

Oxfam Management response to the review of *Accountability Review in Haiti: Small-scale urban farming in Port-au-Prince (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 project focusing on small-scale urban farming in Port-au-Prince, in Haiti, 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.

Carrefour Feuilles, located on the hill overlooking the metropolitan area, originally was a forested area protected by the state. Under heavy migratory pressure from rural areas to Port-au-Prince, it became arbitrarily occupied by people seeking a place to build homes. It is currently inhabited by more than 300,000 people, making it one of the most populated parts of the municipality of Port-au-Prince. Carrefour Feuilles was most severely affected following the 2010 earthquake, which claimed many lives and destroyed the revenue sources of most of its inhabitants.

The general objective of the project is to contribute to improving food security for vulnerable households in urban areas through the development of a small-scale urban farming system in three urban districts in Carrefour Feuilles.

Specific objectives:

1. To encourage poor households in Carrefour Feuilles to grow vegetables in the surrounding areas or on the roofs of their houses, in used tyres and other receptacles.
2. To improve access to food and to revenue-generating activities through the development of small-scale urban farming in Carrefour Feuilles.
3. To strengthen the role and the voice of the poor in their process of successfully adopting urban farming as a strategy for improving access to food through environmentally friendly urban gardening.

The evaluator took opinions from more than 67 people in the following forms:

- Oxfam senior management team (3 people)
- Workshop with Oxfam staff and partners (8)
- Six male/female focus groups in three communities (48)
- Individual meetings (8)

An additional two feedback sessions were held, one with Oxfam staff and the other with 30 beneficiaries and partner staff. The evaluator also visited the project execution sites.

2. Summary main findings and recommendations

Summary table: Oxfam’s score for accountability to partners – from 1 (low) to 4 (v high)

Acct Indicator	Transparency	Feedback	Participation
Review Team Score	4	3	3

Transparency: Information provided to the partners was available in the agreement between the two parties for conducting the work on the ground. There have been a number of exchanges between Oxfam and the partners throughout the project, and changes have been made based on the discussions. The partner could have asked for more information if it was necessary during the launch phase of the project, and during its execution. The partner should have taken more of a lead on the matter of managing information with the community.

Feedback: Decision making habits have been inherited from the previous phase of the project persist, as well as imperfections of the existing complaints system. Implementation of certain decisions could also be more timely. However, Oxfam always gives feedback on the documents submitted by COZPAM.

Participation: The partners were consulted and dossiers were discussed jointly, but they did not always have all the strategic information that was available to Oxfam in order to make their final decisions. This missing information relates in particular to the levers available to Oxfam with which to provide additional programme resources to the project if need be. With regard to this indicator, an improvement in transparency will also have a beneficial impact on the partner’s involvement in decision-making concerning major changes to the project.

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

Acct Indicator	Transparency	Feedback	Participation
Review Team Score	2	2.7	2

Transparency: The Oxfam team makes an effort to share MEAL (monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning) reports with the partners and the community, and arrangements are made based on these reports. However, information in managing the project, particularly with regard to financial management was not widely shared. A discussion about financial resources would enable community members to better understand the choices made in managing the project and would improve their involvement in the activities.

Feedback: The feedback mechanism currently in place can be improved by involving the partners and the community in systematising it and regularly monitoring its functioning. The improvement of this mechanism within the project will have a positive effect on the other accountability indicators. The implementation of a concerted feedback mechanism would make it possible to reduce tensions that harm the project's development.

Participation: The community feels very involved in the project activities and participates in several meetings, and its satisfaction with the project also influences the participation score. An improvement in transparency, particularly with regard to financial data, would enable vulnerable groups to participate more in the management committees' decision-making. In order to improve decision-making by the communities themselves, it would be necessary to focus on the governance of community organisations, helping them to implement mechanisms for electing leaders using criteria based on committee members' eligibility for leadership.

Recommendations:

Improve transparency by improving the project communication plans to encompass relations with both partners and communities. It should include a presentation of the budget for the project activities on the ground, with an explanation of the choices made. In the presentation of MEAL reports, emphasis should be placed on the resources available for the continuation of the activities.

