SEIZING AN OPPORTUNITY TO SUPPORT FARMERS

How Oxfam helped create Bolivia’s first national comprehensive agricultural insurance scheme

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This is the story of how Oxfam in Bolivia took considerable risks to help a sympathetic government create a national agricultural insurance scheme. This involved weathering a political storm and carefully navigating the difficult space between the government and popular organizations. Oxfam’s work in Bolivia shows how important it is to seize opportunities, to change both strategy and tactics, to sometimes work discretely, but at the same time be open and transparent, and to make the most of our worldwide networks and local knowledge.
1. What change(s) was this programme intending to influence through its leverage strategy?

Bolivia is a country particularly vulnerable to current and future climate change impacts. With this in mind, Oxfam’s team there has promoted an ambitious advocacy strategy for the Bolivian Government to implement public and institutional policies to help citizens adapt to climate change. As part of this campaign, which began in 2009, we established alliances with local social organizations, grouped into the ‘Platform of Social Organizations for Addressing Climate Change Impacts’. They have established an agenda for the promotion of climate justice, which includes risk management measures for the agricultural sector. One of the ideas coming from the Platform was for there to be an insurance system against climate risks.¹ Pilot initiatives have been implemented by two Swiss NGOs since 2000, and Oxfam has continued to develop the idea.

We started carrying out activities to generate knowledge and discussions, proposing that the Bolivian state implement an agricultural insurance scheme for small farmers, thus reducing crop loss caused by climate change variations. The challenge was a big one, but it came at the conjuncture of helpful events. At the international level, Oxfam was promoting the idea of a Green Climate Fund, funded by developed countries, to which vulnerable countries may apply for money to implement mitigation measures. In Bolivia, the government promotes and leads the World People’s Conference on Climate Change² and its president, Evo Morales, wants to become known worldwide as an indigenous leader who defends ‘Mother Earth’ from the environmental consequences caused by development. Importantly, Bolivian social organizations have increasingly demanded concrete measures to favour the social grassroots of the ruling political party. The Platform of Social Organizations for Addressing Climate Change Impacts demanded more coherence between rhetoric that promote environmental protection and concrete actions, requesting that the state commit to implementing a sustainable development model.

2. What, if anything, was new, innovative or different about the way this programme attempted to bring about change?

Our bid for fostering an agricultural insurance scheme posed several challenges for the Oxfam team in Bolivia, because it was a new and risky initiative. We decided to have a direct relationship with the government, which risked criticism from our local partners. Usually, Oxfam works in Bolivia supporting local NGOs and autonomous coalitions of civil society groups that put pressure on the government to encourage change. Oxfam itself has a very low profile in the national political arena; to achieve our aims, we decided that we must use Oxfam’s networks and international knowledge about the policy and practice of such insurance schemes from other countries. While this was essential, because local NGOs cannot access such networks and knowledge, it was another potential area for criticism from a national perspective.
3. Recognizing that leverage can be achieved in different ways, how did the programme leverage change?

We used different strategies throughout the process, combining high-level advocacy, work with local NGOs, capacity building of government technical teams, and channelling resources from and to other strategic partners. The story of how and why we used such different strategies and tactics is worthy of note.

Once the decision was made to implement an agricultural insurance scheme, we began gathering information on similar schemes elsewhere. Using Oxfam’s global network, we contacted colleagues from Brazil, Mexico, Colombia and other countries to get their perspectives on various implementation models; in this way, we developed contact with specialists who might help us. At the local level, we gathered information about the negative effects climate change was having on crops, the number of affected families, the consequences for food prices and – especially – the large amounts of money governments were spending to assist the recovery of peasant and indigenous communities after adverse events. To gather such information, it was necessary to contact many local institutions and individuals, who provided specific technical data.

With all this information in hand, we set up a meeting with the Deputy Minister for Rural and Agricultural Development, with whom we had contact because she had authored a book sponsored by Oxfam when she was working as a researcher for a local counterpart. This link, and her knowledge of Oxfam, meant that she trusted us from the beginning to advocate for this initiative. At this initial meeting, we presented the idea of an agricultural insurance scheme and the possibility of securing funding from the international community; also, we introduced the political benefits and other possible gains the government might receive (at national and international level) for implementing this initiative. Once the Deputy Minister was convinced about the idea, she requested Oxfam enhance the technical capacities of her trusted team to develop it.

