



Garment factory workers march in the streets of Phnom Penh, Cambodia. They demonstrate for their democratic rights such as the right to be heard and to protest, and additionally for better wages and working conditions and their rights as employees. Several grassroots organizations, such as United Sisterhood, organized the march. Kimlong Meng/Oxfam Novib.

CHANGE GOAL: THE RIGHT TO BE HEARD

Executive Summary by Laura Roper

The Oxfam Strategic Plan (2013–2019/20) states that at the heart of Oxfam’s theory of change is the belief that “the interaction between active citizens and accountable state as fundamental to development.” The Right to be Heard (RTBH) is the plan’s first change goal and, during the course of the plan, has become a central element across all change goals as influencing has increased in importance. This review, of 21 external evaluations and 12 internal case studies, reports, supplemented by interviews with 13 Oxfam staff (10 in southern country offices and three in northern country offices) focuses on the mechanisms Oxfam uses and how effective they are in protecting or opening up civic space, preparing active citizens and their organizations to engage with government to advance policy agendas; and in transforming power relationships.

The interventions, projects and programs reviewed were quite diverse, ranging from discrete interventions (such as laboratories of activism in Peru and the political empowerment component of a large-scale savings program in Mali); to country programs in Ghana and El Salvador on extractive industries, an ambitious program in Vietnam that sought to open up policy space and policy-making process, and investments in transformative leadership for women in Tunisia; to regional and multi-country programs on empowering marginalized workers in ASEAN, mobilizing marginalized youth to advocate for health and education, and revitalizing the Education for All campaign in Africa (ANCEFA) to address the issue of education financing through better taxation and budgeting.

Because of the diversity of programs reviewed and the non-uniformity of the documentation (in terms of types of documents, the different evaluation designs; and the uneven, although overall good, quality of the evaluations) it is not possible to draw general conclusions about effectiveness of Oxfam’s work in promoting active citizenship, protecting, opening up and occupying civic space, advancing policy or changing power relationships, although there are some strong examples of effective programs. However, the documentation is rich in examples of Oxfam leveraging opportunities and confronting the challenges of pursuing influencing strategies, although still quite weak in gender analysis.

Active Citizenship and Civic Space

Across projects and programs, Oxfam supports building the capacity of both citizens and CSOs to more effectively engage with government. Noteworthy among the projects and programs reviewed is the number that focused to bring the most marginalized people from the political margins and empower them as primary agents of change. This is often done by means of new forms of organizing, such as in transformative leadership for women programs and the emerging work with Youth as Active Citizens (YAC), but more typically through strengthening CSO individually or in alliances or coalitions. There are strong examples and different models of coalition building from the support of multiple, relatively small, specialized coalitions in Vietnam to build their research, advocacy, media and negotiation capabilities; to carefully constructing a broad-based coalition in Zambia to work on issues of debt, taxation and budgeting, with members identified based on the assets they brought to the coalition; to trying to foster regional coalition building in several programs to reinforce national work (less successful). One interesting

development, seen across several programs, are efforts not only to attract media coverage, but also to build the capacity of journalists in investigative reporting. Another is greater engagement and support of southern think tanks and research centers to make them more policy-relevant and increase their standing as interlocutors with government.

Oxfam has developed a wide repertoire of points of entry to occupy civic space – working with marginalized workers to establish dialogue spaces with government officials and employers in ASEAN; strengthening the capacity of traditional, indigenous authorities to better engage with official government offices in Guatemala; creating synergy with youth groups to amplify their own and Oxfam’s messages and activism on a range of issues; to identifying openings in closed or weak spaces in countries such as Zimbabwe and the DRC; to supporting women to gain direct power as elected and appointed political office in Morocco, Tunisia and Colombia, among others. Oxfam also pursues insider strategies to influence government on policy matters and to increase engagement with civil society. In Ghana, Oxfam worked with partners to influence language in several important pieces of legislation that were enacted and in Ethiopia, that has one of the most restrictive NGO laws, Oxfam pursued an insider strategy to influence climate change governance by seconding staff to key ministries, with the long-term goal of greater citizen participation at the local level.

