

## OXFAM'S ROLE IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

### Overview of Oxfam's Role in Humanitarian Action

Oxfam commits to:

- More effective crisis response, both through Oxfam's own capacity and increasingly through the capacity of other organizations, partners and communities.
- Increasing our work to reduce the risk of disasters (DRR) and build the resilience of communities, drawing from experience and learning from existing programmes with civil society.
- Strengthen the institutional capacity of states to respond to crises, working in a set of selected countries to drive transformative change at the global level.
- Influence others and campaign for the respect of the rights of communities who are at risk or affected by conflicts and disasters at the grassroots, national, regional and global levels.
- Support poor women and their organizations in emergency preparedness, risk reduction and response, through intensive capacity building and partnerships, by assisting women and men to safely voice their concerns and hold duty bearers accountable.

We deliver assistance (including water, sanitation, emergency food security and livelihoods) and strive to ensure civilians are protected from violence. Where possible, we support civil society and state bodies to do so. Where not, we work with our staff and international agencies, and help bring international NGOs together to coordinate programmes and policy.

We are independent and impartial. Our humanitarian work follows international guidelines, including the Sphere Humanitarian Charter, <sup>1</sup>Code of Conduct for the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief,<sup>2</sup> the principles of the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership,<sup>3</sup> and the People in Aid Code of Practice.<sup>4</sup>

We strengthen communities' resilience to disasters and conflict, in high risk countries, through building their capacity to prepare for disasters, manage shocks and stresses, and address the root causes of conflict. And we campaign for the rights of those affected to be respected, their needs met, and for the reasons that they are in crisis in the first place to be addressed – as part of a rights-based approach to overcome poverty, suffering and injustice. We recognise men and women's needs for immediate assistance and protection, *and* their long-term struggle to reduce their vulnerability, and raise themselves out of poverty.



**OXFAM**

## 1 Background – Humanitarian Principles for Effective Aid

Every person deserves dignity and respect, and to enjoy their rights to life and security, and the assistance and protection that make that possible. We are bound to help provide assistance and protection in each crisis where we work. That is our humanitarian imperative. That help must be:

- **Impartial:** for every person, according to their needs, without discrimination because of race, gender, religion, age or anything else; and
- **Independent:** directed without influence from any interest group or political group.<sup>5</sup>

That impartiality means providing aid *proportionate to needs* (not providing the same aid to all) and resisting the pressure to provide aid to secure:

- Visibility in high-profile crises (unless this is driven by relative needs); or
- Funds from donors that would exploit that to further their political or commercial agendas.

We strive to be impartial *between crises* as well as *within them*, prioritising crises because of needs or opportunities to reduce human suffering, not media profile. There may be good reasons to focus more on one country than another, because of our distinct expertise, capacity or historical knowledge. And insecurity, political obstructions or lack of funds may limit our ability to act as we would choose. But we must always strive to overcome such obstacles to provide assistance where it is needed.

We also recognise that impartiality can be threatened when humanitarian agencies fail to perform or coordinate well enough, because that too can lead to a biased distribution of aid.

The humanitarian imperative does **NOT** mean that we:

- *Must always provide assistance ourselves.* We should also support others – including local civil society organisations and state bodies – to do so, and build their capacity for the future.
- *Should provide assistance without considering whether its harm could outweigh its benefit.* We must judge the likely *immediate and long-term consequences* of different actions before deciding how, and whether to provide aid.<sup>6</sup>
- *Neglect the principles of effective aid* – such as local ownership and long-term impact.<sup>7</sup>

In all this, we interpret the guidelines we have endorsed built upon the principles enshrined in international humanitarian, refugee and human rights law,<sup>8</sup> including the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief.

Developed in 1994, its principles continue to guide our work:

### **Code of Conduct for NGOs in disaster relief**

1. The humanitarian imperative comes first
2. We shall give aid on the basis of need alone – regardless of race, creed or nationality
3. We shall not use aid to further a political or religious standpoint
4. We shall endeavour not to act as instruments of governments' foreign policies
5. We shall respect culture and custom
6. We shall attempt to build disaster response on local capacities
7. We shall involve beneficiaries in the management of our relief aid
8. We shall strive to reduce future vulnerabilities to disaster as well as meet basic needs
9. We hold ourselves accountable to those we assist and those who give us resources
10. We recognise victims of disasters as dignified humans in our publicity and advertising

## 2 Oxfam's humanitarian approach

Beyond these basic principles, our humanitarian work is guided by:

### A rights-based approach

All people have the right to life and security. We seek to uphold that while promoting a full range of rights – to a decent livelihood, food and shelter, health and education, a voice in decision-making, and freedom from discrimination. We do that in the way we work, including being as accountable as possible to those we work with, and helping them demand their rights.

