IMPROVING PROGRAM QUALITY IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Lessons from Oxfam's Program Standards Self-Assessment Year 1

Ngabu, 8 "I love to have knowledge" Credit: Rankin/Oxfam

Oxfam's Program Standards are a mandatory benchmark for our rights-based work. But how are we making sure that we are accountable in terms of our adherence to our set standards and, more importantly, that we improve our practice over time?

We have developed a learning process which helps us critically assess our program practice against our standards and improve over time. Between April 2012 and December 2013 roughly 62 per cent of our country programs had gone through the first round of self-assessments and developed action plans to improve our practice.

This report summarizes findings from the global analysis of the first assessment exercise. The first chapter presents an overview of findings in relation to our performance on each of the Oxfam Program Standards and improvement priorities. The following chapters discuss findings on each of the Program Standards in more depth. The final chapter describes how we currently use the PSSA to support better programming. The technical annex is available as a separate document (ISBN 978-1-78077-662-0).

Across the board, the Program Standard Self-Assessment (PSSA) exercise offers us a solid vision of the current state of our program quality. As well, it helpfully confirms a number of challenges where we need to dedicate particular attention in our program support. Much work remains to be done after this first exercise, including monitoring the improvement plans that teams developed as a result. In the meantime, honoring Oxfam's commitment to be accountable to our stakeholders, we offer the initial findings for your review.

Report prepared by

Jasmin Rocha

Global Evaluation Research and Learning Officer

Oxfam International Secretariat

www.oxfam.org

OXFAM

CONTENT

List of Abbreviations

ARR	Adaptation and Risk Reduction
CAMSA	Common Approach to MEL and Social Accountability
CONSOL	Common framework for consolidated financial reporting within the Oxfam Confederation
ECA	East and Central Africa region
EJ	Economic Justice
ES	Essential Services
GJ	Gender Justice
Horn	Horn of Africa region
JCAS	Joint Country Analysis and Strategy
LAC	Latin America and Caribbean region
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
MEMAG	Middle East and Maghreb region
OGB	Oxfam Great Britain
OPA	One Program Approach
OSP	Oxfam Strategic Plan
PGG	Program Governance Group (at regional level)
PSSA	Program Standards Self-Assessment
RBA	Rights-based approach
RiC	Rights in Crisis
WIN	World-wide Influencing Network

1 THE PSSA AS A BASELINE FOR IMPROVING PROGRAM QUALITY

The Oxfam Program Standards[1] were approved by the Executive Directors in 2009, and are a mandatory benchmark for our rights-based work. But how are we making sure that we are accountable in terms of our adherence to our set standards and, more importantly, that we improve our practice over time? To ensure that we gradually improve our *adherence to our program standards,* we have developed a learning process in which all country programs participate. Step one is a self-assessment of our current practice against our standards, i.e. the baseline of our adherence to the Oxfam Program Standards.[2] The Program Standards Self-Assessment exercise (PSSA) helps us critically assess our program practice against our common Oxfam standards. It is primarily an opportunity for discussion and reflection, to ensure shared understanding about how programs are developed and implemented, and to identify areas where there is room to improve practice. It helps us discuss questions such as: What does program quality mean to us? What are the practices and views of the different affiliates involved? What do our partners think about the quality of our programs? What aspects are we good at and which aspects could be improved? What kind of support do we need?

Based on the findings from the first assessment, program teams develop a detailed action plan for improving program practice in prioritized areas. Action plans are then reviewed and revised on a yearly basis. The results are not only used at the country level. They also inform the design and improvement of regional and global program quality support structures.

Figure 1: PSSA Learning Cycle[3]
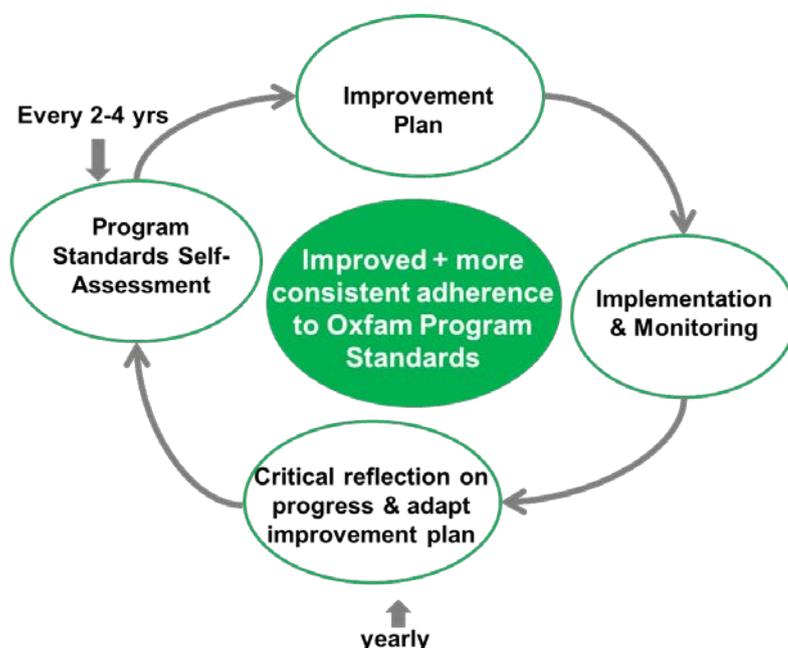

1.1 Progress on PSSA baseline to date

Between April 2012 and December 2013 roughly 62 per cent of our country programs had gone through this baseline. Depending on the complexity and size of each program as well as the way the self-assessment is organized, the exercise takes between 4 hours up to two days. The number of participants and whether partners have been involved

particularly has an effect on the exercise, i.e. the more participants; the longer the exercise normally takes. On average, 7 colleagues per program participated in a self-assessment exercise, generally with an equal gender balance. In total, more than 800 colleagues have been involved. Thus, it is fair to say that the costs of conducting the exercise in terms of human resources are not negligible.

