
ACCOUNTABILITY REVIEW IN MALAWI

Building the resilience and enhancing the adaptive capacity of women and men to climate change and climate variability

Effectiveness Review Series

2013/14



Photo: Innocent Kommwa/Oxfam

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACPC	Area Civil Protection Committee
AR	Accountability Review
BSHDC	Blantyre Synod Health and Development Commission
CPC	Civil Protection Committee
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GVH	Group Village Headman area
KII	Key Informant Interviews
MEAL	Monitoring Evaluation Accountability and Learning
MEL	Monitoring Evaluation and Learning
Oxfam GB	Oxfam Great Britain
TA	Traditional Authority
VCPC	Village Civil Protection Committee

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Accountability is the process through which an organisation balances the needs of stakeholders in its decision-making and activities, and delivers against this commitment. Accountability is based on four dimensions: transparency, participation, learning, and evaluation and feedback mechanisms that allow the organisation to give account to, take account of, and be held to account by stakeholders. Oxfam's principle is: 'We hold ourselves primarily accountable to people living in poverty, but we take our accountability to all stakeholders seriously, and continuously strive to balance their different needs. Increased accountability will be achieved and demonstrated through respectful and responsible attitudes, appropriate systems and strong leadership.' This assignment assessed accountability in terms of transparency, feedback/listening, participation, partnership practices, staff attitudes, and satisfaction (how useful the project is to the people and how wisely the money on this project has been spent). Staff attitudes and satisfaction did not apply to Oxfam's accountability to partners, but did to partners' accountability to communities.

To assess the levels to which Oxfam Malawi is meeting its accountability commitments to partners and communities, an Accountability Review (AR) was undertaken. Accountability is one of the eleven standards that Oxfam is expected to meet in its development work. This was the first AR to be conducted for Malawi Rights in Crisis projects under Oxfam, which sets a good basis for other projects, but also sets a foundation upon which accountability improvements can be made. An AR was conducted for the Projects Direct: 'Building the resilience and enhancing the adaptive capacity of women and men to climate change and climate variability in Malawi' with Blantyre Synod Health and Development Commission (BSHDC). Data was gathered through focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews (KII), home visits, manager and partner interviews, joint (partner and Oxfam) discussions, observations, attitudes and a document review. The AR was guided by tools provided by Oxfam for the purpose of information gathering. All the tools had similar indicators to be assessed. FGDs used the Ten Seed Technique where quarry stones (rather than red seeds) were used to represent responses on the artwork. Scores for all the exercises ranged from 1 to 4 (low to very high). Group Village Headmen (GVH) visited included GVH Damba, M'banda, Sitande, Majola and Gwadani. Six FGDs, six KIIs and fifteen home visits were conducted.

1.1 OXFAM'S ACCOUNTABILITY TO PARTNERS

Observations through the joint discussion and manager and staff interviews indicated that most indicators, such as transparency, feedback, participation and partnership practices have been partially implemented. There is no systematic approach on accountability that staff and partners are exposed to; it is basically business as usual.

Oxfam's accountability to partners – from 1 (low) to 4 (v high)

	(Average) Oxfam score	(Average) Partner score	Review Team score
Accountability Indicator			
Transparency	3	3	2
Feedback	3	3	3
Participation	4	3	3
Average Total:	3	3	3
Partnership practices	4	3	3

The reviewer's scores were based on the accountability matrix for Oxfam. On transparency – which measures information sharing – the issues of monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) were not fully adhered to, including a limited sharing of baseline reports by Oxfam to partners. It was also evident that reports are not made available to other stakeholders or in appropriate local languages. However, the reviewer scored transparency at level 2 because Oxfam and partners agreed that detailed project information is made publicly available, as well as general information about what Oxfam is, what it does, how it does it, who it works with, who funds it and basic information about project budget and activities. Methods for sharing information are chosen by project staff and/or partners. In addition Oxfam is able to share annual reports, conduct monitoring visits and quarterly review meetings, and engage in joint proposal and budget development at the beginning of the project. Changes to the project are documented and shared with partners. With regard to feedback, there are no established complaint/feedback mechanisms. However, complaints are informally addressed through emails, telephone calls and human-resource established systems. Funding agreements also provide for complaints channels. On participation, partners and Oxfam are involved in decision making, planning and budgeting as well as agreeing a common approach to implementation. It was found that communities were consulted about the project and information is provided for project staff to use in making decisions. Vulnerable groups to be supported in the project were identified. The only challenge was lack of evidence about whether men and women were consulted separately in the project development and the weak MEAL process. On partnership practices there was evidence that mutual expectations in the programme are politely discussed, and roles and responsibilities are clearly set out. Oxfam's practices support mutual growth, organisational development and institutional strengthening through capacity building. The only drawback is that there is no clearly agreed and relevant exit plan for the project.

The scores for document review were relatively low because staff and partners are not aware of most policy instruments, such as open information policy, minimum standards for transparency, Oxfam's complaints policy and procedures, and the Statement of Partnership Principles. Partners and staff could not ably and confidently refer to such policies in the discussion.

1.2 OXFAM AND PARTNERS' ACCOUNTABILITY TO COMMUNITIES

With regard to the accountability of Oxfam and partners to the community, the average score from the community on transparency was 3 because of limited knowledge of the project budget and how it is spent. Transparency scored 3 because of limited openness on budgetary issues and sometimes limited information on the type of interventions to be implemented by the partner. Furthermore, most communities are not aware of their right to demand this information. Other than that, they know the objectives of the project and the target group of the project and it is very easy for them to find out information about the project. Feedback, which was assessed through listening, was scored highly by communities and they indicated that the partner listens to their issues. The only challenge is on providing responses, hence the reviewer's rating of 3. Participation for communities, especially on decision-making, has not been inclusive. Partner staff are very friendly and communities feel comfortable discussing their issues. Satisfaction, which was measured by how useful the project is and how wisely the money has been spent, scored 3 because of the limited knowledge of communities on the project budget and hence the difficulty in knowing how wisely the money has been spent. However, the communities appreciate the project because it is changing a lot of lives for the better. They also indicated that they judge expenditure from the activities being implemented. During home visits, most households complained of not participating in the interventions.

