
Abstract

This article explores Oxfam GB’s early experience implementing an alternative approach to operationalising global outcome indicators as a means of understanding programme impact and organisational performance.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating in the international development sector need credible, reliable feedback on whether their interventions are making a meaningful difference, but they struggle with how they can access it in a practical, proportional way. In 2011, Oxfam GB established its Global Performance Framework (GPF) to enable the organisation to deliver on its commitments to be accountable to its wide range of stakeholders and improve its ability to both understand and communicate the impact of its programmes in seven thematic priorities. The GPF is comprised of two key elements: a Global Output Report which details what the organisation is doing to bring about a world free of poverty, inequality, and injustice; and Effectiveness Reviews, intensive evaluation processes that consider the extent projects have contributed to change in relation to the particular global outcome indicator that it has been selected under.

Three years in, Oxfam GB has undertaken a review of the Global Performance Framework in order to acknowledge its strengths and weaknesses and inform decisions on how to strengthen and evolve the GPF to ensure it remains fit for purpose. While it is too early to draw overall conclusions on the approach, it is hoped that the lessons learned from this review of the first phase of implementation can be useful and informative for other development actors grappling with similar challenges.

1. The Challenge/ Background

A member of Oxfam International, a confederation of 17 independent national organisations working in more than 90 countries, Oxfam Great Britain (GB) is a large UK based international NGO which delivers 1200+ projects annually across a diverse range of issues vital to tackling the root causes of poverty, from life’s basics - food, water, health and education - to complex questions around aid, climate change and human rights. Building from a strong conviction that active citizenship and good governance are key ingredients for lasting change, Oxfam’s programming is ultimately about working with and supporting communities and individuals to identify lasting solutions to problems of poverty, inequality and injustice.

A key challenge for the organisation has been how to reliably understand and “sum up” its effectiveness as an organisation across such a diverse portfolio of work – operating as it does in numerous countries and diverse contexts, and pursuing “bottom-up” programming. The drivers for this have been both an increasing internal appetite to understand and communicate its effectiveness as an organisation, as well as increased pressure from donors to demonstrate “results” and “value for money.”

Like many other NGOs, Oxfam GB considered adopting a global outcome indicator tracking approach. However, ultimately it was felt that this would not deliver the information that the organisation needed. The costs involved in quality assuring global outcome data – ensuring that the indicators were commonly understood and measured consistently – was felt to be prohibitively high. And, perhaps more importantly, it was recognised that while tracking changes in outcome indicators would allow the organisation to understand and communicate changes in the contexts in which it is working, crucially it would not allow Oxfam GB to unpack what, if any, contribution its interventions had made to those changes (see Hughes and Hutchings, 2011, for a more detailed discussion). Additionally, there was concern that requiring all

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1 Humanitarian response, adaptation and risk reduction (resilience), livelihood enhancement, women’s empowerment, citizen voice, and policy influencing. Accountability was added as a 7th outcome area in 2013.

2 Caldwell, 2014
programmes to collect data on pre-set global outcome indicators had the potential to distort programme design, and would be at odds with the value Oxfam GB places on developing programmes “bottom-up”, based on robust analyses of how change happens in the contexts in which it is working.

After undertaking an ‘Indicator Feasibility Study’\(^3\) in 2006, it was agreed that capturing outcome-level data on indicators – the Outcome Indicator Tracking option – could not, by itself, evidence Oxfam GB’s effectiveness, that such efforts would need to be complemented by sufficiently rigorous evaluation designs. And so Oxfam GB pursued an alternative way of operationalising global Indicators.

In 2010, senior leadership defined seven thematic priorities as central to Oxfam GB’s efforts: humanitarian, livelihoods, disaster risk reduction (increasingly referred to as resilience), women’s empowerment, citizen voice, policy influence and accountability, and developed global outcome indicators for each. The challenge was to develop a measurement system that would allow the organisation to understand and credibly “sum up” its effectiveness in these areas.

