

Oxfam Management response to the review of *Resilience in Bolivia: Impact evaluation of supporting communities to adapt to changing weather patterns and improve their livelihoods* (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 'Supporting communities in Bolivia to adapt to changing weather patterns and improve their livelihoods' project was selected for review in this way under the resilience thematic area.

The project was carried out by Oxfam in partnership with the Kenneth Lee Foundation in several communities of the municipality of Trinidad in the Beni Region of Bolivia between 2010 and 2013. The key activities of this project (together with its predecessor, launched in 2008) were to construct and promote the use of 'camellones', an indigenous land-management system intended to protect livelihoods (agriculture and fish farming) against drought or flood. This Effectiveness Review, for which fieldwork was carried out in April 2015, was aimed at evaluating the success of this project in enabling households that directly participated in the camellones to strengthen their livelihoods, to minimise risk from shocks and to adapt to emerging trends and uncertainty.

This Effectiveness Review used a quasi-experimental evaluation design to assess the impact of the project activities among the people who directly participated in production from one of the camellones constructed under the two projects between 2008 and 2013. It is important to note that a major emphasis of the camellones projects – and an important reason for constructing the camellones in and around the regional capital of Trinidad – has been to influence municipal, regional and national government bodies to take an interest in and eventually to invest in the construction of camellones themselves. The success of these advocacy activities on influencing policymakers was not evaluated in this Effectiveness Review. In particular, the effects of more recent investments in the camellones made by the municipality of Trinidad are not covered by the Effectiveness Review.

To implement the Effectiveness Review, a survey was carried out in the three rural communities and one peri-urban area in which camellones were constructed by Oxfam and the Kenneth Lee Foundation between 2008 and 2013. All the households that were registered as participating in production at one of the camellones sites in at least one year between 2008 and 2013 were targeted for interview. There were 179 such households, of which 135 could be identified and located and were willing to be interviewed. For comparison purposes, 459 households were interviewed at random from rural communities and from neighbourhoods in the city of Trinidad with similar characteristics to those from where the project participants were drawn. At the analysis stage, the statistical tools of propensity-score matching and multivariate regression were used to control for apparent baseline differences between the households in the project and comparison communities, to increase confidence when making estimates of the project's impact.

The potential of this Effectiveness Review to draw conclusions about the impacts of the project was limited by the small number of project participants that were available to be interviewed, by the fact that many of them had participated in the project activities only in earlier years, and by production from the camellones having been disrupted by severe flooding in the year prior to the survey. In addition, the survey was conducted soon after contentious elections, which may have affected respondents' willingness to provide sensitive information during the survey questions. Nevertheless, some conclusions can be drawn with reasonable confidence.

2. Summary main findings and recommendations

Key results of this Effectiveness Review

Outcome area	Linked to project logic?	Evidence of positive impact?	Comments
Engagement in fish farming and crop production	Yes	Yes	Significantly higher proportions of households of project participants were engaging in fish farming and crop production in 2013 than were comparison households.
Increased household income	Yes	No	No evidence that household income was higher in 2014/15 among project households than comparison households, nor that there have been significant improvements in other indicators of household wealth over the projects' lifetimes.
Better able to cope with the 2014 flood	No	Not clear	Project participants in the rural communities were more likely to have been negatively affected by the floods, but also appear to have increased their ownership of physical assets between 2013 and 2015 by more than those in comparison communities.
Indicators of resilience	Yes	No	Evidence of positive impact on only two or three of the characteristics of resilience, and not on the overall index.
Women's involvement in productive work	Yes	Yes	Women in project households were contributing a much higher proportion of overall household income than they were in comparison households – or, at least, their contribution was better recognised.
Women's ability to make and influence decisions	Yes	No	Little or no difference between the project and comparison households in indicators of women's self-confidence or influence in decisions in the household or community.

Results apply across all households that were registered producers in one of the camellones established under this project in at least one year between 2008 and 2013, and who were available and willing to be interviewed during the survey period. The impact of the advocacy work and of the various project activities in communities where camellones were not constructed was not evaluated in this Effectiveness Review.

