



*Various partners and Oxfam met for a training in December 2015. Partners on the picture include: Women Leaders from the National Women Council from Eastern province, the Ministry of Justice and GLIHD<sup>1</sup> staff. Photo credit: Oxfam.*

# HOW OXFAM PARTNERS WITH GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS TO CREATE TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

My experience in Rwanda – by Théoneste Ndababonye

**In Rwanda, without good relations with government institutions at different levels, it would be impossible to operate and consequently have any impact on the poorest communities. This paper sheds light on how the Oxfam in Rwanda programme works with government institutions, highlighting some of the challenges as well as some key successes in building and maintaining good relationships.**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Théoneste holds a master's degree in project management and has nine years of experience in project management and monitoring and evaluation. He is currently Oxfam's MEAL (Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning) Coordinator in Rwanda. He has extensive experience working with different partners and his main responsibilities include partner selection, assessment, reviews and reassessment, enabling Oxfam to work well in partnership and ensure programme quality and effectiveness.

## 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>2</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 the development sector, it is crucial to have good partnerships and maintain good relations with key players and stakeholders to ensure that collective efforts achieve common goals. This is particularly true for government agencies. In Rwanda, without good relations with government institutions at different levels, it would be impossible to operate and consequently have any impact on the poorest communities.

The Oxfam Rwanda Programme, therefore, works closely with the government through different strategic channels at both central and local level.

In what follows, I will shed light on how the programme works with government institutions, highlighting some of the challenges as well as some key successes in building and maintaining good relationships. In particular, I will focus on the positive effect good relationships at local level can have on the relationship with central government

## 2 WHY DOES OXFAM PARTNER WITH THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

There are several reasons why we work with government:

- **Legitimacy and accountability:** It is the government that shapes the legal framework in which international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), such as Oxfam, operate. To that effect, the government issues an Annual Registration Certificate for INGOs based on an evaluation of annual reports and action plans of programme interventions, as well as recommendation letters received from local government representatives.
- **Influencing:** Engaging with government creates opportunities for Oxfam to contribute to and influence the government's long-term strategic plans, such as Rwanda Vision 2020 and the Rwanda Economic Development and Poverty Strategy, as well as other government policies.
- **Effectiveness:** Working in collaboration with government ensures effective coordination and contribution to the achievement of development plans.
- **Reach and scale:** Working with government allows for effective scale-up and smooth replication of Oxfam's successful models and approaches.

- **Partnership and visibility:** Building relationships with government bodies, at both national and local level, increases and maintains good working relations and makes Oxfam visible to all implementation areas.

In the Rwanda Programme we have found that partnering with government, especially at district level, is an effective way of bringing about changes on a large scale, by helping districts to develop and achieve their performance plans, as well influencing policies that allow our target beneficiaries to enjoy their rights and to participate in decision-making.

## WHO IS OXFAM PARTNERING WITH?

The Oxfam Rwanda Programme partners with the government through five central ministries, and several government institutions, in ten districts, as well as other government bodies and authorities.

At the central level, the Oxfam Rwanda Programme has signed memoranda of understanding with ministries and other government bodies. These include the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Gender and Promotion of Family, the Ministry of Disaster Management, the Ministry of Local Government, and the Ministry of Justice. Oxfam staff are members of several steering committees at ministry level in which thematic priorities and plans are discussed. These staff participators provide technical support and, through their expertise, can influence policies, for example:

### **Within the National Women’s Council at the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion, Oxfam’s role is to:**

- Strengthen capacity building on women’s economic and social rights (including political rights, participation in decision making, leadership training).
- Support their key events (including ‘GBV 16 Days’, International Rural Women’s Days, International Women’s Day, etc.).

### **Within the Media High Council, Oxfam’s role is to:**

- Train media practitioners on women’s rights.
- Document women’s rights violations and report them, (for example through media coverage of Oxfam key events, media talk shows, etc.).

### **Within the Ministry of Agriculture (MINAGRI):**

- Examples of programmes and policies to which Oxfam has contributed are use of land, the crop intensification programme, and the horticulture value chain policy.
- Oxfam Rwanda Programme Conduct Value chain conducts research jointly with the National Agricultural Export Board to improve

horticulture value chains.

