

Oxfam Management response to the review of *Resilience in Mali: Evaluation of increasing food security (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 and their effectiveness rigorously assessed. The Increasing Food Security in Mali project was selected for review in this way under the resilience thematic area. The Effectiveness Review, which took place in southern Mali in March and April 2014, aimed at evaluating the impact of the 'Increasing Food Security' project. In fact, as designated by Oxfam, this project applied to two related initiatives aimed at building food security and resilience among vulnerable people in Mali. The 'Food Facility' project was implemented between in 2010 and 2011 in partnership with Save the Children, the Institut d'Economie Rurale (IER) and the Mouvement Biologique Malien (MoBioM), providing cash transfers, training and agricultural inputs. This was a pilot initiative, intended to test a model for carrying out cash transfers, generate learning, and provide a basis for advocacy with government and donors. Six hundred households in the commune of Fakola, located in the *cercle* (district) of Kolondiéba in southern Mali, received support, as did 400 households in two communes in the cercle of Bourem in northern Mali. The current 'Food Security Support Project' (known by its French abbreviation as PASA 5) is implemented in partnership with MoBioM, Welthungerhilfe, the Groupe Action pour l'Enfance au Sahel (GAE-Sahel) and local organisation, Jiekataanie. Since June 2012, this project has supported households in four communes in the cercle of Kolondiéba, again with a combination of cash transfers, training and agricultural inputs. Other activities included in the PASA 5 project include developing land in several communities for kitchen gardening, training and supporting women's groups in the production of infant formula, broadcasting a radio show and using the 'Reflect' approach to community mobilisation to promote positive agricultural practices and good nutrition.

This Effectiveness Review used a quasi-experimental evaluation design to assess the impact of the activities among of the Food Facility and PASA 5 projects among those households directly supported by these projects. For security and logistics reasons, this Effectiveness Review was carried out only in the cercle of Kolondiéba, not in Bourem. Nineteen of the 44 communities in the cercle of Kolondiéba where the two projects were implemented were selected to be included in the Effectiveness Review, based on their feasibility for evaluation. The larger settlements in which the project was implemented, and those lying close to the main town of Kolondiéba and in the northern part of the project area, were excluded from the Effectiveness Review.

Survey respondents were selected at random from among the lists of those who received direct support from the PASA 5 project. These direct participants were divided into two groups: the 'very poor' households, who were provided with cash transfers, and the 'poor' households, who were provided with agricultural inputs and support. The impact of the project activities on the wider population of the communities was not assessed. In total, 150 'poor' households and 152 'very poor' households were interviewed across the 19 project communities. For comparison purposes, 500 households were interviewed in nearby communities where the project had *not* been undertaken. At the analysis stage, the statistical tools of propensity-score matching and multivariate regression were used to control for apparent baseline differences between the households in the project and comparison communities, to increase confidence when making estimates of the project's impact. The household survey was complemented by a number of focus group discussions to provide deeper insights into the impact of the project than could be captured in the quantitative survey.



2. Summary main findings and recommendations

Key results of this Effectiveness Review			
Outcome area	Evidence of positive impact		Comments
	'Very poor' households	'Poor' households	
Adoption of improved agricultural practices	Yes	Yes	Use of improved seeds was higher among those in the project communities than in the comparison communities – and not only among those who received distributions of seeds directly from the project.
Production of staple crops	No	No	Total quantity of staple crops produced in 2013 did not differ between those in the project and comparison communities.
Production from a kitchen garden	Yes	Yes	Households in the communities where the kitchen garden intervention was implemented produced a considerably wider range of crops than those in other communities.
Borrowing and indebtedness	No	Yes	'Poor' households supported by the project relied less on borrowing during the year prior to the survey.
Livestock ownership and savings	Yes	Yes	'Very poor' households supported by the project were more likely to own livestock, but 'poor' households were less likely. Both groups are more likely to have a useful amount of savings than comparison households.
Dietary diversity	Yes	Yes	Those supported by the project were consuming a wider range of food types than those in comparison communities. This effect is not restricted to those supported in kitchen gardening.
Total food consumption	Yes	No	Total food consumption among the 'very poor' households appears to be approximately 16 per cent higher than among the corresponding households in comparison communities.
Indicators of resilience	Not clear	No	There is evidence of an impact from the project on some specific indicators of resilience – but little evidence of impact on the overall index of resilience.
Results apply to the households who were directly supported by the PASA 5 project in either the 'very poor' or 'poor' groups, in the 19 communities included in the project. The 19 communities include all those in the communes of Fakola and Kadiana in which the PASA 5 project was implemented, except for the four largest communities, as well as three communities in the commune of Kolondiéba that are not located within the immediate vicinity of the town of Kolondiéba. The impact on community members other those directly supported in either the 'very poor' or 'poor' groups is not covered by this Effectiveness Review.			

Recommendations:

Use the results of this Effectiveness Review to contribute to the evidence base on the impacts of cash transfers, in order to inform future decisions on their use by Oxfam and by other actors.

The PASA 5 project has already been important in demonstrating a workable model for providing cash transfers, which has encouraged their adoption by other actors – particularly through the World Bank-funded cash transfer scheme now being implemented in the same area. The results of this Effectiveness Review provide evidence that transfers targeted at ‘very poor’ households had some sustained effect on their level of food consumption some months after the transfers were made. That cash transfer recipients had delayed making crop sales until later in the year and were more likely to have significant savings at the time of the survey are also positive indications. These findings can be used to strengthen the case when advocating for greater adoption of cash-transfer programmes.

Consider conducting further follow-up work to understand the longer-term impacts of these interventions.

