



Oxfam Cymru / SRCDC: SKILLS FOR LIFE



FINAL EVALUATION (March 2017 – March 2018)

Executive summary by:

The Social Effectiveness Research Centre

www.socialeffectiveness.org.uk

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I. Introduction and Methodology

“If you help a woman, you are helping a whole family.”

Project participant, Skills for Life

Oxfam Cymru's Skills for Life project was a one-year pilot delivered in Cardiff in partnership with South Riverside Community Development Centre (SRCDC). It was funded through the Innovation Fund of the Welsh Government's Communities for Work programme.

The focus of Skills for Life was on helping women aged 25+ from Black or Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds, in order to *“build long-term, lasting outcomes for participants beyond moving into entry-level work or enrolment in Communities for Work schemes, and beyond ‘first jobs’ (whilst recognising their value as stepping stones)”*.¹ In this focus, the project took as its starting point the overall change goal of Oxfam GB's UK Programme Strategy 2015-2020, namely the goal of *“decent and sustainable work as a route out of poverty for women in the UK”*.²

The project utilised Oxfam's Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA), which proceeds from the starting point that all people experiencing poverty or marginalisation have some kind of asset or ability that could be built upon to improve their situation.

The Skills for Life project began in March 2017 and ran until March 2018. The first months of the project were taken up with recruiting and inducting project staff, planning activities and recruiting participants. Formal work with participants then began on a rolling basis from the last week of May 2017 onwards. An interim evaluation was completed at the midway point of the project's ten-month active life at the end of October 2017. This final summative evaluation builds on that work to consider the key learning generated by the project over its lifetime as a whole.

II. Project Activities

The first target Skills for Life had was to engage 75 BME or other disadvantaged women by the end of the project. Participants were to be women over the age of 25 living in one of four Communities First cluster areas in Cardiff, with a focus on those with care or childcare responsibilities and low or no skills.³ In total, the project engaged 53 women, 48 of whom came from BME backgrounds, over its lifetime. Nineteen further participants were referred to the project but proved to be ineligible.

1. Communities for Work, 'Communities for Work Innovation Fund: Agreement Number C130/2015/2016 (Technical Criteria Response)', p.7.

2. Oxfam GB, 'UKP Programme Update: Women United - March 2017', p.4.

3. The Communities First clusters in question were: BRG (Butetown, Riverside and Grangetown); East (Rumney, Trowbridge, Llanrumney and Pentwyn); STAR (Splott, Tremorfa, Adamsdown and Roath); and West (Caerau, Ely, Fairwater, Trelái and Tylgoed).

Altogether, nineteen participants undertook a total of 23 work placements with the project (with four participants doing more than one placement). Organisations who hosted work placements included the following:

- Cardiff Business School
- Cardiff Central Library
- Cardiff University
- Grangetown Hub
- Housing Department, Cardiff City Council
- Legal and General
- National Museum Wales (Cardiff)
- Oxfam Boutique
- Wales and West Utilities
- Welsh Assembly
- Welsh Centre for International Affairs

Eighteen participants took up the offer of professional coaching sessions and 44 participants received SLA support on an individual or group basis. The following general training workshops were run by the project during its lifetime:

- June 2017 – Introduction to Skills for Life
- July 2017 – Employability Training (I)
- August 2017 – Sustainable Livelihoods Approach
- September 2017 – Being Your Own Boss
- October 2017 – Communication Skills and Assertiveness
- November 2017 – Employability Training (II)
- December 2017 – Visit: National Assembly of Wales
- January 2018 – Influencing Change
- February 2018 – Media Training
- March 2018 – Mapping Your Future

III. Outcome 1: Skills and Experience

“Before the project, I didn't have the skills to be employed.”

Project participant, Skills for Life

53% of participants (28 women in total) completed baseline surveys recording their positions in relation to various components of a sustainable livelihood before and after their involvement with the project. All of the participants in the sample made progress in relation to the various components of their livelihoods, with an average increase overall of anywhere between three and 54 percentage points per participant. Specifically in relation to the project's second outcome, participants

increased their human assets (having the necessary skills required for a livelihood to be sustainable) by an average of 18 percentage points, or almost a fifth.

As well as the quantitative baseline data generated by the project, qualitative data from it underlined that the project was generally working with, as the Communities for Work criteria specified it should, those furthest from the labour market. This was important, given that, in the words of one participant:

“Starting steps are the most difficult. [A f]ew months ago, I didn't think I would be applying for jobs or training. Childcare has helped me to take opportunities. I now have a CV.”

