Management Response


A: Context, background and findings

1. The context and background of the review

Oxfam GB Effectiveness Reviews

Oxfam GB has conducted rigorous evaluations (known as Effectiveness Reviews) every year since 2011 on samples of randomly selected mature projects to help the organisation understand whether its work is resulting in positive change. Development projects targeted at individual, household and community levels have been assessed using ex-post quasi-experimental impact evaluation techniques where individual or household survey data is collected from a sample of project participants, as well as from a comparison group. The two groups are then analysed using propensity-score matching and multivariate regression to assess the impact of the project and to foster programme learning. Oxfam GB has committed to publishing all evaluations, regardless of whether the results are positive or negative. The number of evaluations conducted in a given year is not big enough to draw generalizable conclusions on the overall impact of the organisation. However, the accumulation of evaluations (of projects selected following a random selection process) avoids the risk of implicitly, or explicitly evaluating only the best and most performing projects, and provides a realistic overview of Oxfam’s impact.1

Meta-analysis and systematic reviews

In the wider arena of international development research, meta-analyses and systematic reviews are becoming an important tool to promote transparency, and to strengthen the available evidence on development interventions. Meta-analysis, or ‘the statistical combination of results from two or more separate studies’, allows researchers to increase the power and precision of research on specific interventions, and to answer additional questions not posed in the original evaluations.2

Purpose and scope of the meta-analysis of women’s empowerment projects

The study by Lombardini and McCollum (Using internal evaluations to measure organizational impact: a meta-analysis of Oxfam’s women’s empowerment projects3) combines the effect sizes from all Oxfam Effectiveness Reviews undertaken since 2011 under the thematic area of Women’s Empowerment.

The purpose of the meta-analysis is to:

(1) Assess and measure the overall impact of Oxfam projects aiming to achieve women’s empowerment. This is done by investigating the aggregate projects’ impact, using a multidimensional index developed by Oxfam to measure women’s empowerment, in addition to the most commonly used empowerment indicators.

(2) Investigate heterogeneity in the projects’ impact, and explore whether projects with certain characteristics are more or less likely to present higher impact.
(3) Assess the validity of the measurement tools employed in measuring women's empowerment.

(4) Explore whether meta-analysing the treatment effects in these evaluations reveals aggregated project effects which were previously undetectable in individual evaluations.

The Effectiveness Reviews, or quasi-experimental evaluations, examined 16 randomly selected women's empowerment projects, with a minimum budget of £200,000 and at least 30 months into implementation. The geographic spread was global: 16 projects in 16 countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East and North Africa. All projects in the sample shared the goal of contributing to greater women’s empowerment, but there was significant variation in project design and implementation. Given the variety and complexity of projects, it should also be noted that not all project activities were evaluated, nor were all project components implemented at the same scale or intensity within and between projects.

11 of the 16 evaluations were classified as Women’s Economic Empowerment (WEE) projects. All 11 WEE projects were implemented in rural areas, had strong agricultural components and, though specific interventions and activities varied, all shared the aim of increasing women's income potential. The remaining five projects were defined more broadly as women’s empowerment projects with more varied aims, including enhancing women’s access to justice or increasing women’s participation, leadership and advocacy.

2. Summary main findings and recommendations

The meta-analysis provides evidence that, overall, projects in the women’s empowerment thematic area contribute to a positive impact on women’s empowerment.

The meta-analysis of the 16 Effectiveness Reviews provides valuable insights, both into the impact of Oxfam’s work in the area of women’s empowerment, and as an example of how meta-analysis can support evidence-based learning, organisational accountability and improved programme implementation in the presence of a robust organisational evaluation framework.

