



Illustration by Christine Harrison.

# HOW CAN WE AVOID ABSORBING OTHERS IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE GREATER EQUALITY IN OUR PARTNERSHIP APPROACH?

My experience in Mali – by Sekou Doumbia

Can you imagine if a book that you co-wrote was published without your name on it? It's difficult to imagine this kind of scenario; however, Oxfam's partners in Mali often suffer these same types of inequality through our partnership practices. This paper explores possible solutions for meeting the challenge of building a win-win partnership approach.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sekou joined Oxfam in January 2014 as the MEAL (Monitoring Evaluation, Accountability and Learning) Coordinator. One of his main responsibilities is to follow up on monitoring and evaluation activities so that Oxfam in Mali learns from the programme and ensures accountability towards the partners and communities it works with. He also works closely with the programme managers, and is the partnership focal point in country.

## 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

Due to our legitimacy and expertise in many fields, it is often the case that Oxfam works in partnership and undertakes the leadership role in its relationships with other organizations. However, the management of this leadership is a big challenge for us. In fact, when the partnership is viewed as an equal relationship between the different contributing stakeholders, **undertaking the leadership role can prove to be tricky in such a relationship.**

There cannot be two captains in one boat, but at the same time one captain cannot sail a boat to its destination on their own – that is down to teamwork coordinated by a captain, obviously, but also taking into account the contribution made by the crew. This is demonstrated by our collaborative relationships with our partners.

Undertaking the leadership role in a partnership often causes us to adopt an attitude of superiority towards our partners. **This generates frustrations in our partnerships and leads to our partners not putting too much effort into the collaboration.** This is the main challenge in Oxfam's partnership approach. This situation seriously hinders the empowerment of our partners and acts as a brake on the sustainability of our activities on the ground.

Fortunately, we constantly learn lessons from our experiences. We look at ourselves in the mirror and listen to the opinions of others on our approaches. Indeed, we have accountability mechanisms and communication opportunities with partners that enable us to learn lessons from our errors and to improve our approach. However, achieving our objective of creating solid win-win partnerships requires that we change the way think about, and implement, partnerships.

For us at Oxfam, this will involve strengthening our accountability mechanisms and improving our communication with our partners in order to meet these challenges.

## 2 CHALLENGES

In partnership models such as consortiums,<sup>2</sup> roles are divided between the partners based on each one's area of expertise under the sole leadership of one of them. As such, it is frequently the case that Oxfam carries out the leadership role, on account of its legitimacy and expertise in many fields. This can create **a lack of equilibrium in the relationship, and one of the main challenges that I have noticed is around communication and visibility.**

*'Oxfam often values its visibility too much, which relegates that of their partners to the background.'*<sup>3</sup>

Concerned with maintaining its image with donors and the wider public, Oxfam is very active in communicating results. It produces many communication materials to make the results of its work with partners known. However, in the majority of cases, we forget to make the work carried out by the partners visible.

In many cases, partners stay silent due to the existing power relationships. Considering that Oxfam is, for the most part, their main fundraiser, or donor even, partners are often apprehensive about making their frustrations known externally for fear that the relationship and funding will stop.

However, in rare cases, partners have let us know about their frustration when they were given the opportunity to do so. Thus, we have heard: *'We didn't see our logo on this document',* and even *'You have spoken about this activity without mentioning us, even though it was us who implemented it on the ground'.*

As an example, we can cite a partnership evaluation in Mali during which a partner, under the cover of anonymity, made the comment: ***'The fact that Oxfam often values its visibility too much relegates that of their partners to the background'***.

### **Partnership practices that often contradict our principles of accountability**

On a completely different level, Oxfam's partnership practices are often in contradiction to its principles of transparency and social responsibility. Under the cover of confidentiality, partners do not have access to various pieces of information. It often happens that, after having written and submitted projects with partners, Oxfam refuses to give the partners all the information on the budget. At Oxfam, we justify this in the interest of confidentiality.