Partners participated in this first self-assessment exercise in one in three programs. While the majority of program teams felt that partner involvement would not be feasible at this point, it was often stressed that partner involvement is desirable and should be considered when the self-assessment is to be repeated at a later point. The majority of programs assessed (68 %) are implemented by multiple affiliates. The following graphic shows the composition of the sample that is analysed in this report, organized by change goal.

Figure 2: Sample composition by change goal
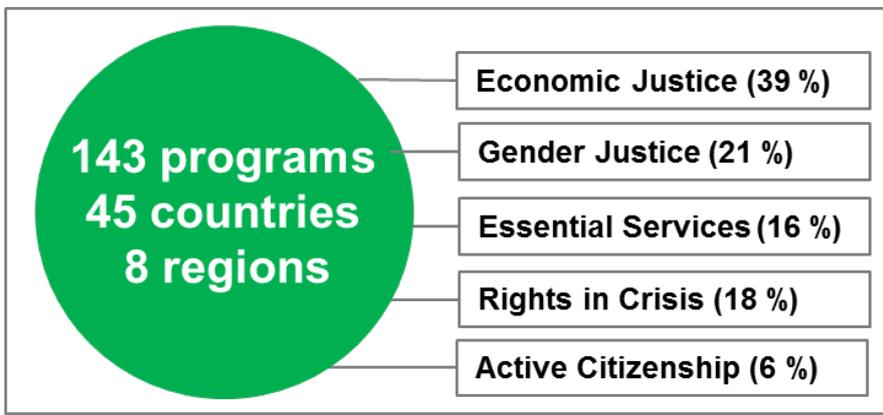
The majority of countries that have not yet completed the exercise do have a plan for implementation in place. However, it should be noted that the PSSA exercises were temporarily put on hold until late 2014 due to the changing organizational context and related work load on country teams. Affiliate MEL (monitoring, evaluation and learning) colleagues are currently developing a proposed revision in the PSSA exercise that will better reflect the organizational changes.

Figure 3: Overview submissions between April 2012 and January 2014
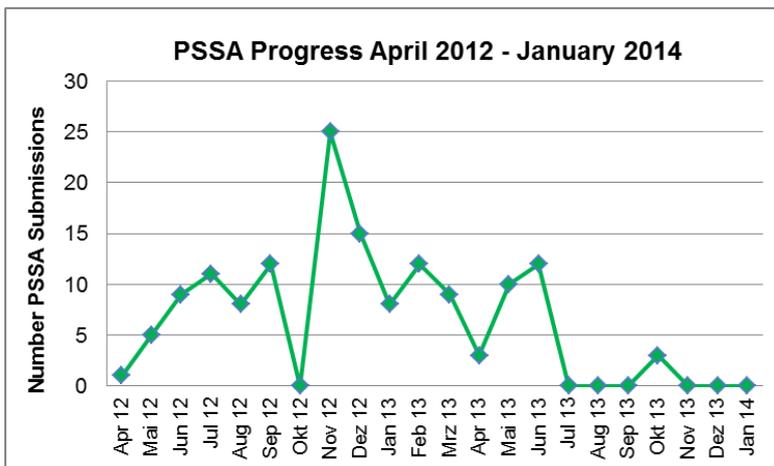
1.2   How this report is organized

This report summarizes findings from the PSSA baseline self-assessment. The first

chapter presents an overview of findings both in relation to our performance on each of the Oxfam Program Standards and improvement priorities while the following chapters discuss findings on each of the Program Standards in more depth. An analysis of regional or change goal specific differences is only offered where differences have emerged. Thus, if no regional or change goal specific differences are reported, the analysis did not identify any systematic differences. The final chapter describes how the PSSA is currently used and what changes are needed to maintain its relevance in light of the changing organizational context.

The annex includes the Oxfam Program Standards as well as the list of countries which which have been included in this analysis.

The technical annex is available as a separate document.

2 OVERVIEW EMERGING TRENDS

Overall, program teams assess their performance as strong in the areas of poverty analysis, their ties with the OSP as well as Gender Equity and Active Citizenship as cross-cutting issues. In contrast, program teams' common challenges are establishing effective partnerships and limits to our social accountability practice as well as uneven consideration of HIV/AIDS issues and engaging with private sector actors as cross-cutting issues.[4]

We're doing really well

The majority of program teams assess their performance to be strong on the below standards: more than 60 per cent of program teams rate themselves high on all components of a standard and additionally not more than 15 per cent rate themselves very low on any one of the components of a standard.

Standard 1: Collaborative, iterative, **analysis of root causes of poverty and injustice…**

Standard 3: The program has **clear ties to the Oxfam strategic plan[5]**

Standard 9: Gender Equity and **Active Citizenship**

We're cautious about making a judgement

Our performance on the below standards does not (yet) present a clear trend towards strong or weak performance: some components may be more challenging than others but overall, performance ratings are varied.[6]

Standard 2: Program strategies are created in a participatory and collaborative manner...

Standard 4: Programs are flexible and adaptive …

Standard 5: Programs link development, humanitarian, and advocacy and campaigning work (**'One Program Approach'**) …

Standard 7: Programs will have the **capacity to deliver effective national campaigning** (…) and to **link this work to Oxfam International global campaigns.**

Standard 8: When programs engage in **humanitarian work**, they adhere to existing humanitarian agreements, standards, norms, policy, and guidelines.

Standard 9: Programs integrate **OI's agreed cross-cutting objectives of Gender Equity and Active Citizenship**[7], (…) **HIV and AIDS Response and engagement with the private sector**

Standard 10: Programs engage in **participatory, evidence-based learning** and are **results based**

Challenging - We have to do better

Across the board, programs are struggling with the below standards: 1 in 2 program teams assess their performance to be low on the majority of components and, additionally, 1 in 4 program teams rate themselves very low on at least one component of a given standard.