Summary results relating to women’s empowerment (indicators)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Empowerment indicator</th>
<th>Evidence and direction of impact</th>
<th># of evaluations included in analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increase in women’s positive opinions of women’s economic role</td>
<td>Positive and significant impact</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in women’s contribution to household income</td>
<td>Positive but not significant evidence of impact</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in women’s influence in household decision-making</td>
<td>No evidence of impact</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in women’s influence within the community</td>
<td>Positive and significant impact</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduction in women’s experience of violence</td>
<td>Negative and significant impact</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the 13 projects that used Oxfam’s multidimensional index (see A ‘How To’ Guide To Measuring Women’s Empowerment) for measuring women’s empowerment, the aggregate impact of these projects is estimated to have a positive and statistically significant effect size of 0.32, with the real value ranging from 0.23 to 0.42. This effect size is in line with the effect size found in systematic reviews on similar topics, such as the systematic review on the impact of self-help groups on women’s empowerment published by Brody et al in 2017.5
The heterogeneity of projects in the sample was matched by similarly heterogeneous impacts. The meta-analysis was unable to find robust evidence to explain this heterogeneity, despite conducting sub-group analysis on project characteristics (such as expenditure, duration, region of implementation and theory of change). In other words, the meta-analysis is not able to shed light on project characteristics associated with higher levels of empowerment.

The meta-analysis also investigated impact on some of the most commonly used empowerment indicators (first column of Summary Table below) across the evaluations, providing more differentiated insight into some of the key empowerment indicators of the index. As the index and indicators were adapted to each project’s respective project and country contexts, only the evaluations that collected the relevant data for each indicator were included (last column of the Summary Table).

**Key recommendations to Oxfam**

1. Women’s empowerment projects, especially those with a focus on increasing women’s access to income, need to take a holistic approach to empowerment, given the mounting evidence that increasing women’s access to income alone is not sufficient for women to have more bargaining power in their household. A holistic approach means working to achieve women’s personal, political and social empowerment alongside their economic empowerment. This includes supporting women to: increase their autonomy and self-belief to make changes in their own lives; enhance their agency and power to organize and influence; live lives free from violence; redistribute responsibilities for heavy and unequal care work; and achieve equal rights to men. Among other strategies it involves effective ways of working with men and boys as key partners and allies.
2. Projects need to incorporate strategies to minimise, mitigate, properly measure and monitor, and respond to potentially unintended negative consequences, especially on women’s experience of violence.
3. The measurement of women’s experience of violence needs to be strengthened in future evaluations.

**B: Oxfam's response** to the validity and relevance of the review findings, conclusions and recommendations.

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

The findings of the meta-analysis are largely aligned with our expectations. The overall finding that our portfolio of women’s empowerment projects contributes to a positive impact on women’s empowerment, provides reassurance that our approach to working with women has been largely effective, especially given the long timeframes it can take to observe change. We are also pleased that positive and significant impact was found for a few important indicators, including increases in women’s positive opinions of women’s economic role, and increases in women’s influence in community decision-making.

The meta-analysis also highlighted several indicators where no positive and significant impact was found, including on women’s contribution to household income and women’s influence in household decision-making. The challenges in achieving certain indicators of women’s empowerment have been highlighted in previous Oxfam publications, internal and external.
For example, the Oxfam GB Economic Justice and WEE Thematic Reviews in 2015 identified that increases in household income often remain quite modest in programmes and are difficult to sustain, due to the range of complex factors that limit access to decent work for women and equitable sharing of revenues from productive activities in the household.

Achieving women’s empowerment generally, or in all its constituent parts simultaneously, is not easy or straight-forward. Women’s empowerment is multi-dimensional, and all dimensions do not progress evenly. It may be easier to make changes (or at least detect or find evidence of that change) in some areas, but not others. For example, it may be easier to influence or detect changes at a personal level (for example, individual attitudes and opinions) than it is to change gender power relations in a household, especially for short projects that are evaluated for impact shortly after they finish.

Some dimensions, in fact, may not appear to progress at all, but reverse simultaneously as some dimensions reveal positive changes. For example, there is a body of evidence that shows how women can become more at risk of experiencing gender based violence (a sign of ‘social’ disempowerment) despite (or because of) increasing economic independence (a sign of ‘economic’ empowerment).

