

Oxfam Management response to the review of:

Accountability Review in Cambodia: Strengthening partnership towards participatory and accountable governance (Effectiveness Review Series 2014/15)

Prepared by:	<i>Tuy Samram, Project Manager, and Sok Khim, Head of Programme, Oxfam GB in Cambodia</i>		
Contributors:	<i>Lim Dalis, Programme Officer, Than Bunly, Programme Officer for Oxfam GB, Som Sopheak, Programme Manager-Partner-Action for Development; Chem Tem, Programme Manager-Partner, Angkar Ponleu Aphiwat, Ray Bunthin, Project Manager-Partner, Ponlok Khmer; Sun Kimhoeun, Project Manager-Partner, Community Economic Development; and Khem Ra, Provincial Coordinator-Partner, Prom Vihearhor</i>		
Signed off by:	<i>Sok Khim, Head of Programme, Oxfam GB in Cambodia</i>		
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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 projects a quarter to a half way through their lifetime are randomly selected each year in order to review the levels of accountability they are achieving. The accountability indicator that Oxfam has chosen to examine in its Accountability Reviews (ARs) is the degree to which its work meets its own standards for accountability. Oxfam is able to do this as it has clear standards that describe how a project/intervention/activity should be delivered by staff and partners and how it should be experienced by those for whom we are seeking change.

The ECCF project on 'Strengthening Partnership towards Participatory and Accountable Governance of Land and Natural Resources in Cambodia' was selected for review in this way.

Accountability is one of the 11 Programme Standards that Oxfam is expected to meet in its development work. It is the process through which an organization balances the needs of stakeholders in its decision-making and activities, and delivers against this commitment. Accountability is based on four dimensions: transparency, participation, learning, and evaluation and feedback mechanisms that allow the organization to give account to, take account of, and be held to account by stakeholders. Oxfam's principle is: 'We hold ourselves primarily accountable to people living in poverty, but we take our accountability to all stakeholders seriously, and continuously strive to balance their different needs. Increased accountability will be achieved and demonstrated through respectful and responsible attitudes, appropriate systems and strong leadership.' This review assessed accountability in terms of transparency, feedback/listening and participation – three key dimensions of Accountability for Oxfam. In addition it asked questions around partnership practices, staff attitudes, and satisfaction (how useful the project is to people and how wisely the money on this project has been spent) where appropriate.

Kampong Thom, Preah Vihear, Kratie, and Stung Treng provinces were originally recognized as forest provinces in Cambodia. These provinces were not densely populated, and where the majority of ethnic minority groups live. The main sources of livelihoods to this day rely on natural resources and agriculture.



Development activities have increased since the end of the civil war in 1998, and this has resulted in land conflicts and natural resources being sourced legally and illegally. Resources sourced illegally have consequentially affected changes in the ecosystem in these areas, mainly due to deforestation, which has had serious effects on livelihoods and natural resources such as water, land and fish.

In response to these areas of concern, the project under review was devised in 2013 in order to ensure equitable and sustainable use of natural resources for future generations in Cambodia. The ECCF project has been implemented in four provinces including Kampong Thom, Preah Vihear, Kratie, and Stung Treng in partnership with local organizations. These include Action for Development (AFD) and Angkar Ponleu Aphiwat (APA) based in Kampong Thom province; Ponlok Khmer (PKH) based in Preah Vihear; Community Economic Development (CED) based in Kratie; and Prom Vihearthor (PVT) based in Stung Treng.

The project's objectives are:

- (i) to enhance capacities and platforms for engaging with state agencies at sub-national authorities in the governance of land and natural resources; and
- (ii) to build capacity and establish platforms for civil society, rights holders and at state level to advocate for equitable management of land and natural resources.

Four outcomes are expected to be achieved including:

- Strengthened capacity of 260 Sub-National Authorities, 45 NGOs, 90 Community-Based Organizations and 170,837 villagers in the KPT, PV, KI and ST provinces of Cambodia on participatory engagement in policy dialogues for transparent and accountable governance of land and natural resources.
- Institutionalized engagement mechanisms and cooperation between SNAs and CSOs for developing and implementing policies and strategies for land use planning and development.
- Citizens and groups affected by land disputes and conflicts in the KPT, PV, KI and ST provinces of Cambodia have access to legal services for resolving their cases.
- Strengthened capacity of local communities and rights holders, particularly women and vulnerable groups, for claim-making and demanding good governance of land and natural resources.

Due to time and budget constraints, the Accountability Review was conducted in two of the four target provinces (Kampong Thom and Stung Treng) where the project was implemented.

Primary and secondary data were collected during the review. Primary data were gathered through key informant interviews (KII) and focus group discussions (FGD) with implementers and partners, stakeholders, and project participants, using standard questionnaires. Secondary data involved reviewing existing project documentation such as project documents, monitoring and evaluation reports, and annual reports.