While it would be technically possible to demonstrate Oxfam GB’s impact by bringing together the findings and lessons from individual programme evaluations, in practice the purpose of programme level evaluations differs – not all are concerned with assessing contribution to impact – and the quality of evaluations across the organisation is mixed. While efforts are ongoing to strengthen evaluation quality, with approximately 400 projects closing in any given year, it would have been difficult to ensure that all projects delivered impact evaluations of an acceptable standard and, given the different drivers for evaluation, not necessarily desirable. The organisation therefore decided to focus on delivering rigorous evaluations of a smaller sample of projects, and in 2011, Oxfam GB established its Global Performance Framework (GPF) to enable the organisation to deliver on its commitments to be accountable to its wide range of stakeholders and improve its ability to both understand and communicate the impact of its programmes.

The GPF is comprised of two key elements: the Global Output Report and Project Effectiveness Reviews.

In order to understand the scale and diversity of its work, all Oxfam GB projects are required to report applicable output data against the seven outcome areas on an annual basis. While not all that Oxfam GB does is captured, it does allow the organisation to paint a compelling picture of many of the critical things the organisation is doing to bring about a world free of poverty, inequality, and injustice. This speaks to what is Oxfam GB is delivering.

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\(^3\) Shroff, and Stevenson, 2008.
In order to understand and evidence whether all this work is bearing fruit, closing and sufficiently mature projects contributing to five of the seven global outcomes (livelihoods, resilience, women’s empowerment, citizen voice, and policy influence) are randomly selected each year and rigorously evaluated. These intensive evaluation processes are known as **Effectiveness Reviews**, and they consider the extent each project has promoted change in relation to the particular global outcome that it has been selected under.

The other two thematic areas - humanitarian and accountability - consider the degree to which interventions meet agreed standards. **Accountability reviews**, undertaken for a random sample selected from all active projects, consider the degree to which interventions are deemed accountable by Oxfam GB’s partners and beneficiaries in relation Oxfam’s standards around transparency, accountability, monitoring, evaluation, and learning. And finally, all large scale humanitarian responses are assessed in terms of the degree to which they meet agreed quality standards for humanitarian programming (e.g. Sphere guidelines).

It is important to recognise that when the GPF was designed it aimed to tackle two distinct but related challenges: how to access credible, reliable feedback on whether interventions are making a meaningful difference in a practical, proportional way; and how to ‘sum’ this information up at an organisational level.

2. **The measurement challenge**

The challenge of how to deliver credible evaluations of impact is not particular to efforts to address the question of organisational effectiveness, but is instead a conversation about what constitutes rigour, and how best to investigate whether there is evidence of a causal link between an intervention and outcome level change, particularly for interventions that don’t lend themselves to experimental approaches. It is a live discussion in the sector, which includes debates about how the burden of proof is established, the degree to which researchers can or cannot achieve objectivity, limitations on the ability to prove causality after the event etc. For NGOs like Oxfam, it is also, critically, about determining the appropriate levels of investment and effort to assess the impact of their work – in order to be accountable, but perhaps more importantly in order to learn what works and what doesn’t in ways that can inform and guide programming by Oxfam, national partners and others. Without wanting to go into these debates in any great detail, it is worth setting out that the focus for most of the **effectiveness reviews** is to enable a judgement about whether there is a cause-effect relationship between the intervention and observed outcomes/ impact, even where the intervention may be only one contribution to that change. It is unabashedly about investigating causality.

There are four different methodologies used in the effectiveness reviews.

The **humanitarian effectiveness reviews** critically examine the performance of selected humanitarian responses against 12 quality benchmarks. This includes things such as timeliness, coverage, and gender mainstreaming. Following the protocol of the **Humanitarian Indicator Tool (HiT)**, external consultants review existing documentation and interview programme staff to assign ratings against each benchmark.