Hughes et al (2015) address this very issue in Gender & Development identifying the potential for women’s empowerment programming to increase violence against women. Drawing from Oxfam staff experiences, the article identifies how positive advances in women’s empowerment can lead to increased household tension(s), and men responding with violence to women (often called ‘backlash’) as patriarchal systems are challenged. The authors argue that awareness of these links between women’s empowerment and increased violence puts practitioners in a ‘position of ethical responsibility’ and they must do more to minimise unintended negative consequences and maximise positive potential impact. Among other recommendations, they suggest that programmes be designed to be holistic and multi-disciplinary, be based on risk assessments and include components to minimise risk of violence, monitor for it and respond when it occurs.

This evidence, along with the larger body of evidence and learning from Oxfam’s experiences and beyond, have helped to shape Oxfam’s approach and guidance on gender justice and women’s empowerment programming. Oxfam’s Conceptual Framework on Women’s Economic Empowerment, for example, encourages programmes to take a holistic approach to women’s empowerment, working towards all types of empowerment (personal, political and social), even if economic empowerment is the entry point. This is critical for women’s economic empowerment to be meaningful and sustained.

There are also specific tools that have been developed to better mitigate the risk of violence against women in programming. For example, the Toolkit for Managing the Risk of Violence Against Women in Economic Development Initiatives features local risk assessment, resource mapping and risk reduction planning tools to help Oxfam staff and partners to assess and mitigate the risks of violence against women within programmes.

Despite having the evidence and guidance on the importance of designing and delivering holistic, transformative approaches for women, we would still expect that programmes face challenges and difficulties in achieving women’s empowerment. Because, fundamentally, to do so requires changing unequal power relations (at every scale) and these are not easily or quickly changed.

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

The meta-analysis highlighted a number of strengths of Oxfam’s portfolio of women’s empowerment projects, with positive and statistically significant impact found in the following areas:

1) On women’s empowerment overall (using Oxfam’s multidimensional index on women’s empowerment);
2) On increased women’s positive opinion on women’s economic role; and
3) On increased women’s participation and influence in the community.
5. Did the review identify areas that were particularly weak in the project?

The meta-analysis also identified a few areas in the thematic area of women’s empowerment that did not lead to positive and/or statistically significant impact, including:

1) On increased women’s contribution to household income (positive but not statistically significant);
2) On increased women’s influence in household decision-making; and
3) On women’s experience of violence (negative and statistically significant impact).

However, on this last area of women’s experience of violence, the authors cast doubt on the negative finding due to the methods used in obtaining the data, highlighting that it alone does not provide convincing evidence of an increase in women participants’ own experience of violence. Most of the individual impact evaluations comprising the meta-analysis used a method which asks women about episodes of violence that happened to a woman close to them, rather than about their direct experience of violence. This finding may therefore be identifying an increase in women’s awareness of violence in their community, and/or ability and willingness to report on violence in their community, rather than women participants actually experiencing more violence.

6. Summary of review quality assessment

Overall, the review quality is strong and the recommendations are clear.

A few of the weaknesses of the review were identified by the authors themselves, including a) not being able to find robust evidence to explain heterogeneity in the sample and b) a lack of confidence in the finding on women’s experience of violence.

In terms of heterogeneity, the meta-analysis was unable to find conclusive results in most of the sub-categories involved, apart from finding a statistically significant relationship between per capita project expenditure and effect size. They suggest that further impact evaluations and sub-group analysis could help to distinguish which types of programmes contribute most to empowerment. While the authors’ suggestion of adding more impact evaluations could potentially help, meta-analysis of quasi-experimental impact evaluations are not the only way to explain variation, whether between programmes or within.

Further definition of what information is needed to support decision-making, especially on what, where and how to invest would be useful:

a) why some women’s empowerment programmes are more effective than others (given we know it will be the result of a complex combination of factors, from programme design and implementation, to personnel and partners, to country and local context, to the larger ‘structure of opportunities’ for women, and so on);

b) testing hypothesis around partnering with women’s rights organisations would provide useful information on programme approaches;

c) and seeking to understand how interventions targeting ending violence against women enable pathways to other dimensions of empowerment.

We also want to encourage investigating variation within each impact evaluation (for example, asking ‘who is left behind’ in our project sample) as much as attempting to explain variation across the sample of impact evaluations, as this meta-analysis did.