- The commitment to change in the context of Oxfam's work in Haiti must focus on improving transparency. This commitment must encompass relations with both partners and communities. The target should be level 4, the highest possible. Partners should also be asked to aim for this level in their work. Based on the experience of this project, certain financial information should be disseminated and discussed with the partners and communities.
- An improvement in transparency on financial matters is extremely important in helping to manage beneficiaries' expectations. By knowing in advance which activities will be carried out and what the associated costs will be, beneficiaries will be more aware of the need to take care of the materials provided to them. Extra-budgetary demands made when requesting changes will be reduced because the financial information will be known. The implications of changes on the project's progress will also be known.

Implement transparent feedback mechanisms by which requests for change by the communities are handled:

- It is necessary to put in place a mechanism that is familiar to the parties to deal with how to implement changes to the project. The mechanism's tools will consist of a communication plan and a flow diagram depicting the progression of requests for change and the role of the stakeholders in this mechanism, including the beneficiaries. The time it takes to pass from one stage to the next will be represented by a gap in the diagram.
- With regard to feedback, Oxfam programmes should achieve or maintain at least level 3. This level requires the existence of a mechanism for managing feedback and complaints. Stakeholders are encouraged to formulate such comments. They are then recorded and responses are subsequently generated. The quality of interventions improves when feedback and complaints are taken into account. Based on the experience of this project, a transparent mechanism for managing requests for change with which the stakeholders are familiar needs to be put in place. The project manager must evaluate all requests for change to assess whether they will have an impact on the project's objectives. If he considers a request to be important, he must submit it to an approval mechanism and inform the partner and the community of the progress of their request. Once this system has been mastered by the partners and beneficiaries, they could attain level 4 by implementing a joint system and introducing training sessions on mastering this mechanism for the more capable organisations.

Ensure community committee members are representative of vulnerable groups:

- In terms of participation, it is necessary to ensure that community committee members are representative of the various vulnerable groups. Committees should have statutes with internal rules governing how they function. These rules should allow for the election of leaders in such a way that this representation is ensured. They should also allow for the making of changes where necessary. These committees play a key role in disseminating information, collecting feedback and complaints, and taking decisions within the project. The proper functioning of these committees will have a positive influence on how accountable Oxfam is to the communities.

Support partners in establishing detailed project monitoring and evaluation plans from the outset and consider presentation of information to aid transparency of the project within the community:

- In terms of the preparation of reports by the partner, Oxfam could support COZPAM from the outset by setting up a detailed project monitoring and evaluation plan. This plan should include:
- Indicators. These should be explained to COZPAM very early on in terms of outputs. Each indicator should have the information required and the sources of data defined in detail.
- Data collection and use protocols. The plan should set out which persons will be responsible for collecting data, how frequently data will be collected, and how the data collected will be used in the report.

In order to make the text more comprehensible, data could be presented as a graph. The text can then explain the graph highlighting any disparities noted. An analysis of the problems encountered during the execution of the project will aid understanding of the reasons for these disparities. It would be clearer for the beneficiaries if COZPAM presented activity reports to them using graphs and images, and this would aid the transparency of the project within the community.

Use the project as an example to ensure that other Oxfam projects and programmes meet the needs of the beneficiary communities.

- The community has said it is satisfied with the project. This project should therefore be used as an example to ensure that other Oxfam projects and programmes meet the needs of the beneficiary communities. Since the community's satisfaction level is 4, this project can serve as a reference, and projects should attempt to maintain this level in future.

Continue field visits and staff competencies to maintain beneficiary satisfaction and channels of communication.

- The community considers the attitude of the staff to be very good. Frequent field visits contribute greatly to the satisfaction of the beneficiaries, as well as being necessary to make any changes required. The community believes that the practical staff listen to them and are technically competent to carry out the work.

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

In terms of community satisfaction, Oxfam was expecting the results to be less positive given that there were some difficulties working with the community committees during implementation. Despite these issues, it seems that communities were for the most part satisfied with the results of the project and their participation in it.

Regarding working with partners, the findings are in line with Oxfam's expectations as one of the limitations of our approach was not including the partners during the design of the MEAL framework.

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

In terms of accountability, this project demonstrates more strengths than weaknesses. From the community's point of view, the project's greatest strengths are that its results satisfied the community's needs. Feedback and the level of participation are good and the staff had a positive attitude. The project met their need, since the issue of food security was important at the time. Community members have acquired new knowledge that will improve their family finances.ⁱ

Moreover, they said that Oxfam listened to them and changes were made to the project based on their requests. All letters addressed by the committee to Oxfam received a response. The committees said they were satisfied to see that the head of Oxfam in Haiti was present at a clarification meeting following a letter from the Ti Savann committee.