Standard 6: Programs rely upon **partnership and alliances** with autonomous, independent, accountable organizations ...

Standard 9: HIV/AIDS and **Private Sector**

Standard 11: **Programs are accountable to stakeholders**.

Across the board, the PSSA exercise has given us a solid foundation for making the vision of improved program quality happen. The PSSA as an exercise can be another step in further strengthening the quality of our programming work. However, it also confirms a number of challenges that have already been identified elsewhere and that we need to dedicate particular attention to in our program support. The most common priorities both for improvements and capacity building needs are not only those areas that

we consider weak but also those areas where our self-assessments are highest.

Top 3 Priorities: Improvements & Capacity Building Needs

More than 8 out of 10 program teams have plans to improve some aspect of:

- Poverty Analysis
- Program Strategy
- Partnerships & Alliances

It should be noted that shared Oxfam programs are not yet functional everywhere; rather they are often in the design phase, under (re)construction or loosely formulated as a bunch of projects simply stuck together until the different affiliate teams make more progress developing shared programs. For these programs, the PSSA can be a particularly challenging exercise, for example because of the consequent variation in adherence to program standards within the different affiliate teams. However, the PSSA often also contributes to discussions around strengthening country programs.

An additional challenge in terms of interpreting rating levels actually stems from how teams rate themselves in the face of the diversity of their different program approaches. When program teams rate themselves weakly on a particular program standard, it may be that the program standard doesn't adequately reflect that diversity. So, for example, some program teams explicitly chose to focus their work on partners with little direct engagement with communities, while in contrast, other program teams actively engage directly with communities. Or, in some cases, program teams have clearly set out their relationships with their partners because these are bound to specific contractual terms while other programs maintain long-lasting relationships beyond contractual limits. While this might reflect a weakness of the PSSA tool itself, its strength lies in the promotion of cross affiliate dialogue - and greater understanding of the strengths and limits of this diversity. And, of course, feedback from the program teams provides valuable input to strengthen the future versions of the Program Standards themselves, as well as our ways of measuring our own adherence.

3 ZOOMING IN[8]

3.1 Program Standard 1: Our analyses of the root causes of poverty and injustice

Although ratings suggest strong performance, participatory analysis and regular reviews of the analyses are common challenges. It should be noted that Program Standard 1 does not measure the actual quality of the product but rather focuses on the process being collaborative and iterative.

Practice can vary significantly, across countries, across country programs and across projects within countries. Given that we know from other sources (such as the OGB effectiveness reviews) that poverty analysis is a common challenge for program teams, it is not surprising that this also represents one of the most common priorities for improvement and capacity building needs.

Collaboration and iterative approaches in our analyses of the root causes of poverty and injustice appear - in comparison to our performance on other standards – to be among our biggest strengths. However, if we take into account what we consider strong performance in the PSSA, we see that a high performance level is fairly easily achieved (i.e. our ambition as reflected in the measurement of standard 1 is not very high). Thus, for this standard it may be more indicative to consider the number of teams who see a need to improve their poverty analysis than to look only at the ratings (8 out of 10 teams plan to improve some aspect of their poverty analysis).

Only 11 per cent of program teams actually use participatory analysis to ensure that all key stakeholder groups, including women, men and other vulnerable groups meaningfully input into efforts to understand poverty and injustice and only one in four poverty analyses includes an effort to understand the relative power of key stakeholders. In two of three cases poverty analyses are not reviewed at all or are only reviewed in an ad hoc manner. In reality, practice can vary significantly, across countries, across country programs and across projects within countries (see reflections from country teams). As can be seen in their improvement priorities, teams genuinely strive for meaningful participation by stakeholders, particularly communities; however, resource constraints can limit participation in practice (see text box).

> RiC Mekong: "Analysis is collaborative but there is not yet enough consultation with affected populations."
> ECA EJ: "Poverty analysis is not done jointly with target groups. Reviews are not feasible due to budget and time constraints."

The Oxfam country strategy review process – currently being rolled out now - provides country teams with a good opportunity to improve their analyses and the guidelines developed to support this review extensively address the issue of how to improve the analysis of poverty and injustice.

> **Reflections from country teams**
>
> *"The EJ Program developed through a process involving research, validation workshops of the researches and EJ Partner's assembly. Workshops and assembly included representatives from Community-based Organizations and women farmer leaders. Each partner assembly thereafter has included a discussion on the changing context and updated power analysis." (EJ Archipelago)*
>
> *"During program implementation we held a number of consultations with partners; we*

read what they produce and we document our own analyses. However, we realize that partners' influence is limited – we need to intensify participation." (EJ LAC)

"Community members/target groups involvement in program design for some was limited. However, one should know that the GJ program is designed in such a way that was built-up from partners' proposed programs, in which was developed based on their strategic planning that is designed in consultation with their target groups at community level." (GJ Archipelago)

3.2   Program Standard 2: Strong program strategies or weak measurement?

The assessment of program strategies in the PSSA contains eight components: 1) the degree of joint development, 2) the articulation of how change is expected to happen, 3) the change in gender relations, 4) Oxfam's role in change, 5) identification of key risks, 6) measurement of progress and success, 7) identification of key relationships and 8) identification of resources, skills and capacities needed. While overall performance ratings are high in the majority of PSSAs, the measurement of progress and success, as well as the identification of resources, skills and capacity, seems to be a weak point in a number of program strategies. Forty per cent of program teams indicate that program strategies are not explicit about indicators of success and mechanisms for how these will be measured, making it difficult to use data for learning and to inform program strategies. Only one in four program strategies explicitly addresses the use of monitoring data and evaluation by setting out moments for review and reflection. Similarly, almost half of the program teams consider that the program strategy does not adequately address how resource needs will be addressed and does not identify relevant donors.

The reflections from country teams illustrate the diversity of challenges but also the acute awareness of the need to improve specific areas of program strategies.