Effectiveness reviews of Oxfam GB’s **community-level development programmes**, including livelihoods, women’s empowerment or resilience outcome areas, employ a quasi-experimental design to consider the counterfactual, collecting information through household surveys and other means from both intervention and comparison populations. Advanced statistical methods such as propensity score matching and multivariable regression are used to reduce bias in this comparison by controlling for any measured differences existing between the two groups. It is critical that the changes we’re seeking to achieve are properly measured, and a further challenge for these large n studies was developing appropriate evaluation designs and measurement approaches for these outcome areas, many of which are considered hard to

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4 Richmond, 2012; Savedoff, 2012
measure benefits (HTMB). While livelihoods borrows from existing knowledge in the sector, measuring income through consumption and assets, Oxfam GB has invested in developing more bespoke measurement approaches for women’s empowerment and resilience outcome areas.

Oxfam GB’s citizen voice and policy influencing interventions seek to empower citizens and bring about pro-poor policy change. Effectiveness reviews of these typically small n interventions, where there are too few units of assignment to permit tests of statistical significance between treatment and a comparison group, have considered contribution through the use of qualitative causal inference method known as process tracing. External researchers are contracted to determine the degree to which outcomes have materialised, and the significance of the intervention’s contribution to these outcomes in light of other possible explanations for change - looking to establish a case “beyond reasonable doubt” of the link between intervention and change, beyond “simple association”.

The Accountability Reviews, first introduced in 2013/14, assess the degree to which randomly selected projects meet Oxfam’s accountability standards. External local consultants are engaged to explore two different manifestations of accountability - Oxfam GB’s accountability to partners and Oxfam GB and partners’ joint accountability to communities.

The procedures used in the quantitative ERs have been external assessed and found to be “rigorous, unbiased and relatively robust”, and there is consensus that the effectiveness reviews are delivered cost effectively for the type of evaluations conducted, with the total cost of each review (including set up and follow up costs, staff time in country and central costs) being £20-40k, depending on the methodology used (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Estimated Unit Cost of Effectiveness Reviews
Average costs, £k, based on budget analysis and staff estimates of time required, includes set up and follow up costs

3. The aggregation challenge

Responding to internal and external pressures, a key driver for the GPF was the desire to ‘sum up’ impact information from programmes in order to understand and communicate effectiveness at an organisational level.

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6 The number of household surveys conducted ranges from 400-800 households
6 See Hughes and Bushell, 2013; and Bishop and Bowman, 2014
7 White and Philips, 2011
8 Ipsos Mori, 2012
9 Caldwell, 2014
The Global Output Report provides the organisation with details on the numbers of people, communities, partner organisations, policies, etc. meaningfully reached by Oxfam GB’s programmes, both overall and by particular thematic areas. Although it requires technical input and oversight, of the deduplication processes and quality assuring the data for example, it gives the organisation a comprehensive and reliable picture of what Oxfam GB is delivering.

Demonstrating Oxfam GB’s impact by bringing together the findings and lessons from individual effectiveness reviews is more challenging. As discussed, the organisation has focused on delivering rigorous evaluations of a sample of mature projects (>2.5 years old) of significant scale (total spend >€250k). The sample is randomly selected to avoid ‘cherry picking’ and other selection biases often associated with this type of exercise. And to further strengthen the representative nature of the sample, the projects have been selected as they reach the end of their current phase rather than as they are starting-up — though this has meant that the effectiveness reviews are limited by methodological constraints implicit in ex-post evaluations. Around 100 projects (10-15% of all live projects) are eligible for selection each year, which means that eligible projects have around a 20% chance of being selected in any one year.

Global indicators that would allow the organisation to credibly “sum up” the findings from the effectiveness reviews of these sampled interventions were developed. Standardised data collection instruments for the reviews of community-level development programmes (livelihoods, women’s empowerment and resilience) were used to enable data from different projects to be aggregated. A process was developed for translating qualitative judgements on the extent to which citizen voice and policy influence interventions contributed to the targeted change into ‘contribution scores’ which conveyed the extent to which a) the targeted outcome in question materialised; and b) intervention’s contribution to this change. And methodologies were developed for aggregating the performance scores from the HITs and Accountability Reviews. In this way, the organisation draws on the findings of the effectiveness reviews to calculate annual and cumulative scores for each global outcome indicator, as an alternative way of operationalising global indicators.