Finally, given the negative finding on women’s experience of violence, it would have been useful to have more information about the types of violence women are reporting and other relevant details.
7. Main Oxfam follow-up actions

We are pleased that the meta-analysis indicates that, overall, our portfolio of women’s empowerment projects contributes to a positive impact on women’s empowerment. This provides reassurance that our approach to working with women has been effective and reinforces our commitment to continue investing in our women’s empowerment programming.

But the meta-analysis also highlights ways we can improve our programming to be more effective and safer for the people – and especially the women – we work with.

For example, it shows that we cannot assume that one indicator of women’s empowerment (for example, economic empowerment vis-à-vis women’s higher access to income) will automatically accompany other types of empowerment (social or political) or lead to empowerment overall. This chimes with our own body of evidence and guidance that encourages our programmes to take a holistic approach to women’s empowerment (working towards women’s personal, political, social and economic empowerment simultaneously) to achieve lasting, transformative changes for women (see for example Oxfam’s Conceptual Framework on Women’s Economic Empowerment10). But we can do more to ensure our existing learning and guidance on achieving holistic, transformative change for women is relevant, useful and used by all programmes, and we commit to doing so.

We also commit to improving the ways we prevent and respond to the potential increased risk of violence against women in our programmes. The meta-analysis reminds us that we must do more to raise questions around whether our programmes may be contributing to women experiencing increased threat of violence, and invest more in processes and tools to mainstream and mitigate risks of ending violence against women and girls (EVAWG) across all our programmes. We will do this in close collaboration with others, putting the voices and experiences of survivors, women from marginalised groups and Southern women’s rights organisations (WROs) at the centre. We also commit to working with others across the Oxfam confederation to take this forward.

Reflecting on the approach, methods and insights from the meta-analysis also flags the need for us to consider using other types of measurement approaches and methods, including qualitative methods, which may help us to better understand transformative changes for women. Changes in women’s household decision making power over time, for example, is notoriously difficult to assess. Trying to assess our impact on this, needs to be done in multiple ways. Even where a significant impact was not identified by this meta-analysis, does not mean our women’s empowerment programmes are not leading to changes, just that it was not observed via this one method or the survey module used.

Similarly, adopting a multitude of approaches and methods to further measure and investigate women’s experience of violence will give us more confidence in the estimates, and would enhance our understanding of how programmes contribute to more, or less violence against women.

Follow-up actions

- Increase our knowledge and learning on what ways our programmes may contribute to more holistic, transformative changes for women, including preventing or reducing the risk of violence against women. For example, by reviewing and adapting available strategies, practices, processes and tools on mainstreaming and mitigating risks of EVAWG in development programmes from across the sector, and conducting small research projects to learn from survivors, women from marginalised groups and WROs.
- Test and adopt new strategies, practices, processes and tools for mainstreaming EVAWG across all our programmes, including developing checklists and guidance for staff, encouraging leadership on EVAWG and celebrating EVAWG champions, and developing clear protocol for addressing cases of increased VAWG in projects.
- Improve research, monitoring, evaluation and learning systems and tools that enhance our understanding of how our programmes contribute to more holistic and transformative changes for women, and are better able to detect negative unintended consequences that may arise, such as
increased VAWG. This includes improving approaches and methods, developing and sharing tools that can be embedded into existing MEL systems and testing out different ways of measuring women’s experiences of violence.

- Increase staff and partner awareness of holistic programming for women’s empowerment and capacity to integrate effective strategies to achieve this. Actions include sharing and encouraging the uptake of the body of evidence and learning available, creating and sharing training modules and developing and sharing engaging communications from some of the research and pilot activities.
- Revisit and update this meta-analysis with new evidence from Oxfam programmes, also exploring other important outcomes which were not reported in the original paper (e.g. opinions and attitudes towards unpaid care work). With more studies, combined with a better measurement approach for exposure to violence, we hope to be able to shed more light on the results on exposure to violence. Additional studies will also enable us to explore heterogeneity across studies further to better inform programme.

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

| None |
Notes


7 Ibid.


10 Kidder et al. (2017), op. cit.