"The Project has some sporadic risk management process especially on the sisal value chain but not clearly seen in the other value chains. There is clear relationship and partnership guideline but its review is done on an ad hoc basis. The project's field monitoring is not supported by tools and the general framework monitoring is not complete… Resources and capacities are well identified, the challenge remains on how the project gets regular and timely financial support and staff retention and capacity as we implement." (ECA EJ)

"Overall, our ratings are based on the fact that while we do have all the information required, it is not currently addressed adequately in the program strategy. We have to do that." (West Africa GJ)

"The JCAS is clear on identification of areas of work and long and medium term results as well as capacity needed to implement the action. The underlying analysis using the theory of change and other tools to justify choice and explain how change will happen is less obvious. The inclusion of partners in the process is not clear. Partners in different projects are treated differently in engaging them in planning and monitoring and evaluation; partners identify resources and budget but the final decision comes from Oxfam; partners and beneficiaries are not aware about the program strategy…" (MEMAG GJ)

Unsurprisingly, the most common areas for improvements are the measurement of progress and success as well as the identification of resources, skills and capacities needed. In addition, more than one in two teams intends to strengthen partner and

community participation in the development of program strategies. Similarly to the ratings on poverty analysis above, the ratings on program strategies do not automatically suggest high-quality program strategies. Evidence from other sources (e.g. the OGB effectiveness reviews) suggests that understanding the context and how change happens and then the decision to choose the most appropriate theory of change is one area where we frequently lack rigour, which may consequently lead to lack of or reduced impact.

Roughly 40 per cent of teams express capacity building and training needs related to this program standard, in their majority in the area of MEL. Other areas mentioned (significantly less frequently) for capacity building and training are institutional fundraising, risk management and participatory programming.

3.3   Program Standard 3: Almost all programs link with the OSP 'Demanding Justice'

Almost all program teams assess their programs to have a clear tie with the Oxfam Strategic Plan indicating in the country or program strategy how the program contributes to the priorities expressed in the OSP. In addition, four out five programs report results on Oxfam change goals. Obviously, the links with the OSP refer to the strategic plan 2007-2012 ('Demanding Justice') which last year was superseded by the current strategic plan. Thus, unfortunately we do not have any information on the extent to which current programs additionally include the priorities spelled out in Oxfam's new strategic plan. A revised version of the PSSA exercise will have to account for this change in our organizational context.

3.4   Program Standard 4: How flexible and adaptive is our programming?

Overall, the majority of program teams assess themselves to be fairly adaptive; three out of four programs assessed have formal mechanisms for regularly reviewing program implementation, and adapt in light of changes in the external context, new insights about the local context, and/ or new partner or donor priorities. In contrast, progress towards outcomes (as opposed to implementation) is much less frequently reviewed on a regular basis. Similarly, the communication of substantial changes in the program could be improved in many programs; in less than 1 in 10 programs, decisions about changes to the program are proactively shared with stakeholders in ways that are relevant, accessible and appropriate to them. This is particularly true for the communication of changes to communities; as an ES team in ECA reflects:

> "*Generally, the programme is considered flexible and adaptive and any changes to the programme are well documented and communicated. The exception to the latter is how we communicate this same information to communities that we work with. Often this is skipped or done in a very superficial or an ad hoc manner.*"

Roughly half of the program teams intend to improve the adaptiveness of the program or the communication of changes; almost one third of program teams have plans to improve both. Improving the review mechanisms is also a particular priority for teams, which already rate their performance as relatively high, reflecting awareness among program colleagues of the need to not only track implementation but also progress towards outcomes.

3.5 Program Standard 5: One Program Approach

Across our change goals and across the regions where we work the One Program approach is well integrated in more than one third of our development and humanitarian programs.

The One Program Approach is one of the most challenging program concepts across the confederation; given that it needs to be adapted to different contexts in different ways, it is challenging for many teams to understand its practical expression.

Nevertheless, the majority of long-term development and humanitarian programs link with work to influence policy at appropriate levels and include Adaptation and Risk Reduction or preparedness work. In fact, one in three humanitarian and development program teams assess their performance as strong both on linking with advocacy/campaigns work and ARR/preparedness (as opposed to a strong performance on just one aspect of the One Program approach).

Two out of three program teams have an explicit advocacy strategy or have set out how the program links to a relevant advocacy/ campaign program at local, national and/ or international levels. There do not seem to be any systematic differences between regions or change goals. However, only 17 per cent of program teams regularly review progress on policy goals.

Some teams consider that it is not necessarily Oxfam who should act as an influencer in the country, but support partners with their influencing agendas. As an EJ team in Southern Africa explains:

> "…*The program has a domain of change/goal focussed on influencing government around policy (which partners report against). However, a specific strategy on influencing policy is not outlined in the program strategy itself because the program approach is to empower partners and build partner capacity to raise policy issues that are of concern to them and to the communities in which they work.*"

Roughly one in four programs - mostly Economic Justice and Rights in Crisis programs - articulate at least one explicit objective to support people living in poverty to adapt to climate change and natural disasters. In contrast, programs focusing on Essential Services or Gender Justice seem to struggle with the inclusion of ARR and preparedness more frequently, but are in their majority relatively strong in linking with work to influence policy.

Except for the teams in Mozambique, all teams in humanitarian priority countries have at least one program that explicitly addresses ARR and preparedness.

Strengthening links with influencing work as well as ARR and preparedness is considered a priority for improvement actions over the coming two years by roughly half of the programs that have already done the PSSA.

3.6 Program Standard 7: Advocacy and Campaigning

Almost all programs maintain some link with national or regional

campaigning. The majority of programs with a core policy objective and an advocacy and communication strategy to deliver national campaigning, also link national realities with regional and/or international processes.

Almost all programs maintain some link with national or regional campaigning. Half of the programs have at least one core policy objective, and have an advocacy and communication strategy in place to deliver national campaigning. These programs are also in their majority better able to link national realities with regional and/ or international processes. However, only a small number of programs (15 per cent) analyse their contribution to regional and/or international processes as part of regular progress reviews. Systematic differences across regions or change goals cannot be observed.