While the sample is too small to enable generalisable claims about Oxfam GB’s overall effectiveness, the intention was that by bringing these reviews together with the results form reviews of projects randomly selected in previous years, the organisation would, year on year, build its understanding of both the challenges and strengths of Oxfam GB’s project effectiveness.

4. What is the GPF delivering?

In 2014, Oxfam GB commissioned an independent review of the GPF to reflect on its performance to date; understand its strengths and weaknesses; consider changing internal and external drivers; and, in light of this take decisions on how to strengthen and evolve the GPF to ensure it remains fit for purpose.

After some initial teething problems, the GPF has now been up and running for just over three years. The Global Output Report collects data annually from Oxfam GB’s active projects, to build up an aggregate picture of the scale and diversity of OGB’s work around the world, collecting data on 5-7 output indicators per outcome area. Effectiveness reviews have now been completed of 75 projects. In addition to publishing the individual reviews, summary information is communicated through Oxfam GB’s Annual Report and Accounts, and there are efforts underway to make the data sets publically available.

The review confirmed that the GPF is serving an important accountability function, primarily with institutional donors and the public. The quality of the effectiveness reviews along with Oxfam GB’s commitment to publish the results have helped to establish Oxfam GB’s credibility as an organisation that delivers and measures results.

While there is no hard evidence of who is using the effectiveness reviews, the website statistics show that reports are downloaded an average of 200-300 times per month, that the most popular effectiveness
review reports are generally on humanitarian responses and advocacy projects, and indicate that the primary users are likely to be from the evaluation and research communities. References to the GPF and the effectiveness reviews in the public domain suggest that the reputation of Oxfam GB in these communities has been enhanced by the decision to publish.

Oxfam GB’s management response system has helped to facilitate learning for individual project teams by engaging them in conversations about next steps. The results are usually shared with programme partners and with project funders, and at a project level there is evidence that country staff are using the findings from effectiveness reviews to make changes to interventions in order to strengthen project effectiveness.

At an organisational level, Oxfam GB is starting to pull out thematic learning, as well as lessons on the design and implementation of interventions. The GPF Review confirmed that effectiveness reviews are a useful source of information for relevant global and regional advisers, and contribute to improving their advice to programmes. And the process of developing, testing and refining the measurement approaches is itself supporting Oxfam GB to not only strengthen its evidence based, but to be even sharper and stronger with its analysis and the development of more comprehensive and thorough theories of change.

For all this progress, it is fair to say that challenges remain. The review of the GPF responded largely to questions around the balance of learning vs accountability, and related to this, rigour vs utility.

The review drew attention to the fact that the Global Output Report (GOR) information is used primarily for accountability and reporting at global level. There are some examples of good practice in use of GOR information at country and regional level, but in the main GOR is seen by country and regional programmes as providing data needed at global level. While there is consensus that outcomes and impact are where the organisation wants to focus management attention, and an awareness of the potential for creating perverse incentives, there is agreement that the aggregation of output data into the Global Output Report and the information it provides on the scale and diversity of what the organisation is delivering, represents a necessary minimum requirement. In the next phase, beyond continued efforts to ensure that the output indicators are fit for purpose, Oxfam GB will explore ways in which GOR might be better integrated with core country programme monitoring and reporting processes, and have increased visibility and utility at country and regional management levels.

The more substantive issues raised by the review are around the effectiveness reviews and broadly relate to the balance between the two often competing key drivers for the GPF – accountability and learning (see Figure 2). The review identified 5 key stakeholder groups - individual projects and their key stakeholders, national actors such as government and private sector, institutional stakeholders within Oxfam GB and the wider Oxfam confederation, the donor community and development sector more broadly, and finally the public at large. Drawing on a variety of sources, the review rated how effectively the GPF was perceived to be serving learning and accountability agendas for each of these groups. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the GPF is considered to be most effectively serving an accountability agenda, though learning was recognised as increasingly important.
The tension between accountability and learning is evident even in the choice of projects: randomly selecting them at ‘the centre’ avoids cherry picking and arguably gives a more honest picture of effectiveness, and selecting projects as they come to a close has helped to ensure that they do not enjoy a ‘spot light’ effect, receiving special attention and becoming different or distinct as a result. Further, the randomly sampled projects don’t always mesh with the learning priorities at country and regional level. In some cases this is because Oxfam GB is moving out of a particular area of programming, or away from previous programme strategies in that context. But even where this is not the case, resource constraints have meant that the effectiveness reviews need to prioritise obtaining credible findings on impact on the outcome area under which each project has been selected rather than trying to assess the full breadth of multiple outcomes that most projects aim to influence. Finally, the evaluation designs, for the ‘large n’ interventions in particular, are complex and often unfamiliar to programme staff, and may fail to ‘tell the story’ in ways that are meaningful to the team’s broader understanding of their operating environment.