The main strength for Oxfam is that all the accountability policies are in place, but what remains is the implementation of such commitments, including communicating them to staff. Overall, Oxfam exercises an average accountability in its leadership, systems and practices, hence the following recommendations to improve its accountability.

- Oxfam should sensitise staff, partners and communities on accountability principles (accountability matrix), standards and policies.
- Oxfam needs to develop and strengthen mechanisms for providing feedback both to partners and communities. Such mechanisms will assist with how MEAL findings, such as baseline, can reach the intended target.
- For the sake of sustainability and ownership, the partner should ensure that communities are involved throughout the project, including issues of budgets.
- An exit strategy for the project should immediately be developed, otherwise it will be too late and sustainability of the project will be affected.

2 INTRODUCTION

In addition to inclusivity and empowerment, accountability is a core value for Oxfam. This commitment means that *how* Oxfam does the work it does is as important as *what* is done. Oxfam has a responsibility to be accountable to the partners with whom it works, and Oxfam's accountability to people living in poverty is the joint responsibility of Oxfam and its partners.

Accountability is the process through which an organisation balances the needs of stakeholders in its decision making and activities, and delivers against this commitment. 'Accountability is based on four dimensions: transparency, participation, learning and evaluation, and feedback mechanisms that allow the organisation to give account to, take account of, and be held to account by stakeholders.' Oxfam stated principle is that: 'We hold ourselves primarily accountable to people living in poverty, but we take our accountability to all stakeholders seriously, and continuously strive to balance their different needs. Increased accountability will be achieved and demonstrated through respectful and responsible attitudes, appropriate systems and strong leadership.'

The accountability indicator that Oxfam has chosen to examine in its Accountability Reviews (ARs) is ***the degree to which its work meets its own standards for accountability.***¹ Oxfam is able to do this as it has clear standards that describe how a project/intervention/activity should be delivered by staff and partners and how it should be experienced by those for whom we are seeking change.

ARs seek evidence for, perceptions of, and make judgements about the degree to which any given project meets Oxfam's standards for accountability with regards to both:

- Oxfam GB's mutual accountability in our partnerships, and
- Oxfam GB and partners' shared accountability to those they work on behalf of.

The purpose of ARs is to examine performance against standards. ARs are not designed to measure accountability *per se* or impact as a result of good accountability – both of which are pieces of research Oxfam might choose to develop in the future. ARs take place at project level, in randomly selected projects that are approximately a quarter to half-way through their cycle – enough time for relationships to have been developed and with enough time remaining to put learning into practice during the lifetime of the project.

Oxfam in Malawi engaged a consultant to carry out an AR for Projects Direct 'Building the resilience and enhancing the adaptive capacity of women and men to climate change and climate variability in Malawi' implemented by Blantyre Synod Health and Development Commission (BSHDC) in Blantyre and Balaka Rural Districts. At the time of this review, the project had been implemented for two years and had one more year to close (April 2012 to March 2015). The AR was carried out with two main purposes:

1. To improve the way project work is carried out (not to cut poorly performing projects); and
2. To learn, as an organisation, what constitutes good accountability practices as far as key stakeholders are concerned.

It is believed that findings from this review will be used to improve accountability practices both internally within Oxfam and more broadly across the sector.

3 METHODOLOGY

Oxfam believes in assessing the ways in which it carries out its work, and therefore has devised a methodology for examining the leadership, systems and practices employed at project level to increase accountability to people living in poverty. In order to achieve consistency in a series of ARs around the world, Oxfam has developed a methodology for assessing accountability.

This assignment employed the tools provided to collect both qualitative and quantitative data from the communities (beneficiaries), partners (BSHDC) and manager and staff of Oxfam. The AR followed the steps below.

- *Assessment of leadership/management of project-level accountability:* this information was obtained through reviewing existing documentation, evidence from office visits, observation of behaviour, and interviews with managers and staff of the country programme.
- *Assessment of Oxfam's accountability to partners:* through a joint discussion (facilitated discussions) with both Oxfam and BSHDC staff, perceptions of and evidence about accountability were obtained. In addition, interviews with Oxfam and partner staff following questionnaires supplemented evidence on Oxfam's accountability to partners.
- *Assessment of Oxfam's and partners' accountability to key stakeholders:* this information was obtained through interviews with Oxfam and partner staff, observation, and an office-based exercise plus focus-group discussions and key informant interviews with communities.

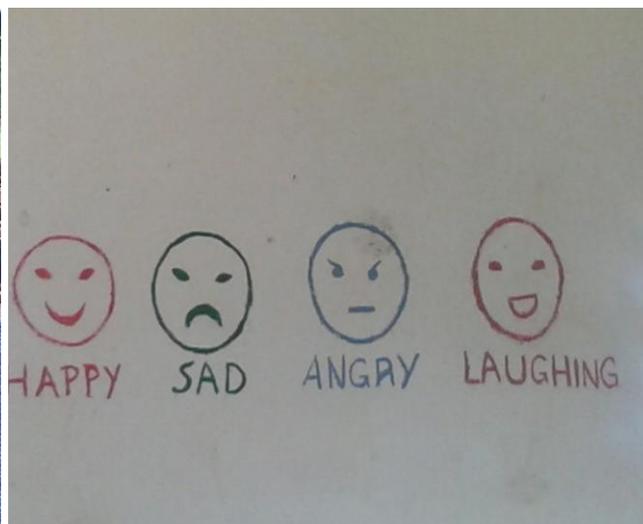
Before undertaking the AR, the reviewer spent a day reviewing the tools and relevant documents in order to fully understand the assignment. In addition she spent half a day at the Oxfam office in Lilongwe with Mr Chiyambi Mataya, Rights in Crisis Coordinator, to understand further the tools and the assignment. The reviewer and four research assistants spent half a day reviewing the methodology, testing questionnaires and focus group discussions (FGDs), testing modalities, preparing materials and sorting out the logistics to ensure a common understanding of the assignment. All the research assistants were engaged because they experience of research work. The data collection was conducted on 1–4 March and 28 March 2014.

