

Oxfam Management response to the review of *Accountability Review in Yemen: Humanitarian assistance and resilience building (Effectiveness Review Series 2014/15)*

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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 ‘Humanitarian Assistance and Resilience Building in Western Yemen’ project was selected for review in this way.

Accountability is one of the eleven standards that Oxfam is expected to meet in its development work. It is the process through which an organisation balances the needs of stakeholders in its decision-making and activities, and delivers against this commitment. Adhering to Oxfam accountability standards allows the organisation 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 the people and how wisely the money on this project has been spent) where appropriate.

The project “Humanitarian Assistance and Resilience Building in Western Yemen” is a two-year project supporting vulnerable communities in Al-Hodeidah and Hajjah governorates. Oxfam and its partners aim to build resilience and provide humanitarian assistance to men, women and children, contributing to reducing the impact of chronic poverty, natural hazards and conflict by:

1. Working to increase the capacity and equality of men and women’s access to resources that will help them cope with shocks and stresses
2. Improving community-based disaster preparedness that is supported by responsive governance and civil society
3. Improving the management and the sustainable use of scarce water resources
4. Increasing increased and equitable access to basic services
5. Supporting targeted communities, humanitarian stakeholders and national and local decision makers to increase their knowledge and coordination of how to develop effective and gender sensitive programs addressing disaster response, mitigation and resilience.

The project is working in 42 selected villages in Al-Hodeidah and Hajja governorates with integrated Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) activities, unconditional cash transfers, cash for work (CFW), food security and livelihoods interventions, and disaster risk reduction, leading to integrated development and a more focused and sustainable impact. Oxfam and its partners work directly with the beneficiary communities throughout the project cycle. The project involves close coordination with the rural water authority, the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation (MAI), Social Welfare Fund (SWF), Social Fund for Development (SFD) and other relevant stakeholders. To ensure a community driven process the project is seeking to establish or strengthen existing water management committees, and agricultural and livelihoods groups.

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	2	3	3

Transparency: There is a poor flow of information due to the absence of appropriate ways of providing and receiving information.

Feedback: A formal feedback and complaints mechanism for partners is not available. However, if there was a complaint from partners regarding Oxfam staff, they would talk to another member of Oxfam staff to find a solution.

Participation: The score above is in line with the programme standards of Oxfam GB. However, the author of this review observed that the relationship between Oxfam staff and seconded partner staff could have been stronger. Partner staff did not participate in all project activities, and perceived that they were not fully integrated into Oxfam’s office (e.g. usage of certain equipment).

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

Acct Indicator	Transparency	Feedback	Participation
Review Team Score	2	3	3

Transparency: Oxfam staff shared some project information with the community, particularly at the beginning of the project and sometimes during the cash distribution, training, hygiene awareness and community meetings. Oxfam could have shared relevant information (such as Oxfam project budget or the project spending mechanism) with communities at all stages. Community members did not always know who the Oxfam partners were.

Feedback: Several methods of feedback were in place and there was a dedicated member of Oxfam staff dealing with feedback and complaints. The majority of project participants knew how to make complaints as the hotline number and related information had been shared in advance. Oxfam staff did their best to solve community problems and would always call back in response to missed hotline calls or SMS messages. Oxfam staff use a Post Distribution Monitoring (PDM) tool to collect additional feedback/complaints on the unconditional cash transfer (UCT) and cash for work (CFW), and assess people’s level of awareness and the overall use of the complaints/feedback handling mechanisms in place.

Participation: Oxfam staff regularly met with VDCs (Village Development Committees) to discuss intervention plans on UCT and CFW components, Water User Committees (WUCs), and community health volunteers (CHVs). VDCs then delivered information to help implement project activities. Due to cultural conventions there was limited women's participation and decision-making except in women-only project interventions.

Recommendations:

- Oxfam project team and partners should work on ways of improving and strengthening relations among themselves.
- The Oxfam project team should coordinate and promote dialogue between Oxfam and partners, partners and communities, and develop coordinating mechanisms among the various levels.
- Oxfam project team should involve partners and communities during the project concept phase to build and strengthen partnership and project foundations.
- Oxfam project team should facilitate partner's access to information and the use of related equipment, such as provision of individual computers for staff seconded to Oxfam offices for information access, follow-up on project activities, track impact of projects, and preparation of reports.
- Oxfam project team should share information with partners that is relevant to the project. This should include Oxfam policies, project documents, budget, related MEAL (monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning) and progress reports, and plan for regular meetings for information sharing.
- Oxfam project team and partners should consider how they will share relevant information with project participants, including budget/financial information.
- Oxfam project team should encourage and empower partners to seek and obtain information, rather than waiting for Oxfam to provide it.
- Oxfam project team should discuss and decide on the level of financial information that should be shared with partners to ensure the smooth functioning of the project.
- A feedback mechanism should be set up by the Oxfam project team in regards to complaint/feedback between Oxfam and partner so as to deal with partners complaints, with a committed response system and clear ways to follow up in case of delayed responses.
- Oxfam project team, partners and communities should discuss and decide on an exit plan. Oxfam project team should consider how to improve partnership practice. For the improvement of partnership practices; partners suggested that Oxfam partnership officer (in Al-Hodeidah office) should spend some time (such as 5 days or a week every month) in each partner office. Oxfam project team should expand partnerships and seek new partners.