Efforts are being made to redress this. The increased priority ascribed to the learning agenda has led Oxfam GB to move from using a fairly standardised approach for the effectiveness reviews under each outcome area, to investing more in tailoring and contextualising evaluations designs to individual interventions. Recognising that country-level ownership and interest in the effectiveness reviews is needed to ensure that the findings are acted upon and influence practice, a key focus in recent years has been on creating opportunities for project teams to engage with and inform the effectiveness reviews. This has involved spending more time with teams to unpack their theory of change and build understanding and ownership of the questions the effectiveness reviews are trying to answer, and doing more to support learning from the reviews – including debriefs with country teams following data analysis, and a commitment to undertake more in depth follow up research to better understand the mechanisms contributing to or blocking the achievement of results.

However, this shift over time from an almost exclusive focus on accountability to an agenda that is more concerned with learning has, in effect, meant that the focus on the ‘sum’ has decreased. Oxfam GB still delivers a cumulative aggregate rating for each of the global outcome indicators annually, and while this highlights some interesting trends, helping the organisation to develop benchmarks, for example, on the effectiveness of its projects in different thematic areas, it is not a figure that is widely used or communicated within the organisation. While this has not been formally explored, one can hypothesise about some of the reasons. In order to respond to the need to ‘sum up’ its effectiveness, Oxfam GB had to define global indicators that could be commonly applicable. However, interventions contributing to these outcome areas are diverse and not homogenous, employing different strategies to contribute to

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10 Caldwell, 2014
comparable (though not identical) outcomes, and as such, the aggregate information communicated by these global indicators is not easily interpretable. For project teams, working to deliver analogous impact through very different causal mechanism in very different contexts, and even thematic advisors, it is often the interim outcomes, also measured by the effectiveness reviews that are of the most value. While lessons are emerging on the challenges and strengths of Oxfam GB’s project effectiveness, the primary value of the effectiveness reviews still lies in the richness of the individual reports, their findings and recommendations.

The review highlighted a need to think more systematically about how the organisation can draw more from the evidence base being developed by the GPF to support institutional learning. For example, to influence the development and refinement of other related projects in other countries, to encourage replication of effective approaches, or to inform strategic decisions around organisational priorities. The GPF is delivering a valuable results measurement system, but there is still more work required to link it into to an effective results management system – to get the most from the evidence base it is building, and capitalise on the potential for organisational learning.

Finally, the review also helped to draw attention to the wider portfolio of evaluations being undertaken by Oxfam GB interventions, and their relationship with the GPF and its effectiveness reviews. The sampling strategy employed by the GPF to select projects for effectiveness reviews was in part a response to the variable quality of evaluations in the organisation. However, the investment in the GPF has not been accompanied by a concerted investment in the quality of evaluations more broadly. While there is enormous value in the portfolio of high-quality evaluations that the GPF has delivered, the quality of evaluations in the organisation remains mixed, despite some examples of excellent practice. With approximately 400 projects closing in any given year, this represents a missed opportunity (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**: Estimated Global Annual Spend on Evaluations
Based on budget analysis and staff time estimates

[Diagram showing estimated global annual spend on evaluations]

100% = £2.5m

- **Country-led evaluations (restricted)**: 46%
- **Country-led evaluations (unrestricted)**: 19%
- **Country-led Evaluations (Field staff time)**: 12%
- **Effectiveness Reviews (HQ managed costs)**: 12%
- **Effectiveness Reviews (Field staff time)**: 11%

