

PROJECT EFFECTIVENESS REVIEWS

'enhancing effectiveness through evidence-based learning'



SUMMARY OF 2012/13 FINDINGS AND KEY LESSONS LEARNED

The content of this pack focuses primarily on 23 of our projects that were randomly selected and reviewed in 2012/13 under six thematic areas – humanitarian support, adaptation and risk reduction, livelihoods, women's empowerment, citizen voice, and policy influencing. The random sampling process helps to ensure we're overcoming some of the selection biases often associated with this type of exercise. It is important to note that it is not possible to make generalised claims about Oxfam GB's overall effectiveness or the effectiveness of projects under the six thematic areas from the four projects sampled under each annually. Nevertheless, by bringing these reviews together with the results from reviews of the 26 projects randomly selected in 2011/12, we are, year on year, building our understanding of both the challenges and strengths of Oxfam GB's project effectiveness.

As with the results for 2011/12, the results for the 2012/13 cohort of projects are mixed, with the results for most projects positive in some areas and negative in others. There is evidence of significant impact for several of the projects (for example, Nepal, Honduras, Sri Lanka, and Malawi) but little evidence of impact on the main outcome measures in other cases.

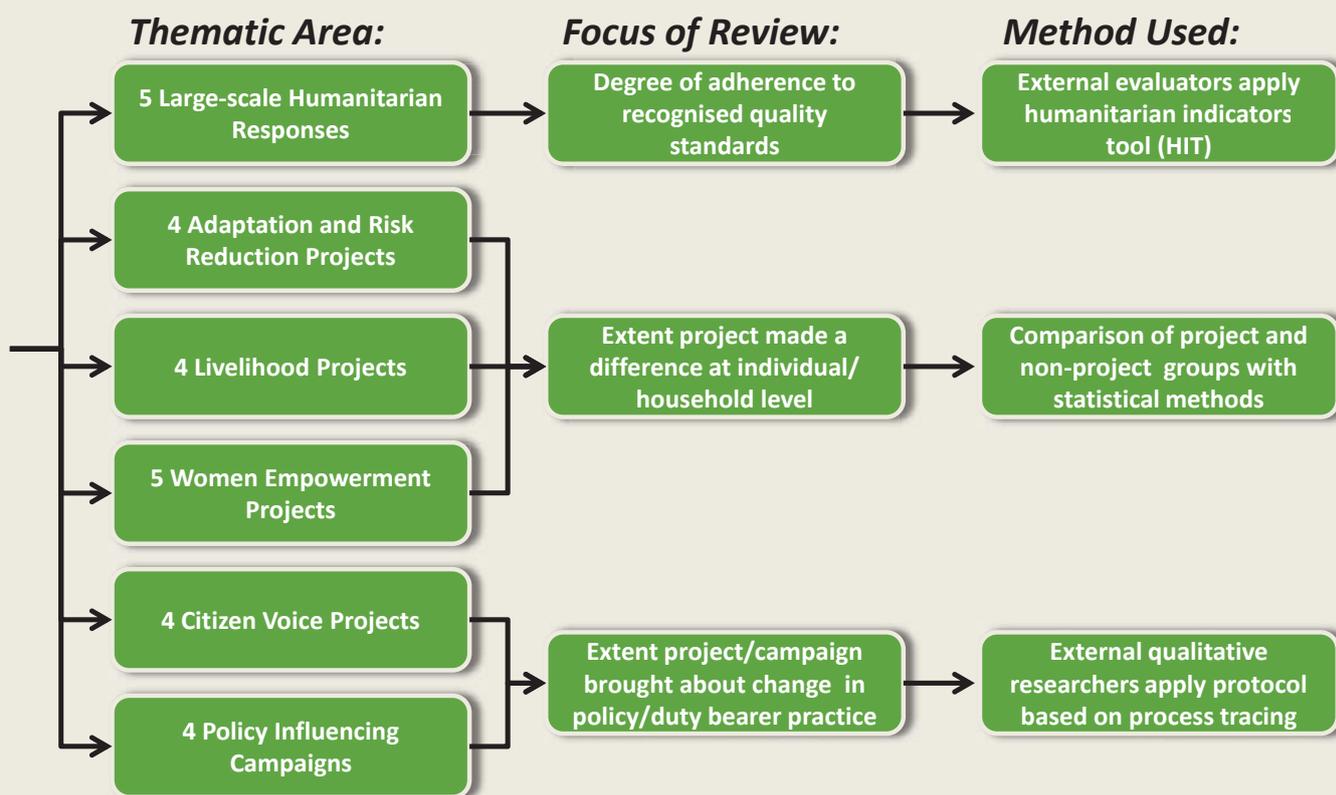
Assessments of humanitarian responses indicate that Oxfam met standards for excellence in three out of five