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

It is critical to note upfront that this review took place in 2014. Since then, the whole of the Yemen country programme, including this project, underwent major changes due to the eruption of violent conflict in March 2015. In agreement with DFID, the country team prioritised the essential life-saving components of the project. The Disaster Risk Reduction component was dropped in the move towards a large scale humanitarian response. Between March and June, the primary activities under this project were rehabilitation of water supply systems and community mobilisation in hygiene promotion. Since July 2015 the primary focus of our work has been Emergency Food Security and Vulnerable Livelihoods (EFSVL) interventions as well as ongoing Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WaSH) work.

The spread of violence and insecurity in Yemen as well as the marked shift towards humanitarian work affected the way we work with partners as well as the nature of our programme. From our internal assessment report in 2014, it had emerged that our NGO partners on this project were very strong at mobilising communities, which was most needed at the time, but lacked technical capacity in EFSVL and WaSH work. The latter became critical to our collaboration as the conflict unfolded.

Furthermore, our NGO partners had to relocate due to airstrikes and on-the-ground fighting that posed significant risks to their operations and staff safety. Some did not have adequate security management measures in place and ongoing field activities would have subjected our partners to an unacceptable level of insecurity. With these major considerations in mind, we discontinued our NGO partnerships in both areas. The partnerships with local authorities, however, are ongoing and in some ways have deepened, so that we can facilitate access to water and essential services to internally displaced people and their host communities. For example, we collaborate closely with local water authorities such as the Government Authority for Rural Water Projects (GARWP), the Local Water and Sanitation Company (LWSC) and the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MoPIC). In aid of our EFSVL work, the Yemeni Post Office is the financial service provider for our life-saving livelihoods' interventions. In light of the above mentioned changes, we can say that overall this assessment is in alignment with our own expectations of the state and nature of the project at the time the review was conducted. To ensure that this is a useful document, the responses to the rest of the questions will review the project in its current state and will reference the relevant developments.

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

Documentation - The country team takes pride in the detailed documentation of their work. We strongly believe that good documentation and information sharing are key to organisational learning.

The feedback/complaints mechanism for beneficiaries – At the time of the review beneficiaries had indicated they found our feedback mechanism useful and fit for purpose. Oxfam's accountability strategy for project implementation is based on four pillars: transparency, participation, feedback, and learning and evaluation. Receiving feedback and responding to complaints from stakeholders is an important part of improving program/project accountability. Ensuring that stakeholders, in particular beneficiaries and those living in the communities where we work, can hold us to account, improves the overall quality of work. Based on this principle, Oxfam has robust mechanisms in place to ensure accountability at the community level.

Our complaints mechanism is continuously under review so we can fully adapt it to the changing country context. Our technical teams review the complaints on a weekly basis, classify them and track the response to every issue. In terms of tools to measure how Oxfam has mainstreamed accountability in the post distribution monitoring – these components have been successfully incorporated in the project, as well as tools to assess awareness, the level of participation and perceived usefulness of the

complaints/feedback handling mechanisms. We have a very practical one-page guideline on the overall MEAL framework in place. The project staff has incorporated their MEAL duties into their annual performance review. Oxfam exit interviews are conducted immediately after Oxfam distributions as the beneficiaries leave the distribution sites. Oxfam exit interviews focus on the process of the distribution. This is a valuable opportunity for Oxfam to gather feedback on how smoothly the distributions proceeded; whether the information provided before each distribution was adequate; what beneficiaries experienced during the process; whether beneficiaries received what they expected; and whether there were any protection concerns raised during the distribution process, etc.

The level of involvement of community members – *Community members were involved in a wide range of activities at every stage of the project implementation cycle. In the current emergency response, we are using a community-based approach to identify community priorities and plan all humanitarian interventions. Solving problems in group dynamics through communication and facilitating productive discussions between the Village Development Committees and the beneficiaries.* – This was very much the case at the time the review was done. We still facilitate as much dialogue within and between communities as possible, but given the current conflict in country, Village Development Committees are currently inactive.