The reviewer conducted community visits through FGDs, home visits and key informant interviews with beneficiaries from Traditional Authority (T/A) Kunthembwe, in Blantyre Rural, interviews with managers and staff, joint discussions with Oxfam and BSHDC staff and observations. The community visits were conducted only in T/A Kunthembwe because of accessibility during the rainy season compared to Balaka District. All five Group Village Headman areas (GVH) were visited, that is GVH Damba, M'banda, Sitande, Majola and Gwadani. Six FGDs were conducted; two with men only, three with women only and one group with both women and men. The FGDs had the minimum of five community representatives to a maximum of 18 community representatives and took about two to three hours on average. The composition of the FGD was members of the Civil Protection Committee (CPC) and community members. The selection criteria for the interviewees were being a member of CPC and community members. CPC is the entry point for the project. The review team supported by BSHDC field officer conducted the interviews using the local language.

The FGDs were as follows:

GVH	Number of participants	Representation of participants
Damba	5 males and 6 females	Dam Committee, Village Civil Protection Committee (VCPC) and Area Civil Protection Committee (ACPC).
GVH M'banda	5 males	VCPC and ACPC
GVH M'banda	7 females	VCPC and ACPC
Sitande	19 females	VCPC, ACPC and community members
Majola	10 females	VCPC, ACPC and community members
Gwadani	11 males	VCPC, ACPC and community members

Overall, 63 community members, inclusive of VCPC and ACPC, participated in the FGDs. It was noted that one of the participants was a man with physical disabilities who was very active in the FGD in GVH Gwadani. The Ten Seed Technique was used to seek community members' perspectives on accountability.



Using the Ten Seed Technique on 'Participation'

During the FGD, such artwork expressions were used

Participants were each given a quarry stone and invited to place it on one of four different ratings: low, average, high and very high against five main criteria: transparency, listening, participation, attitudes and satisfaction. Discussions before and after the scores were made took place to ensure the community clearly understood what was meant by accountability and how they perceived the performance of BSHDC, who is their main link to Oxfam in the project. It was noted that the discussion before and after scoring encouraged participants to make informed ratings, and in some instances they would discuss first before each one made their ratings independently reflecting their heightened understanding of the questions and their revised perceptions.

An artwork translated into the local language illustrating accountability indicators and the Ten Seed Technique were employed for the FGDs. Fifteen home visits and six KIIs were conducted in all the five GVHs following the two different sets of questionnaires. The KII checklist was administered to community leaders and leaders of CPCs.

FGDs, KIIs and home visits followed the accountability indicators – namely transparency, listening, participation, attitudes and satisfaction. After the interview, scores were compiled by the research assistants for each of the questionnaires. For KII, consent was obtained to

administer the questionnaire and the participants signed for the responses provided. Home visits used the KII questionnaire as there was no separate questionnaire provided.

In addition, a joint group discussion composed of five staff from BSHDC (three programmes staff and two finance staff) and four staff from Oxfam (four programmes staff and one finance staff member). Before the joint group discussion, a separate group discussion was conducted for the five BSHDC staff to ensure independence in the views is expressed. Three Oxfam manager and staff interviews (one from finance, one from programmes and another from management) were conducted. These two sets of data collection tools emphasised transparency/information sharing, feedback, participation and partnership.

The review team used the Oxfam matrix at Appendix 1 as the basis of the ratings, which shows different degrees of transparency, participation, feedback/complaints and staff attitudes. Ratings range from 1 to 4 with 1 being a 'low', 2 'average', 3 'high' and 4 'very high'.

The turnout for the FGDs, especially on the first day with the first group, was poor. The reviewer and the team arrived at the site and no participants were present, the team had to wait for the community members. Some people were actually invited to come from their homes, dam project and gardens; this resulted in others joining in the middle of the discussion. At this stage it was difficult to separate the group into women and men as guided, hence the mixed FGD GVH Damba. After realising that it might be difficult to use the project entry for FGDs, which is the VCPC, beneficiaries were invited for the discussion in the subsequent FGDs. In almost all groups, some people dominated, but the review team deliberately encouraged others to ensure inclusivity in the views contributed. In some cases the reviewer would ask quieter participants to explain their rating.

Furthermore, uninvited beneficiaries joined the discussions, which exploded the FGD numbers up to 19 in one case. Although this was good for diverse views, it meant that the well-prepared scores would be more than 10 and this would require some logic in the use of the Ten Seed Technique.

For home visits, it was challenging in some cases to travel longer distances from one home to another and this was overlooked during planning. Consequently time was lost and other homes waited for a long time to be interviewed. In addition, an appropriate tool was not provided by Oxfam so the review team improvised by using the KII tool.

It was challenging to find a suitable time for Oxfam and partners to conduct the joint discussion on Oxfam's accountability to partners. Similarly, it was difficult to find time for manager and staff interviews, resulting in only three interviews taking place.

4 SITUATIONAL SUMMARY

Malawi's human population is estimated to be 15.38 million (World Bank, 2011). The Third Integrated Household Survey (IHS) of 2012 revealed that 49% of the population is male and 51% is female. It is estimated that up to 85% of the population live in rural areas compared to 15% in urban areas. More than 25% of households in the country are headed by females. The national poverty rate is 50.7%, indicating that almost half of the population is poor and 25% of the population is ultra-poor. This means that about one in every four people lives in dire poverty, such that they cannot even afford to meet the minimum standard for daily recommended food-requirement. About 49% of people in male-headed households are poor and 57% of people in female-headed households are poor. The Southern region has the highest poverty rate (63%) implying that three out of five people live in poverty in the rural areas of the Southern region. The Northern region has the second highest proportion of poor people (60%). The Central region has the lowest proportion of poor people (49%).

About 85% of households in Malawi are engaged in agricultural activities. The country has for many years relied on agriculture as its economic mainstay. The agriculture sector accounts for about 93% of the total export earnings, providing more than 80% of the total employment and contributing about 35% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (NSO, 2011). Furthermore, the sector contributes 63.7% of total income for the rural poor. Agriculture also supplies at least 65% of the manufacturing sector's raw material requirements (DAES, 2000).