Despite participants' generally low starting points in terms of their livelihoods, however, employers seemed impressed by the general skill levels of those participants who, having received training from the project, then moved on to take up work placements. As one placement provider fed back:

“We were very impressed with [our Skills for Life placement]. She is very professional and personable. She fitted in very well with [our t]eam. She was thrown in at the deep end since her arrival coincided with [a big event] [...] and I was very impressed by the way she rose to this challenge. She has very good people skills and has an open and engaging manner. We can only speak highly of [her]; she is hard working, reliable and quick to learn. [She has] grown in confidence and gained a wealth of experience.”

One slightly unanticipated skills and experience related outcome to arise from the project were the changes employers saw in themselves arising from hosting a placement. As one put it:

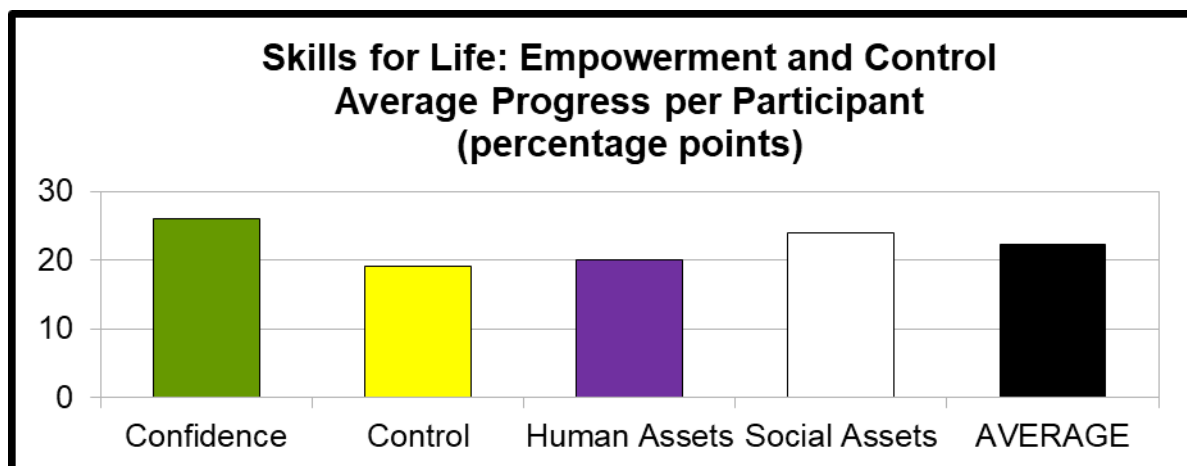
“I think the project is very worthwhile, not just for the candidates who have placements but for everyone involved as I have learned so much from working with [the participant, project staff] and Oxfam [...]. [I]t is also helping me to develop too and to also understand barriers and needs.”

IV. Outcome 2: Empowerment and Control

“[The participant I referred to you] has really come out of her shell after attending nearly all the courses you have run and [your] arranging for her to volunteer at [a local organisation]. She has blossomed to such an extent that she doesn't stop talking, a marked difference to before I referred her! In fact, she went on to start work [in a well-known department store] over Christmas. Thank you again for all the support you've given my participants.”

Referral partner, Skills for Life project

The baseline surveys specifically asked about the issue of control, as well as other elements of a sustainable livelihood related to this outcome, in the form of confidence more generally, as well as social capital (having the necessary people around them needed to make their livelihoods sustainable) and physical assets (the general ability to find help to support their livelihoods when needed, particularly through accessing the right services). As the following graph shows, the project's participants made particularly strong progress in these areas:



Importantly, the change in confidence observed in the participant referred to in the opening quote to this section was also confirmed by the participant herself during her interview:

“I was really quiet before, but look at me now! The most significant change for me is that I can speak up for myself when I'm at work (I've now got a job [now] thanks to the project – it's part-time, I'm looking for full-time now, it could be any retail job, not just [the kind of shop I'm currently I'm working now]). I enjoy myself in the Oxfam group by meeting with the other women.”

She was not alone; other participants also described the same process. In the view of one, *“the project is everything to me – my self-esteem was really zero, but look at me now, I have a voice!”*

The peer support element of the project also hinted at the importance of seeing examples of new ways of doing things and other 'positive peer pressure' influences on this particular participant group, for instance in one participant's observation that *“I see women who are busy, volunteering and doing training and now I care more about how I spend my time, not just playing with my daughter”*.

