



Together with some 60 allied organizations, Oxfam works to support farmer field schools in five countries (Zimbabwe, Lao PDR, Vietnam, Myanmar and Peru). The participants carry out variety evaluation studies; their ultimate aim is to select and/or create crop varieties that best suit their needs and preferences. Photo: Syed Tashiq Mahmood.

REFLECTION AND SENSE-MAKING ON SUSTAINABLE FOOD

by Jan Maes and Jo Zaremba

This report represents a meta-analysis of evaluations, reviews and reports on a selection of Oxfam's work under the Sustainable Food Change Goal of the Oxfam Strategic Plan 2013–2019. It provides a synthesis of Oxfam's contributions towards fulfilling the objectives specified under the Change Goal, identifying actionable insights and recommendations for their inclusion in the development of the new strategic plan. While the strategic plan lays out the ambitions – the goals and objectives, outcomes and some of the approaches that Oxfam will employ – it does not clarify the role of Oxfam in achieving these goals.

A range of different campaigns, programmes and projects have emerged over the period of the OSP that have led to a diverse set of outcomes using a range of approaches.

1. The level of ambition set out in the Sustainable Food Change Goal is high, and requires the cooperation, coordination and collaboration of Oxfam, partners and many different stakeholders. The programmes and campaigns that constitute Change Goal 4 pose challenging goals, which are ambitious to achieve within the short space of time allotted to the OSP. Despite these ambitions, many programmes are achieving their stated objectives as set out in their specific theories of change and programming commitments. However, it is not clear how, or indeed whether, the programmes are working together to deliver the Change Goal.
2. Overall, there has been progress towards the Sustainable Food Goal. There are clear policy level outcomes depicting systemic shifts, and evidence of farmers, women and other people with whom Oxfam works making their voices heard in new spaces. Even where dialogue has been constrained, such as in some Latin American countries or in dealing with some Private Sector actors, Oxfam has successfully supported building new arenas for discussing issues critical to Sustainable Food, such as land rights. The resulting outcomes - shifts in policies and practices - are visible at multiple levels – from global engagement in COP21 to regional leverage on EU policy and formulation of national policies.
3. The more substantial outcomes have resulted from programmes that are designed to influence food systems from the outset. Individual programmes have delivered on very specific objectives, such as influencing policies relating to land rights and agriculture, raising awareness about and building resilience of smallholder women farmers. While many of the outcomes are only partially completed, with the effects of the changes not yet known, they do illustrate a momentum that can be built behind change and the pivotal role that Oxfam has played in mobilising these movements. However, the impact on smallholders, women and food security in general is usually invisible, at least in the documents which this evaluation reviewed. Furthermore, sustainability remains a challenge which needs to be addressed in the very design of an initiative or movement in order to ensure that changes are seen and followed through.
4. While some programmes combine field level implementation with influencing, their impacts have been more localised and they have been less effective in shifting policies and institutions in the food system more widely. The five examples of mainly direct implementation programmes

confirm earlier findings that these contribute little to changing the food system.