2. Summary main findings and recommendations

Summary table: Oxfam's score for accountability to partners – from 1 (low) to 4 (v high)

Acct Indicator	Transparency	Feedback	Participation
Review Team Score	4	3	3.5

Transparency: The review team awarded a score of 4 for Oxfam GB's transparency level because all the standard criteria were fulfilled. For example, project documents were shared with all concerned partners before the project started and from the beginning of project implementation. Reports, monitoring, recruitment, auditing and work delivery documentation had been shared properly and widely among all project partners.

Feedback: Oxfam needs to improve the quality, impact and continuity of its feedback mechanisms. In particular, providing responsive actions to address comments, feedbacks, and proposals submitted by partners and local communities during project implementation to enhance stakeholder participation and trust in the project.

Participation: Oxfam could reframe its strategies in involving partners' participation in modifying key project frameworks and implementing strategies that can be open and flexible over space and time. For example, Oxfam is compliant with expenditure and financial management standards, but needs to explain its funding policy, communicating it coherently with partners and stakeholders before they take part in project activities to improve Oxfam's stakeholder engagement strategies and partnership alliance.

Summary: Oxfam and partner accountability to communities – from 1 (low) to 4 (v high)

Acct Indicator	Transparency	Feedback	Participation
Review Team Score	3	3	3.8

Transparency: The review team felt that, despite quite difficult operating circumstances, a good degree of transparency had been achieved. However the villagers, except key people and some involved stakeholders in the communities, did not know about budget planning, duration of the project, the project's goal, donors, project plan, the benefits from the project, and other related project documents.

In general it was felt that the long distances contributed to the fact that visits from partners to communities were irregular and infrequent. Sharing of project reports suffered similarly. The challenge of travelling to some of the furthest locations has had an impact on all aspects of accountability – transparency, feedback and participation. In some cases the communities felt that the information partners were trying communicate was too complex. It was suggested that the use of visual aids as training documents had been limited.

Feedback: The communities felt Oxfam and partners always accepted villagers' requests and concerns and had good relationships with the commune council and other local representatives. However, the review team assessed a more continuous effort is required to further improve existing feedback mechanisms in order to enhance the quality and culture of feedback.

Participation: The project had involved all key stakeholders in planning, deciding, implementing, and monitoring the progress activities. In particular, participatory approaches have always been considered as the main tool in all the project implementation phases, as local villagers become more enthusiastic about participating in the project activities.

Recommendations

- Set up mechanisms to improve accountability knowledge of OGB's staff, partners, and key local beneficiaries.
- Design approaches to share more project information to sub-national authorities (SNAs), line departments, and local communities as well as OGB's partners.
- Redesign time-specific action plans that entice more community participations, while focusing on incentive mechanisms to support their livelihoods.
- Revisit and strengthen accountability (especially transparency) of the financial plan, which will allow Oxfam's partners, stakeholders, and community to better capture and understand the financial flow and management of the project.

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

These studied findings are consistent with the project team's expectations and understanding.

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

Yes, the participation and transparency were particularly good because the project employed a partnership approach, to engage all key actors (state, civil society organizations, community and medium/large land owners) in the process to promote governance of land and natural resources.

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

N/A

6. Summary of review quality assessment

This AR result is accurate. Approaches, tools, samples selected, data analysis and interpretation are precise and useful. Recommendations are relevant and considered taking action to improve these shortfalls.

7. Main Oxfam follow-up actions

After the completion of the Accountability Review, findings and recommendations were incorporated into the Year 3 Project Workplan, covering the period from January to December 2015. Methodologies and resources were allocated to achieve these proposed planned activities/interventions. In particular the recommendations incorporated were:

- Oxfam will set up a common or proper schedule which ensures full participation from majority stakeholders and beneficiaries of the project.
- Oxfam and its partners will get together to explore an effective support mechanism for the core people in the communities. This will allow them to provide more effective information dissemination to the villagers.
- Oxfam and its partners will improve feedback reporting on the communities' concerns.
- Oxfam and its partners will strengthen and diversify the means of project dissemination to partners, to ensure excellent onward explanations to communities.
- Oxfam and its partners will add more visual aids to training materials, which will allow villagers to better understand content and focus.

The project ended at the end of December 2016. Oxfam GB in Cambodia has been winding down its programme in order to merge into the 'One Oxfam' structure. In order to replicate the lessons from this review into the wider Oxfam programme in Cambodia, project staff will discuss the results of the review and lessons learned with the new Country Management team.

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

N/A

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?

This AR exercise is relevant and useful. It is recommended that Oxfam-supported projects/programme considers employ this tool.

10. Additional reflections

The Oxfam Programme Management team has introduced AR into its approach to programme management. The back-donors, especially the EU, are pleased with this initiative and requested a copy of the report. In addition, this exercise added value in building confidence in the project results. This led to trust-building and increased cooperation and ownership.