The project was intended to help households cope with moderate floods, whereas the 2014 flood was extreme.

'No evidence of positive impact' does not mean 'evidence of no impact'. This table reports only whether or not there was strong evidence of a positive impact.

Recommendations:

Review the approach used to identify and select project participants, and consider how best to facilitate management of the camellones at the community level.

In the early years of the camellones projects, large numbers of participants were recruited to work on the camellones. In the rural areas in particular, the participants made up a sizeable proportion of the population of each of the communities. However, most of these people participated in the project for only a year or two: by 2013, relatively small numbers of producers were still working on the camellones. This was partly due to a deliberate decision on the part of the implementers in later years to restrict participation in order to allow those who remained to produce at a more efficient scale – but feedback from the participants suggests that withdrawal from the project was also partly due to dissatisfaction on their part. It is natural that not everyone will find that engaging in crop production or fish farming is the best way that they can invest their time, and experimenting with which types of people to work with is to be expected

during the first implementation of a new project. However, it will be important in future camellones projects to have a clear strategy for targeting those who have the most potential to engage in and benefit from work on the camellones.

At the same time, many of the project participants in the rural communities mentioned that disputes about the management of the camellones were an important reason for their choosing to leave the project. Project staff should proactively look for ways to manage relations both among the project participants and with the wider community. Focusing on providing training may not be enough to ensure sustainability and effective results.

Carry out regular monitoring visits with project participants, to gain insight into how the project activities are developing on the ground, as well as with those who have chosen to leave the project.

Some of the weaknesses in the management of the camellones that were mentioned by project participants during the survey could probably have been understood earlier if there had been a stronger system for monitoring participants' experiences with and perceptions of the project. Collecting regular feedback from a sample of participants is crucial, not only in order to identify implementation problems that can be corrected, but also to understand whether expectations about the project's ability to boost livelihoods and resilience are being met. Such monitoring need not be a formal process, but it is important that the results are recorded and reviewed regularly, so that implementers can adjust their approach as necessary.

An even higher priority would be to try to interview people who voluntarily withdraw from a project like this, to understand their reasons for doing so, and how the project could have supported them better. While some may have stopped working on the camellones for positive reasons – such as finding a new job opportunity – these cases appear to have been a minority. It is not enough to be satisfied with reaching targets for the number of participants engaging in the project in each year, if the specific people involved are frequently changing. For a household to generate positive results from a project such as this can be expected to take some time, so it is important to understand and take action if people are leaving before they have been able to realise significant benefits.

Seek to carry out a more comprehensive evaluation of the impacts of camellones projects on household livelihoods and on resilience, in order to build an evidence base for decisions on future scale-up.

This Effectiveness Review did not find clear evidence that the camellones projects have had significant positive effects on household incomes and on risk management. However, the limitations faced by the review – particularly the small number of participant households who could be interviewed, the fact that many of them had withdrawn from participation some time before, and the disruption caused by the 2014 floods – meant that the potential for identifying any positive effects was limited. The data do provide some reasons for optimism that they had a positive impact on the livelihoods of participant households, although the qualitative feedback received from participants was less positive.

The launch of further camellones projects in other municipalities in Beni provides an opportunity to carry out an evaluation of the impact of those projects, preferably when implemented on a larger scale and using a more settled model of implementation. This would ideally include collecting baseline data from project participants and non-participants, then following up after they have been engaged in the project for two to three years, to see what differences can be observed. Investing in good-quality evaluation at this stage would provide evidence that will enable municipalities and other government bodies, as well as Oxfam and partners, to make informed decisions about the implementation of camellones projects in the future and the impacts that can be expected from them.

Further investigate the results that camellones projects are having on women's involvement in livelihoods activities, and what potential there is for this to be translated into empowerment.

The clearest result from the Effectiveness Review was that women in the project households were seen to

be more engaged in income-generating activities than are women in comparison households. What is not known is the extent to which this implies that women are engaging in additional productive work - and so increasing overall household income – and the extent to which it reflects better recognition of work that women were doing anyway. This will be an important question to assess in evaluating the impact of future camellones projects.