responses, namely Yemen, Chad and Sierra Leone. Through these interventions, 1,239,420 people, 54% of whom are women and 46% are men, received assistance from Oxfam of excellent quality. Two other responses did not meet the indicator for excellence, but still provided much-needed humanitarian assistance to a further 144,579 women and men. The greatest areas of strength were in accountability, gender, safe programming and advocacy, while challenges included timeliness, preparedness, and partnerships.

The results for the four projects assessed in 2012/13 under the adaptation and risk reduction thematic area are more positive than those reviewed in 2011/12, with a higher proportion of households in the project areas demonstrating greater resilience than households in the comparison areas, though in some cases these differences are modest in size. Changes to the measurement approach go some way to explaining why the results for the projects assessed in 2012/13 are more positive than results from the 2011/12 cohort. Nevertheless, the climate change adaptation project in Nepal stands out as particularly successful, with households supported by the project found to have more positive results than the comparison households across a wide range of indicators, including crop diversification, access to irrigation and soil fertility, awareness of and involvement in drought-preparedness initiatives, and measures of social capital. In two of the studies, there was some evidence of positive



26 projects randomly selected from over 300 'mature' projects



SUMMARY OF 2011/12 EFFECTIVENESS REVIEW COHORT

results, including fewer losses of livestock during a time of drought, and modest improvements in material wellbeing. In the final study, although significant changes were found in measures closely connected to the outputs of the project, there was little evidence of change in higher-level outcomes such as livelihood diversification or flood preparedness practice.

The results for the four livelihoods effectiveness reviews are mixed. While there is some evidence that all four projects increased adoption of preferred or improved agricultural practices and techniques, there was only evidence of this leading to impact on household income (as measured by household consumption) in two projects. For these two projects, the reviews found differences in the results between different components of the project that can usefully inform programming going forward. Evidence from the four effectiveness reviews suggests that more work on the design and/or implementation front is needed. In particular how targetting is done, and our analysis of the relationship between new crops and/or agricultural techniques being promoted by projects and existing livelihoods strategies.

Two of the five reviews carried out under the women's empowerment thematic area showed some evidence of positive impact, particularly around engagement at community level and control over resources. Positive results in control over resources were found to be limited to women who are directly engaged with the project, rather than on

the wider population of their communities. Unlike last year, there is clear evidence of some impact on household decision making in two projects, which seems linked to the maturity or duration of the project, with no evidence of changes in decision-making powers found in those projects that have been supporting women over shorter time periods. These results generally provide support to the view that programme work will be most effective if it combines work on the social, political and economic dimensions of empowerment. As with last year, it is important to note the possible measurement shortfalls, given that women's empowerment is a complex, multi-dimensional construct that is challenging to measure.

Efforts continue to be made to ensure the validity of the results of the quantitative effectiveness reviews (which are a type of quasi-experimental impact evaluation design). Much effort again went in the identification of plausible comparison populations in the 2012/13 quantitative reviews, but it is important to acknowledge those studies where this process was problematic. In Liberia, newer project participants were used as a comparison group for assessing impact among the original project participants – but the socio-economic profile of the older and newer participants was found to be quite different, complicating the analysis. In Kenya, the only communities available for comparison purposes were in an area which appears to



RICE HARVESTING, SUAKOKO DISTRICT, LIBERIA

have been affected less by recent droughts than the project communities, which created uncertainty in interpreting the results. Care also had to be taken when interpreting results in the case of Honduras, since the comparison respondents were residing in a different municipality to the project participants – but qualitative work conducted after the effectiveness review supported the conclusion that the Oxfam project was the major factor in the large differences in incomes and women’s empowerment found between the two areas.

