

Oxfam Management response to the review of:
Citizen voice in Afghanistan: Evaluation of National Solidarity Programme III
(Effectiveness Review Series 2014/15)

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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 National Solidarity Programme III was selected for review in this way under the Citizen Voice thematic area.

The National Solidarity Programme III (NSP III) was launched in 2010 by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. Called “the largest people's project in the history of Afghanistan”, it is funded by diverse international donors, including the World Bank. The NSP main objective is “To build, strengthen and maintain community development councils (CDCs) as effective institutions for local governance and socio- economic development”. Fully materialized, it would represent a major change in the way the Afghan rural communities approach their development. NSP cycle starts with local elections to select CDCs members, followed by comprehensive training modules to build their capacity. Small grants are allocated to CDCs to let them govern their development on their own, with the support of the contracted NGOs, called Facilitating Partners. They need to follow heavily regulated framework of the Operational Manual, giving no much discretion for any innovations or value added. Oxfam GB has decided to be one of Facilitating Partners as the NSP objectives align with its Joint Country Analysis and Strategy for Afghanistan, in particular Goal 1 “Right to be heard - Governance & Active Citizenship”, and Goal 2 “Advancing Gender Justice”. Oxfam adds value to the NSP by facilitating well-intentioned gender mainstreaming and paying special attention to linkage-building between the CDCs and other developmental actors in order to encourage the rural communities to exploration external funding opportunities.

Oxfam GB has been implementing NSP in Daikundi province of Afghanistan since 2003 and started the implementation of the NSP Phase III in 2010. Each year a new group of CDCs is introduced to the Programme. This review exploited this phased approach to implementation in order to mimic counterfactual analysis by comparing two contrasting types of communities: (1) those which only recently entered into the NSP (hereinafter called the NEW CDCs) and (2) those who started in 2010 and who have now completed the NSP intervention. Findings were triangulated with key informant's interviews as well as primary and secondary sources.

Summary: main findings

Summary of key results

Outcome	Rating	Short Commentary
Final outcome: CDCs are effective institutions for local governance and socio-economic development	4	The sheer scale of the NSP means that it is unrivalled in its contribution to building, strengthening and maintaining the CDCs as the effective institutions for local governance and socio-economic development.
Intermediate Outcome 1: CDC play active role in socio-economic development	4	Summing up, the evaluation found CDCs play the active role in socio-economic development and there is evidence that the NSP intervention made a crucial contribution to achieving this impact (average score out of all contributing factors is equal to 3.7)
Intermediate Outcome 2: Women and girls empowered socially and economically	3	The evaluation found strong evidences that the NSP set foundation for women's involvement in CDCs. Without the CDCs, women would - most probably - still be out of governing structures. Although NSP documents only vaguely mentions the participation of "both men and women", gender is an important element of the Oxfam Programme.

Scoring key: Specific contribution of intervention

5	Outcome realised in full Evidence that intervention made a crucial contribution
4	Outcome realised in part & evidence that intervention made a crucial contribution Outcome realised in full & evidence that intervention made an important contribution
3	Outcome realised in part & evidence that intervention made an important contribution
2	Outcome realised in part & evidence that intervention made some contribution Outcome realised to a small degree & evidence that intervention made an important contribution
1	Outcome realised, to any degree, but no evidence that the intervention made any contribution

Interim Outcome 1 contribution scores

Outcome 1	Contribution scores
CDC play active role in socio-economic development	4
Proper representation of all villagers	4

Development funds conditioned upon proper representation of all villagers	5
Community members become CDC members (election)	5
Community eager to gather and reach consensus on development issues	4
Transition of power from the elders to CDCs	4
Capacity building of CDCs	3
Well-educated and active CDC members	2
Improved perception of CDC members' skills	4
CDCs considered as valuable partner in development	2
CDCs have good linkages with developmental actors	4
CDCs are well-established as local governance institutions	4
CDCs collaborate with each other on common problems	5
Transparency and accountability of CDCs' work	3
Strategic planning at the local level	5
Effective management of common resources	2