Key problems affecting agriculture in Malawi include unsustainable farming practices, heavy dependency on rain-fed systems and a low level of irrigation development. Furthermore there are high levels of vulnerability to the impacts of climate change and severe environment and natural resources degradation.

In Malawi natural resources and environment play a significant role in influencing social and economic development at both household and national level. Approximately 80% of Malawians depend on natural-resource-based livelihoods. If these resources were properly utilised they could provide the basis for sustainable socio-economic development of the country. However these resources are subject to increasing pressure. Achieving environmental sustainability in Malawi is an urgent concern. Unsustainable use of natural resources adversely impacts on the rate of economic growth in Malawi. Yaron *et al.*, (2010), for example have estimated that Malawi's GDP would be higher by 5.3% per year were it not for the unsustainable use of natural resources.

Malawi is one the most vulnerable countries to climate change and variability. This situation is aggravated by low adaptive capacity, chronic poverty and vulnerability, limited disaster risk analysis and action planning among the poor and rights holders at district and community level, heavy dependency on rain-fed systems and severe environment and natural resources degradation. The situation is further aggravated by a lack of understanding of climate variability and change issues among the poor in Malawi and a lack of enabling government policy and institutional frameworks on climate change.

The sectors mostly affected by the impacts of climate change include: agriculture, fisheries, forestry, infrastructure, health, water and gender. The impacts of climate change are being manifested in various ways in the country. Malawi has experienced increased frequency of extreme climatic hazards, such as intense and unreliable rainfall, sudden and severe floods, droughts, prolonged dry spells, and heavy thunderstorms and hailstorms. The increase in the number of extreme climate related events is a source of mounting concern because they are leading to lack of access to enough food and other livelihood assets. Across the country a growing number of communities are now experiencing the effects of climate change that seem to be out of the ordinary. Their quality of life is thus deteriorating every passing day due to the negative impacts of climate variability and change.

5 SHORT PROJECT SUMMARY

Balaka and Blantyre Rural Districts are in the Southern region of Malawi where poverty and ultra poverty levels are at 67.7% and 33.2% and 40.05% and 3.5% respectively – higher than the national averages of 50.7% and 24.5% (NSO, 2012). The major climate-related hazards in these areas affecting the livelihoods of the poor are drought (due to a changing climate) and seasonal dry spells (due to increasing climate variability). These have resulted in food and livelihood insecurity. It is extremely difficult for the poor living in these areas to adequately produce and meet their household food and income needs within a season and access adequate food from one season to another. Consequently, poor households have had to deplete their already limited household assets, but are still failing to cope. According to food security and livelihoods assessments conducted by the Malawi Vulnerability Assessment Committee (MVAC),² Balaka and Blantyre Rural Districts have, over the past 10 years, always featured as having poor populations experiencing food and livelihood insecurity. Most poor households harvest only enough to cover a month or two of household consumption requirements per year and have to depend on other negative coping strategies, such as begging for food, piece work in the fields of others at the expense of their own fields, burning and selling of charcoal (causing widespread environmental degradation), and over-collection of fuel wood for sale (causing environmental degradation) to be able to access some food for the rest of the year.

In spite of the erosion of livelihoods among the poor in Balaka and Blantyre Rural Districts being due mainly to the impacts of climate variability and change, the poor women and men in the districts have very limited adaptive capacity. They have a very limited asset base and undiversified livelihood strategies; they lack access to climate and hazard related information that could help them diversify their livelihoods effectively to adapt to a changing climate and manage hazard risks. The systems, especially agriculture extension systems, which are key to building the adaptive capacity of the poor to a changing climate, are also inaccessible to the poor.

This background informed Oxfam's introduction of the project 'Building the resilience and enhancing the adaptive capacity of women and men to climate change and climate variability in Malawi' through BSHDC. This project began in April 2012 and will close in March 2015.

The overall project aim is to enhance the adaptive capacity of 8,000 households of poor women and men from Balaka and Blantyre Districts by 2015. Specifically the project intends to:

- increase resilience and adaptive capacity to the impacts of climate variability and change for 8,000 households of poor women and men from Balaka and Blantyre Districts of rural Malawi by 2015;
- reverse trends and factors that exacerbate vulnerability and reduce resilience to the impacts of climate variability and change for 8,000 households in Balaka and Blantyre Rural Districts by 2015; and
- improve community awareness and preparedness for future climate-change risks and impacts in 10 GVHs from Balaka and Blantyre District by 2015.

6 HOW ACCOUNTABLE IS OXFAM TO PARTNERS IN THIS PROJECT

To address this question, data were collected using the manager and staff questionnaire, joint and individual discussions with Oxfam and BSHDC partners, and observations. The average respective scores were as follows.

Accountability Indicator	(Average) Oxfam score	(Average) Partner score	Review team score
Transparency	3	3	2
Feedback	3	3	3
Participation	4	3	3
Average Total	3	3	3
Partnership practices	4	3	3

The reviewer used the levels given in the Oxfam Accountability Matrix to score the respective accountability indicators.

6.1 TRANSPARENCY³

The main focus on transparency is on information sharing. As drawn from the matrix, the reviewers score on transparency (2) is dependent on the fact that both Oxfam and partners agreed that detailed project information is made publicly available, basic information about what Oxfam is, what it does, how it does it, who it works with, who funds it and basic information about project budget and activities. Methods for sharing information are chosen by project staff and/or partners. In addition Oxfam is able to share annual reports, conduct monitoring visits and quarterly review meetings, undertake joint proposal and budget development at the beginning of the project and ensure changes to the project are documented and shared with partners. Transparency failed to score either 3 or 4 because of the limited availability and accessibility of reports, such as baseline reports, limited feedback to partners on emerging issues, limited joint reviewing of MEL (monitoring, evaluation and learning) findings and the absence of systematic complaints-handling procedures with partners in ways that are relevant, accessible and appropriate. In addition, it was indicated that in most cases partners do not access the policies and guidelines supporting the contracts as such – they implement programmes as usual. Furthermore, there was no evidence of the budgetary information and M&E reports in appropriate local languages for stakeholders to access or that this information is regularly updated. Oxfam needs to improve on transparency with the guidance given in footnote 3 and in the accountability matrix on transparency. Oxfam rated itself 3 on transparency because it communicated all the information through emails, review meetings, informal discussions and telephone calls, as well as explaining that the changes, partner proposal and agreements are developed together and Oxfam’s plans are shared with partners. Oxfam recognised MEAL as a drawback where the baseline findings for this particular project have not been provided to

partners and yet the partner is half way through the implementation of the project. In addition the MEAL is currently weak and the partner knew nothing of it at the time of the review. The partners (BSHDC) scored transparency at 3 because they acknowledged to have received all the information about the project. They listed three limitations: baseline findings not shared with them, reasons for delayed funding not shared – mainly in the first quarter, and exchange gains on their budget pounds not being well explained, especially on the rate being used.

