

Oxfam Management response to: Accountability review in Kenya:
Improving Access to Water and Sanitation Services (Effectiveness Review Series 2015/16)

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A: Context, background and findings

1. The context and background of the review, i.e. the purpose and scope of the evaluation.

As part of Oxfam Great Britain's (OGB) Global Performance Framework (GPF), samples of projects a quarter to a half way through their lifetime are randomly selected each year in order to review the levels of accountability they are achieving. The accountability indicator that Oxfam has chosen to examine in its Accountability Reviews (ARs) is the degree to which its work meets its own standards for accountability. Oxfam is able to do this as it has clear standards that describe how a project/intervention/activity should be delivered by staff and partners and how it should be experienced by those for whom we are seeking change.

The 'Improving Access to Water and Sanitation Services' project was selected for review in this way.

Accountability is one of the eleven standards that Oxfam is expected to meet in its development work. It is the process through which an organisation balances the needs of stakeholders in its decision-making and activities, and delivers against this commitment. Accountability is based on four dimensions: transparency, participation, learning, and evaluation and feedback mechanisms that allow the organisation to give account to, take account of, and be held to account by stakeholders. Oxfam's principle is: 'We hold ourselves primarily accountable to people living in poverty, but we take our accountability to all stakeholders seriously, and continuously strive to balance their different needs. Increased accountability will be achieved and demonstrated through respectful and responsible attitudes, appropriate systems, and strong leadership.' This review assessed accountability in terms of transparency, feedback/listening, and participation – three key dimensions of Accountability for Oxfam. In addition, where appropriate, it asked questions around partnership practices, staff attitudes, and satisfaction (how useful the project is to the people and how wisely the money on this project has been spent).

One of the three projects randomly selected for Accountability Review this year was SWIFT, a 3.5-year WASH project supported by DFID. The project is being implemented in Turkana County, Kenya and addresses some of the water and sanitation issues in the region, which has been experiencing droughts and serious food shortages for the past decade.

ARs employ a participatory methodology. In this instance, a total of 94 individuals took part in this assessment: Oxfam staff, partner staff (LOWASCO, KAWASEPRO, the Water Department and county government), and community members from Kakuma, Chokchok and Nasechabuin. The review process utilised document review, key informant interviews, two workshops and focus group discussions to understand and capture insights about accountability.

2. Summary main findings and recommendations

Oxfam's accountability to partners

Accountability Indicator	(Average) Oxfam score	(Average) Partner score	Review Team score
Transparency	3.0	2.5	2.0
Feedback	3.0	2.5	3.0
Participation	3.0	2.5	3.0
Average total:	3.0	2.5	2.7

Oxfam's accountability to its partners is chiefly assessed by looking at three main dimensions: transparency, feedback and participation. In terms of TRANSPARENCY, the review team gave a score of 2 (medium). It became evident that sharing of project information with partners was limited; the 'How is information best shared?' question did not receive enough attention. Documents such as the MEAL plan, MOU, complaints handling procedures and open information policies are available, but only partially known by partners. The detailed financial information is evidently not shared with all partners. The score for FEEDBACK is 3 (high). Focus group participants confirmed sharing complaints and receiving response verbally (face to face or by phone), which is very positive. The score would have been higher, but the team did not see evidence of complaints being written down or reported on. In addition, the 'UWAJIBIKAJI FORUM', a complaint system used within the project, has limitations in that responses and actions are fairly slow. PARTICIPATION received a score of 3 (high) from the review team. Although it became clear from the reviewed documents and staff interviews that partners were involved during implementation, and particularly in the launching and handing over of the project, some partners raised a concern about there being less engagement at the project design stage. The interview with Oxfam staff indicated that some of the partners, such as KAWASEPRO and LOWASCO, were brought on board at the last stage of submission with limited time for consultation.

Oxfam and partners' accountability to communities – from 1 (low) to 4 (v high)

Accountability Indicator	(Average) Oxfam/Partner score	(Average) Community score	Review Team score
Transparency	2.3	2.1	2.0
Feedback	2.3	3.1	2.7
Participation	2.7	3.3	3.3
Average total:	2.4	2.8	2.7

The review team assessed OGB's and partner's accountability to communities by assessing the same three dimensions as above: transparency, feedback and participation. The review team's score for TRANSPARENCY is 2 (medium). This is the low, but we think fair when considering the sharing of information. Only limited project information was shared, budgetary information, in particular, was hardly shared at all. Further, communities feel that they are not consulted on what kind of information they would like to get. All three communities had a unanimous score, 2 (medium) on transparency. The FEEDBACK dimension has a better score at 3 (high). A use of community *baraza*, located in the communities, provided a cheap and easy way of proactively seeking ideas, issues and listening to communities. The UWAJIBIKAJI platform as a formal complaint system provides ways of receiving complaints (but is slow as mentioned above). The score given by the review team for PARTICIPATION is 3 (high). Generally, communities' participation in the project varies considerably. Kakuma's score is 2 (medium) compared to Nasechabuin and Chokchok whose scores are 4

(very high). While Kakuma community reported limited participation and decision-making, Chokchok and Nasechabuin decided where to put a borehole, where the taps should pass, who should engage in labouring work and where to put the water tanks.