Indicator Outcome 2 contribution scores

Outcome 2	Contribution scores
Women and girls empowered socially and economically	3
Women's involvement in CDCs	4
Women participate in CDCs' decision-making	3

Recommendations

As mentioned in the report, the NSP structure does not leave Facilitating Partners any discretion in terms of its implementation. It also imposes limitation on the learning considerations, most of which relate more to programming or organisational design by the MRRD than directly to the works of Oxfam GB and other FPs. The following recommendation points relevant to Oxfam have been extracted from section 6 (Programme Learning Considerations section) of the report:

Consider rethinking Oxfam's involvement in the NSP (or any other programme of similar nature).

The soft objective implicit in the NSP of creating local governance structures, trapped in a heavily regulated framework of the Operational Manual, may be unpromising for the organisations like Oxfam, which has significant potential for value-added. And, as mentioned in case of gender, the focus on results may limit the NSP impact.

Discuss the plans to subcontract the NSP to a local NGO with the Ministry as soon as possible for the betterment of future cooperation. In the event of such subcontracting, consider the fact that the quality implementation of NSP would depend on the capacity of selected partner(s), which might initially have to be built by Oxfam.

Oxfam has done this already and the decision has been made to subcontract the NSP to a local NGO. Taking into account the high expectations the MRRD has for value-added of the international NGOs, it would be advisable to discuss the plans with the Ministry as soon as possible for the betterment of future cooperation. In the event of such subcontracting, the quality implementation of NSP would depend on the capacity of selected partner(s), which might initially have to be built by Oxfam.

Consider whether Oxfam should collect data above and beyond the figures required by the MRRD to enable discussion on effectiveness, efficiency and relevance.

The MRRD needs a lot of information from high number of Facilitating Partners on thousands of CDCs. The easiest way to (1) collect them and (2) make sense of them is to use clearly defined and easily-collectable indicators. Being paid by results, Facilitating Partners follow those requirements, without giving extra consideration to effectiveness or efficiency, relevance or other factors. This may, possibly, negatively affect the Programme impact. One example is gender. The NSP declares (in Annex K), that it aims at ensuring meaningful participation of women but in practice only the figures matter, like number of women present at the CDC meetings (required by monitoring forms) or women's declarations of involvement in Programme activities expressed while gathering data for an Institutional Maturity Index. There is no mechanism to verify those data.

Consider how Oxfam can use its position to advance social changes and governance aspect of the programme indirectly, through the NSP

The communities, and the FPs sometimes, may concentrate too much on the tangible effect, neglecting the governance aspect. Such the substantial social changes like the introduction of local governance and women empowerment require time to materialise in those traditional communities. Oxfam, with its high-recognition and respectable social organisers, is well-positioned to advance those social changes indirectly – through the NSP - onto the rural communities.

Consider how to advise and advocate on future design of the NSP

Both MRRD and PMU think highly of Oxfam and its involvement in NSP implementation

Conduct more formal trainings on gender and procurement, as requested by PMU.

The organisation conducts some of them on "learning-by-doing" bases. Certainly, this is an effective approach for mostly illiterate communities who may have never heard about any project management concepts. Such the outstanding issues shall be openly discussed with the PMU and the recommendation for flexibility (e.g. different staff levels depending on the Programme phase) shall be made in order to improve future programming.

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

The Afghanistan team is partially satisfied with this review. We agree that these findings concur with our own assessments and the data we collected from provincial offices on the working of the CDC, but we have additional points where we needed evidence from the review. Our reactions to this external review are as below:

- It identified areas of achievements and gaps in the programme (see sections 4 and 5 below).
- We agree that the programme is one where community institutions need to be built for strengthened governance, but we think the assessment has not adequately covered the results of the work done by the project on helping CDCs develop their Community Development Plans, most of which in these initial stages were around infrastructure. However, such planning and implementation is itself a major departure from the past. As the assessment has stated, the NSP interventions “represent a major change in the way the Afghan rural communities approach their development”. Thus we feel the review should also have looked at Socio-Economic Development Indicators of the program:
 - Minimum 70% of sampled communities have access to services (transport, irrigation, water supply, etc.) through NSP block grant financed subprojects;
 - At least 50% of NSP's total beneficiaries are female.
- The review has given recommendations, which will help Oxfam in moving on to the next phase of the programme and our reactions to the same are given in sections below.