6.2 FEEDBACK⁴

The reviewer gave feedback a score of 3 because of the absence of feedback and complaints systems, but recognised the existence of an informal system of feedback through emails and when a need arises. In addition, funding agreements provide channels of complaint. Also, regardless of not having a formal system, feedback is provided. The best practice on feedback is to design and implement a system. Indicators for attributes of a good feedback system can be found in the accountability matrix at the end of this report. Oxfam staff scored 3 on feedback because of the existence of open communication channels for partners on complaints and because feedback is provided to partners. They acknowledged that no formal structures are instituted for channelling complaints and providing feedback to partners. The partner BSHDC rated 3 on feedback, they indicated that the programme's review meetings are conducted regularly to provide feedback, but sometimes it takes a long time for Oxfam to give feedback to partners, especially on financial matters. In addition there is no systematic complaints mechanism and sometimes Oxfam is not flexible in discussing other emerging programme issues, such as improvement to beneficiary priority needs. Best practice would be for the project to demonstrably seek continuous improvement in the quality and use of a complaints mechanism.

6.3 PARTICIPATION⁵

Participation in accountability is about staff involvement in making key decisions about the project. The reviewer scored 3 because BSHDC and communities were consulted about the project, information is provided for project staff to use in making decisions, and vulnerable groups were identified. In addition, the partner and Oxfam operate joint proposal and budget development. The weakness on participation is because of unclear evidence whether women and men were consulted separately in the project development. On the other hand, Oxfam rated itself 4 for participation because it indicated that all partners and staff participate equally in all processes, such as decision making, planning and budgeting. Both BSHDC and Oxfam have a common agreement on how to implement the project. BSHDC also appreciated gender balance within the programme and scored 3 on participation.

6.4 PARTNERSHIP PRACTICES⁶

Partnership refers to relationships between project staff and stakeholders. The reviewer scored 3 on the partnership practices because there was evidence that mutual expectations in the programme are politely discussed, roles and responsibilities clearly set out Oxfam's practices to support mutual growth, organisational development and institutional strengthening through capacity building. The only drawback is that there is no clearly agreed and relevant exit plan regardless of a partner knowing the project life. Finally, on partnership practices, Oxfam also rated itself 4 because agreements and contracts are in place to define roles and responsibilities, capacity development of partners takes place and regular joint reviews are conducted. The partner indicated that the roles and responsibilities are very clear and the only drawback is the lack of exit plan/strategy. The only stakeholders involved in the programme are the government personnel in the implementing area.

With the manager and staff interview, some staff showed that accountability is being fulfilled within the 11 standards; however there is need for improvement. It was also shown that some staff did not know much about accountability because they have not been oriented comprehensively to the standards of the organisation. Some of these staff could not point to accountability policies that their work or the organisation is aligned to. In fact, it was the first time that they had heard of accountability within Oxfam.

The document review, which was very limited, also showed that although policy documents, such as the open information policy, minimum standards for transparency, Oxfam's complaints policy and procedures, and Statement of Partnership Principles exist, staff and partners are not very much aware of these instruments and their contents. Partners and staff could not ably and confidently refer to such polices and promised to take increasing awareness forward in the action plan.

7 HOW ACCOUNTABLE ARE OXFAM AND PARTNERS TO COMMUNITIES IN THIS PROJECT?

Oxfam and partner accountability to communities – from 1 (low) to 4 (v high)

Accountability Indicator	(Average) Oxfam/Partner score	(Average) Community score	Review Team score
Transparency	3	2	3
Feedback ⁷	3	3	3
Participation	3	3	3
Total:	3	3	3
Staff attitudes	n/a	3	3
Satisfaction	n/a	3	3

The scores are the averages of the five different scores for respective GVHs and KIIs. On accountability of Oxfam and partner to communities, the score was only made by the partner (BSHDC) because of their direct link with communities. Within BSHDC, the rating was made by the field officer responsible for Blantyre Rural. Communities access most of the information through committees, such as the VCPC, who have a direct link with the project officers. BSHDC is the link between Oxfam and communities.

The community rated the partner at 3 for feedback, participation, staff attitudes⁸ and satisfaction⁹ because of the aggregation from the FGDs, KII, home visits and observations. The FGDs used the Ten Seed Technique to arrive at these scores.

7.1 TRANSPARENCY

The average score from the community on transparency was 2 because of the community's limited knowledge of the project budget and how it is spent. Some communities know that they can demand this information, but they do not have the confidence to do so, sometimes being afraid to demand this type of information. Some members of VCPC in Gwadani attempted to demand such information on the budget, but to no avail. The reviewer scores on transparency are equal to the community (3) because of limited openness of issues budget and sometimes limited information on the type of interventions to be implemented. Other than this, communities understand the objectives of the project and the project information is easily accessible.

7.2 FEEDBACK

Feedback was addressed through answering the question ‘How much does Oxfam or the partner listen to your ideas and concerns?’ Feedback seemed limited because of the complaints from the communities that the partner should improve, especially on responding to their concerns, and not just responding, but also considering the timing. Responses have mostly been delayed. Although feedback is provided, most GVHs, especially through the KII, complained that when concerns are expressed there is no feedback or feedback is delayed, which sometimes clashes with the farm calendar, hence the reviewer’s score of 3. Communities feel that although most of their concerns are not addressed, the partner does have a listening ear to their challenges.