The overall main strengths include:

- Use of community structures, such as *barazas*, during implementation.
- Community participation during the project implementation in identifying sources of water, where the taps should pass and distribution points, as well as actual work such as labour power for the project.
- Gender consideration is a strength; women participated in many project activities and *baraza*.
- Complaints are addressed through both formal and informal processes and this is mainly due to good relationships and the positive interactive environment built by project staff.

Recommendations include:

- Using *barazas* as an avenue for promoting community-driven initiatives to enhance the sense of responsibility to the community's development needs.
- Signing of an MoU needs to involve not only the signatories, but also those mandated to implement the project during the project cycle.
- There is a need to develop a participatory feedback mechanism with participating communities targeting marginalised and illiterate groups. The system also has to capture feedback from all partners involved in the project, such as government and government agencies at different levels, community representatives and communities.
- Enhancing the understanding of the communities about the project from the beginning: who are the partners involved and what are the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders. It is only through this that issues that emerge are resolved within locally available structures, even after hand over is completed.
- There is a need for greater awareness on the budget and MoU for both higher-level signatories and implementers. If this does not happen, an information gap occurs at the implementation level which has knock on effects for accountability and programme quality.
- Sharing of budgetary information with partners and communities needs to be done in appropriately accessible ways: ask people how they would most like to receive the information.

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?

To a large extent, the findings do concur with most of our expectations as can be noted in the scoring between Oxfam Kenya and the review team which gave almost the same scores for the various dimensions of accountability. In fact, the only difference in scoring on Oxfam's accountability to partners was on TRANSPARENCY while all the other dimensions had the same ranking between Oxfam and the review team.

On Oxfam Kenya's accountability to communities, it is interesting that the Oxfam Kenya team awarded itself a lower score than the communities and the review team. It is therefore important to note that the team acknowledges the current levels of accountability towards communities and has put in place measures to improve accountability. Since the time of the AR and to date, Oxfam Kenya has increasingly engaged the local radio and had several community meetings to improve its accountability to communities.

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

The AR revealed that Oxfam Kenya is strong on PARTICIPATION both to partners and communities. It is also important to note that communities also ranked Oxfam high on participation and feedback and above average on transparency, this mean that Oxfam has a strong relationship with the community that it serves in Turkana.

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

TRANSPARENCY received a medium ranking among all the accountability dimensions, both from communities and partners. This indicates that there is an opportunity to improve on this dimension in the future.

6. Summary of review quality assessment, i.e. quality of the review is strong/mixed/poor and short assessment of the process

Generally, we find the quality of the assessment and the approach used in this AR was good. The AR was truly participatory involving Oxfam, its partners and communities.

It was interesting to have a diverse team together in one room and reflect on the rating by the different groups. Oxfam, partners or communities gave a specific ranking and the team was able to challenge each other meaningfully thus drawing an action plan as a result.

7. Main Oxfam follow-up actions

A joint feedback workshop involving both Oxfam and partners was facilitated to validate findings and draw up an action plan for gaps identified during the review process. Emphasis was placed on ensuring the development of realistic actions that are built into the project work and recognised by the parties taking responsibility. At the time of the review, the project was approaching a second phase which focuses on capacity building and monitoring, thus providing opportunity for addressing most of the identified gaps within interventions.

The ideal accountability situation that Oxfam, partners and beneficiaries hope to achieve by December 2016

Accountability to Partners			Accountability to Communities		
Accountability indicator	Reviewer score	Desired score (Average)	Accountability indicator	Reviewer score	Desired score (Average)
Transparency	2	4	Transparency	1	3
Feedback	2	4	Feedback	2	3
Participation	3	4	Participation	2	3
Partnership practices	2	3	Staff attitudes	2	3
			Satisfaction	1	3

8. Any conclusions/recommendations Oxfam does not agree with or will not act upon - and why (this reflection should consider the results of the review quality assessment)

The recommendation on the MoU signing to be done by both management and implementers is not clear. The MoU is always a commitment by the different organisations and always signed by management, but the Grant Agreement Letter is drafted by a Project Manager from both Oxfam and the partner. It is also important to note there are several other documents attached to the MoU, such as the work plan and the budget, which are always generated by the implementers. It is therefore expected that the implementers will have full understanding of the commitment and expectations.

It is however important to note that the SWIFT WASH project is a 'payment by results' project where Oxfam and partners are paid only after achieving a specific and verifiable milestone. The nature of the project could therefore have limited the sharing of some information (such as budgetary information), since Oxfam only gets paid after implementation and thus partners would only be informed of set ambitions rather than actual budget.

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? Please be as specific as possible and provide context where relevant, naming projects in full where learning from the review will be applied.

- Moving forward Oxfam Kenya will ensure a more proactive approach in sharing information with its beneficiaries such as using the radio, developing information pack and posters among other approaches.
- Improve documentation of complaints and feedback received from communities and partners for future learning and to improve programming.
- Initiate more regular internal accountability reviews with partners and communities for continued learning and improvement.
- Provide avenues and mechanisms for partners to share complaints and feedback in an open, accessible and timely manner and employ back the learning into programmes.

10. Additional reflections that have emerged from the review process but were not the subject of the evaluation.

- During the review process, the Oxfam team reflected on more practical approaches for information sharing to improve on TRANSPARENCY. Though the field teams were confident of having done a lot on information provision, the team reflected on the obstacles to having communities understand, internalize and make use of the information provided. One of the main obstacles was observed to be the high levels of illiteracy among the community members. As such the project team reflected on using local staff and local media persons to share information over the radio using the local radio stations.