With regard to their participation in the project, the local committees participated in and negotiated the decisions taken. The project activities required a good level of community participation to be put in place, and the community mobilised around the committees in order to create the gardens. The professional attitude of the project staff was also appreciated. During the period of the project when Oxfam was operational, the constant presence of staff on the ground provided motivation for the community.

In terms of partnership practices, responsibilities were clearly defined and expectations were well managed, with any alterations being formal (contract, method of working, etc.). The project strengthened COZPAM's position on the ground by broadening its remit. Moreover, COZPAM members benefited from various training sessions on disaster risk reduction (DRR), finance, etc. There was good mutual cooperation.

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

Transparency was a weak point in terms of how the project was conducted, particularly with regard to financial matters. Knowing that resources are not unlimited and that expenditure is progressing in line with the budget set out, could have reduced tensions with the community in negotiations for changes within the project.

The partner, COZPAM, had access only to certain information about the project, meaning it did not participate in all the decisions made concerning the project. Documents were not sufficiently discussed with the partners, and there was not enough partner feedback on these documents. For example, Konsey Nasyonal Finansman Popilè (KNFP)ⁱⁱ was the partner chosen to create and implement an exit strategy for the project. Although there was some discussion between KNFP and COZPAM, the leaders of COZPAM were not sufficiently involved to be able to arrive at a joint strategy for raising awareness among the communities about the importance of implementing the cooperative. At the time of the study, the communities had not fully understood the exit strategy and the committees were reticent about communicating in depth about the future cooperative.

In terms of feedback, although there were always responses from Oxfam, decisions sometimes took a long time to come. Moreover, there is no guarantee that Oxfam is going to apply the requests for change made by the partner. The current feedback mechanism has no shared time scheduleⁱⁱⁱ between Oxfam, the partners and the communities for obtaining responses to complaints and applying the decisions taken.

6. Summary of review quality assessment

In general the review was conducted to a very high standard and the questions elicited insightful responses. The consultant was very professional and deliverables were received on time and to a high quality. Some of the recommended tools were not used as they were not deemed appropriate in the urban Port-au-Prince context, for example the artwork approach.

7. Main Oxfam follow-up actions

As all of the recommendations are in line with standards included in the Common Approach to Monitoring, evaluation and learning, and Social Accountability (CAMSA), the CAMSA standards have been referenced below. Oxfam will work with partners to create MEAL plans together that include mechanisms through which participating communities can communicate with Oxfam and its partners. Learning and evaluation activities will be planned with partners and partner capacity on MEAL will be strengthened where necessary.

In order to ensure that community groups are representative, when projects involve working with groups the Gender and Active Citizenship Adviser will be involved from the beginning to enhance internal structures of these groups and to guarantee the participation of vulnerable groups.

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

Oxfam will not act on the following recommendation: **Use the project as an example to ensure that other Oxfam projects and programmes meet the needs of the beneficiary communities.**

While the results of this Accountability Review are quite positive, Oxfam feels that there are stronger projects in Haiti that demonstrate how programming has met the needs of beneficiaries. Oxfam plans to champion this across every project rather than choosing one project as an example.

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?

Going forward the implementation of CAMSA will ensure that all recommendations from this project are applied to future projects. The regional centre can assist by giving guidance on the tools to be used and training to staff where necessary

10. Additional reflections

The tools and methodologies used during the Accountability Review were very useful and should be adapted to ongoing MEAL activities in country in order to enhance accountability. These tools could even be added to the CAMSA standards to ensure that the tools are used globally and not just during Accountability Reviews.

ⁱ 'We have been able to save money thanks to the vegetables produced in our garden, and the amount we saved has enabled us to buy things like soap, water, coal and even meat.' Quote from a focus group with women from Campêche (Carrefour Feuilles).

ⁱⁱ KNFP stands for Konsey Nasyonan Finansman Popilè in Haitian Creole or 'Conseil National de Financement Populaire' in French.

ⁱⁱⁱ It should be noted that written complaints from the committees are always dealt with by Oxfam. A letter of response is addressed to the author and meetings are organised to resolve disagreements.