1. Introduction

Oxfam GB welcomes the findings of the independent evaluation of this three-year project funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF). In recent years, Oxfam has worked to improve the quality of development interventions and advocacy supporting women smallholders in agricultural markets. The collaborative project Researching Women’s Collective Action (RWCA) aimed to create a base of rigorous evidence about ‘what works’ in women’s collective action. Furthermore, there was an explicit strategy to engage Oxfam’s staff, partners, and local and international stakeholders in the research in order to promote better practice and policy from the research findings. The combination of rigorous academic research, collaborative learning and influencing is inherently complicated and new to some of the national teams involved. Thus it was important to commission an independent assessment of the process and outputs of the project.

We commend Pamoja’s ability to manage an evaluation with the complexity of this project and develop clear recommendations. While Oxfam is aware of the limitations of time and budget for the evaluation, the key points are thorough, relevant and insightful.

2. Response to Areas of Good Practice

This section responds to ‘Areas of Good Practice’ highlighted in the report. The next section discusses the recommendations for change and key lessons learnt.

We welcome the evaluation findings that “the value of this research is phenomenal…we have taken a significant step forward that will be valued by lots of other INGOs and research institutions”. Renowned researchers have grappled with the challenge of developing research to assess rural women’s empowerment and income in developing countries. Oxfam’s project has benefited from collaborations with these researchers; we also appreciate that this research on women’s market-based collective action was considered a ‘significant contribution’ to the wider development and research communities.

We are happy to see that the evaluation team found unequivocal affirmation of the relevance of ‘illuminating a research domain that has hitherto suffered from a dearth of rigorous evidence’ and the research findings ‘of high relevance to women smallholders, donors and development actors’. In the current context of international concern about food systems, and national initiatives on small-holder agriculture in the three countries – Ethiopia, Mali and Tanzania – this evidence provides a base from which to advocate for women smallholder farmers to benefit fully from policy and investments in agricultural development.

We also note that the evaluation finds that ‘in relation to research outputs…the project scores highly for effectiveness’. Clearly, an important achievement was high quality, rigorous research findings that will facilitate adoption by institutional actors.

The evaluation team heard high praise for the quality of the communications products and activities. Oxfam invests significant resources in communicating research findings and programme learning and it is heating that this aspect was commended by the evaluators. Following the lead demonstrated by RWCA, it has become increasingly common for the Programme Policy Team to place dedicated communications posts within multi-country projects. RWCA’s website and publications have been a good example and will be continued to be supported after the end of the project.
In terms of partners and collaborative projects we are delighted by the positive evaluation of the respondents from the International Advisory Group and the national stakeholder events.

3. Response to Recommendations and Lessons Learnt

This section responds to ‘Lessons Learnt’ (section 3.6 of the Report). We agree with the evaluation team that the timing of the evaluation was less-than-ideal, as the final products were still in draft form and the influencing from the findings was therefore incomplete. This was a consequence of the wider issues with timelines during the project and the impending project end.

We recognise evaluators’ findings that the initial design of the project was complex and ‘overly ambitious’ and the decision to bring the research management in-house ‘led to a number of other challenges which forced the project over-budget and over-time, reducing its overall efficiency on a number of fronts’.

The RWCA project managers did recognise the complexity and over-ambition during the second year, and renegotiated activities with BMGF representatives. For example, the influencing audiences were prioritised to those where the project could have significant impact. In addition, Oxfam contributed significant additional funds and staff time to ensure the project’s quality and completion. The Campaigns and Policy Division has also increased senior management involvement and oversight in the design phase of projects, in part as a result of this experience. Recognising that capacity on Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) is needed during project design, an additional MEL adviser has been hired in the Division since the inception of RWCA, to avoid the weakness of project monitoring systems, as identified by this evaluation.

Furthermore, Oxfam agrees with the lessons about thinking through research partnerships and management of large research projects. The high-calibre ‘advisory group’ should have been convened earlier in the process to clarify the research framework. Oxfam’s Research Team has been reconfigured to strengthen capacity on research design and partnerships, and to provide support to other teams on identifying high quality external candidates and assessing ‘fit’ during recruitment and commissioning of research.

Oxfam agrees with the findings and recommendations about the project being ‘unnecessarily top-down and directive, [needing] more emphasis on building country ownership’. While there is an inherent tension in decentralised projects between consistency and national contexts, Oxfam recognised this dynamic, and made changes during the later stages of the project. Other current research and influencing projects – Africa Climate Change Resilience Alliance and Within and Without the State have shown better practice on country-level ownership in planning.

Oxfam agrees with the importance of continuing the influencing work which was curtailed during the Project period to prioritise the research component. Oxfam recognises the need to address the concern about ‘momentum... to see the Project’s findings translated into improved programming and decision-making at country level’. As reflected in this report, findings have begun to influence Oxfam’s programme design in the three countries researched. Oxfam's initiative Gendered Enterprise and Markets (GEM) which is lead by the Programme Policy Team (including some of the staff who worked on RWCA), will carry on with the website, building the communities of practice established during this Project and actively promoting the RWCA recommendations in GEM training. The final report was launched as an Oxfam International GROW campaign Research Report. Women’s Collective Action: Unlocking the potential of agricultural markets: http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/womens-collective-action-unlocking-the-potential-of-agricultural-markets-276159. Oxfam’s Policy and Practice website team is disseminating the communications products. In addition, the organisation’s Strategic Plan reflects Oxfam’s commitment to support effective organisation of women smallholders within the change goal on Fair and Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems.

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