Scarce resources, the sensitivity of a particular issue or the early stages of a program may limit the teams' ability to increase advocacy and campaigning efforts (particularly with respect to regional and international processes). Further, some teams consider that particular country contexts are more challenging in terms of campaigning. However, the data does not suggest a systematic link between campaigning and advocacy and the country context, i.e. even under difficult external conditions programs manage to develop influencing work.

A number of program teams stress that it is not their role to do national advocacy and campaigning but that of partners which the program supports. One program team however explains that partners consider the lack of an explicit campaigning strategy on the side of Oxfam a weakness that could be mediated through a stronger involvement in planning:

> *"… there really is no clear link between their* [i.e. partners'] *efforts on the ground and that of the efforts at the national level. It was pointed out that this link would be felt if the partners are involved in the onset like during the planning stage."* (EJ Archipelago)

The focus of improvements depends to a certain extent on the approach chosen in the program. A number of programs intend to develop or strengthen their advocacy strategy, particularly strengthening local to global links. This is also an area where a number of programs have expressed a need for program support (campaigning and advocacy skills). However, where advocacy and campaigning is considered the responsibility of partner organizations, the improvement phase rather concentrates on capacity-building. Program teams will be supported in their efforts to strengthen their influencing work as we aspire to adopt more effective tools, including a strong quality assurance system, for program standards on influencing, as well as influencing guidelines for country teams as part of our WIN enabling goal.

3.7 Program Standard 9: Gender Equity

Gender equity as a cross-cutting objective is well integrated in programming across the range of programs. A common challenge is gender-sensitive MEL.

The PSSA tool offers specific measures for Gender Equity as a cross-cutting issue and for changes in gender relations (as made explicit in the program strategy). Feedback has pointed out that although the program standards explicitly reference gender sensitivity with regard to our poverty analysis, the PSSA tool lacks a gender-sensitive approach to the analysis of root causes of poverty and injustice. Furthermore, the relationship (as outlined in the OSP) between gender, ethnicity and economic situation is not considered to be sufficiently addressed.

That said, the vast majority of programs clearly articulate in their program strategy how they will address the practical challenges faced by poor and marginalised groups in the context, and women in particular. More than one in three programs articulates at least one core objective to deliver transformational change in poor women's lives.

1 in 3 programs articulates at least one core objective to deliver transformational change in poor women's lives.
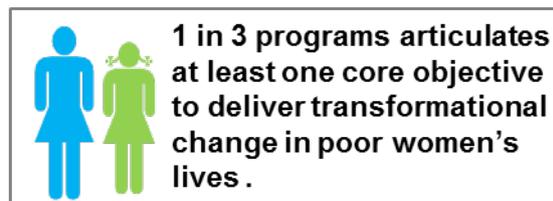
Gender equity as a cross-cutting objective is well integrated in programming across the range of programs. Most program teams, independently of whether they are Gender Justice programs or not, consider the allocation of resources to be 'adequate' to ensure that gender is mainstreamed into the program, and encourage and measure the participation/ leadership of women and men in all aspects of program implementation. However, particularly within EJ and RiC programs, mechanisms to review how effectively gender is being mainstreamed into program implementation could be strengthened.

One of the more challenging aspects of Gender mainstreaming for many programs however, is gender-sensitive MEL, making it more difficult for us to speak about changes in women's lives that Oxfam is contributing to. A number of teams therefore have focused improvement efforts in this area around gender-sensitive measurement. Gender Justice programs may provide best practice examples around gender-sensitive MEL as these show a stronger performance in this area than other programs.

3.8   Program Standard 9: Active Citizenship

8 in 10 programs have at least one core objective to build the capacity of individuals or civil society groups to engage with state institutions and other key actors, independently of the main change goal the programs are contributing to or the region where they are located. Nevertheless, one in three program teams have plans to strengthen active citizenship in their programs. Particularly, Rights in Crisis and Essential Services program teams see room for improvement.

3.9   Program Standard 9: HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS is the cross-cutting issue considered 'not relevant' most often. 55 per cent of program teams have not provided a rating on this component of the PSSA. Particularly in LAC, MEMAG & EEFSU as well as East Asia & Pacific, this program standard is not considered relevant by the vast majority of program teams. Where HIV/AIDS is considered to apply, the program strategy often is limited to providing information on HIV/AIDS related challenges facing individuals in the context, but does not provide any detail of how these challenges will be substantively addressed by the program. Almost all programs with a stronger performance on integrating HIV/AIDS are located in Sub-Saharan Africa. Of those programs where HIV/AIDS is considered relevant, one in two intends to strengthen HIV/AIDS as a cross-cutting issue.

3.10   Program Standard 9: Private Sector

Engagement with private sector actors as a cross-cutting strategy is, similarly to HIV/AIDS, assessed to be fairly weak by the majority of program teams. Twenty per cent of program teams have not provided a rating on this component, suggesting that the private sector is not considered relevant. Providing a rating is more common among Economic Justice programs. This is also where 'high performance' examples are more frequent.

Overall, almost half of the program strategies assessed do not identify ways of engaging with the private sector (although relevant actors may be identified). Comments from program teams suggest that while the private sector is an important actor to engage with, there is limited knowledge on how to do this. More than half of the program teams intend to improve their engagement with the private sector; many are looking for guidance and support.

<div style="border:1px solid #000; padding:10px;">

MEL challenges

- **Using monitoring and evaluation findings for learning and adaptive programming**

- **Reviewing and adapting MEL systems as our programs evolve**

- **Involving communities in our MEL processes including feedback of findings**

</div>

3.11 Program Standard 10: Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

In most programs the basics are in place but work needs to be done for MEL to become an integral part of program management, contributing to a culture of greater accountability and learning.