V. Outcome 3: More Sustainable Livelihoods

“Without the project I'd have thought as a BME person, 'This place [where I am doing my placement] is not for me. Things I wouldn't have thought of as a possibility I can think of now.”

Project participant, Skills for Life

Skills for Life's third outcome centred on the sustainability of the livelihoods of its participants. Its first target was for 15 of them to have entered employment (in roles of 16 hours per week or more) by the end of the project. Seven participants had done so by the end of the project, with a further six having found work but in roles of 15 hours a week or less.

A variety of barriers to work, such as having to do unpaid training, being required to pay for uniforms or equipment or having to clear particular bureaucratic obstacles that would not have affected non-refugee applicants were reported even by those women who did successfully gain employment through the project. For example, one of the participants gaining employment in a leading High Street store was unable to start in the position as the Home Office had not yet returned her passport to her following her successful application for citizenship. As a result of this delay, which was completely beyond her control, the position was given to another (non Skills for Life) candidate instead.

All of this adds weight to the fundamental tenet of the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, which is that there is (far) more to a sustainable livelihood than the bare fact of whether someone has a job or not. Stressful, irregular or precarious work can actually be counterproductive in terms of someone's overall livelihood.

At the same time, the importance and potential of these stepping stones should not be in any way undervalued. As noted by the participant quoted in the first outcome section above, starting steps are always the most difficult ones, but once taken – as the participant quoted at the start of this section demonstrates – they can make the previously unthinkable thinkable, such as the mention by one participant in the interim evaluation of how the project's training had given her *“a push to try to start my own business”*.

The participant quoted in the section on skills and experience above expanded on this point about starting steps in her interview:

The employability training really helped and the interview training [too]. By September my daughter will be in full-time nursery so I can look for work. Before it would be 'Where do I start?!', now I know exactly what I want.