7.3 PARTICIPATION

Participation for communities, especially with decision making, has not been inclusive. Conversely, for women participation has always been encouraged and they have been empowered through the project and some are holding decision-making positions in the committees. The staff from the partner are very friendly and communities feel comfortable to discuss their issues with them, but communities complained about how meetings are arranged, being called without prior notice and sometimes people are kept the whole day without food and with no allowance, while others within the same meeting do receive an allowance. Venues are often poor. This shows weaknesses in both attitudes and transparency. The communities indicated that this may affect their future participation. KIIs in GVH Gwadani and Dambe indicated that key decisions by partners are made without their input. But other GVHs acknowledged being consulted and involved in most decisions made, hence the score of 3.

7.4 SATISFACTION

Satisfaction, measured by how useful the project is and how wisely the money is being spent, scored 3 because of limited knowledge about the project budget and hence difficulty in knowing how wisely the money has been spent. Despite the budget issue, communities appreciated the results of the project and they feel the money is being spent well because of the interventions and materials or inputs being disbursed. The communities were happy that the project is targeting them, especially the most vulnerable, including the old, orphaned, people living with disability, those affected with HIV and AIDS, child-headed families and farmers/households affected by climate-change effects, hence the reviewer’s scoring of 3.

During home visits, most households complained of not participating in the interventions as their direct link is the committees and sometimes they are not given a chance to voice their ideas.

During the home visits, the lowest average score was on satisfaction. Similar views on limited budget information were also shared.

8 OVERALL MAIN STRENGTHS

- Accountability is not a new principle within Oxfam, some staff know about it and others do not. This review presents a good starting point to implement accountability among the 11 standards that Oxfam is aligned to. This also applies to policies that Oxfam's work is guided by.
- All related accountability policies, such as open information policy, minimum standards for transparency, Oxfam's complaints policy and procedures and Statement of Partnership Principles already exist within Oxfam.
- Concerns and complaints are dealt with regardless of not having a formal system in place to deal with such issues. The findings of this review should stir the management to start considering instituting formal complaint mechanisms at community and partner level.
- There is a considerable level of accountability at community level, especially with regard to participation, staff attitudes and satisfaction. Transparency and feedback are somewhat weak because of the gaps that were identified, such as limited information on budget and delays in response to concerns. Responses from other GVHs clearly showed that they are involved in decision making.
- There is high participation of both men and women at community, partner and Oxfam level. This was shown through the numbers that came for the meetings as well as designated positions in the offices.
- Partnership is strong because of the funding agreements and related contractual procedures that are agreed mutually at the beginning of the project. All other accountability issues are indicated in the agreements among other standards, but suffer during implementation because of lack of understanding.

9 OVERALL MAIN WEAKNESSES

- Oxfam did not share findings of the baseline with its partners, which is a major gap in transparency. In addition, issues concerning finances, especially on exchange rates, were not clearly communicated to the partner.
- Oxfam is not flexible on suggestions from the communities through the partner. Partners have an interface with the communities, but the lack of response to some changes for the benefit of the project affects the implementation of the programme
- Oxfam has no formal way of addressing complaints and concerns. This was traced through the discussion with the partner and Oxfam staff. This could result in inconsistent addressing of issues. The partnership agreement does not sufficiently provide for complaints mechanisms.
- Limited involvement of communities in decision-making is affecting the type of interventions and other logistical arrangements for the projects, such as quantities of inputs to be distributed, sources of the inputs and the number of people to be targeted for the intervention. Home visits also revealed that community members that are not part of the committees are left out and miss a lot of information.
- The communities have very little or no information on the budget for the project. This means they not to know how the money has been spent or how to contribute to effective spending.
- The majority of the communities, except for those in Gwadani, are not aware of their right to demand a level of transparency from duty bearers. This was illustrated by them not demanding information on the project budget or how the money was spent.
- The project has no exit strategy; this is a serious limitation in terms of sustainability. The project is in its second year, but communities have not yet been told of the exit strategy.

10 PROGRAMME LEARNING CONSIDERATIONS

The project staff responsible for the project implemented in Blantyre Rural District, should seriously consider taking forward the following recommendations in order to improve accountability.

- Oxfam could achieve significant accountability if the staff and partners are sensitised to the accountability principles (accountability Matrix) among other standards. This could be done through orientation when they are entering Oxfam. Those that have been there for a while should also be inducted in the principles.
- Oxfam is aligned to a number of policies. These should also be known to staff in order for them to effectively achieve accountability among other standards.
- Oxfam needs to develop mechanisms on how to provide feedback both to partners and communities. Such mechanisms will assist MEAL findings, such as baseline, to reach the intended target.
- Oxfam should institute complaints mechanisms, such as suggestion boxes or score cards, to ensure that complaints and concerns are addressed fairly and systematically.
- For the sake of sustainability and ownership, the partner should ensure that communities are involved throughout the project, especially on key decisions that affect them.
- There is a big problem with transparency on budgets for the project. Even Humanitarian Accountability Standards principles encourage projects to be accountable to beneficiaries. Oxfam should be sensitive to how this can be done.
- Oxfam and partners should sensitise communities on accountability principles so they can demand this from duty bearers. Sensitisation should also go beyond the committees.
- An exit strategy for the project should immediately be developed, otherwise it will be too late and the sustainability of the project will also be affected.

11 COMMITMENTS FOR/TO CHANGE

In the validation workshop, it was noted that most staff have not been inducted with regard to accountability within Oxfam. Most of them have realised the importance of accountability through the review. Therefore all the recommendations that the reviewer made were agreed upon as action points to be taken forward and these include the following.

- Oxfam and partners should devise ways to communicating budgetary issues to communities.
- Transparency should go beyond the programme. Issues on finance, especially exchange rates, should be clear to the partner.
- MEAL should be as inclusive as possible.
- Feedback mechanisms both for the partner and community should be developed.
- Participation of communities in decision-making processes, especially the project cycle, should be promoted.
- There should be rapid response to issues.
- An exit strategy for the project should be developed.
- Oxfam should devise strategies to ensure that partners and staff are inducted with regard to all necessary policies.