This attitude leads to the partner adopting the same type of relationship with community based organizations, who in turn pass it on to the communities. This, therefore, undermines the principles of accountability that our image should reflect.

The lack of transparency also creates a feeling of distrust and a lack of confidence at all levels. Thus, rumours gain the upper hand over information. Partners are frequently heard murmuring: *'They receive so much money from donors, but they only redistribute a small proportion of it'*.

## What effects does this have on our partnerships?

The challenges detailed above can act as a brake on empowering our partners and also on the sustainability of Oxfam's activities. As an example, the exit strategies of our programmes are not followed up by local partners after our withdrawal. The reason generally given by partners for this is the lack of resources, and this is after two or three years of partnership.

# 3 GOOD PRACTICES

Indeed, Oxfam is constantly learning lessons from its relationships to improve its work. We have remained faithful to our reputation as a learning organization, through initiating consultations with our partners, enabling them to give their points of view on our way of working.

The existence of **a consultation mechanism enables specific misunderstandings to be ironed out**. In fact, during the half-yearly programme reviews, at which all the stakeholders (NGO partners, state technical departments, local authorities and communities) are represented, exchanges take place on the successes and weaknesses of the partnerships. **These exercises enabled some partners to 'break the ice' and to point out specific deficiencies**. Challenges that were the source of specific frustrations were discussed with partners as being a problem of Oxfam's accountability to them.

The discussions with partners have allowed specific shortcomings to be corrected, in particular concerning the low visibility of partners. **Our communication materials increasingly feature partners' logos and names**. Moreover, the reporting system currently gives more space to partners.

Furthermore, beyond the updates produced, **more in-depth exchanges have taken place, formally and informally, in order to better clarify each other's roles and responsibilities**.

For example, following the partnership evaluation, Oxfam initiated a meeting in Mali with its partners to discuss the issues raised. This meeting enabled suggestions to be made on how to overcome the shortcomings, not only on Oxfam's side, but also on the partners' side. Even if all the proposed solutions have not yet been implemented, we have seen an improvement at certain levels.

We note that the partners' participation in Oxfam's work is also steadily increasing. Mali is a concrete example of this growing participation, where **our partners participate in major processes, such as strategy development and annual meetings for learning, as well as drawing up plans and programmes.** Their participation alongside Oxfam in large events, such as the celebration of Women's Day, should also be added to this list. This gives our partners much greater visibility.

## 4 KEY LEARNINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We identified some critical success factors that could be replicated throughout the programme in Mali, but also elsewhere:

- Oxfam and its partners put in place a consultation mechanism, which enabled certain misunderstandings to be ironed out. The process was not only to review the activities and results on the ground, but also an opportunity to exchange views on the successes and shortcomings of the partnership.
- Discussions with partners enabled specific shortcomings to be corrected, in particular the low visibility of partners.
- More in-depth exchanges, both formally and informally, are required in order to better clarify each other's roles and responsibilities.
- It is very important to exchange views on the content and the quality of the relationship right from the start. This allows the tasks, roles and responsibilities to be discussed, defined, divided and communicated between the partners.
- Establishing a mechanism for coordination with clear lines of communication and fast circulation of information is a sine qua non condition for the success of a partnership.
- Considering the visibility of each partner in communicating the results means that frustrations in the partnership can be avoided.

In conclusion, we face many challenges in any partnership but for me, managing the leadership role in a partnership without overshadowing others is one that can be tackled positively. The impact will go beyond improving visibility issues, as it will also increase transparency and accountability of every party, and increase our chances of delivering a programme that creates a positive change in the communities Oxfam and its partners work with.

# NOTES

- 1 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.
- 2 A consortium is a group of organizations participating in the design and delivery of a common programme.
- 3 Quotes taken from a partnership evaluation in Mali Affirmation d'un partenaire lors de l'évaluation du partenariat au Mali

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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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