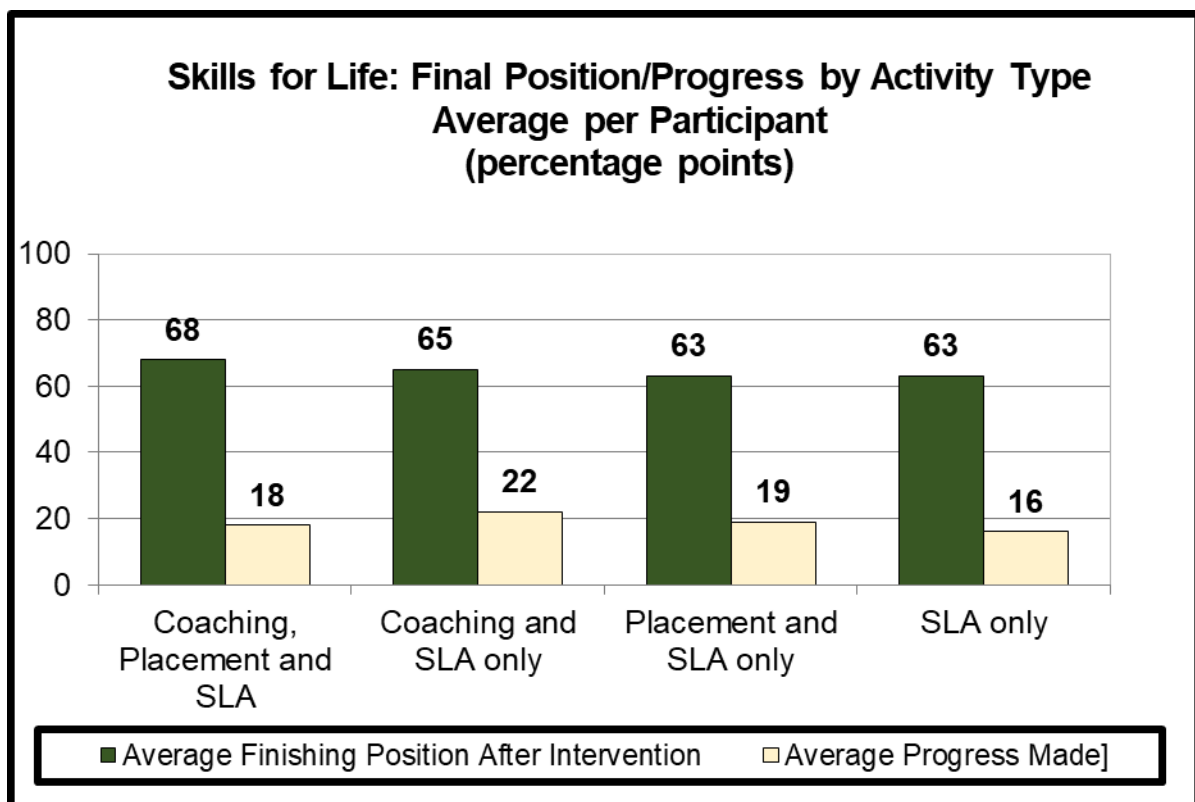
VI. Outcome 4: Wider Contribution

“Our staff have benefited from working with a more diverse group of people. This is the way we break through barriers.”

Work placement provider, Skills for Life

The final outcome for the project was slightly less prescriptive than the others, namely a general ambition for it to make a wider contribution to the work of the organisations it involved, be they organisations delivering the project, project partners or other third party stakeholders

Evidence generated by the project also recorded the effectiveness of its person-centred approach with – as would be to be expected in a successfully person-centred project – little difference between the amount of progress made by participants taking part in different types of project activity. Instead, whether participants undertook placements or utilised the professional coaches or just took part in the group training sessions or received one-to-one SLA support, they made much the same amount of progress, and reached much the same final position, as the following graph records:



This evenness of progress is a testament to the success of the project in helping participants in the ways that were right for them, rather than prescribing a set route (such as work placements or coaching sessions for every participant) that would have been effective with some participants but not others.

This approach was summed up by the comment of one participant at the time of the interim evaluation, which compared the project to the other help they had received from Communities for Work:

“This is better, more one-to-one, they can give you more time than the Communities for Work person. I just didn't know what I wanted, that was the problem, but [the Livelihoods Worker] could help me.”

The value of this more person-centred approach also came through in other feedback from participants, such as view of one participant that *“the most significant change for me [has been] getting the placement, getting what I really wanted, having the option that I really wanted”*.

VII. General Issues and Themes

“The biggest barrier to paid employment is childcare – the project has been brilliant paying for [...] nursery for my daughter so I can come, and go on the placements, but you don't get that with a job unfortunately.”

Project participant, Skills for Life

“I think childcare is the main barrier. If participants were able to do a full day I think it would be more beneficial to them [...]. if childcare was available before school or after school it would enable each participant to see a whole working day rather than a snippet.”

Work placement provider, Skills for Life

“The main barrier for all of these women has been childcare. Sometimes you're better off organising sessions last minute rather than three weeks in advance if someone is really busy like these women are.”

Professional coach, Skills for Life

As the interim evaluation had observed, in terms of general themes, one in particular stood out above all others: the barrier formed by childcare, and specifically the lack of affordable childcare available when women needed it to be able to work. It is hard to overstate how important the issue is for BME women with children (as over half of the Skills for Life participants were; around half of those with children were also single parents). As one participant commented about Skills for Life in her baseline survey, *“it's the only project that helps with childcare”*, and she was not alone among participants in drawing attention to this issue. As another put it:

“Doing the project was a real eye-opener. The most significant change for me was meeting other women in the group who were in the same position. I

realised I was not alone. They understood why I was not working. Creches are too expensive, this keeps mothers at home. [The project] has helped me a lot, for example, with my housing benefit. Other services wouldn't do that. [...] I am planning to further my career and get a better job now."

Other barriers reported included welfare changes, especially the benefit cap, additional employer requirements facing non-Britons, the amount of time needed to set up placements, the issue of responsibility for participant development once in a placement, the need for more information to support the initial set up process and potential wider issues around both employer capacity and project capacity more generally.