At local level, Oxfam works with government through the Joint Action Development Forum (JADF), a government programme that aims to improve and create sustainable economic development, service delivery and domestic accountability in local communities, as well as in a national development management capacity.

Each district has an Oxfam focal person who is a member of district development commissions under the JADF.

## **What type of relationship does Oxfam have?**

None of our partnerships with government involve direct transfers of funds. We only provide capacity strengthening and technical support in strategy, policy and programme development, influencing these at the core. In cases where we do fund government actions, we contract the suppliers directly and have goods delivered directly to the government institutions.

The type of agreement we establish with the government is usually a memorandum of understanding, which explicitly states the objectives of the collaboration as well as ways of working together, including regular meetings, joint monitoring and reporting.

## **The importance of good partnerships with local government institutions**

In the Rwanda Programme we have experienced that partnering with the district government is the best way to:

- Achieve our transformational goals at a large scale.
- Enhance the government's awareness of our work and willingness to collaborate.
- Influence integration of our key priorities in District Performance Plans.
- Promote our models and approaches.
- Increase Oxfam's visibility and enhance relationships with central government, facilitating the annual registration process.

To establish good relationships in the districts, Oxfam in Rwanda uses existing structures, such as the JADF, the District Open Days and Line Ministry Stakeholder meetings.

The JADF is a channel of structural partnership in the districts. Oxfam is a member of the District Development Commissions under the JADF, which is the platform where the District Development Plans, Performance Plans and key priorities are shared and discussed with all stakeholders.

Oxfam also actively participates in the District Open Days, which are district accountability events where stakeholders meet, discuss progress, and share models, approaches, experiences and learning.

These platforms play a big role in promoting Oxfam's work, as well as in influencing. A good example of how these district events support Oxfam's work is the fact that several small and medium enterprises started using the pineapple drying technology promoted by Oxfam's Enterprise Development Programme after seeing it at the district exhibition.

Besides these events organized by the government, Oxfam itself also organizes specific activities, establishing new ways of working with districts and line ministries. The respective programmes are responsible for maintaining good relations with their line/thematic ministries through the following actions:

- Referring to national and district government plans during programme strategy design (Vision 2020 [the Strategic change goals for 20 years] and EDPRSII [Economic Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy]) including each ministry's five-year strategic plan.
- Courtesy visits to districts.
- Inviting district leaders to key events (e.g. the official launch of the Oxfam Country Strategy, official opening of workshops, field visits, etc.).
- Joint planning/action plans shared with district officers/JADF and Immigration.
- Agreement and collaboration letters.
- Joint monitoring field visits to project sites with district officials.
- Inviting district leaders/ministry leaders to Oxfam's key influencing events/workshops, etc.
- Quarterly Joint Action Development Forum meetings.
- Attending evaluation sessions with some districts.
- Organizing annual reflections and learning sessions with government officials to review programmes and the partnership.

This new approach, with a strong focus on active engagement with local government, has had significant successes, not least in increasing Oxfam's visibility at central level and in the facilitation of the annual registration processes.

For instance, during the District Open Day on 19 June 2015, the mayors and local authorities awarded Oxfam certificates for good performance, which helps the registration process at central level. A concrete example is Oxfam's work with the District of Muhanga on women's rights and economic empowerment. When it came to annual registration, the line ministry, in this case the Ministry of Gender and Promotion of Family (MIGEPROF), required Oxfam to be 'recommended' by the target district before approving the action plans. This was very easy, as the district knew about the work done by Oxfam and its plans. The mayor wrote a letter to the line ministry recommending Oxfam as a good partner of the district. Finally, MIGEPROF approved the Oxfam plan for annual registration (2015–2016).