The eight effectiveness reviews carried out under the citizen voice and policy influencing thematic areas are grouped together as they can be seen to fall along a spectrum of interventions aimed at improving governance processes and outcomes at local, sub-national and national levels. There is evidence that most of these projects contributed to important and meaningful short-medium term changes, but because of much longer horizons for change, none had yet reached a stage where the long term changes they sought to achieve could realistically be expected to have materialised. The reviews highlight the importance of locally defined issues and solutions, and community ownership of the process as critical success factors. Linked to this, and equally relevant, we see the need for greater investment in efforts to effectively connect strategies operating at local, national and international levels.

Finally in 2012/13 we developed and piloted a methodology for examining the degree to which we met our own accountability standards. An external reviewer looked, in depth, at the leadership, systems and practices of Oxfam GB and its partners in order to reach conclusions on the degree of accountability achieved by Oxfam in its relationship with partners, and the degree of accountability Oxfam GB and partner staff afforded communities targeted at a project level. Given its ‘pilot’ nature, the focus has been as much on gaining insights about the nature of our accountability, how the methodology worked and the degree of confidence we could have in the findings as it was on the results themselves.

There were also noteworthy investments in strengthening and further developing the measurement approaches being used in the effectiveness reviews in 2012/13.

For the reviews carried out under the women’s empowerment and resilience thematic areas, there has been simultaneous investment in the complex theoretical constructs being used to define and measure the concepts, as well as increasing appreciation for the need to ground these in local contexts and project realities. Going forward, we will invest more in qualitative enquiry ahead of the survey work to better understand project realities and tailor survey instruments accordingly.



WOMEN HOLDING THEIR PRODUCE, DADELDHURA, NEPAL

Evidencing contribution continues to prove challenging in the context of the citizen voice and policy influencing effectiveness reviews. This is partially due to time and budgetary limitations, but also relates to the inaccessibility to critical data sources, and a tendency for less systematic analysis of qualitative data. We continue to improve our understanding of the conditions and project characteristics that indicate where process tracing may be most usefully applied, and are experimenting with adaptations to the process tracing protocol that has been developed, such as in Tanzania where process tracing was brought together with Outcome Harvesting. The emphasis on triangulation and verification continues to inform this work.

For the humanitarian effectiveness reviews, we will explore the value of field visits to validate existing data and to feed back results to country teams in real time in order to increase adequacy of scores.

Oxfam's priority remains to ensure that both the evaluation process and results of the effectiveness reviews influence decision-making and, ultimately, improve organisational effectiveness and the impact we have on peoples' lives. The management response system developed in 2011/12 continues to help facilitate this for individual project teams by engaging them in conversations about next steps. The focus in 2012/13 has been on creating more chances for project teams to engage with and inform the reviews.

At an organisational level, we're starting to pull out thematic learning, as well as lessons on the design and implementation of interventions. The process of developing, testing and refining the measurement approaches themselves is supporting Oxfam to be even sharper and stronger with its analysis and the development of more comprehensive and thorough theories of change. For example, Oxfam has made considerable efforts during the past year to improve the way in which resilience is measured. While this approach is continuously developing, and some challenges remain around the measurement of some important characteristics, the process has strengthened Oxfam's conceptual understanding of resilience, and work is underway to apply this throughout the programme learning cycle in order to support greater consistency of analysis, learning and ultimately impact across the five dimensions of resilience over time.

We're also seeing an increasing appetite for including impact assessments in the initial programme design which will improve Oxfam's ability to draw on impact assessments from a much larger sample of projects going forward.

Photo credits from top: Abbie Traylor-Smith, Aubrey Wade, Jisu Mok