Oxfam staff act impartially in a fragile and complicated context. While our staff has been inducted and abides by the humanitarian standards for the selection of beneficiaries, intervention and target areas, it has to be noted that since March, 2015 the country has been in ongoing conflict and the needs for humanitarian assistance have grown exponentially. Oxfam is one of very few INGOs with a substantive presence in the country and while we select our beneficiaries fairly within our areas of operation, we do need more INGO partners to be able to respond at a greater scale to the overwhelming needs.

The country team agrees with the last two strengths identified in the assessment, namely that **staff frequently solves community problems** and that **communities appreciate the staff attitudes and participation levels in this project**. They are clearly inter-related, in the sense that communities appreciate the attentiveness of the team as well as Oxfam's willingness to look for quick and effective solutions to each problem at hand.

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

While partnership agreements were drawn up between Oxfam and the partners, stipulating the roles and responsibilities of the partners, it seems that partner's roles and responsibilities were not clearly communicated, or their expectations fully discussed. Partners did not feel they could participate equally in the making of key project decisions on aspects such as planning, budgeting, implementation, and monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL). – The team agrees with this weakness in our accountability practice. Partner capacity on overall project management was insufficient. Had the current crisis not happened and dictated a dramatic change in our relationship and ways of working, the team would have invested in systematic capacity building activities of partners.

Most activities are technically and financially planned, implemented and managed by Oxfam. This resulted in poor transparency to partners. Involvement of partner staff (who are seconded to Oxfam) is not sufficient. We fully agree with this finding. There is a clear need to revise the way staff is seconded to Oxfam in order to involve partners at a higher level of decision-making and ensure transparency.

There was no exit plan in place, which was a source of concern to partners. While we agree with the accuracy of this finding, it has to be noted that we can only take remedial action once there is peace in the country. An exit plan would be an asset to any programme that is developmental in nature. However, during the current humanitarian response, an exit strategy in the framework of this project could constitute delegation of risk to vulnerable partner staff.

6. Summary of review quality assessment

This is a strong review that makes adequate recommendations to this project in its original form. However, in the past 12 months the nature of the project has changed dramatically due to the ongoing conflict in Yemen. This also affected the way we work with partners and our current expectations from partnerships. In the management response, we have listed the relevant changes in as much detail as possible and outlined which recommendations will be taken forward and how.

7. Main Oxfam follow-up actions

- Planned improvements to the complaint mechanism system.
- Revision of the Post Distribution Monitoring process.
- A reflection workshop is currently being designed in order to sensitize our staff about accountability to partners.
- In the revision of our partnership strategy, we are looking at ways to improve the different aspects of information sharing with partners.
- In our new partnership strategy, we are also looking at ways to expand our existing partnerships under the current country context.

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

Facilitating partner's access to information and the use of related equipment through the provision of individual computers for staff seconded to Oxfam offices for the purpose of information sharing, access and follow-up project activities. We feel strongly that the provision of personal computers or laptops is not a solution to the problem of information sharing and access to information. Most of the partners do have their own equipment of this kind.

There should be some discussion on the level of financial information that should be shared with partners to ensure the smooth functioning of the project We find this recommendation insufficiently precise to be actionable.

For the improvement of partnership practices, partners suggested that the Oxfam Partnership Officer for Al-Hodeidah should spend time (for example one week per month) in each partner office. While this is certainly a good idea, our partnership strategy is under review at the moment and while we are operating in the current emergency context, it is unlikely we will be able to establish such a mechanism at this stage.

Oxfam should give information to partners. This should include Oxfam policies, project documents, budgets, related MEAL and progress reports. Oxfam is already doing this as part of its standard interaction with partners.

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?

When our country programme shifted completely towards a humanitarian response, we saw clearly that in the Hajjah Governorate, the level of community acceptance towards Oxfam is exceptionally high. In this area, we have had pre-crisis interaction with the local communities in the framework of this project. Even in situations where we are delivering aid only to internally displaced people, the host communities show a remarkable degree of acceptance and understanding. We believe that this is largely due to the trust we have built over time with these communities as well as our ongoing commitment to involve the beneficiaries at every stage of our work.

The team understands that our resolve to continuously work on our participation and accountability systems does not only benefit the relevant projects, it is also a powerful way to consolidate our long-term relationships with partners and beneficiaries and secure vital humanitarian access during one of the most acute crises of our time.

10. Additional reflections

None