The natural next question is whether these changes have resulted in any changes in women's position in their households or communities. The suggestion in this report that women in project households may have higher *expectations* about the influence that they should have in household decisions may be seen to be a positive step towards empowerment, though clearly it remains to be seen whether this translates in time into actual increased influence. The project team should clarify the specific changes that they are expecting to see in women's empowerment, and then ensure that projects have a strategy to further those aims.

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

The review dealt with the issues covered by the project design. These responded to the objectives set at that time, focussing on strengthening the capacity of the families in the communities involved to adapt, as well as touching on the impact this has on household income and, finally, tackling women's empowerment.

The findings related to the families' adaptability and capacity for resilience, given the context in which the review was conducted (following unprecedented flooding in the region and before an election), could be biased towards an overestimation by those surveyed of their situation in relation to the variables analysed.

With regard to income generation, it is important to stress that, although there was no impact in terms of an increase in income levels (from agriculture), the use of camellones, as well as the incorporation of certain fish farming practices, has diversified household income, which could have led to reduced vulnerability for families and, therefore, greater resilience to possible effects on income-generating activities. However, this conjecture cannot be proven by the study, since it was not addressed in the review.

With regard to women's empowerment, on the other hand, Oxfam and its partner have been able to observe a significant increase in female participation in household economic activities. The practice of fish farming has been accompanied by an increase in women's participation in generating household income. Although women's participation in household income was analysed, the leadership or possible empowerment component was almost invisible in the document. This issue features as part of the recommendations for future investigations, since it could be considered to be outside the remit of this study.

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

As mentioned in the previous question, the effectiveness review tackled areas that were, at the time, considered important in formulating the project, as summarised in the project objectives, dating from 2009.

However, we believe that one weakness is the failure, within the analysis, to cover key aspects of the project intervention strategy, such as advocacy work with institutional actors in the public sector and the diversification of income within households.

In this sense, we can see that the advocacy component was not considered in the analysis, which could have revived the work carried out with the municipal government of Trinidad. This was an important element of the project, which managed to attract interest from the authorities in adopting and improving the aforementioned practices (camellones) in other areas vulnerable to flooding in the region.

Moreover, we believe that the review barely dealt with the attempt to diversify household income as a strategic line of work, which was more important than simply seeking to increase income.

The Oxfam team and its partner became aware throughout the implementation of the project that, given the context of vulnerability and risk in relation to disasters and the families' situation, it was better to place greater emphasis on strengthening productive capacities, in order to improve the structure of household income, than to focus on increasing households' income. Although it did not mean an improvement in the families' income, the productive practice acquired could represent a possibility option of subsistence that has not been achieved by the families before, giving them an alternative for survival during times of crisis.

We believe it is possible that these weaknesses derived from a lack of communication from the country team about events and possible causes of delays to the evaluation, at a time that could easily be foreseen in order to amend the work plan and field visit.

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

The review definitely helps to confirm some of the project's weaknesses, such as the low impact on increasing household incomes, households' failure to incorporate resilience practices and, of course, the scant monitoring of the condition and situation of the project's beneficiaries following its implementation. These findings served as inputs for analysis, reflection and consideration by the team, with a view to adjusting the focus of its work for the coming years.

However, we believe that it would have been very useful to look at these aspects in more detail, which would be helpful for learning within the team. We believe that a clear knowledge of the reasons why the increase in income was not effective would have been significant in terms of reflection and understanding one of the main unanswered questions within the project.

We think that monitoring beneficiaries could be very useful in order to gather knowledge and learn lessons about the development and sustainability of our lines of work. However, additional resources would be required to carry out this task, since such practices do not form part of the funding for the project.

6. Summary of review quality assessment

The review follows a clear methodology, which sets out the details and methodological and technological principles on which the analysis is based. However, there are limitations in its implementation, which placed the robustness of the analysis in doubt.