5. **So what are the implications for the GPF going forward?**

The review helped to flag a number of practical tweaks that can be made to strengthen the GPF. For example, ways in which GOR might be better integrated with core country programme monitoring and reporting processes, and have increased visibility and utility at country and regional management levels. Similarly, the thematic focus areas covered by the GPF will be revised to better align with the Oxfam

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11 Caldwell, 2014
Strategic Plan, in order to ensure its continued relevance as Oxfam GB works together with all Oxfams globally to support Oxfam 2020, a confederation-wide change programme that is reshaping Oxfam.

More substantively, the review pointed to two areas that require attention to ensure that the GPF remains fit for purpose: the relationship between effectiveness reviews and evaluations more broadly; and making more of the learning at an institutional level.

Ensuring the continued credibility and rigour of the effectiveness reviews remains a challenge, and the technical team overseeing these reviews is continually working with key stakeholders - within Oxfam GB, in the contexts in which Oxfam GB works and in the wider sector - to strengthen and improve evaluation designs, measurement approaches and analyses. Taking this iterative approach has not only helped to ensure that the effectiveness reviews are valid but has prompted important discussions about how Oxfam GB understands and defines hard to measure concepts such as women’s empowerment, resilience and citizen voice. Oxfam GB has invested significant resources and thought leadership in developing practical and proportionate (aka affordable) approaches to measuring these difficult concepts, and while the effectiveness reviews may have been the driver for this thinking, their value is not limited to ex-post evaluation studies. The potential for application in impact evaluations designed ex-ante, or even as a programme design and/or outcome monitoring tools is huge. Similarly, the effectiveness reviews have demonstrated how impact can be considered in a pragmatic and proportional way by NGOs like Oxfam. In the three years since they were introduced, OGB’s Effectiveness Reviews (ERs) have played a powerful role in showing how higher quality evaluations can be carried out at reasonable cost using a variety of respected methodologies appropriate to the work. The internal political commitment to rigorous measurement of results remains, and in the second phase of the GPF, Oxfam GB will need to identify ways to extend the technical competence that has been built to the broader portfolio of evaluations undertaken by Oxfam GB’s projects and programs each year - to apply the lessons learnt from ERs to the meaningful implementation of Oxfam’s evaluation policy and help achieve more consistent high quality evaluations across Oxfam GB. This will involve defining, more tightly, standards for evaluation quality and setting up processes to enable central monitoring of quality.

The arguably greater challenge of how best to support the utilisation of effectiveness reviews, and evaluations more broadly remains. Involving staff and partners (including country directors and programme managers) at key points in the process, and opening up space for some of their own evaluative questions to be answered continues to support uptake at a country level from individual effectiveness reviews. At an institutional level, though, investment is needed both to digest and synthesize learning, and get this fed back into organisational decision-making. In the second phase of the GPF, this will involve even greater collaboration with internal colleagues, like research staff, and external stakeholders with shared interests to make the most of the evidence base that is being developed. For example, making the data sets from the ‘large n’ studies more readily available to those interested in undertaking further analyses or meta-analyses to look for patterns and trends that can be proactively be communicated and shared. Perhaps most importantly, it will also require more formal engagement with those senior programme managers and advisors responsible for defining thematic priorities, and resource allocation.

The Global Performance Framework was designed to enable Oxfam GB to capture and communicate its effectiveness. Drawing inspiration from some of the large development bank and government agencies, Oxfam GB has demonstrated that is it possible to design an approach capable of delivering credible evaluation results in a practical and affordable. In the first phase of the GPF, the organisation has grappled with the challenge of how to get an appropriate balance, ensuring that external accountability purposes do not overwhelm the potential to use this evidence for learning and improvement. While rigorous evaluations are an important building block, their value for NGOs like Oxfam lies in their ability to support the organisation to not only demonstrate but improve its effectiveness. In the second phase, Oxfam GB will need to focus its efforts on how to mature the results measurement system that has been developed into an effective results-management system.
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