



Illustration by Christine Harrison.

# HOW TO MANAGE A PARTNERSHIP IN THE HUMANITARIAN CONTEXT

My experience in Haiti – by Régis Michel-Ange

Over the space of two years, Haiti was hit by a series of natural catastrophes; the human cost was huge. How do we face such challenges? Oxfam has sought to start a new intervention and attempted to renew links with a local organization with which there had been differences in the past.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Régis Michel-Ange studied administrative sciences at the National Institute of Administrative Sciences, Haiti, and has also completed training in project management. Régis joined Oxfam in November 2004 as Finance Assistant and is now a Programme Administrator.

One of his main responsibilities is the administrative management of local partnerships, and he also supports partners with finance and project management.

## PARTNERING FOR IMPACT SERIES

To do the work it does, Oxfam works closely with partners at all stages of the programme, in all kind of contexts: humanitarian, influencing, development, etc. But what does it mean for our staff? Each day brings new challenges and opportunities, so how do they do it? Following a reflective and productive writeshop<sup>1</sup>, this Partnering for Impact series was developed to share and explore learning from experienced practitioners about what it takes to “work well in partnership”.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

In January 2010, a violent earthquake hit Haiti, followed in October of the same year by a significant cholera epidemic. Then in August 2012, Hurricane Isaac hit. Consequently, many international organizations, including Oxfam, implemented major humanitarian operations in the country.<sup>2</sup>

The South-East municipality was one of the areas worst affected by Hurricane Isaac. Oxfam, which was already involved in operations in response to the earthquake and cholera epidemic, decided to help the victims of the hurricane.

In order to implement this action, **Oxfam approached a local organization in the area affected by the storm with which it had previously worked.** However, the relationship between Oxfam and this organization had stalled for more than two years due to differences of opinion and ways of working.

Based on its own experience, **this partner organization had its own concept of how to manage humanitarian aid and intended to impose it on its collaborators.** It wanted to be autonomous during implementation and viewed Oxfam solely as a funding provider. For its part, Oxfam wanted to provide this organization's staff with technical and financial support. However, Oxfam found itself confronted with an unwillingness to collaborate by the partner organization's management, who considered this approach to be more like supervision, believing it **called into question their capacity, their experience and their knowledge of the community's problems.** This idea of humanitarian intervention contrasted with that of Oxfam, whose objective was to come to the aid of the 5,000 victims in the municipality's two communities.

Following the hurricane, **Oxfam and the local organization resumed contact and met again to lay down the foundations for a new collaboration.** We managed to initiate a new partnership through improved communication, which contributed to restoring the peace and trust between the two organizations. The signed partnership agreement was the result of this commitment and desire to work together with our differences for the benefit of the most vulnerable.

In view of the experience of collaboration between Oxfam and this organization, **what lessons can be learned to improve Oxfam's partnership model in implementing emergency operations?**

## 2 CONTEXT

The local organization, which operates in Haiti's South-East municipality, is made up of about **fifty associations working together**. Due to its wide geographical coverage, it has a large influence and acts as a relay point for many other international organizations. It is led by managers who have experience both in the private sector and the public sphere.

The collaboration between Oxfam and this organization is not new. From 2004 to 2009, Oxfam implemented many humanitarian operations alongside this partner. **Oxfam also gave institutional and technical support**, enabling the organization to develop a guide on administrative procedures and a contingency plan for managing risks and disasters.

However, as a result of Oxfam implementing the humanitarian response primarily in the Western, Artibonite and Northern municipalities, firstly connected with the earthquake and then the cholera outbreak, **the relationship between these two organizations froze**. Oxfam was focusing its efforts on managing these two major humanitarian crises, and collaboration with this partner in 2010 was severely tested and then ceased.

## 3 HOW WE MANAGE THE NEW PARTNERSHIP

The initial phase to re-launch the partnership was bound to be difficult; however, it was crucial for the project implementation. **Meetings were organized with the emergency unit so that appropriate decisions could be made**. The idea for re-opening discussions with the local organization then emerged. The Oxfam teams were composed of staff from the programme and the fundraising team, as well as some extra support from the regional centre. The local organization was represented by its coordinator, administrator and head of programme.

The meetings took place within an atmosphere of **mutual respect**, even though signing an agreement did not seem possible at first. The local organization wanted to stick with its programming approach because it felt that it had sufficient capacity to manage this project which, in its view, appeared to be similar to another project it had already implemented.

Oxfam's approach aimed at **a transfer of knowledge** between the two organizations. Oxfam has extensive experience of carrying out this type of intervention across the world and has operated in Haiti in the humanitarian sector for more than thirty years. Therefore, **its objective was to provide technical support to the local organization**. For its part, the local organization also had technical skills, having led several humanitarian operations, both in partnership with Oxfam and with other

international organizations. Furthermore, it had an in-depth understanding of its geographical area and the mechanisms in place for reaching beneficiaries quickly.

