

Oxfam Management response to the review of Resilience in Nicaragua: Impact evaluation of climate change adaptation among small-scale producers (Effectiveness Review Series 2014/15)

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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 ‘Climate Change Adaptation among Small Producers’ project was selected for review in this way under the resilience thematic area.

This project was carried out by Oxfam and in partnership with the Centro para la Promoción, la Investigación y el Desarrollo Rural Social (the Centre for Promotion, Research and Rural Social Development) (CIPRES) in three municipalities of the department of Chinandega in the west of Nicaragua, between early 2011 and October 2013. The Effectiveness Review, which was carried out in November and December 2014, was aimed at evaluating the success of this project in enabling women producers and their households to strengthen their livelihoods and to minimize risk from shocks and adapt to emerging trends and uncertainty.

The project under review aimed to improve small producers’ understanding of the impacts of climate change and to build their capacity to adapt to any changes it causes. Project participants received a programme of support, including training on improved techniques for crop production and soil management, on the selection and storage of seeds, on livestock management, and on protection of the local environment. A key element of these activities was to build understanding of climate change and its effects on food security and livelihoods, and to encourage experimentation and adaptation in productive activities. All the project participants also received distributions of seeds and tools, while some were provided with metal silos for grain storage, biodigesters (for producing gas from organic waste for cooking) or ecological latrines. A revolving credit fund was established within each cooperative, and project participants were asked to contribute 20 per cent of the value of any inputs or support they received to the fund, so that it could be lent to members for productive investments. Project participants were also supported in establishing and running risk management committees. Visits to exchange experiences with producers in other areas were also organised.

The project aimed to have an impact not just on the 120 direct participants and their households, but also on the wider population of their communities. The programme of support to the direct project participants ended in early 2013, and those participants were then particularly encouraged to raise awareness of what they had learned among other members of their cooperatives and among their neighbours. Also, during the project, specific participants were trained as local promoters, and established demonstration plots on their land. However, this emphasis on creating ‘spillovers’ from the main project participants to others was not part of the project design phase, and was only brought in towards the end of the project cycle.

This Effectiveness Review used a quasi-experimental evaluation design to assess the impact of the activities among the women who directly participated in the project activities. All 120 of the direct women participants in the project were targeted for interview, of which 101 were able to be interviewed. At the same time, all other women members of the same local cooperatives (indirect beneficiaries) were interviewed; a total of 76. This allows the Effectiveness Review to test whether the support provided to direct project participants created ‘spillovers’ for other members of the cooperatives. For comparison purposes, 328 women were interviewed from among the



membership of local cooperatives in nearby communities, where the project activities had not been carried out. At the analysis stage, to increase confidence when making estimates of the project's impact, 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.

Even though the project was focussed on resilience, an exploratory analysis of women's empowerment outcomes was also conducted, since the project had some specific objectives related to women's involvement in cooperatives and decision making.

2. Summary main findings and recommendations

Key results of this Effectiveness Review					
Outcome area	Linked to project logic	Positive and significant impact on:		Comments	
		Direct project participants?	Other cooperative members?		
Resilience	Yes	Livelihood viability	Yes	Yes	Main evidence of impact on crop diversification and adoption of improved agricultural practices, among both direct project participants and other cooperative members.
		Innovation potential	Yes	No	Direct project participants had improved understanding of climate change and were more likely to adopt new practices or initiatives, but spillovers to the other cooperative members were limited.
		Access to contingency resources and support	No	No	No evidence of change in savings, access to remittances or state support, or grain storage, even though the latter was directly connected to the project logic.
		Integrity of natural and built environment	Yes	Yes	Evidence among both direct project participants and other cooperative members of increased tree planting.
		Social and institutional capability	Yes	Yes	Strong evidence of increased involvement in risk management and emergency preparedness committees as well as knowledge of risk management plan for both direct project participants and other cooperative members.
Agricultural activities	Yes	Mixed	Mixed	Evidence that the project increased the amount of land households devote to kitchen gardens and forest-pasture. Also increased use of organic fertilisers and crop rotation/mulching practices.	
Dietary diversity	Yes	Yes	Yes	Evidence of increased consumption of fruit and vegetables, especially among the other cooperative members.	
Women's empowerment	No	Very limited	No	Limited evidence that direct project participants were more involved in decisions around agricultural practices, but no evidence that women were more empowered over financial issues. No evidence that women's time use was affected by the project.	

Recommendations

Whilst the findings of the Effectiveness Review are largely positive, there are additional lessons emerging from the results that can be applied to other projects of this type in Nicaragua and elsewhere. Through discussion with the country and project teams, and with input from partner staff, we are able to generate the following learning considerations:

Increase the emphasis on spillovers during the project design phase.