From the beginning, we thought that Oxfam’s role should be to give priority to national actors in relation to the development of policy proposals. This was due to concerns that government, and social organizations that support the government, might have shown resistance to the involvement of an international NGO in the design of national policies, especially those for the benefit of peasant and indigenous communities. Additionally, if the initiative were successful, the government would want to claim it as its own. We agreed. We believed that, in this way, the Ministry would assume leadership, which it did. If we had worked from the start as part of an alliance of social organizations and institutions, it would have been simply treated as just another social demand. Thus, the Oxfam team worked with the technical team from the Ministry for Rural and Agricultural Development, providing funding for visits by foreign specialists and contributing to the development of local technicians’ capacities.

Equally, it would have been a mistake to keep what we were doing a secret. We shared what we were doing with certain partners, including
the Peasants Promotion and Research Centre (CIPCA), the Platform of Social Organizations Against Climate Change, the Women Transforming the Economy Network (REMTE) and Woman Coordinator.

These organizations and advocacy scheme coordinated, under the leadership of “neutral” INGO, provided greater opportunities to have a dialogue that influence at government's agenda.

However, when the proposal was about to be presented to farmers’ organizations, the first political problem in the process arose: the universal character of the insurance scheme – subsidized by the government – led the peasant sectors to accuse the Deputy Minister of trying to favour big soya exporters. Additionally, some social sectors felt that the proposal was not built in a participatory manner, and so did not answer the needs of small farmers.

These criticisms may have contributed to the departure of the Deputy Minister from her post. In October 2009, the agricultural insurance proposal had disappeared, and Oxfam had apparently lost its strategic position.

Eight months later, the new Deputy Minister for Rural and Agricultural Development invited Oxfam to a meeting. The former Deputy Minister and the technicians we had helped to train had told him about the project. The new Deputy Minister requested our support because ‘Oxfam knows about agricultural insurance schemes’, but as this was a national government initiative intended to meet the demands of peasant communities, it was thought necessary to ‘retake the initiative’.

In this context, Oxfam changed its strategy from that of technical facilitator to that of a representative of a number of actors, with the hope of lending more legitimacy to the proposal.

We made sure to learn from previous experience. Therefore, we first built a broad alliance with farmers’ organizations and, making use of CIPCA’s technical support, conducted a wide consultation about expectations and demands for an agricultural insurance scheme. The dialogue was led by CIPCA and funded by Oxfam. After three months, the farmers’ organizations had agreed on the feasibility and usefulness of the initiative. We then wrote-up and publicized the agreements and discussions – and did not receive the criticisms we anticipated. This could be because Bolivian organizations do not see Oxfam as a competitor. More positively, they may also recognize that Oxfam is able to realize opportunities for initiatives that have been supported by local groups for a long time without success. While the idea of insurance came from the Platform of Social Organizations for Addressing Climate Change Impacts, the farmers’ movement has been trying to get various agricultural risk measures implemented since 1950.

This broad consultation and the growing number of news reports about the initiative (which was being publicized by the Deputy Minister for Rural Development) helped to make the agricultural insurance scheme a key demand of Bolivian social organizations at the Social Summit. With such
momentum behind it, the scheme became a priority issue for the government. Some months later, the Law for Agricultural Community Productive Revolution\(^5\) was introduced; thereby, the legal framework and state bodies needed to implement the agricultural insurance policy were established.

4. What worked well and not so well with efforts to leverage change through this approach?

Although initially there were quick results when working with the Deputy Minister, this strategy became untenable later because of the changing political context and unexpected opposition. Oxfam was then required to involve a greater number of stakeholders, which resulted in a slower but stronger process, which was able to address the concerns of other social groups. For this, it was necessary to establish alliances with individuals and institutions with technical and advocacy capacities, such as local NGOs, social organizations and political leaders.

It is important to quickly seize opportunities when those with power are open to proposals. This means being proactive and prepared – with information, proposals and other inputs – in order to achieve our goals. However, the team should be aware that contexts and actors in political spaces can be changeable, with interests that are not always visible.

