reflections as much as possible, and involve more than one person from Oxfam in institutional relationships in order to ensure continuity and capture learning.

7. Develop mechanisms to encourage staff to spot windows of political opportunity.

8. Incentivise flexibility and responsiveness in programming, as well in developing strong relationships with partners and others.
Summary of key points

Hybrid and fragile contexts differ significantly, and different change models may be appropriate to each context. It is therefore not possible to recommend a particular model of governance work in fragile contexts, but some broad conclusions are drawn about the principles underpinning such work.

**Changing context**
Working on governance in fragile contexts requires recognition that the situation may be in continual flux, requiring constant checking of assumptions underlying programme strategy, planning, and implementation – and making changes to planned work as necessary.

**Power analysis**
Rigorous political economy and power analysis is vital to allow Oxfam to understand where power lies and how change can happen. Diverse sources of information, including taking the ‘pulse on the ground’, are essential to inform the analysis: citizens themselves are an important source of information.

**Levels of governance**
It is important to understand how power operates at all levels of governance, from local to national, and across various institutions and spaces. Addressing each type of power and level of governance will require different approaches and strategies. Targeting all levels of governance at once (either directly or through strategic alliances with others), rather than focusing on one, is more likely to bring about sustainable change. Building safe spaces for engagement is important in developing citizen capabilities in transition contexts. Oxfam can use its convening power to create spaces between formal and informal power-holders.

**Working with unusual actors**
Oxfam may find that those with power and influence are armed actors, or that the only way into certain territories is to collaborate on a specific issue with a repressive government. The choice of partners and approach Oxfam takes to working with these actors will be crucial – and must be sensitively made with full awareness, management and documentation of the purpose of the work and the risks involved.

**Relationships with partners**
Prioritise building trust and strong relationships with partners, whether CSOs, citizens’ groups, elements of the government or more unusual partners, as a strategic approach for working between informal and formal politics and types of power. There is a lot of potential for non-conventional methods, such as art, drama, music, film, etc, to be used as a way of opening discussion about sensitive issues.

**Identify and respond to windows of opportunity**
Political transitions may offer opportunities for change, but these windows are often short. Staff should be encouraged to use their knowledge and understanding to identify such opportunities. This requires Oxfam to provide appropriate support to country programmes.

**Direct versus indirect approaches**
Building citizen capabilities around more neutral entry topics, such as livelihoods, can allow people to develop citizenship skills even in repressive contexts and enable citizens to take advantage of spaces for participation as they open up.

**Promote democratic principles**
Oxfam can promote democratic principles (including gender equity) through its governance work. It should be alert to the danger that it can inadvertently reinforce an anti-democratic political culture through its own ways of working, and actively aim to address this.
**Oxfam resources**

These can be downloaded at http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications

- Programming in Fragile and Conflict-affected Countries: A learning companion (2011)
- Programming in Fragile and Conflict-affected Countries: Programme policy guidelines (2011)
- Right to Be Heard, Framework (2012)
- Within and Without the State: Strengthening civil society in conflict-affected and fragile settings (2011)
- Programming on Right to Be Heard, a learning companion (2012)
- Rough Guide to Power Analysis
  A two-page guide to power analysis, including references to further useful resources.

**Other resources**

- Guidance on the contribution of political economy analysis to development thinking, the range of tools and approaches available, and their application to programming.
  An online resource which includes a framework for analysing the levels, spaces and forms of power and how they interact.
- Guide to Political Economy Analysis, GSDRC (Governance and Social Development Resource Centre) (2009), www.gsdrc.org/go/topic-guides/political-economy-analysis
  A handbook for exploring power in relation to achieving change in the interests of communities.
- Powerhouse http://powerhousenetwork.ning.com/
  An online community enabling practitioners to discuss, debate and explore the many dimensions of power; exchange tools and resources; and work with others to develop strategies for change.

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Front cover picture: Ahlan, (age 9), moves through the streets of Al Shorfa, Yemen. Photo: Abbie Trayler-Smith/Oxfam

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