While it would be reasonable to assume that the impact of providing cash transfers would be visible in the short term, the effects of providing agricultural support may take longer to become clear as participants gain experience and trust in the use of new practices and technologies. Some of the ‘poor’ households who were supported in agricultural production by this project had been receiving that support only in the year prior to the Effectiveness Review, while others had received the support two years previously. It is possible that the full effects of the provision of agricultural training and inputs had yet to become clear at the time the survey was conducted – particularly among those supported during the previous year. (There are no clear differences in outcomes between those who were supported in the first year of the project and those in the second year, but this analysis was limited by a small sample size.) A better understanding of the longer-term effects of the project could be gained by carrying out a follow-up evaluation after another year or two has passed.

Seek to understand how the sharing of resources provided under a project affects the targeting of resources and what this means for monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of a project.

There are some interesting indications from this survey of significant redistribution within communities of the tangible forms of support provided by the project. Sixteen per cent of respondents in the project communities reported that others had shared part of a cash transfer they had received with them. The survey data and focus groups both indicated that the improved seeds had also been shared within the communities, rather than being used exclusively by the households they were given to. It would be useful in planning future interventions to have a better understanding of how this sharing is carried out, and what its consequences are. This behaviour may be seen to undermine the targeting strategy employed by projects, but it certainly means that a full understanding of the impact of a project has to take into account wider impacts than simply those among the direct project participants. Further investigation of how this sharing behaviour affects social relations – for example, whether this tends to empower the recipients of support or whether it increases stress on them by forcing them to prioritise between their own needs and those of others – would also be valuable.



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

The results of the review largely tally with our expectations. However, the conclusions of the review about certain aspects of resilience are not very clear. Despite the implementation and reinforcement of several groups, particularly in the areas of the transformation of local produce and market gardening, the results of the review show that the interventions did not have an impact on the beneficiaries' participation in community groups. The situation is similar for social cohesion, although these same results show the opposite: a better redistribution of the support received by the beneficiaries with other members of the community.

Moreover, some of the elements used by the review to justify the lack of capacity for resilience and the vulnerability of the households targeted by the projects do not seem convincing. The report shows that the populations were vulnerable because they used both common and unusual adaptation practices between harvests in 2013. On the contrary, we believe that this vulnerability would be proven if the practices used were harmful, which is not specified in the report.

It would have been good to show how the activities carried out to supplement cash transfers have contributed to their effectiveness. Similarly, it would have been good to explain why very poor households have shown more of an impact than poor households for most of the indicators, whereas the opposite is generally observed with a resilience project.

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

The review highlighted the success of the adoption of farming practices and market gardening activities. The conclusions of the review show that the project encouraged wider adoption of improved seeds and organic fertilizers in the beneficiary communities, not just among the people who directly received support. Moreover, there has been more diversification of market garden produce in the beneficiary communities of market gardening activities.

The review also highlighted the effectiveness of the cash transfer model adopted, which has enabled beneficiaries to purchase farming inputs and small livestock, but also to improve their food consumption and protect their farming produce against cheap sales.

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

According to the results of the review, it seems that the interventions proposed by the project do not allow for an increase in the surface areas cultivated by households. This shows the need to couple the interventions with advocacy measures, so as to improve access to land and farming equipment. It has also emerged that the approaches proposed by the project do not allow for access to drinking water, which is a key element in improving the nutrition of women and children.

6. Summary of review quality assessment

We believe the quality of the review to be good. According to the results, none of the respondents from the comparison communities said that they had benefited from transfer sharing. This means we can state that the comparison households are suitable for assessing the impact of the interventions carried out.

However, we believe that the methods used to calculate the resilience index, and in particular the weighting system, need to be improved. This is because this system gives the same weighting to all characteristics, regardless of whether they are part of the project intervention. The review should also highlight qualitative approaches to explain certain developments, rather than being restricted to quantitative results, even if this requires a great deal of time and financial resources.

Similarly, although the focus of the project is not on gender, it would have been useful to study the role of women in the effectiveness or otherwise of the project's results. An initial review report on the "Food Facility" project identified the fact that women were the sole beneficiaries of training on savings and investment as a weakness. This report could follow that up.

7. Main Oxfam follow-up actions

Make the most of cash transfers
Review of aspects related to sharing the project's resources with non-participants
Post-exit review of the two projects in 2016

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

Nothing to report

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?

Certain types of intervention must be targeted depending on the objectives set for future projects. If the projects are targeting rapid short-term impacts in terms of means of subsistence and food diversification, then cash transfer and market gardening support activities would be better. On the other hand, if the objective is to boost households' capacities to deal with shocks and shore up long-term food security, it would be better to carry out activities aimed at supporting farming production and strengthening growers' institutions.

For non-humanitarian projects, targeting beneficiaries is important. The level of vulnerability of the target households has an impact on the expected results and how long they will take to achieve

At the political level, discussions have already taken place with the offices of the Ministry of Social Development and the Ministry for the Solidarity Economy, with a view to harmonising targeting methods. These discussions could be expanded at the national level with the Ministry of Social Development and the other partners.

10. Additional reflections

The following reflections have emerged from this review:

- an increase in the surface area of fields, which is much more closely linked to traditional land ownership rights, as well as the availability of manpower and farming equipment, is not necessarily guaranteed by the project interventions under the current approach;
- the project does not guarantee access to drinking water for the beneficiaries, even though such access is a determining factor in the fight against malnutrition, which is one of the project's main objectives.

It is therefore necessary to couple future interventions with advocacy measures concerning access to factors of production (land and equipment) and drinking water.