To further boost the dialogue, Oxfam's Country Director went to meet the coordinator of the local organization. He described Oxfam's partnership approach and presented an outline of the actions carried out by Oxfam as part of the response to the earthquake and the cholera outbreak. This meeting helped to reassure the coordinator, who immediately understood that the approach proposed by Oxfam was in no way a form of supervision. In fact, it was about **a desire to collaborate in the interest of transferring and exchanging skills and knowledge.**

This meeting enabled the various differences to be ironed out and meant that the partnership could start again. Focus points were identified to enable better management of communication between the two organizations.

This new collaboration was achieved through many meetings between representatives from the two organizations. These meetings led to the signing of a **grant agreement**, which set the objectives and results to be achieved by the project. **The results of the partnership were therefore strictly linked to the results of the project.**

As a direct consequence of this agreement, **the local organization participated in drafting the project document and budget alongside Oxfam.** Its involvement in this process improved the partnership as it involved **a dynamic process** that required many exchanges within an emergency situation.

A smaller Oxfam GB unit was set up in the South-East municipality with the aim of supporting the partner. The description of roles and responsibilities did not eliminate all risks of misunderstanding. For example, when selecting beneficiaries, Oxfam placed a strong emphasis on selecting the most vulnerable victims, arguing for the principle of neutrality in emergency interventions. The local organization had a different view but came round to this approach. **Setting up a steering committee** composed of, among others, representatives from the local authorities, **guaranteed transparency in the selection process.**

At the end of the project, **a joint evaluation of the partnership** was carried out. The implementation of the project enabled lessons to be learned, and the **two organizations agreed to sign a collaboration agreement** that did not involve any transfer of funds, but was **based more on cooperation between the two partners.** This agreement enabled Oxfam to rely on a strategic partner in an area prone to many natural disasters.

# 3 KEY LEARNINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The experience of working with this organization identified several essential elements to be taken into account when managing a partnership.

- There must be a **clear exit strategy**. The absence of a clear exit strategy creates expectations that could lead to significant unease during future collaboration. The evaluation workshop carried out at the end of the project in response to Hurricane Isaac, and the signing of a non-financial agreement, are good ways of working and mechanisms to put in place ahead of any future collaboration.
- **The importance of communication:** communication must be well articulated and structured around clearly defined objectives, and be organized around two principles:
  - Internal principle: **establish a channel that allows information to be at the centre of decision making**. In the case detailed in this document, we saw that the emergency unit was well informed about the difficulties in the field and could give clear instructions. It was as a result of the considerations made by this unit that it was decided to continue discussions with the local organization. This then led to the signing of an agreement.
  - External principle: **the objective of the programme must be at the forefront of all conversations while also taking into account the considerations made by all partners and stakeholders**. Communication with the local organization was not an easy task. However, because sufficient time was taken to lead constructive discussions, an agreement was able to be reached.
- **Bring added value:** the partner may have managers who have experience of project implementation. It is fundamental that Oxfam GB demonstrates the added value it can bring to the project's implementation. This could be based on things such as qualified staff in a specific field or the adoption of Oxfam's values and vision by the partner organization's staff, or even sharing information about existing standards and procedures in the humanitarian sector.

# NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> A 'writeshop' is an intensive, participatory process that brings together experts and process facilitators under one roof to produce simple, user-friendly materials in a short period of time.
- <sup>2</sup> For more information about Oxfam's programme in Haiti, please visit: <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/what-we-do/countries-we-work-in/haiti> and <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/haiti-progress-report-2014-337992> (last accessed in April 2016)

© Oxfam GB May 2016

This case study was written by Régis Michel-Ange. Oxfam acknowledges the assistance of Jan Bouwman, Audrey Lejeune, Francois Kergoat, and Yo Winder in its production. It is part of a series of papers and reports written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues.

Illustration copyright Christine Harrison <http://www.christineharrisonsdesign.com/>

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email programme learning team at [programmelearning@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:programmelearning@oxfam.org.uk)

This publication is copyright but the text may be used free of charge for the purposes of advocacy, campaigning, education, and research, provided that the source is acknowledged in full. The copyright holder requests that all such use be registered with them for impact assessment purposes. For copying in any other circumstances, or for re-use in other publications, or for translation or adaptation, permission must be secured and a fee may be charged. Email [policyandpractice@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:policyandpractice@oxfam.org.uk).

The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

Published by Oxfam GB under ISBN 978-0-85598-706-0 in May 2016.  
Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

## OXFAM

Oxfam is an international confederation of 20 organizations networked together in more than 90 countries, as part of a global movement for change, to build a future free from the injustice of poverty. Please write to any of the agencies for further information, or visit [www.oxfam.org](http://www.oxfam.org).