While the majority of programs have basic MEL systems in place, 4 in 10 programs have less than 1 per cent of program costs available for MEL or no dedicated budget line at all. These programs also focus monitoring more often on implementation (rather than outcomes) and are less likely to plan for a final evaluation. As we aspire to invest a minimum of five per cent of program budgets in MEL by the end of the Oxfam Strategic Plan 2013-2019, significant efforts will be needed to reach that target.[9]

There are three main challenges that many programs are struggling with: 1) evidence-based learning; 2) the involvement of communities in MEL processes and 3) the lack of flexibility of MEL systems.

While the majority of program strategies identify indicators of success, only one in four program strategies clearly outlines moments for reflection and reviewing MEL findings as well as how these will be used to inform decisions about the program going forward. However, this does not mean that there is no space for reflection. To the contrary, the majority of program teams do include space for reflections but, according to them, these reflections may not always be grounded in the monitoring data being collected by the program.

Secondly, MEL systems are rarely reviewed and adapted to changes in the context and/or the program over the course of the program cycle, thus running the risk of disconnecting from program teams' learning needs.
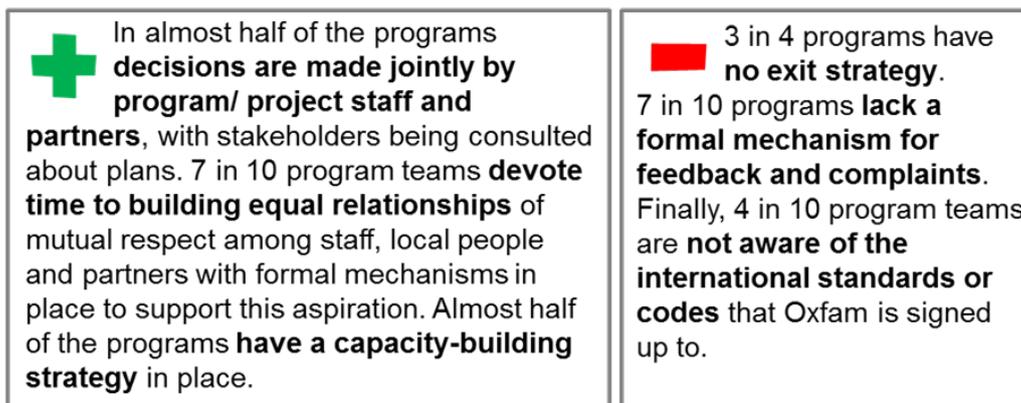
Two in three program teams do not consult communities and partners on the development of outcome indicators; communities and partners from less than ten per cent of programs actually participate in decisions about what to monitor and evaluate in a project. One third of programs include capacity building of partners and communities to undertake basic monitoring activities themselves.

Finally, feedback from programs suggests that (affiliate) MEL activities and systems at the project level still need further work to allow us to speak to outcomes at the program level. Strengthening MEL is a priority for the majority of programs; 6 in 10 program teams intend to work on their MEL system as part of their improvement plans. Only half of the programs indicating a limited budget for MEL have planned to increase the budget. Teams seek specific support related to MEL capacity building in general both for partners and Oxfam staff. The common approach to MEL and Social Accountability (CAMSA), launched in April 2014, is expected to serve program teams as a source of guidance and support in their efforts to strengthen capacity as well as processes around MEL.

3.12 Program Standards 6 & 11: Partnerships and Stakeholder Accountability

While program teams assess their relationships with partners and allies as strong, it is the formal aspects of our partnerships and accountability commitments that many programs are struggling with.

Overall, our partnerships and accountability to our stakeholders represent weaker areas of our programming in comparison to other aspects of the Oxfam Program Standards. A close look however reveals a rather nuanced picture: while relationships appear to be strong, many program teams struggle with accountability and other formal aspects of partnership.

In almost half of the programs **decisions are made jointly by program/ project staff and partners**, with stakeholders being consulted about plans. 7 in 10 program teams **devote time to building equal relationships** of mutual respect among staff, local people and partners with formal mechanisms in place to support this aspiration. Almost half of the programs **have a capacity-building strategy** in place.

3 in 4 programs have **no exit strategy**. 7 in 10 programs **lack a formal mechanism for feedback and complaints**. Finally, 4 in 10 program teams are **not aware of the international standards or codes** that Oxfam is signed up to.

Views on whether the formalization of relationships is always desirable vary. Depending on the type of partnership (strategic vs. project-based) program teams do not necessarily consider clear formal mechanisms desirable. This may be due to funding being project-based and the absence of long-term financial security: for example, exit strategies may then only refer to a contractual relationship, while the strategic relationship may not be set out formally. One program suggests not making exit strategies a requirement as partners value Oxfam's flexibility.

For the majority of program teams, improvement plans focus on developing or strengthening an exit strategy as well as improving the transparency and openness of information shared. However, full transparency is not aspired to everywhere; a fragile country context with the resulting security concerns as well as the sensitivity of issues (e.g. land rights) can be reasons for not being fully transparent.

Program teams seek support particularly in the areas of capacity building for staff and partners on accountability and communication. In the common approach to MEL in countries (CAMSA) that is being developed by the affiliate MEL colleagues' network, efforts have been made to more systematically incorporate accountability as common practice and work will continue to identify and propose the corresponding tools. Program teams' efforts to improve stakeholder accountability and partnerships will also be supported by our joint efforts towards strengthening accountability (as part of the OSP 2013-2019).

3.13 Value of the process

The PSSA is a first step towards improving quality of country programs by raising awareness and understanding amongst team members of how our aspirations translate into programming practice. It helps teams to discuss and agree ways forward with an emphasis on strengthening country programs.

The Program Standards Self-Assessment can present an opportunity for program teams to engage with our Program Standards and with each other. In some contexts, it may have been the first time that program staff from different affiliates and different program components came together to talk about their joint program (particularly from a quality perspective).