We consider the low level of methodological coordination with the country team (as a preliminary stage to the implementation of the field work) to be a weakness. Although coordination did take

place with the programme coordinator and the official and, subsequently, in Bolivia with the person in charge of MEL in the country, and efforts to ensure the participation of the country team in the evaluation, this dialogue was not able to be sufficiently developed, since it took place at a time when the country office was undergoing a process of change and transition, with the country director and the programme coordinator both leaving Oxfam in Bolivia.

It would have been beneficial to consider, on the one hand, updating and readjusting the theory of change for the project (which arose, over several years of work, from the revision and rethinking of certain lines of work by the team), and, on the other, identifying variables related to the final impact analysis.

These limitations relate to: 1) the heavy flooding of 2014, which had a significant impact on the families' situation and on whether they stayed in their homes, with unprecedented consequences, 2) the municipal elections to be held following the review, which meant that the survey conducted as part of the review became confused with others that were carried out for electoral purposes; 3) the migration and movement of the project's beneficiary families, which made it difficult to locate them and, therefore, to identify an adequate control group for the intervention group, and, lastly 4) other factors in the area related to the final impact analysis, such as the similar interventions (to the camellones) carried out by the government.

These limitations give rise to a distortion of information quality and, therefore, of the findings reported.

In this sense, we believe that the review should involve a preliminary analysis of the context and the current condition of the project, in which external factors are identified that directly affect the results.

Lastly, we believe that the combination of quantitative and qualitative information would have been beneficial in terms of complementing and improving understanding of the findings reported, but we understand that this analysis would possibly have gone beyond the planned scope of this study.

Moreover, we think that in many cases, the qualitative component would have helped the reviewing team to analyse the reasons behind the results, which are often not very illuminating in statements made based on a purely quantitative analysis (impact determined by statistical significance based on confidence levels of 95%).

7. Main Oxfam follow-up actions

As regards the work carried out on camellones and the fostering of resilient practices, considering the experience acquired from the projects implemented, Oxfam in Bolivia will focus its efforts on attempts to influence public policy, and in particular on support for the implementation and acquisition of resilient capacities at municipal government level (beyond just promoting this specific practice). Oxfam currently has resources dedicated to work on resilience-building processes, based on advocacy with municipal governments in the Beni department (in the municipalities of Rurrenbaque and Reyes).

The work is therefore focussed on analysis, originating from the aspects dealt with by the effectiveness review.

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

The recommendations made are clearly derived from the focus adopted and the findings obtained in the review. The findings and recommendations served to confirm the existence of certain weaknesses and support decision-making concerning the work carried out in this field.

Some of them could be taken into account for similar interventions in future, but this time as policy

recommendations, to be dealt with directly by government authorities (in line with the approach to advocacy work to be adopted from now on).

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?

In accordance with the new Country Operating Model (COM), Oxfam in Bolivia will work on two programmes relating to Gender Justice and Natural Resource Management and Governance. There are no plans to continue with projects similar to the camellones project. The topic of resilience will continue to be a cross-cutting focus and, therefore, the review's recommendations will be adopted for subsequent proposals to be developed on this issue.

10. Additional reflections

We believe that the country team should prioritise participation in and be more committed to the work carried out internally concerning the evaluation, as well as the hoped-for findings. The evaluation took place at a time when the country office was undergoing a process of change and transition, with the country director and the programme coordinator both leaving Oxfam in Bolivia, which made this engagement challenging. Greater responsibility should be taken with studies of this scale to ensure that internal learning that can be useful and beneficial.

From now on, we will be attaching a great deal of importance to the planning advocacy work, with a focus on risk management, that has been fostered in the municipality of Trinidad as a result of the camellones project. Oxfam has therefore decided to focus its future work on advocacy concerning the use of resilient practices, incorporating the experience acquired from the projects implemented and reviewed in this process. Oxfam in Bolivia has begun a process of reflection, looking at what we understand by 'resilience' and what the best practices are to promote it, in which it will use the findings of this review.