## 3 MAIN CHALLENGES

There are challenges and risks involved in working with government. The main issues we face are the following:

- Government has its own agenda (setting up infrastructures, services delivery, etc.) that is sometimes different from the priorities or concerns of civil society organizations (policy monitoring and advocacy, challenging government strategies to make them pro-poor, value for money, etc.).
- Government needs to achieve its performance plans using its own strategies and frameworks.
- Government may need to address some of its priorities in a very short timescale (e.g. construction of a school in two months, etc.), which can result in certain issues, such as planning, participation, ownership and sustainability, not being adequately addressed.

Considering these challenges, it becomes clear that partnerships with government institutions require Oxfam to have a deep understanding of the national context, and to undertake a strong power analysis to define clear influencing strategies to minimize the risks for the organization. In Rwanda it is also beneficial to have influential people within the organization who can give timely advice on effective ways of working with the government

## 4 KEY SUCCESSES

**These are some of the successes that Oxfam achieved thanks to the partnership with government institutions, at both local and central level.**

- Working closely with the districts is the foundation of a good partnership with central government. The successes were observed, not only on the District Open Days where Oxfam was awarded certificates for good performance, but also through high levels of participation with district and line ministries in the official launching of the Oxfam Country Strategy.
- Rulindo District contacted the Rwanda Programme to discuss how Oxfam could manage a new business and tourism centre at Kirenge. This happened because the district appreciated Oxfam's work and wanted Oxfam's skills and expertise to coordinate and empower women's cooperatives. This is a success for Oxfam Rwanda because Oxfam was selected above other INGOs operating in Rulindo.
- After successful influencing work around gaps identified in the legal framework (impeding women's full access to their sexual and reproductive health rights), members of parliament recommended that Oxfam and partners to be invited to the National Law Reform

Commission to give their input to policy change. This work is still ongoing.

- Oxfam signed an agreement with the Media High Council and National Women's Council (government institutions) as a way to influence them from within.

Local leaders, women's leaders, and government officials are very happy to collaborate with Oxfam, and the ministries demonstrate this through strongly positive testimonies from MIDMAR (Ministry of Disaster Management and Refugee Affairs).

## 5 GOOD PRACTICE

To secure good relations with districts and line ministries, we have identified the following key elements. To make the relationships work and to add value, it is important to do the following:

- Align Oxfam's work with government strategies and priorities at district and national level, in the expectation of reaching more people and achieving Oxfam's transformational goals.
- Communicate and create opportunities to explain to local authorities what Oxfam is doing and how it will have an impact by contributing to their performance development plans.
- Work collectively with local authorities at the district level at all stages of the project (planning, monitoring, reviewing, evaluation and learning).
- Establish clear agreements in which roles and responsibilities are discussed and agreed upon in detail.
- Involve government in all reflections and learning events so that they will see the added value provided by Oxfam, and the expected impact on, and changes to, the communities for which Oxfam is operating.
- Use any opportunity to attend strategic meetings where Oxfam will be able to advise what needs to be done and how it will benefit the community.
- Be innovative and use an evidence-based approach. This will help to demonstrate Oxfam's role and provide a channel to influence local authorities on certain decisions and policies.
- Be persistent, flexible and take time to evaluate and react to local government requests for funds and technical support.

# 6 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Oxfam in Rwanda has found that having good working relations with government institutions provides many opportunities for both the organization and targeted communities, in particular:

- Good relations with the districts helps Oxfam to increase its visibility to central government and reach more affected people, thanks to district officials' efforts and support.
- Influencing work does not pose a problem because Oxfam has a reputation and good relations with government authorities. Oxfam knows who to influence, about what, and how.
- Aligning to district and ministry priorities, and participating in line ministries' and districts' steering committees, helps Oxfam to bring about changes and promote its models/approaches in cost-effective ways.
- Full involvement of Oxfam in District Open Days/Line Ministry Stakeholder meetings are good occasions to interact/network with other stakeholders and donors and to learn from their experiences. These occasions provide opportunities to demonstrate what Oxfam does and the positive impact it has had on communities.
- Flexibility in partnership with government and use of collaborative advocacy approaches to target government are key elements.

# NOTES

<sup>1</sup> GLIHD stands for the Great Lakes Initiative for Human Rights and Development

<sup>2</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.

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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)

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