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

The report has identified a number of areas of strength in Oxfam's implementation of the programme. Among these are the following:

- Participation of women and their involvement in key decision-making processes
- A genuinely participatory planning process for the first time in Afghanistan's history

However, the team feels that the review has not mentioned an important positive feature of Oxfam's work mentioned by the programme donor (MRRD/NSP) and NSP operation manual – viz. the physical quality of CDC sub-projects implemented through the programme.

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

The review did identify some areas that need to be improved for better outcomes to be obtained from the program:

- Rethink Oxfam's approach in the program, pass on its current responsibilities to a local NGO
- Collect data beyond that currently required by the programme to enhance Oxfam's evidence-based advocacy role for strengthening local governance structures
- Input into the project design and capacity building processes in future.

These areas identified will be taken up for consideration in future programming.

4. Summary of review quality assessment

The Oxfam Afghanistan team is satisfied with the quality of the assessment and the approach. The assessment showed adequate respect for local conditions and perceptions, and made sure that key stakeholders – such as community members, women and other stakeholder who were involved in the programme are interviewed and their responses reflected in the report.

5. Main Oxfam follow-up actions

Given below are the follow-up actions arising from the recommendations of the review:

- a. Oxfam Afghanistan has decided that it will be part of the design of the next phase of the NSP programme, the design of which has already started. It appears that NSP will now be changed to a new programme called Citizen Charter. The roles and responsibilities of the Facilitating Partner (such as Oxfam) under the new programme are not yet clear. However, if the next phase is in line with Oxfam's Country Strategy, Oxfam will ensure that it will involve its partners in facilitating the programme at local level. This will be done by September 2016.
- b. Oxfam will collect more data – beyond that currently required by the programme and will build up an evidence base to influence the NSP programme for enhanced governance systems in future programme s. The exact data requirements will be worked out by September 2016.
- c. Oxfam will also continue to stress the importance of ensuring REAL participation of women in decision-making at community levels. For this, Oxfam will ensure that the learnings of another of its programme s in Daikundi - Building Livelihood Resilience – will be incorporated into the NSP design of next phase. As a Facilitating Partner, Oxfam will also - along with other FP - contribute to the design of the new Citizen Charter programme particularly to ensure that women's role in decision-making at community and CDC levels are a critical portion of the new programme. This should be done by September 2016, when the Facilitating Partner Representative Group meets to discuss the role of the FPs in the next phase.
- d. The Oxfam Afghanistan team has already planned to conduct more gender training for various CDCs, as per the request from the project PMU, and as mentioned in this review. This will be done until end of current project period, which is by August 2016.

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

We feel the review should have covered the following points in greater clarity:

- The fact that this programme is run by MRRD as per standard implementing procedures, policy and regulations.
- The programme already requires a huge amount of paper work by CDC/community. Therefore there is a limit to how much Oxfam can bend the programme rules and increase training topics and other documentation for CDC.

Thus we wish to add a word of caution. In large programmes of this size and complexity, it is not always possible for Oxfam to ensure that the recommendations given by this assessment are incorporated fully. Oxfam cannot always make changes in its own working area unless such changes are incorporated into the overall programme design and operating procedures of the entire programme.

However, Oxfam commits to work on enhancing its own programme quality within the framework of the programme operation manuals and programme training manuals. The Oxfam team will also share the findings of this assessment with the Afghanistan government during the design of the next phase.

7. 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?

Oxfam will also use the findings of this review in designing other community development projects in the country. Other points are already covered above.