

Oxfam Management response to the review of *Women’s Empowerment in Armenia: Impact evaluation of the women’s economic empowerment project in rural communities in Vayots Dzor region (Effectiveness Review Series 2015/16)*

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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 mature projects are randomly selected each year and their effectiveness rigorously assessed. The ‘Women’s economic empowerment in rural communities of Vayots Dzor region’ project was selected for review in this way under the women’s empowerment thematic area.

The project implemented by Oxfam in partnership with Business Support Centre (BSC), Scientific Center for Vegetable and Industrial Crops (SCVIC) and Horizon Fund, started in April 2011 supporting four cooperatives in four villages in Vayots Dzor region, and concluded in 2013. The Effectiveness Review took place in November 2015 (two years after the project conclusion) and it intended to evaluate the project’s impact in promoting women’s empowerment, reducing household exposure to climate risk and increasing household income.

The evaluation adopted a mixed method approach employing quasi-experimental impact evaluation design combined with a qualitative component. The quantitative impact evaluation aimed at measuring change that is causally attributable to and representative of the project intervention. It involved comparing women that had been supported by the project with women in neighbouring communities that had similar characteristics to project women in 2010, but who had not participated in the project. A household survey was carried out with 107 women participating into the project (either being directly involved in the project activities or being the spouse of a project participant), and 350 comparison women who had never been involved in any Oxfam project. At the analysis stage, the statistical tools of propensity-score matching and multivariate regression were used to control for demographic and baseline differences between the households surveyed in project and comparison areas to provide additional confidence when making estimates of the project’s impact. The qualitative component informed the design of measurement tools for women’s empowerment and triangulated results from the quantitative data. Qualitative work consisted of field-based focus group discussions and individual interviews. These were conducted in both the project intervention area, and in some comparison villages. They served to gather additional information, understanding and learning around the project implementation, as well as trying to answer the question of what women’s empowerment means in Vayots Dzor region (Armenia).

2. Summary main findings and recommendations

Summary results of this Effectiveness Review			
Outcome	Linked to project logic	Evidence of positive impact	Comments
Women's empowerment	Yes	Yes	Positive and significant results on overall women's empowerment, particularly on indicators referring to changes taking place at environmental level and relational level, such as participation and influence in community groups and public events. However there is no evidence of change in power relations within the household.
Reduced exposure to climatic risk	Yes	Yes	Improved farming management, including higher use of greenhouses, cold storages and drip irrigation systems. Significant reduction in likelihood of suffering loss due to weather conditions or poor access to markets.
Improved household income and wealth	Yes	No	There is evidence that some of the farmers involved in the project areas still producing and selling agricultural products within cooperatives. However there is no evidence of higher household income or increased production and sales from household agricultural production.

Recommendations:

Some important lessons that can be applied to other projects of this type in Armenia and elsewhere have emerged from this evaluation. The Armenia country team and the programme team in particular, are encouraged to consider the following:

Consider expanding women's economic empowerment activities

Two years after the project's conclusion, the evaluation found a positive and significant impact on women's empowerment characteristics referring to women that engaged in cooperatives and community-level activities. Given the successful component of community level activities, future projects are encouraged to consider how to connect these activities with other activities taking place at regional and national level, as well as supporting changes taking place in power dynamics within the household.

Consider expanding supporting activities promoting the adoption of new agricultural technologies

Adoption of greenhouses, cold storages and drip irrigation systems are associated with lower losses due to bad weather (estimated at an average reduction of 60 USD per year). Future projects aiming to reduce weather-related exposure are therefore encouraged in supporting a greater and wider adoption of these technologies.

Consider sustainability

The evaluation was conducted two years after the project's conclusion, allowing the exploration of the project's impact and sustainability. Two years on the evaluation found that involvement rates of project participants in community groups varied substantially from village to village. Learning from those villages where cooperative participation is still high after project conclusion, it appears that characteristics such as extensive consultation processes with community members during the project implementation and adequate location of the greenhouses are associated with a lower drop-out rate of project participants.