5. The most influential programmes under Change Goal 4 apply a mix of different approaches – ranging from developing their own theories of change based on unique power analyses, to applying a mix of strategies to collaborate with or influence different actors. The strength in Oxfam’s approach lies in its flexibility – both in terms of framing how programmes are designed and in their implementation. Due to this diversity of approaches, this evaluation could not discern which approach, or combination of approaches, are most effective under varying contexts.
6. Flexibility across the Change Goal has also proven to be a strength, especially in the increasingly uncertain and changing context of today’s world where political lines shift and spaces for engagement are fluid or closed down, as the Case Study of the *Crece* (Grow) Campaign in Nicaragua shows.
7. While almost all programmes reviewed expressed ambitions to have an impact at scale, this was interpreted in different ways. Some programmes set out goals in terms of households while others measure themselves by the number of companies in which the programmes operate. There are still a number of programmes that base their scaling strategy on trialling and piloting methodologies, systematising learning and then using this as evidence to provoke wider policy or market changes which are intended to have the impact at scale. Other campaigns and programmes are designed to drive systemic changes through influencing policies or institutions, which in turn leverage changes in behaviours and outcomes across a wide set of stakeholders. Due to the difficulties in measuring the impact of such systemic changes, it has not been possible to evaluate the extent to which this approach has actually led to impact at scale – beyond the direct sphere of influence of a particular campaign or programme. For instance, evidence of the spill over effects from the banana (in the Make Fruit Fair Campaign) or strawberries (Moroccan Strawberries project) were not present in this evaluation.
8. While women’s rights are incorporated in varying degrees across the initiatives reviewed for Change Goal 4, programmes with more intentional and intensive focus on women’s rights have been more influential in enforcing women’s rights from personal, household, community through to national levels. Many programmes provide evidence of building women’s leadership capacity, increased income and livelihoods opportunities for women, changes in recognition of women’s role in food systems, and in some cases such as in Burkina Faso have led to policy level commitments. However, the extent to which programmes are generating true shifts in gender dynamics, and in the relationships and processes guiding decision making that affects poor rural women and food systems, is not clear. Gender dynamics in economic, social and political spheres drive food systems, and this requires a consolidated and coordinated effort between different gender justice initiatives, both across Oxfam as well as with stakeholders across the world. The scale and depth of gender inequality and women’s calls for longer programme and campaign time frames, allowing deep-seated changes in attitudes and social norms to take root and to permeate the

way in which food systems operate.

9. Oxfam's approach to partnership, coalitions, movements and networks is visible across its programmes and campaigns under Change Goal 4. As an experienced convenor and facilitator, Oxfam has shown it is able to apply different forms of engagement with allies and antagonists alike, and to develop new and innovative collaborative approaches that fit specific contexts and needs. Oxfam encourages coalitions and networks to take on their own identity and agendas, supports empowerment of southern-based partners and movements, and responds to changing contexts and circumstances through shifting strategies and sometimes allegiances. The willingness to release control of issues and agendas to partners is critical for developing power within civil society. This process can take time, and some movements and coalitions struggle to continue functioning after Oxfam withdraws its support, indicating that in addition to building capacities to deliver solid outcomes, more attention needs to be given to developing organisational and financial stability.
10. Investing in efficient and responsive coordination, management systems, and in working with partners and other collaborators pays off. With excellent project management, large complex programmes like MFF showed how good organisation, committed management and clear strategies were able to rally different stakeholders towards a common goal. Strong management supports information and knowledge exchange, learning, and generating focused analysis for clear and effective campaign messaging.

While programmes and campaigns are contributing towards systemic changes and shifts in the balance of power influencing food security and agriculturally based livelihoods, the extent to which these outcomes are contributing towards a complete transformation of the food system is hard to gauge. The Sustainable Food Change Goal, in its breadth and spread, seemingly encompasses such a large number of issues and areas which are difficult to synthesize into a focused direction. From land rights to financial flows, trade policies to supply chain practices, changes in the many arenas where Oxfam has been working are happening, but often without a visible impact at scale on the people whom Oxfam seeks to support – in other words beyond the groups that Oxfam directly engages with. Furthermore, the overarching progress towards a common Change Goal – namely transformation the Food System – was not evident in this exercise.

Successful transformation of food systems intersects with the other change goals, as well as many other initiatives outside of Oxfam and will require being at the leading edge of new forms of collaboration, of communication and influencing tactics, and most importantly, being patient and giving sufficient time to develop long-lasting, deep changes. Working through and with a range of institutions and organisations, facilitating movements and combining adversarial and collaborative tactics targeting allies and antagonists alike, Oxfam can play on its strengths to challenge and drive forward changes in the food system. What is more challenging, is tackling the entire ambitious Sustainable Food Change Goal in one sitting. With limited resources and reach, Oxfam needs to identify a few focus areas and the levers to pull that initiate change.

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