Therefore, it is necessary to be calm when opportunities disappear. If we believe that a proposal is good, then sooner or later that proposal will be taken up again by new decision makers, which constitutes a new opportunity for which we have to be ready. We cannot and should not rely on a single individual, but more on the state institution for which they work, and, if possible, create links with mid-level civil servants, since they are responsible for maintaining institutional memory for longer periods of time.

Another useful strategy is to work at two levels: advocacy with state decision makers, and dialogue and advocacy with social actors (e.g. unions and farmers’ organizations), since they are able to apply more pressure than Oxfam at the national level.

5. What capabilities, knowledge or skills were helpful when implementing this approach?

Oxfam’s global network is capable of providing information about specific issues based on different experiences from across the world. The team possessed advocacy skills and experience, but not knowledge about agricultural insurance. Therefore, it was important to contact colleagues in Colombia and Brazil. It was helpful to talk frankly and in confidence, and we received quality information within a short time period. Having ‘horizontal’ relationships across countries and regions was a great strength, with the regional team able to connect us with specialists in other countries, such as Mexico.

Oxfam’s technical team was able to understand the local context, and to gather and process necessary information to present ideas effectively to decision makers in government.
The experience therefore demanded a variety of skills from the Oxfam team in Bolivia. The following points of advice emerged:

• Have the capacity to change strategies: In this case we moved from an ‘insider’ track of technical design to carrying out consultations with different organizations to reach agreements.

• Oxfam’s reputation is an important factor: For example, in rural development, Oxfam has a reputation for supporting social policies that favour the poor. In any country where we have a reputation and we consider that we have the necessary expertise, it is likely that we will be called upon when political opportunities open. If in any country we lack either the reputation or the expertise, we should work to build up one or the other.

• Keep relationships of trust with a network of local NGOs: This enables us to promote quick alliances, without necessarily having to go through the process of building relationships and investing significant resources while implementing a programme or project.

• Always consider the local scope without losing regional and/or global contexts and contacts: This helps to build good experiences; learn from these experiences and present them to decision-making levels when needed.

6. What has changed as a result of the programme and how have you measured this? (Where possible, quantify the scale of programme success in terms of outcomes and reach, and relate this to inputs and cost.)

Bolivia now has the legal framework and the institutional bodies in place to implement Universal Agricultural Insurance. The first stage for field implementation (SAMEP) has started and is reaching nearly 700,000 people. We expect that in the coming five years there is going to be gradual implementation until the insurance scheme covers the whole country.

The Oxfam budget for this was £58,000, most of that being allocated to CIPCA for the consultation process, some to cover expenses for external consultants to advise the government, some for publications (by the government), and 20 per cent of the time of two staff dedicated to the process to lobby and to work with partners. Through Oxfam’s influence, the Embassy of Holland allocated £116,083, which has gone through a partner, FUNDEPCO. For the insurance scheme, we expect a state investment of US$4 million for the first year, and later on, when coverage is general, US$27 million approximately.

7. Can you describe (or measure) Oxfam’s contribution to that success?

Oxfam has provided a meaningful contribution throughout the process: i) we generated demand from society (coming out of the Climate Justice agenda) to promote a concrete policy (agricultural insurance); ii) we promoted the vision that change was possible, and that it would have positive results for both farmers and for decision makers; iii) we gathered and articulated information to structure a proposal/idea based on
convincing arguments; and iv) we enhanced the visibility and promoted the demands of social players on this matter, since they are the ones who should have real power to exercise political pressure on the government. We did not represent them, we acted as facilitators.

2 See www.movimientos.org/conferenciamundialpueblos

3 See www.eabolia.com/economia/2812-implementaran-seguro-agricola.html
   and http://economiaagricola2.blogspot.co.uk/2010/01/nace-el-mapa-agroalimentario-con-el.html

4 In January 2012, the President Evo Morales made a call to have a Social Summit with different civil society
   organizations for the prioritization of their demands. See http://www.jomadanet.com/n.php?a-72310-1

5 See Law for Agricultural Community Productive Revolution No. 144 and Regulation Decree SD. 942.