Consider mitigation activities for unintended effects, such as violence against women and unpaid care activities

The evaluation identified that overall more than 10 per cent of the women interviewed reported having a woman close to them exposed to violence. While there is no evidence that the project under analysis exacerbated this phenomenon, future projects working with women's empowerment are advised to closely

monitor gender-based violence and take measures to mitigate this phenomenon.

Improve project targeting

From the evaluation it emerged that there is no evidence that the women involved in the project were, on average, the poorest or more vulnerable in the area. The project team is encouraged to explore alternative targeting process if it aims to approach the most vulnerable women in a given area.

Consider evaluation questions during programme design

In future projects, it is advisable to consider including an evaluation framework in the project design. Evaluation is a key tool for learning, to help projects and programmes succeed and generate evidence of success. When designing a project, the programme team is encouraged to consider and define key evaluation questions to be addressed and to plan for sufficient budget, time and resources. Different evaluation designs and methodologies provide different types of evidence, with different levels of confidence.

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

Yes, in general it concurs to our own expectation of the project effectiveness.

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

Yes, among the strong areas identified by the review were: women economic empowerment and reduced exposure to climatic risks.

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

The review identified that the project area of improved household income and wealth was weak. There are two reasons why the review could identify some areas weak in the project. Firstly, because agricultural production coming from cooperatives represents relatively small proportion of the overall agricultural production that is mainly taking place at household level. Secondly, the revenues obtained from cooperatives are not necessarily redistributed at household level but are spent within the community/cooperative as a contribution to social needs of the community within the social objectives/commitment of the beneficiary coops.

6. Summary of review quality assessment

The whole process of the review was strong and well organised starting from preparatory work and revision/adjustment of interviews/questionnaires according to country context, transparent selection process of project country evaluation/consultancy staff (outsourced experts), the process of field work interviews, surveys to the follow-up analysis and communication with the country management staff and finalization and approval of the final draft of the evaluation.

7. Main Oxfam follow-up actions

The key actions of the detailed plan will focus on the following areas: (i) strengthening economic empowerment of women through current and future EJ projects; (ii) expanding and promoting new climate adaptive agricultural technologies and practices through promotion of greenhouses with its drip irrigation and heating systems; (iii) strengthening sustainability of beneficiary cooperatives through strengthening their institutional capacity, diversification of agricultural value chains and increasing market linkages for beneficiary cooperatives and their women member farmers;

conduction research on unintended effects of the project such as violence against women and unpaid care activities; (iv) targeting more vulnerable women groups in future projects; (v) considering evaluation framework in the project design.

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

The Armenia country team does not agree particularly with evaluation finding that it did not find evidence of increased production and sales from household agricultural production.

We do not agree with this statement because we do have many evidences and records that beneficiary female members of the project coops have not only increased their crops production but also diversified their local production with new varieties of high value vegetable crops which are cultivated in new climate adaptive infrastructures -the new greenhouses provided by the project to all beneficiary coops. Actually each greenhouse has had around 3 tons of mixed vegetables yield which definitely contributed in increasing the beneficiary female farmers agri-production not saying about the coops' income from greenhouses' produce sales.

There is positive contribution of the project on increasing production through cooperative service structures as well as sales both within communities and local/regional markets in Vayots Dzor. The project also aimed at increasing agricultural production within coops' agri-business new infrastructures (e.g. greenhouses) using new technologies and knowledge/skills on cultivation of high value vegetable crops.

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?

We will apply the following learning from the evaluation to our future projects: (i) expanding women's economic empowerment; (ii) promoting climate adaptive agricultural technologies (i.e. greenhouses, fruit/vegetable drying facilities; processing facilities); (iii) considering evaluation questions during future project design.

Despite of Oxfam Armenia office spin off, we anticipate Oxfam future support to OxYGen as spin off organization, especially related to consultation /expertise on strengthening women economic empowerment and access to available financial resources.

Besides, we will be more cautious on unintended impact of the project, especially related to violence against women.

10. Additional reflections

Though the evaluation did not find any statistically significant impact of the project on women's exposure to violence, however it has investigated unintended negative effects that had occurred as a result of the project, such as exposure to violence and unpaid time allocation. Ultimately, the evaluation identified that more than 10 per cent of the women interviewed reported having been exposed to violence.