The project tried to create spillovers to other cooperative members and the community at large by training some participants as local promoters, who could pass on knowledge and establish demonstration plots on their land. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that project participants shared seeds and crops. However, this emphasis on spillovers was only brought in to the project towards the end of its implementation, and was not explicitly part of the design phase. This may explain why the results on spillovers are somewhat mixed. In particular, there is no evidence of spillovers on the dimension of innovation potential, where we hope to see understanding of climate change and new techniques permeating from the direct project participants through the cooperatives. It is therefore recommended that, in order to have more profound effects on other cooperative members besides the direct project participants, it is necessary to make spillovers part of project design.

Take a more integrated approach, taking account of other actors working in the area.

Although the project had a positive overall effect on the resilience index, there was less evidence that higher level outcomes, including wealth, were changed. In order to affect these types of outcomes, we may require better integration of projects like '*Climate change adaptation among small scale producers*' with other activities being undertaken not only by Oxfam, but also by other NGOs in the area. This reflects a 'systems thinking' approach, which takes into account and incorporates all the relevant actors and how they are linked during the design of the programme. This type of approach may also be supported by a monitoring and evaluation framework, which gives project staff information about changes in the system in a frequent and timely way.

Consider further research to investigate why some agricultural practices did not appear to change.

Although there were positive and significant differences for certain agricultural practices, such as the use of organic fertiliser and crop rotation/mulching, there were also some puzzles arising from the results of this Effectiveness Review. For example, although the project provided both training and inputs to help participants store grain, there were no significant differences in the number of households storing grain between the participant and comparison group. Similarly, project participants appeared to show no change in their use of improved seeds. Whilst we can speculate about why this may be, our data do not allow us to unpack these results. We thus recommend further research to ascertain why these outcomes, which appear to be directly related to the project logic, changed far less than others.

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

Yes, we agree. In 2013 and 2014 we decided to improve the incorporation of different focuses (economy, gender and resilience) in productive projects, and through this and other monitoring activities we can recognise that there are still some obstacles to the development of alliances and work with other local actors outside the projects that can enhance the quality and sustainability of outcomes.

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

Yes, mainly those related to direct outcomes in terms of productive capacity, boosting the technical capacities of developers, applying more environmentally sustainable techniques, strengthening networks, and association for production and risk management purposes.



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

The project did not incorporate the women's empowerment dimension in its planning stage, and these components were incorporated as the project went along. However, the project showed that it is necessary to improve strategies for indirect outcomes, particularly in terms of establishing partners in local surroundings, in order to improve access to other resources and capacities. Likewise, the empowerment dimension needs to tackle the issues of workloads, leadership, decision-making and control over financial resources.

6. Summary of review quality assessment

The assessment was good, it was carried out rigorously, and people's participation and opinions were taken into account, in terms of both gathering and analysing information. We particularly value the assessment team's professionalism and their openness to feedback and revision of the process, where necessary.

7. Main Oxfam follow-up actions

Oxfam will supplement this assessment with other assessments of similar projects in the country in order to identify design and implementation strategies that should be incorporated into future projects, particularly with regard to partners, the sustainability of outcomes, and women's empowerment.

One thing that it is important to think about is Oxfam's role in productive projects, for example by rethinking the balance between technical assistance and concentrating energy in forging relations with partners outside of the project that are important in making the outcomes sustainable. For example, in order to improve access to support resources or improve the distribution of such resources between men and women in community and family spaces.

The results of this assessment will be shared with the country programmes team and partners that are part of the Alternative Rural Economy (ARE) programme, in order to improve future interventions. It is important that new project plans are more systematic, bearing in mind that resilience requires approaches on multiple levels and with multiple focuses/actions.

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

In general, all the recommendations are relevant for the development of future programmes. Some may not be able to be implemented in the project, because Oxfam GB is closing its portfolio of projects in Nicaragua in 2016. However, the recommendations are appropriate for future initiatives.

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?

- Revise the focus on partners and relations outside of the projects that are related in terms of access to resources that Oxfam, the donor or the projects do not provide and that are strategic to the sustainability of the outcome.
- Strengthen the connecting role that Oxfam can play with local governments and other actors that can also provide technical assistance, so that Oxfam can use its resources in other aspects of the system.
- Incorporate into the focus on women strategies of empowerment for negotiation, access and control over financial decisions at both household and organisation level.
- The lessons learned from this assessment will be put to use in the NICB 48 project, particularly those relating to women's empowerment, local advocacy plans, and risk management plans.



10. Additional reflections

None