

Oxfam Management response to the review of *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)*

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1. The context and background of the review

As part of Oxfam Great Britain's (OGB) Global Performance Framework (GPF), samples of mature projects are randomly selected each year. The levels to which Oxfam projects are meeting their accountability commitments to partners and communities are assessed. 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. 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.

The 'Building the resilience and enhancing the adaptive capacity of women and men to climate change and climate variability in Malawi' project was selected for review in this way.

Accountability is one of the eleven standards that Oxfam is expected to meet in its development work. It 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 and, participation - three key dimensions of Accountability for Oxfam. In addition it asked questions around 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) where appropriate.

The project was 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.



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. Group Village Headmen (GVH) visited included GVH Damba, M'banda, Sitande, Majola and Gwadani. Six FGDs, six KIIs and fifteen home visits were conducted.

2. Summary main findings and recommendations

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

Acct Indicator	Transparency	Feedback	Participation
Review Team Score	2	3	3

Transparency: Issues of monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL) were not fully adhered to, including 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, 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. Oxfam also shares annual reports, conducts monitoring visits and quarterly review meetings, and engages in joint proposal and budget development at the beginning of the project. Changes to the project are documented and shared with partners.

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.

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.

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

Acct Indicator	Transparency	Feedback	Participation
Review Team Score	3	3	3

Transparency: The community had limited knowledge of the project budget and how it is spent. There was 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: There was an indication that partners listen to the communities' issues, though there is a challenge on providing responses.

Participation: This for communities, especially on decision-making, has not been inclusive. Partner staff are very friendly and communities feel comfortable discussing their issues.

Recommendations:

- *Consider conducting training in accountability principles for all current and new staff: 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 should devise strategies to ensure that partners and staff are inducted with regard to all necessary policies.*
- *For the sake of sustainability and ownership, partners should ensure that communities are involved throughout the project, especially on key decisions that affect them.*
- *Oxfam and partners should sensitise communities on accountability principles so they can demand this from duty bearers. Sensitisation should also go beyond the committees.*
- *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.*

Project Specific:

- *An exit strategy for the project should be developed.*



3. Overall do the findings of the review concur with you own expectations or assessment of the project's accountability?

The findings concur with the Programme expectations and we are aware of where the challenges and opportunities exist. The review has helped to revisit our Accountability plans beyond the Humanitarian Programming. As a Programme we have noted that we have done quite well in addressing the accountability principles in humanitarian response and very little on the ongoing long term development programmes. The assessment also concurs with the Internal Audit which was carried out in August 2014 and identified areas where the programme needs to improve on accountability for both staff and Partners.

4. Did the review identify areas that were particularly strong in the project?

- 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.

5. Did the review identify areas that were particularly weak in the project?

- 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.

6. Summary of review quality assessment

The review quality was mixed and the assessment was based mostly on the interviews with different stakeholders and as such the final rating was not based on a particular scientific formula rather on how the informants responded. The rating therefore was based on how well or bad the informant responded and the interviewer made the final rating. While capacity building on accountability for staff was carried out and internal assessment on the Programme Standards was done, the programme has experienced some staff turnover and therefore not every staff member in the team has knowledge on accountability and partnership principles.

However considering an average score of 3 in accountability for Oxfam and Partners, we take this as an achievement and aim to do more in the next OCS which starts in April, 2015. However the actions to ensure this achievement are basically starting immediately as also recommended from the Internal Audit exercise of August 2014.

7. Main Oxfam follow-up

The Programme will devise accountability strategies at different levels and ensure that staff, partners and communities are trained and are aware of what they need to do at every moment of the project/programme cycle. Communication strategies will be in place at all levels to ensure two way feedback in provided at all levels.



8. Any conclusions/recommendations Oxfam does not agree with or will not act upon

None

9. What learning from the review will you apply to relevant or new projects in the future? How can the regional centre/Oxford support these plans?

The main learning from this review is to treat both long term and humanitarian programmes as the same when it comes to accountability and application of the accountability principles and standards. Ensure that there are clear strategies on feedback mechanism, complain mechanisms, participation by all stakeholders and also transparency at all stakeholders.

10. Additional reflections

None