Policy Change and Change in Power Relations

Many of the evaluations judged program effectiveness by ability to make policy change. While there were some significant policy victories, many more, when they happened, were more small-scale, partial, or ambiguous. For the most part, evaluations, even for those programs that specifically sought to transform power relationships, did not have strong supporting evidence for this, with a few exceptions. Most notable were Ghana’s progress in opening up institutionally sanctioned space for civil society participation and oversight and progress in Vietnam in creating policy spaces for engaging with government, thereby interjecting citizens’ voice in formerly closed processes of decision-making. To some degree, this finding may be a function of lack of convincing methods for measuring this, but several evaluations identified inadequate theories of change and inadequate analysis of power relations, while recent work within Oxfam on the issue of political capture suggests severe structural barriers that impede even challenging power relationships.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Programs seem to gain the most traction in countries with some formal democratic space or spaces that are opening up; when they have a strong, testable theory of change that serves as a touchstone for the program; and programs where there are links with global processes or strong alignment amongst Oxfam priorities. Nonetheless, Oxfam has shown considerable creativity in working in more restrictive contexts, as well, where the need for engagement is arguably greater. Regardless, overall the efforts reviewed also demonstrate just how hard effective influencing to address poverty and inequality is, something that will become more difficult in the current, turbulent, context.

To be more effective Oxfam needs to:

1. Rethink its theory of change (or theories of action for specific interventions) to reflect the dynamic and non-linear reality of pursuing policy, practice and power change, including the high likelihood of setbacks and even backlash.
2. Continue to build on the sophistication of its power analysis and its understanding of political capture and strengthen the interface between theory of change and power analysis, while incorporating contextual dynamics around changing beliefs regarding governance, the value of democracy and the role of human rights.
3. Be disciplined about matching resources to aspirations, investing at sufficient scale and duration to leverage significant change. When Oxfam is engaged in efforts that disrupt or are perceived to disrupt the status quo, it has a moral obligation to address the risk of backlash, not only for staff, but also of partners, allies, and community activists. Oxfam can build on work done the Knowledge Hub for Governance and Citizenship, as well as the guidelines developed by the Transformative Leadership for Women's Rights Working Group.
4. Get clearer actionable definitions of active citizens, active citizenship, and civic spaces (perhaps including typologies and means to differentiate degrees of engagement and quality of civic space). Oxfam also has to be clearer about what transforming power relations means in specific contexts, including incorporating better analysis gender and of intersectional oppression. Measurement will always be a challenge, but there needs to be an intentional process to get to greater alignment and rigor across programs, both conceptually and operationally.
5. Re-examine its portfolio of partners and allies and ways of work. There was considerable evolution under the current plan, but Oxfam still may benefit from a major re-examination, especially as it emerges from a long internal change process, so that its ways of working become more horizontal to more consistently co-create strategy, and more flexible, fluid, and technologically savvy, including lighter, nimbler grant and program management.
6. Have a serious discussion about the evaluation and learning infrastructure and processes needed to support the new strategic plan. It is imperative to be more strategic about what is evaluated and how evaluations fit into broader learning efforts to ensure tight feedback loops and creative cross-fertilization. Oxfam should examine the support to programs, country offices, and campaigning teams need to ensure stronger monitoring and higher quality evaluations, including a much stronger gender lens. Oxfam is literally sitting on a world of experience related to right to be heard and much more of it needs to be captured to inform program, policy, and the broader development community.
7. Finally, a more existential question to consider – with the rise of illiberal regimes and movements, including in democracies the Global North, which fundamentally challenge the relevance of a rights-based approach to development – are the types of programs represented in these evaluations enough of a response to changing national and global dynamics?

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