Feedback from program teams suggests that the exercise first and foremost contributes to a shared understanding of what the program standards (our aspirations) mean in practice and how our current programming practice relates to our aspirations. Based on that understanding, teams can determine concrete steps towards improving quality at the program level. Some colleagues consider the PSSA as a useful tool in designing programs.

The self-assessment requires teams to think and assess their practice at the country program level (as distinct from the more limited project level). This is often experienced as challenging and sometimes as an artificial lens not adequately capturing practice on the ground. However, it is also appreciated as an opportunity to look beyond the narrow project lens:

"The assessment provided a point in time for reflection and seeing the program as a whole, in a "bigger" light. Staff members speak about the program all the time but frequently assessments are done on partners [or] *(…) on components of the work and not the whole. This was therefore the first time that Oxfam staff was 'on the other side of the table'."* (Reflection from Southern Africa)

"Initially, the participants saw the process as more of a tick box exercise, but when they started to engage with it they realised there was more to it than that, and that the process involved "telling the story of the food security program from the beginning". What was seen as a key positive from the process was that it enabled discussion and sharing about lessons learnt" (EJ, Southern Africa)

Particularly where a program starts by combining different projects into a loosely formulated country program, the exercise promotes a process of strengthening the country program by identifying focus areas for improvement and by opening up a space for different affiliates and teams involved to get to know each other's work and dialogue around differences and commonalities.

However, the quality of conversations varies. The PSSA is a time-intensive process if done well and not all programs have taken the time to make a quality discussion happen. A solid preparation (reading program documents, familiarizing themselves with the Program Standards and the exercise itself) is as important as having sufficient time for discussing different views and planning the improvement phase. This may take several days of staff time. As an understanding of the benefits of the exercise grows a number of programs have opted for a staggered process to build understanding and ownership of the exercise.

Country leadership as well as regional leadership play an important role in supporting the process and giving it the adequate space for good quality discussions as well as solid planning for improvements. In some instances the exercise can promote collaborative leadership, for example where it is used for peer learning.

While at the start of the process insecurity and concerns about the value prevailed, more and more programs have come to make use of the

"The exercise was very useful in bringing all the EJ elements together and building the team spirit that is essential to the success of the program. One of the key lessons learned was that differences can be resolved/ accommodated if enough time is set aside to hear from all team members." (EJ, Horn)

PSSA as an opportunity for discussing program quality. At least one affiliate has started using the results as a basis for planning support. Some countries have developed their own comprehensive analysis and reporting. The global results of the exercise are developed for presentation in line with key meetings and shared through Oxfam's internal intranet. Some PGGs have discussed findings in their meetings (autumn 2013). Thus, there are first signs that the process is being used as an evidence-base for decision-making.

3.14   The robustness of a Self-Assessment approach

As in any survey where individuals (or groups for that matter) are asked to rate their practice in relation to a normative framework (the Oxfam Program Standards), responses can be influenced by a number of factors including the fear of consequences from low ratings, different interpretations of answer categories or cultural differences in response behaviour. It has been communicated to country teams that ratings are treated confidentially and that they are not a means to identify 'poor performance' at an individual level. Within the PSSA tool itself, response categories are descriptive so that the possibility of different interpretations is minimized. The analysis of the results rarely shows systematic differences, except for areas where one would expect them (e.g. HIV/AIDS between regions, Gender Equity between change goals). However, subsamples are fairly small so that the analysis of systematic differences can only be limited. One factor that may have influenced response behaviour in programs implemented by multiple affiliates is trust or the lack thereof. As the baseline happened normally within the first year after significant organizational change (the move to a single management structure), in some cases teams from different affiliates were not yet disposed to openly discuss weaknesses in their respective programming components with their colleagues and therefore may rate performance higher. Similarly, partners may have been inclined to rate Oxfam's performance higher as they could not know how Oxfam would react to negative feedback. This means that even if we successfully invest in improved program quality, ratings may over time decrease (or stay the same) as trust and confidence in feedback being used for improvements increases (this has been reported by a country team that reviewed ratings and improvement plans after one year; during the first round, the ratings were higher but as trust grew, the ratings were lowered or stayed the same despite improvements made. This has also been known to happen in other feedback mechanisms).

4 CONCLUSIONS: USE AND RELEVANCE OF THE PSSA

4.1   How are we using the PSSA?

The PSSA has already proven to be useful in different ways. At the country team level, the exercise has created an understanding of what our quality aspirations (i.e. the Oxfam Program Standards) mean in practice; as a process, it has helped teams engage in discussions on different approaches and getting to know each other's work as well as creating awareness of the need to improve the quality of our programs through the use of different approaches that we have developed (e.g. RBA; OPA, WIN, MEL, etc.). Finally, it provided a framework that facilitated the identification of improvement priorities and plans. At the global and regional levels, it represents the first joint MEL initiative using the same processes and definitions across affiliates – it can be used as a joint database on program quality aspirations versus reality. The information emerging from the PSSA baseline has been used to inform program support initiatives in individual affiliates as well.

However, the PSSA baseline is only a starting point for improving program quality. Improvement plans need to be monitored and revised regularly, so that a) we can hold each other to account for our commitment to improve program quality and b) so that our aspirations translate into practice and the reflection processes around these become institutionalized in our programming, ensuring the development of a culture of continuous reflection and improvement.

4.2   Adherence to Oxfam Program Standards remains relevant

Adherence to Oxfam Program Standards continues to be relevant to our commitment to foster program quality beyond Oxfam's initial shift to a single management structure: the consolidation of the PSSA process has been agreed and is part of our Program Quality Agenda going forward. Its monitoring supports not only improved program quality (and evidence-based learning) but continues to be one of many public and internal accountability mechanisms.

At the same time, changes are needed regarding the PSSA process and tools. The process and tools that we use to track how our practice relates to our aspirations need to be reviewed and adapted to Oxfam's changing organizational context as well as changing aspirations. They need to reflect and account for changing affiliate roles and ensure an appropriate participation of different stakeholders.