That rights-based approach includes a strong focus on:

- **Respect for Women's Rights and Gender justice.** We respond to needs expressed by women and girls, as well as men and boys, and believe that equitable humanitarian aid can help challenge the inequality they face;<sup>9</sup>
- **Protection of civilians** from violence, coercion and deprivation. We commit to ensuring all humanitarian programmes are safe, conflict sensitive and avoid inadvertent harm. We seek to reduce civilians' vulnerability to violence, reinforce their peaceful capacity to protect themselves, and campaign for governments and others that have the responsibility to protect them.

In some countries, like the Democratic Republic of Congo, protection is a very significant part of our programme, including training police in human rights, advocating for better Security Sector Reform, and helping communities press for better security from local state bodies.

This is part of our effort to help communities voice their demands. Sometimes, this means addressing local authorities, like those in DRC; at other times, national governments, or international donors and conferences (like the 2012 Tokyo conference on Afghanistan, where Afghan organisations were represented) or a wider international public through our media work.

### Neutrality

Impartial advocacy does not mean saying that every party to violence is always equally to blame. Nor is Oxfam neutral in the sense of avoiding anything that could be construed as a policy controversy.<sup>10</sup> We take a stand on the causes of humanitarian need, and propose policy changes to solve them – based on our experience, values, and international humanitarian law.<sup>11</sup>

### Speaking out

Oxfam routinely bears witness to extreme suffering and violations of people's rights under international humanitarian, refugee and human rights law. This is part of our responsibility to raise the voice of those affected, alert the world, and call on relevant authorities to take action. Usually we do that in public, but sometimes that may create unacceptable risks to the safety of our staff and others, or to our ability to provide assistance.

Judging when and how to speak out is never easy. Campaigning can be vital to ensure people can reach the aid that they need. But we may also have to negotiate with parties to a conflict, in order that affected men, women and children can reach the assistance they need. And that may require us to limit our campaigning or to support other organisations rather than 'speak out' as Oxfam ourselves.<sup>12</sup> In all our actions, support to partners, and speaking out, we strive to have the maximum humanitarian impact in terms of the upholding the right to life and security. That is why we are committed to rigorously analyse the potential impact of different approaches to make decisions on the optimal combination of assistance and campaigning.

## Minimising harm

We strive to 'do no harm' and minimise the risk that we inadvertently do so. This is a particularly acute issue in conflicts or whenever there is a risk that our aid may increase threats to civilians:

- In the short-term when, for example, armed groups target people who receive aid; or
- In the long-term, through, for example, paying 'taxes' to groups that buy arms with them.

While rights are absolute, the best way to ensure they are upheld is not always clear. It requires difficult judgements on what is ethical humanitarian action,<sup>13</sup> based on the best possible analysis of the likely short and long-term consequences of different options.

We also recognise the need to be vigilant against the risk of causing harm through urgent interventions not well grounded in an analysis of how short-term action can sustain or undermine long-term solutions. That is why we strive to plan, implement and evaluate our work on the basis of the best possible context analysis, using political, economic and cultural expertise, conflict analysis and other relevant tools.

We also recognise the risk of causing harm through our own behaviour, in how we treat individuals, communities and other organisations; and in the accommodation, vehicles and other signs of how we live and work.

## Building resilience – integrating our work

We recognise the value of the **resilience** concept in developing a more systematic approach to supporting communities facing:

- Shocks (such as earthquakes, outbreaks of conflict, and price volatility);
- Stresses (such as climate change, degrading environments, and continuing violence); and
- Uncertainty (building the flexibility and capacity to cope with unforeseen events).

Humanitarian assistance can contribute to that effort, but all development staff must be:

- **Alert to the early warning signs of disasters**, and agile in adapting to them; and
- **Focused on reducing vulnerability to disasters**, designing programmes to do so.

