

Oxfam Management response to the review of *Resilience in Nepal: Impact evaluation of the Joint Programme on Risk Management and Humanitarian Preparedness* (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 ‘Joint Programme on Risk Management and Humanitarian Preparedness’ was selected for review in this way under the thematic area of resilience.

Oxfam carried out this project in partnership with several organisations, including the Koshi Victims Society (KVS), the Social Development Research Centre (SDRC), Bagmati Welfare Society Nepal (BWSN), Nepal Red Cross Society (NRCS), and Rural Development Centre (RDC). The project activities, which began in April 2011 and finished in March 2016, were implemented in four districts in the Terai region of southern Nepal – Dhanusha, Rautahat, Salarhi, and Saptari. The Effectiveness Review took place in January 2016 and was designed to evaluate the project’s impact on building resilience – households’ ability to improve their well-being and realise their rights despite shocks, stresses, and uncertainty.

This Effectiveness Review used a quasi-experimental evaluation design to assess the impact of the activities among the households whose members directly participated in Women’s Empowerment Groups (WEGs) that were formed by the project and through which many of the project activities were channelled. This involved comparing those households that participated in the project to a group of comparison households that were similar to the project participants. To this end, a household survey was carried out with 280 households that were participating in the project (households that contained members of the WEGs) and 529 households that had not been involved in the project. Households that were too wealthy or too highly educated to be eligible for participation in the project activities were systematically excluded from the sample using screening questions asked at the start of the questionnaire.

This Effectiveness Review can only identify the household- and community-level effects of the project. Activities operating at the district or national level, including the project’s advocacy work, are not included in this evaluation.

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 project and comparison household areas to provide additional confidence when making estimates of the project’s impact.

Some qualitative information was also collected during the fieldwork to inform the design of the measurement tools for resilience and help with the interpretation of the quantitative data. The qualitative work consisted of field-based focus group discussions, conducted in project areas that were not subsequently included in the final sample for the household survey.



2. Summary main findings and recommendations

Summary results of this Effectiveness Review				
Outcome area	Connected to project logic?	Evidence of positive impact?	Comments	
<i>Resilience</i>	See Table 1 in report	Livelihood viability	Yes	The main evidence of impact was seen in ownership of livestock, crop diversification, and dietary diversity. Diversification into non-farm activities was not affected by the project.
		Innovation potential	No	Project households had better access to credit, but their access to markets was more restricted than the comparison households. There was little evidence of any impact on attitudes to change and innovation.
		Access to contingency resources and support	Yes	The strongest impacts were around awareness of disaster management plans at community, VDC and district levels. Group participation and social connectivity were also improved among project households.
		Integrity of natural and built environment	Yes	Project households were more likely to be raised up for flood protection, and care better for local forest/greenery. However, project households had less access to drinking water, but according to recalled data this had also been the case before the project started. The project was unable to offset these pre-existing differences between intervention and comparison villages.
		Social and institutional capability	Yes	Many indicators were directly related to project outputs, therefore positive impacts on confidence in early-warning systems, and awareness of/participation in disaster planning are not surprising.
Wealth	No	No	No evidence of impact was found for either current wealth or change in wealth levels during the course of the project.	
Livestock	Yes	Yes	Improvements in the livestock portfolio were concentrated in large animals, such as cows, buffalos and oxen. Women's responsibility for livestock care was unchanged.	
Crops	Yes	Yes	Project households had more diversified crop portfolios, and women's responsibility for cultivation increased. There were no clear effects on use of vermi-compost.	
Non-farm livelihoods	Yes	No	No changes were identified in terms of household business ownership, while non-project households engaged more in off-farm casual labour.	
WASH	Yes	Mixed	Project households had improved livestock storage practices, but the initial differences between project and comparison households in terms of drinking water availability were not offset by the project.	



Programme learning considerations:

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

Take a more holistic approach to evaluation design, including discussions around suitable indicators and the possible establishment of a comparison group, at the start of future projects.

The quasi-experimental methodology deployed in this Effectiveness Review was successful due to the extensive inputs of project and partner staff during the fieldwork. The discussions around suitable comparison VDCs and the selection of good indicators of resilience were particularly rigorous and inclusive. In part, this was because the set-up for the Effectiveness Review coincided with a monitoring visit, so it was possible to involve representatives from all of the partner organisations in the process. However, it would have been better to have these discussions before the project activities began. As a minimum, this would have helped create a more comprehensive Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning plan with a wide range of resilience indicators. Going further, it would also have been possible to implement a more robust evaluation design if the comparison group had been established before the project started and baseline data had been collected in project and non-project VDCs. To support this process in the future, the impact evaluation team should provide tools and resources to help project and programme staff with quasi-experimental evaluation designs, especially regarding setting up a comparison group. Therefore, this learning point is relevant not only for programme staff, but also those working on monitoring and evaluation.

Build the support for new livelihood activities into the project at its inception rather than during the later stages of its implementation.

The results suggest that the project had far stronger effects on indicators associated with disaster risk reduction than livelihoods. In particular, there were no clear positive effects on project households' likelihood of engaging in non-farm income-generating activities, and there was only limited evidence that project households had a greater propensity to cultivate crops with new technologies, such as vermi-compost. One possible explanation for this is that many of the activities designed to support new livelihoods were only implemented in the latter half of the project's lifetime. Integrating these activities into future projects from the inception phase may increase the chances of effecting greater change in households' livelihood strategies.

Focus more directly on promoting project households' access to markets to encourage further innovation and adaptation.