Oxfam MEL colleagues will review and adapt the PSSA in order to incorporate the revised evaluation policy, ensure coherence with the new Oxfam Program Framework and the OSP 2013-2019 as well as the revised Southern Campaigning Guidelines; further, it will increase user-friendliness as well as accuracy of the measurement approach. A proposal will be developed on how to adjust the process as well as incorporate robust accountability mechanisms to ensure relevance and maximum usefulness in the changing organizational context.

5 ANNEX

5.1 Oxfam Program Standards

STANDARD 1: Collaborative, iterative, analysis of root causes of poverty and injustice forms the basis of all programs

STANDARD 2: Program strategies are created in a participatory and collaborative manner and contain eight elements.

STANDARD 3: The program has clear ties to the OI strategic plan

STANDARD 4: Programs are flexible and adaptive within the parameters of the OI Strategic Plan

STANDARD 5: Programs link development, humanitarian, and advocacy and campaigning work (a 'One Program Approach') in pursuit of a common objective

STANDARD 6: Programs rely upon partnership and alliances with autonomous, independent, accountable organizations to achieve positive changes in people's lives as well as policy changes. These relationships should be mutually empowering, cognizant of power imbalances between partners, and focused on impact, mutual growth, organizational development and institutional strengthening.

STANDARD 7: Programs will have the capacity to deliver effective national campaigning across relevant elements of the OI Global Campaigning Force model (media, lobby, research, popmob, celebrities etc.) under the parameters set by the OI Southern Campaigning Guidelines as appropriate in a given country context, and to link this work to Oxfam International global campaigns.

STANDARD 8: When programs engage in humanitarian work, they adhere to existing humanitarian agreements, standards, norms, policy, and guidelines.

STANDARD 9: Programs integrate OI's agreed cross-cutting objectives of Gender Equity and Active Citizenship[10], and have strategies in place where appropriate for HIV and AIDS Response and engagement with the private sector

STANDARD 10: Programs engage in participatory, evidence-based learning and are results based

STANDARD 11: Programs are accountable to stakeholders

For a detailed description see: Program Standards at Oxfam: Working towards an agreed set of standards across Oxfam http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/oxfam-program-standards.pdf

5.2 List countries included in this analysis

Number of PSSAs submitted in brackets.

1. **Armenia (3)**
2. Azerbaijan (3)
3. Benin (4)
4. Burkina Faso (5)
5. Cambodia (3)
6. Colombia (3)
7. Cuba (1)
8. DRC (4)
9. Dominican Republic (3)
10. Ecuador (4)
11. Egypt (3)
12. El Salvador (3)
13. Ethiopia (1)
14. Georgia (2)
15. Ghana (3)
16. Guatemala (3)
17. Honduras (2)
18. Indonesia (3)
19. Lao People's Democratic Republic (4)
20. Liberia (1)
21. Malawi (4)
22. Mauritania (3)
23. Mozambique (3)
24. Myanmar (5)
25. Nepal (3)
26. Nicaragua (2)
27. Niger (5)
28. Nigeria (4)
29. Paraguay (2)
30. Peru (4)
31. Philippines (4)
32. Russian Federation (1)
33. Rwanda (2)
34. Senegal (3)
35. Somalia (4)
36. South Africa (4)
37. Tajikistan (3)
38. Tanzania (6)
39. Thailand (2)
40. Timor-Leste (1)
41. Uganda (4)
42. Vietnam (5)
43. Yemen (4)
44. Zambia (5)

Please refer to the technical annex for more detailed information.

End Notes

[1] Oxfam's Program Standards were approved in 2009 and are [available on our website](#).

[2] To support the creation of a safe learning environment, individual PSSA reports are generally treated confidentially, i.e. they are published or shared beyond the country team only with the consent of the country team.

[3] This cycle will have to be revisited in light of changes in our organizational context and may not be adequate for each one of our current programs.

[4] Each one of the eleven Oxfam Program Standards is assessed in the PSSA through a number of complementary measures which address the specific components of a standard separately. The number of components ranges from two to eight.

[5] Program Standard 3.3 on recording funding allocations according to CONSOL classifications was excluded from this analysis because it is not considered a requisite at country level (rather a recommendation).

[6] Neither the rule for green light nor for red light applies.

[7] OISP 2007–2012 "Demanding Justice"

[8] Program standard 8 on adhering to existing humanitarian agreements, standards, norms, policy, and guidelines when engaging in humanitarian work, is omitted from this analysis due to unsatisfactory data quality.

[9] As stated in the Oxfam Policy on Program Evaluation we are committed to invest a minimum of five per cent (5%) of our program budgets to monitoring, evaluation, and learning by the end of the Oxfam Strategic Plan 2013-2019. Oxfam's [policy of program evaluation](#) is publicly available.

[10] OSP 2007–2012 "Demanding Justice"

OXFAM

Oxfam is an international confederation of 17 organizations networked together in more than 90 countries, as part of a global movement for change, to build a future free from the injustice of poverty:

Oxfam America (www.oxfamamerica.org)
Oxfam Australia (www.oxfam.org.au)
Oxfam-in-Belgium (www.oxfamsol.be)
Oxfam Canada (www.oxfam.ca)
Oxfam France (www.oxfamfrance.org)
Oxfam Germany (www.oxfam.de)
Oxfam GB (www.oxfam.org.uk)
Oxfam Hong Kong (www.oxfam.org.hk)
Oxfam India (www.oxfamindia.org)
Intermón Oxfam (www.intermonoxfam.org)
Oxfam Ireland (www.oxfamireland.org)
Oxfam Italy (www.oxfamitalia.org)
Oxfam Japan (www.oxfam.jp)
Oxfam Mexico (www.oxfammexico.org)
Oxfam New Zealand (www.oxfam.org.nz)
Oxfam Novib (www.oxfamnovib.nl)
Oxfam Québec (www.oxfam.qc.ca)