12 EVALUATOR'S VIEW ON VALIDITY OF PROCESS, FINDINGS AND RESULTS

Accountability reviews are not common for most organisations and in most cases these are part of end-of-project evaluation, especially with regard to efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability, but this tends to bury the whole idea of accountability. This review helped us to understand the extent to which Oxfam is implementing accountability as well as the gaps that currently exist. The AR was a very useful tool that helped us to understand accountability at Oxfam, partner and community level through the different levels of analysis.

The review process went well within the communities. Oxfam and partner staff were as open as possible. For communities, arrangements were made on specific dates and times to meet. To ensure openness, it was essential to clearly introduce the team as being independent and that no names would be attached to any exercise unless with consent. It was also made clear that everyone is entitled to their views and would be respected for those views as long as evidence is provided. Indeed in some cases responses skewed towards praising Blantyre Synod and Oxfam, but probing via discussion on certain responses helped to gain insights on areas of improvement. The use of artwork in FGDs with communities was appropriate to get human stories on accountability. In addition, the use of the Ten Seed Technique meant that individuals could make their own view known through casting their own vote.

As guided by the tools, FGDs were grouped into males and females to provide freedom in voicing issues, but the challenge was with the limited numbers of participants for the discussions. Because of small numbers for the first group, a mix of male and female members was convened. The use of already developed tools assisted the evaluators in having similar indicators across different interviews. This made it easier for the review team to improve on the questioning because of the repetition of the indicators.

During the validation workshop, the community responses were triangulated with Oxfam's and partner's to ensure that there was a consensus on the level of accountability Oxfam has achieved on the project.

13 EVALUATOR'S VIEW ON TOOL AND POTENTIAL IMPROVEMENTS

AR is an important process in the development of projects as it provides assessment of factors such as transparency, participation, feedback and satisfaction via a scoring system. The tools developed by Oxfam are good guiding methods to collect uniform accountability information across countries. Although this is the case, Oxfam staff in Malawi are not very conversant with the tools themselves and the reviewer depended on the Oxfam accountability adviser for most technical issues on the tools.

The tools are straightforward and handy to collect data. However few comments on them can be made.

- The tools are too long with repetitive questions, which puts off some respondents when reviewers have not yet mastered the tool.
- There is too much information collected and not used in the report. The tools should be designed to be specific rather than collecting so much information without using it in the report.
- The feedback indicator for FGDs and KIIs was assumed to be 'Listening'. To ensure uniformity this indicator should be the same across all tools.
- The use of the Ten Seed Technique should be clarified especially where the participation numbers are above ten.
- The scoring for satisfaction could be subjective in a way because the tables provide for one score for satisfaction, but the tools have two scores for satisfaction, hence the final scores represents averages of the two satisfaction scores. In addition, there are other two satisfaction indicators especially for KII and FGDs whose information rarely finds its way into the report.
- The tools for FGDs should not only involve categorised sets of women and men but also mixed groups to assess the levels of openness. The mixed group views will assist especially in situations where the turnout of participants for the FGDs is low, as in our case.
- The formulas in the score sheet (015) should be corrected to avoid false information.
- The instructions for tool number 11 are applicable in situations where the number of related staff and partners is large enough. Consideration should be given to accommodating projects with low staff. It was a challenge to achieve the recommended numbers, which forced the taking on of non-project staff who had very little to offer.
- The tool for the home visits was not available, so the one for the KII was adapted for use at household level. There should be a well-designed tool for home visits.
- Using observation in the behaviours and attitudes for evidence was not commonly done in this exercise. This was only applied during FGDs and joint discussions where certain discussion statements were attributed to certain conclusions.

APPENDIX 1 – ACCOUNTABILITY MATRIX

Oxfam GB Definition: ‘Accountability is the process through which an organisation balances the needs of stakeholders in its decision-making and activities, and delivers against this commitment. Accountability is based on four dimensions: transparency, participation, learning and evaluation, and feedback mechanisms that allow the organisation to give account to, take account of, and be held to account by stakeholders.’

Oxfam GB Principles: ‘We hold ourselves primarily accountable to people living in poverty, but we take our accountability to all stakeholders seriously, and continuously strive to balance their different needs. Increased accountability will be achieved and demonstrated through respectful and responsible attitudes, appropriate systems and strong leadership.’

Matrix – Accountability in Oxfam projects

Dimensions	Levels			
	1	2	3	4
Transparency	Limited project information is shared in an <i>ad hoc</i> manner with stakeholders. Most information is provided verbally and/or informally. It is generally provided at the beginning of the project and may not be updated.	Detailed project information is made publicly available: basic information about what Oxfam is, what it does, how it do it, who it works with, who funds it and basic information about project budget and activities. Methods for sharing information are chosen by project staff and/or partners.	Detailed information about Oxfam, the partner and the project, including budgetary information and M&E reports are made available in appropriate local languages using methods that are easy for stakeholders to access: this information is regularly updated. A public annual report of Oxfam’s work in a country is available in hard copies in all country offices.	Full project and financial information is made available in ways that are easily accessible for all stakeholders. Project staff negotiate how best to share project information about objectives, budget, progress and complaints-handling procedures with stakeholders: in ways that are relevant, accessible and appropriate to them. MEL findings are fed back and reviewed with stakeholders.
Feedback	No formal feedback or complaints mechanisms are in place.	Stakeholders are informed of their right to give feedback about projects, to make complaints and are offered at least one way to do both. Project	Project has formal feedback and complaints mechanisms in place; actively encourages stakeholders to give feedback and make complaints; and	Feedback and complaints systems are designed with stakeholders, building on respected local ways of giving feedback. Systems

