Improving Program Quality in International Development
Lessons from Oxfam's Program Standards Self-Assessment Year 1

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INTRODUCTION
The Oxfam Program Standards[1] describe what constitutes good programming for Oxfam and how to consistently implement rights-based programs in the field. They are increasingly part of Oxfam's DNA and gradual increased adherence to, and accountability against, the standards has been identified as a key step toward improved program quality. To promote that adherence, Oxfam developed a learning process in which all country programs participate. This report summarizes findings from the global analysis of the first assessment exercise.

HOW IT WORKS
This learning process begins with program teams: they carry out a self-assessment of their current practice against our common standards. The Program Standards Self-Assessment (PSSA exercise) helps us critically assess our adherence to the standards together. 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 of the exercise, these same 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 advisory services and support structures.

WHO WAS INVOLVED IN THIS EXERCISE?
Between April '12 and Dec '13 over **62% of our country programs from 44 different countries across all regions went through this exercise**. Over two thirds of the programs assessed are jointly implemented by multiple affiliates and in 30% of the cases program partners participated in the exercise. On average 7 colleagues participated in a self-assessment exercise, generally with an equal gender balance. In total, more than 800 colleagues have been involved.

Partners participated in the self-assessment exercise in one in three programs. While the majority of program teams felt that partner involvement wasn't feasible this first time around, the teams often stressed that partner involvement is desirable and would be considered in the future.

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 these initial findings for your review.

MAIN FINDINGS OF THE REPORT
Overall, program teams assess their performance as strong in the areas of poverty analysis, their contribution to the objectives within the Oxfam Strategic Plan, as well as Gender Equity and Active Citizenship as cross-cutting issues. In contrast, program teams' common challenges are establishing effective partnerships, and being accountable to partners as well as men and women in the communities where we and our partners work. Further, we struggle to systematically integrate considerations of HIV/AIDS in our work and we rate ourselves lower in our capacity to engage with private sector actors across all programs.

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

⬤⬤🟢 We're doing really well

The majority of program teams assesses performance to be strong on the below standards: more than 60% of program teams rate themselves high on all components of a standard and additionally not more than 15% 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**
Standard 9: Gender Equity and **Active Citizenship**

⬤🔵⬤ We're cautious about making a judgement

Our performance on the standards below does not (yet) present a clear strong or weak trend: some components may be more challenging than others but overall, performance ratings are varied.[2]

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's 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 **Oxfam's agreed cross-cutting objectives of Gender Equity and Active Citizenship**[3], **HIV-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 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.

To this extent, **80% of program teams identified Poverty Analysis, Program Strategy and Partnerships and Alliances** (formal aspects of our partnerships [e.g. exit strategies] and accountability commitments [e.g. formalized feedback and complaints mechanisms]) **as being the top 3 priorities for the next years.** Likewise, and even if the process itself (standard 1 collaboration, iteration, participation) in Poverty Analysis is also identified as an area of strength, work to **improve the quality of program theories of change** is a key priority.

In addition to those challenges, our monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) practice is emerging as an area to watch closely. **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. The main MEL challenges that many programs are struggling with include: (1) evidence-based learning; (2) the involvement of communities in MEL processes; (3) the lack of flexibility of MEL systems; and (4) gender-sensitive MEL.

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[2] Neither the rule for green light nor for red light applies.
[3] OISP 2007–2012 "Demanding Justice"

HOW ARE WE USING THE PSSA FINDINGS?

So far, the process has successfully served 3 complementary objectives:

(1) At the country level, the exercise helped create an enabling environment for open discussions on different approaches as well as creating awareness of the potential to improve the quality of our programs by better integrating those same approaches developed by Oxfam over the years (e.g. Rights-based Approach, One Program Approach, Worldwide Influencing Network, etc.).

(2) Based on the exercise, program teams identified weak areas and needs for improvement at program and country levels, informing the global and regional levels around cross country needs and priorities for guidelines, training and staff development as well as program quality support staff structures. Each team designed improvement plans based on those findings.

(3) Our senior managers now have a general understanding of the overall quality of our program work and its relationship to our own standards, as well as the priorities for investment to fulfill our program quality agenda.

Responding to the findings, Oxfam put an initial set of initiatives and projects in place last year to address these priorities coming from the countries. Global level efforts included, for instance, the development of **2 Guides** for program staff, on **Women's Transformational Leadership** and **Violence against Women**; the development of **8 e-learning training modules on Gender Justice** (a basic gender module for all staff; gender & power analysis as well as gender, advocacy and campaigns modules, and more); work was done to advance **engendered MEL systems and practices** and a **roadmap for putting women's rights at the core of our work** was finalized. Likewise, new **National Influencing Guidelines** (with special emphasis on power analysis and how to work with the private sector) **were** developed jointly by programs and campaigns staff; the Oxfam **Program Framework** and the **Common Approach to MEL and Social Accountability** were also launched. A cross-affiliate team is working this year to develop a **confederation partnership vision, policy and practice guidance** to complement the existing Oxfam partnership principles. The forthcoming guidance to review existing strategies and develop the next generation of **Oxfam Country Strategies** puts strong emphasis on **power & gender analysis, theories of change and influencing**.

Finally, as part of our commitment to accountability and transparency, the PSSA exercises have been referenced in our annual report and through the Global Reporting Initiative, and we will continue to share occasional reports on progress through our website.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS: RESPONDING TO NEW CHALLENGES

Up to now, the process has had value in itself; work at country and regional level will continue, as program teams monitor the implementation of the agreed improvement plans and organize the necessary support for key programs and countries. Now, our new organizational context (including the new strategic plan, the new evaluation policy[4], and the Oxfam 2020 vision of a much more interdependent confederation) suggests the need for stronger mechanisms to support Oxfam's ambition to have better quality programs and to use our experience and knowledge for influencing. The PSSA will gradually shift to accommodate these challenges, reflecting Oxfam's organizational commitment to a long-term learning process that has as its objective the continuous improvement of our performance, standards, our manner of operationalization, and mutual and external accountabilities.

Oxfam needs to bring together sound evidence and cutting edge learning and innovation from local to global levels (and vice versa) to continuously improve quality and impact, and reinforce our influencing capacity. This means extra effort designing programmes that have the maximum potential to achieve change and therefore, closer monitoring of the quality of our work, as well as identifying strengths and weakness and putting the right improvement strategies in place. We do all this in order to live up to Oxfam's aspiration to become a knowledge-based organization and a thought leader in our sector.

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[4]Oxfam's policy of program evaluation is publicly available.