And we must integrate our humanitarian, development and campaigning work more than ever before.<sup>14</sup> Some of our humanitarian programmes already include work focused on long-term results, rebuilding livelihoods, and empowering people to advocate for their rights. And some of our development programmes already incorporate action to:

- Reduce the risk of disasters and help communities adapt to climate change, such as planting trees to reduce flooding and landslides;
- Prepare for disasters, such as training in response, and building cyclone shelters;
- Support social protection programmes to help communities face semi-permanent crises;
- Support peacebuilding, such as mediation on land conflicts.

But we seek to integrate humanitarian and development programming much more, for example through better managing the transition in and out of periods of acute crisis.

## Accountability

We strive to be accountable to our supporters, as well as governments, trusts and other institutions. But our first responsibility is to those we assist. We try to be accountable to them through consulting on decisions, complaints mechanisms, and through their involvement in designing, implementing and evaluating our programmes.

We seek to learn from every crisis,<sup>15</sup> and improve our performance through evaluations and public reports, such as our those on the US\$118 million spent on the Horn of Africa in 2011-12: <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/food-crisis-in-the-horn-of-africa-progress-report-july-2011-july-2012-231613>, or on Haiti in 2010-11: <http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/haiti-progress-report>.

We take part in the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership, the first international humanitarian self-regulatory body,<sup>16</sup> as well as the People in Aid initiative on human resource management.<sup>17</sup> With those initiatives, SPHERE, ALNAP and others, we discuss new ways to improve performance and accountability.

### **Working with others**

Where possible, we work with local and national partners and affected communities,<sup>18</sup> and help them realise their potential by building their capacity to prepare and respond to future disasters, and to advocate to their governments and others to uphold the rights of affected people.

We respect governments' authority to coordinate humanitarian action. Upon their request, the UN should coordinate the international response to crises, working with regional organisations like ASEAN in South East Asia or ECOWAS in West Africa where relevant. That coordination should focus agencies' strengths in a common effort, without a common political purpose.<sup>19</sup>

Impartial action requires coordination; without it, vital needs are likely to be neglected between different agencies' priorities. That is why we support NGO coordination fora, such as the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR), IASC 'clusters', Humanitarian Country Teams and other means to make programmes and policy more effective.

### **The positive and negative aspects of diverse humanitarian agencies**

While all agencies should strive for greater unity around principled positions, they should not be the same, and greater openness that agencies are quite different should be welcomed.<sup>20</sup> There is real value in the diversity of NGOs, some of which embed their humanitarian work in a wider rights-based mission, with a strong focus on campaigning, and some of which do not. Humanitarian suffering cannot be solved by aid alone; assistance and protection, campaigning, and support for civil society partners and activists all have a role to play in reducing that suffering. All are humanitarian, though every humanitarian agency does not have to play every humanitarian role. Oxfam respects agencies that focus on one area, while finding its own way to deliver its greatest results by combining humanitarian, development and campaigning work.