VIII. Value Analysis

Value analysis looks at three different types of value: fiscal, economic and social. When combined, these three types of value allow the overall value of a project, including its cost/benefit ratios and Social Return on Investment, to be assessed.⁴

- Fiscal value derives from savings that would ordinarily accrue to the state. For example, several Skills for Life participants who had previously been claiming out-of-work benefits gained employment as a result of their involvement with the project. Those participants therefore no longer required the same level of state financial support they had previously been getting, as those benefits were replaced by wages, or by wages plus in work benefits, which represented an overall fiscal saving.
- Economic value is created by savings or benefits that, though they do not accrue to the state (because they result from things the state would not ordinarily be paying for) are nonetheless still of clear economic benefit. Volunteering, and the activities of volunteers, is a good example of this. Other examples might include the additional spending power or taxes paid by participants who have increased their incomes with the help of the project.
- Social value comprises the wider savings an intervention creates for the individual and society, particularly in terms of what it would cost society to provide the same outcome for that individual simply by increasing their income alone. Social value measurement makes use of an approach known as the Wellbeing Valuation Approach. The approach takes large sample datasets, such as the British Household Panel Survey or the Crime Survey for England and Wales and uses them to calculate the effect of a particular outcome, be it gaining employment, regular volunteering or a general increase in confidence, on a person's wellbeing. Through doing this, it allows

4. For further information on the methodology used in the value analysis for this evaluation, together with the results of the sensitivity analysis used to test the key calculations upon which the figures in this section are based, see the full report to this executive summary.

previously unmeasurable value to be quantified consistently, based on individuals' actual reported experiences.

The overall gross fiscal, economic and social value attributable to the Skills for the Life project over one year is £329,107.12. From this sum, however, needs to be subtracted the costs of the project, in order to reach the net overall value it created. Once these costs – the costs both in financial terms (funding) and non-financial terms (the opportunity costs to participants of taking part in the project) – are taken into account, then the overall fiscal, economic and social value attributable to the project becomes visible: a final figure of £208,057.91.

This final total equates to an overall net value ratio of 1.34:1. Or, to express it in other terms, the Skills for Life project generated £1.34 in fiscal, economic and social value for every £1 that was invested in it, meaning that the benefits of the project more than outweighed its costs, even given the frequently resource intensive and time-consuming nature of the work it involved.

IX. Conclusion and Recommendations

“I still need help. This job is hard, minimum wage and only 15 hours. I want to work extra hours. I have lost my counselling support as [the] appointment time is when I'm working.”

Project participant, Skills for Life

The Skills for Life project has generated some important learning in relation to BME women and employment. The final section of this report takes that learning and turns it into a set of recommendations which may apply to a future iteration of the project, other projects within the Oxfam Future Skills programme or any programme or project which seeks to work with those women furthest from the labour market, particularly those from a BME background.

RECOMMENDATION #1: Projects working with those furthest from the labour market, and particularly BME women, should focus on the goal of helping their participants achieve decent work, not just any work.

RECOMMENDATION #2: Any project seeking to help those furthest from the labour market, and particularly BME women, should run for longer than just one year, in order to provide sufficient duration for the longer-term effects of the work to be discernible.

RECOMMENDATION #3: Any project seeking to help those furthest from the labour market, and particularly BME women, should emphasise quality over quantity in terms of the number of participants with whom it works and the type of support it gives them.

RECOMMENDATION #4: Any project seeking to help those furthest from the labour market, and particularly BME women, should take a holistic approach, treating participants' lives in the round and drawing in as many other stakeholders and support techniques as can be demonstrated to have a positive effect on the ability of participants to move closer to decent work.

As the interim evaluation observed, the quantitative and qualitative data from the Skills for Life project suggest that if the project did not exist, then it would have to be invented for more short-term focused programmes like Communities for Work to have success in improving long-term employment rates for BME women participants. There is nothing in the evidence considered for this final evaluation to suggest that this view does not still hold.

Despite the lower than anticipated participant numbers, Skills for Life still came out with a comfortably positive net value ratio at the end of its ten-month operational lifetime. It was able to do this primarily because of the value it was able to add to the original funding it received. It achieved this by working in partnership with coaches, employers, statutory bodies and other third sector and community organisations.

Overall, the project has succeeded in its most basic task of all, namely that of establishing a viable model for future work with women, and especially BME women, who are furthest from the labour market.

Skills for Life has done some extremely important work paving the way for future work with those furthest from the labour market in Wales. Projects building on the legacy of its holistic, person-centred, asset-based approach will hopefully now follow elsewhere. The project has laid down a gauntlet, and it will now be up to Oxfam, SRCDC and other organisations to follow in its footsteps and turn that approach into long-term success in Cardiff, or even on a Wales-wide scale.

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Oxfam Cymru: www.oxfam.org.uk/cymru

South Riverside Community Development Centre: <https://www.srcdc.org.uk/>

Communities for Work: <https://gov.wales/topics/people-and-communities/communities/communities-for-work/?lang=en>