		staff ask for information feedback from stakeholders.	records all feedback and complaints. Feedback and complaints always receive a response. Project demonstrably seeks continuous improvement in the quality and use of the complaints mechanisms.	encourage the most marginalised to respond and are comprehensive. Feedback and complaints always receive a response. Trends are monitored and learning is fed to the wider organisation. Project demonstrably seeks continuous improvement in the quality and use of complaints mechanism.
Participation	Stakeholders are informed about the project. Plans are discussed with key informants in the community, who are taken as representative of the full community. There is limited analysis of who holds authority in the local community and how.	Stakeholders are consulted about project plans. They provide information that project staff use to make key decisions about their work at all stages of the project cycle. Women and men are consulted separately, and main social groupings in the community are identified, including the most marginalised.	Decisions are made jointly by project staff, with stakeholders consulted about plans. Stakeholders regularly provide information that project staff use to make key decisions about their work at all stages of the project cycle. Women and men are consulted separately, and teams ensure main social groupings in the community are identified and their voices heard.	Decisions are made jointly by project staff and stakeholders. Stakeholders contribute equally in making key decisions about the project, throughout the entire cycle, including planning the budget. Project staff make sure they work with individuals and organisations who truly represent the interests of different social groups. It is clear that Oxfam's projects are influenced by partners and communities where Oxfam works.
Relationships	Project staff understands that respect for stakeholders is important but are unsure how to strengthen these relationships.	Project staff are always polite and patient with stakeholders and try to understand local social expectations, and mostly speak local language(s). However staff do not have	Programmes help stakeholders build up their self-confidence and self-respect. Project staff aim to help local people to analyse and tackle their own issues in their own ways.	Programme actively promotes dialogue and reflection between project staff and stakeholders on each other's experience. By working together new options for action are developed without ideas being

		much time to devote to this challenge.	Formal mechanisms exist to support this aspiration.	unilaterally imposed. Formal mechanisms support this aspiration and are regularly reviewed and adapted jointly by project staff and stakeholders.
Standards	Project team is not aware of the international standards or codes that Oxfam is signed up to.	Relevant international standards or codes that Oxfam is signed up to, are clearly referenced in the project approach, and communicated to stakeholders.	Relevant international standards or codes that Oxfam is signed up to are clearly referenced in the project activities, and a clear process to measure performance against these standards is set out. Review and reflection on performance is done <i>ad hoc</i> .	Relevant international standards or codes that Oxfam is signed up to demonstrably inform project design and delivery. Clear processes for measuring and reflecting on performance against these standards exist, and are used to develop plans to improve future practice.

APPENDIX 2 – ITINERARY AND PEOPLE MET

Activity	Day
Briefing with Blantyre Synod Health and Development Commission	February 28 2014
Data collection: FGDs, KII and home visits GVH: Damba and M'banda	March 1 2014
Data collection: FGDs, KII and home visits GVH: Sitande, Majola and Gwadani	March 3 2014
Meeting with Blantyre Synod Health and Development Commission project staff on Oxfam's accountability to partners	March 4 2014
Joint meeting with Blantyre Synod Health and Development Commission and Oxfam project staff on Oxfam's accountability to partners Manager and staff interview	March 28 2014
Final workshop	April 8 2014

APPENDICES 3-12

Appendices 3 – 10 are available on request:

3. 009 Score sheet – document review and evidence scoring sheet.xlsx
4. 010 Questionnaire – staff interviews.docx – ALL
5. 011 Questionnaire – Oxfam GB accountability to partners.docx – ALL
6. Focus group reports – from 013 Instructions – community visits – FGDs.docx – ALL
7. KII reports – from 014 Instructions – community visits – KIIs.docx – ALL
8. Home visits – Reports
9. 015 Results sheets.xlsx
10. Workshop presentation – from 016 Template ppt for workshop.pptx
11. Workshop notes

The workshop was conducted for around two hours on April 8 2014. The presentation was made to Oxfam Malawi staff on the draft findings. The main discussion was on clarification of the findings. Oxfam staff acknowledged limited evidence on understanding policy documents, limited transparency on budgetary issues, no feedback, lack of feedback mechanism and limited participation of partners in decision-making. The issue of no feedback was referred back to reviews of the project, such as baseline and mid-term reviews, but the partners have not yet received the findings. The workshop agreed to take up the recommendations and act upon them.

12. Workshop commitments

Activity	Day
Submission of Report	April 28 2014
Feedback on Report	June 13 2014
Final Report	June 27 2014
Management response	July 7 2014
Report and response shared with stakeholders	Mid July 2014
Publication	End of July 2014

NOTES

- 1 Equating meeting our own accountability standards to acceptable accountability in the delivery of the work we do is an untested assumption. Testing this assumption is an extremely demanding piece of work - really unpicking, examining and having confidence in a causal link between meeting our accountability standards and truly accountable relationships will be challenging for many reasons.
- 2 MVAC is a multi-stakeholder forum that undertakes annual food and livelihood vulnerability assessments in Malawi.
- 3 Best practice – Full project information, including financial information, is made available in ways that are easily accessible to partners. Oxfam GB negotiates how best to share project information about objectives, budget, progress, and feedback/complaints-handling procedures with partners, in ways that are relevant, accessible and appropriate. MEAL findings are fed back and reviewed with partners. Substantive changes to the programme are well documented, including how decisions were taken, and are proactively shared with partners.
- 4 Best Practice – Feedback and complaints systems are designed with partners, building on respected appropriate ways of giving feedback. Systems encourage all partners to give feedback and are comprehensive. Feedback and complaints always receive a response. Oxfam GB monitors, learns and changes its approach based on the feedback and complaints it receives from partners. Oxfam demonstrably seeks continuous improvement in the quality and use of feedback and complaints mechanisms.
- 5 Best Practice – Oxfam GB and partner staff (women and men alike) contribute equally in making key decisions about the project throughout the project cycle, including: planning the budget, policy work, implementation, MEAL process and resulting changes to direction or approach.
- 6 Best Practice - Mutual expectations, with clear roles and responsibilities are clearly set out and subject to regular and formal review. Oxfam's practices support mutual growth, organisational development and institutional strengthening. There is a clearly agreed and relevant exit plan.
- 7 Feedback for the community visits was measured through an indicator 'LISTENING' which captured how much does the partner listen to their ideas and concerns?
- 8 Staff attitude was defined as 'How comfortable do you feel discussing your issues with the organisation's staff?'
- 9 Satisfaction was addressed by four questions: How useful is the project to people? How wisely has money been spent on this project? Which groups of people have benefited the most from the organisation's work? and asking communities to identify two things that they like about the project and two things they do not like?

Oxfam Effectiveness Reviews

For more information, or to comment on this report, email ppat@oxfam.org.uk

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The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

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OXFAM

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