Overall, there was limited evidence that the project generated clear positive effects on households' potential to innovate. This was despite project households reporting that their access to credit had improved. This may be because project households had, if anything, less access to markets where they could sell their produce than the comparison households in our sample. The cooperatives set up by the project could potentially remedy this issue, so they should receive special attention to ensure households can sell their crops or off-farm goods. It may also be possible to link these cooperatives to formal banking institutions, to further relax the credit constraints faced by households and potentially make the borrowing required to facilitate new adaptations even less costly.

Consider avenues for scaling-up the project's successes around local disaster risk reduction plans to other communities.

The most sizeable changes that were generated by the project related to households' awareness of and confidence in disaster management plans at community, VDC and district levels. However, in the non-project communities, awareness of the content of these plans – even district-level plans – was strikingly low. Despite not being the focus of this evaluation, these results suggest that the district-level activities of the project, such as supporting the planning activities of district governments, were only affecting project communities and not the non-project communities in the sample. It is important to find ways of building awareness in VDCs across the whole district to ensure these types of district- and national-level advocacy activities are successful.



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

In most of the assessment dimensions, the review reflects our own assessment of the project. The project achieved a positive impact in most of the higher-level indicators of resilience, except that of 'innovation potential'. The review also covered some other indicators related to livelihood and WaSH which showed mixed results, which might be because these interventions were only included in the later stages of the project and to the frequent climatic stresses in the region.

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

The review shows that the project achieved the strongest impact in indicators or areas associated with the most significant interventions, particularly disaster risk reduction. The project achieved a positive impact in the indicators of livelihood viability, access to contingency resources and support, integrity of natural and built environment, and social and institutional capability. These indicators were directly related to major project intervention areas, such as disaster risk reduction measures, disaster risk management plans and networks, access to contingency items, disaster awareness, social connectivity, saving, farming practices, participation and leadership. The project made rigorous efforts to achieve the strong result in these areas.

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

The review shows the mixed results on some resilience indicators, particularly livelihoods and WaSH. The project did not focus on market-based interventions and climate resilient practices until the review period. Although the project was focused on institutional WaSH facilities, mainly for emergency purposes, the project did not design and support drinking water supplies to households.

6. Summary of review quality assessment

The review was planned and conducted in consultation with the country team (including MEAL staff) and partners, with careful consideration given to defining and selecting project beneficiaries and comparison groups. Precautions were taken to minimise possible errors in sampling and data collection. The review covered the indicators of resilience, together with some other indicators related with WaSH and livelihoods. The result shows the project made a very positive impact in most of the resilience indicators that were linked with the project logic. Some other indicators, mainly related to livelihoods and WaSH show mixed results, which might be firstly because these were implemented in the later part of the project and secondly because of frequent climatic stresses in the region. In sum, the quality of the effectiveness review was good.



7. Main Oxfam follow-up actions

The project will take follow-up actions on the areas outlined in the recommendation. The major focus areas are: MEAL Framework/MEAL plan, income generation activities, climate resilient practices, institutional capacity building of cooperatives and market management, enterprise approach scaling-up DRR measures and plan by 2017 March.

The implementation of projects will be reviewed on a half-yearly basis in order to follow the MEAL plan, and make the activities more effective. The accountability plan for each project will be reviewed and improved for best results, specially focusing on feedback mechanisms and the participation of communities.

To scale up the learning from this project, the DRR& CCA Programme Unit under the Sustainable Development Programme has started integrating the DRR into Earthquake Response & Recovery Programme/Projects, particularly developing Village and District level Local Disaster Risk Management Planning guideline (LDRMPs and DDMPs), promoting Bio-engineering, safer building construction, developing contingency planning for partners and the district government authorities, establishing emergency fund & stockpiling of emergency items, community and school-based DRR programmes including awareness-raising, vulnerability mapping and capacity building of stakeholders, partners, and staffs. One staff member has been assigned to offer capacity building on DRR to other programme pillars.

Oxfam is playing a key role in drafting a National Strategy for Resilient Urban Communities in Nepal with the leadership of the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development (MoFALD). The strategy focuses on systemic DRR assessments including on climate change, interagency coordination, and pro-poor focus at the community level. Oxfam's working modality will be based on the DRR priorities set by the strategy after endorsement of the document by MoFALD by March 2017,

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

The conclusions and recommendations are valued and this effectiveness review of the project is an asset for Nepal programme.

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?

Robust monitoring and evaluation plans will be developed and implemented for all projects from the inception phase.

DRR and the Women's Empowerment Resilience Framework are very strong components in designing & reviewing the projects which will support us to do results-oriented, effective monitoring and evaluation. The project review process will be more comprehensive and in line with our monitoring reports. We will do our best to apply 'control' group methods in our high-value projects while doing the baseline and evaluating.

To develop the project towards resilience, we will incorporate livelihood interventions that will improve food security and income. We will promote climate smart/disaster resilience technology and try to promote Oxfam's food security and livelihood development sectors initiatives. The team will also seek input from other programmes at the design stage of projects.

The Nepal programme is compiling the results/learning from various evaluations conducted in the last 2/3 years, to enable the programme team to benefit from the learning and avoid repeating past mistakes or misusing funds.

This review will also help us to share the evidence in policy forums and support the development of common understanding in developing and improving resilience projects, and reviewing policy & guidelines.

A digital tool for data collection & analysis has been introduced will be promoted & replicated in other project interventions.

10. Additional reflections

The importance of establishing appropriate comparison groups in future projects was stressed by the Effectiveness Review. Selecting and defining such comparison groups requires rigorous efforts and it would be helpful to have tools and guidelines to support this at the start of projects.