### **Oxfam will:**

- Deliver high quality, impartial and independent assistance, support civil society and state bodies to do so, and implement the Sphere Humanitarian Charter and Code of Conduct in Disaster Relief – and evaluate its work against those, learn from each crisis and share that learning;
- Increase our focus on risk reduction and building communities' resilience to disasters and conflict, including through strengthening the capacity of civil society and state institutions;
- Campaign to encourage governments, regional and international institutions to ensure greater respect for the basic rights of crisis-affected men and women; and actively promote humanitarian principles and the principles of effective aid – including local ownership – with governments,<sup>21</sup> the UN, local and international organisations;
- Recognise the different impact of conflict and disasters on men and women, to encourage greater gender justice and respect for women's rights; and
- Strive to be accountable to local people and those who receive its aid – through their participation in planning and evaluating our work and through transparent systems to make complaints – as well as our public and institutional donors.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The Sphere Project, *The Sphere Handbook: the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards for Humanitarian Response*: <http://www.spherehandbook.org/>
- <sup>2</sup> International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (1994): <http://www.ifrc.org/en/publications-and-reports/code-of-conduct/>.
- <sup>3</sup> <http://www.hapinternational.org/>.
- <sup>4</sup> <http://www.peopleinaid.org/>.
- <sup>5</sup> These definitions are adapted from: ICRC (2009) 'The ICRC: its Mission and Work', [http://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/other/icrc\\_002\\_0963.pdf](http://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/other/icrc_002_0963.pdf).
- <sup>6</sup> For a thoughtful discussion on these dilemmas, please see: Fieldview Solutions (2012), *An Independent and Courageous Spokesman? NRC and the dilemmas in Sri Lanka, 2009*.
- <sup>7</sup> According to the international standard for effective aid, the Paris Declaration, it must be aligned to recipients' priorities, owned by the recipient government – contributing to its strategy to reduce poverty; and accountable to donor and recipient governments and their citizens. Please see: OECD (2005), *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness*: [http://www.oecd.org/document/18/0,3343,en\\_2649\\_3236398\\_35401554\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/18/0,3343,en_2649_3236398_35401554_1_1_1_1,00.html).
- <sup>8</sup> For the legal basis of a right to assistance, please see: Oxfam International (2009), *The Right to Survive*, pp. 40-41: <http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/right-to-survive-report.pdf>. For the legal basis of a right to protection, please see: Oxfam International (2008), *For a Safer Tomorrow*, p. 20: <http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/safer-tomorrow-protecting-civilians>.
- <sup>9</sup> Oxfam's approach to gender in humanitarian crises is set out in another note in this series: [http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/oi\\_hum\\_policy\\_gender\\_and\\_humanitarian\\_0.pdf](http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/oi_hum_policy_gender_and_humanitarian_0.pdf).
- <sup>10</sup> 'Neutrality' is sometimes used in other ways, including to avoid any affinity or 'solidarity' with one group that would bias the distribution of aid. Oxfam supports that sense of neutrality, too. See for example the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response's *Promoting Humanitarian Principles – Impartiality*, June 2012.
- <sup>11</sup> For a short summary of international humanitarian law, please see: Oxfam International (2008), *For a Safer Tomorrow: protecting civilians in a multipolar world*, p. 20: <http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/safer-tomorrow-protecting-civilians>; and for extensive information, please see the International Committee of the Red Cross: <http://www.icrc.org/eng/war-and-law/index.jsp>.
- <sup>12</sup> That need to negotiate with all parties is also one reason why we do not work too closely with military forces themselves providing relief, because that could jeopardise our ability to negotiate with all sides. We do, however, share appropriate information with military forces and cooperate in some training. Our approach to this is set out in another note in this series: <https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/hpn-provision-aid-military-forces-010412-en.pdf>.
- <sup>13</sup> Oxfam is one of twelve humanitarian and human rights organisations working the University of Oxford's Institute for Ethics, Law and Armed Conflict to help understand and resolve the moral challenges involved in humanitarian action: <http://www.elac.ox.ac.uk/Humanitarian%20Ethics/index.html>.
- <sup>14</sup> For more information on Oxfam's approach to accountability and evaluations, please see: <http://www.oxfam.org/en/about/accountability>.
- <sup>15</sup> For example: Oxfam International and Save the Children (2012), *A Dangerous Delay: the cost of late response to early warnings in the 2011 drought in the Horn of Africa*: <http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/dangerous-delay>.
- <sup>16</sup> <http://www.hapinternational.org/>.
- <sup>17</sup> <http://www.peopleinaid.org/>.
- <sup>18</sup> For more on this, please see: Oxfam International (2012), *Crises in a new world order: challenging the humanitarian project*: <http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/crises-new-world-order>.
- <sup>19</sup> Oxfam International (2008), *UN Integrated Missions and Humanitarian Assistance*: [http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/oi\\_hum\\_policy\\_integrated\\_missions\\_0.pdf](http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/oi_hum_policy_integrated_missions_0.pdf).
- <sup>20</sup> ALNAP (2012), *The State of the Humanitarian System*, p. 13: <http://www.alnap.org/ourwork/current/sohs.aspx>.
- <sup>21</sup> For the humanitarian principles that most donor governments have agreed, please see: Good Humanitarian Donorship (2003): <http://www.goodhumanitariananddonorship.org/gns/principles-good-practice-ghd/overview.aspx>.



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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please e-mail  
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Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International under ISBN 978-1-78077-359-9 in June 2013.  
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## OXFAM

Oxfam is an international confederation of 17 organizations networked together in 92 countries, as part of a global movement for change, to build a future free from the injustice of poverty. Please write to any of the agencies for further information, or visit [www.oxfam.org](http://www.oxfam.org).

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