Rumi (23) does everything in her power to ensure her daughter can receive a quality education and live a good life. Photo: Vincent Best.

EVALUATION OF THE OXFAM STRATEGIC PLAN 2013–2019: WHERE OXFAM IS ADDING VALUE (OR NOT)

An Executive Summary

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The evaluation of the Oxfam Strategic Plan (OSP) examined evidence on the **key outcomes achieved across the change goals**, as well as on the **effectiveness of the approaches Oxfam deployed** to achieve social change. Of particular focus, was how Oxfam contributed to transformational change, specifically considering shifts in power relationships, changed narratives, and whether local initiatives connect to more systemic changes at national or global levels.

This report presents analysis across all change goals, focusing on approaches to social change and potential investments. The approaches considered here include: **(1) Influencing; (2) Putting women's rights at the heart of all we do; (3) Active citizenship; (4) Thought leadership; (5) Partnership; (6) Impact at scale; (7) Program approach and theory of change; and (8) Knowledge and learning.** Our underlying evidence set is the change goal reports; while they do not cover all of Oxfam's work, they represent enough for us to offer systematic insights.

Influencing

Oxfam managed important advances through influencing during OSP 2013–19. We expanded our universe of tactics, starting by seeking unusual allies. This included, for example, engaging with international stakeholders, appealing to diaspora populations, and establishing relationships with southern think tanks and investigative journalists. Working at multiple levels gave Oxfam access to more information, more actors and more ways to influence for change, for example by linking national tax reform with local level budget work or negotiating access to data to advocate for gender responsive budgets. The organization has impressive levels of access to governments, and constructive insider dialogue is facilitating change. At the same time, Oxfam's roots in communities continue to be fundamental to its credibility. Long-term relationships undoubtedly helped Oxfam navigate closing spaces. Emerging on the horizon, teams are investing systematically in work to change narratives, moving what has been a global effort to regional and national levels.

Oxfam must continuously re-evaluate its influencing repertoire in light of closing civic space. Influencing is an approach in which an **agile learning agenda** is key. Learning how to be more agile working with coalitions, alliances, networks and movements, looking at how and under what circumstances they are effective, requires that Oxfam be explicit about what we know and do well in our influencing with others and what we still do not know and need to learn, and invest in this learning.

Putting women's rights at the heart of all we do

Our evidence shows that Oxfam can do good, even transformative, programming in three areas that we call stand-alone Gender Justice work: Transformative Leadership for Women's Rights, Women's Economic Empowerment, and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (eVAWG). However, the evidence is clear that Oxfam **struggles to mainstream gender**, and to understand and operationalize what it means to put women's rights at the heart of its work. Gender mainstreaming—

which would help us put women's rights at the heart of **all** we do, not just of gender stand-alone work—does not appear to rise to its ambitions. Oxfam has latitude to do better and to provide more value. One promising place to start identified in our eVAWG evaluation, for example, is by ensuring that our efforts to alter unjust gendered social norms are integrated into our projects in other sectors (economic empowerment, education, humanitarian efforts, resilience, etc.).

We must better understand what gender mainstreaming and putting women's rights at the heart of all we do really mean in practice. We must take the opportunity **learn from others**: other organizations that have already gone through these struggles, who are thought leaders in gender justice work.

Active Citizenship

Oxfam and partners have demonstrated considerable creativity in 'prying open' civic space, including in restricted contexts, as well as in preparing citizens to occupy it. Several projects built the skills of youth to engage power holders—and, worth noting, stretched Oxfam's implementation skills in the bargain. Several other examples in our evidence set highlight how Oxfam and partners supported women to take new steps in their engagement with government by *becoming* government. Oxfam's work with journalists (noted above) is mobilizing informed citizens who can better occupy decision-making spaces, thus supporting a necessary condition for accountable government.

In this approach, too, there are risks, though of a different nature: the risk of young people's disillusionment with formal, heavily structured organizations such as Oxfam, and the risk of citizen fatigue with trying to engage illegitimate or non-responsive institutions. In addition, our evaluators challenge us to identify how the journey to active citizenship differs for women and to provide more targeted support.

Overall, our evidence suggests that it would do Oxfam well to continue learning how to address these questions. Oxfam needs to **refresh its understanding of 'active citizenship' as a strategy or an end to itself**. It also shows that Oxfam should **explore how active citizenship can be an effective avenue for transforming gender dynamics**. As active citizenship is an integral part of our OSP's theory of change, these challenges go to the heart of our relevance in the world. They demand that we **continuously learn with others**—our evaluators, partners, citizens, women and youth, and more—to remain relevant.

Thought Leadership

The change goal reports describe two clear cases in which Oxfam has exercised thought leadership in recent years: women's unpaid care work and inequality. Oxfam is now richly recognized by others as a leader on these topics. It is, however, worth noting that in some cases, this achievement happened despite internal organizational challenges rather than with consistent nurturing investments.

The evidence shows that in both cases, Oxfam has influenced the thinking and practice of actors ranging from the global (UN, WB, G7) to the local (women's rights organizations—WROs), from governments to the private sector and researchers, such as the Institute for Development Studies (IDS). However, the universe that Oxfam would like to influence is much larger. Influencers in social networks, bloggers, opinion makers in the countries where Oxfam works: these actors have access to a vast array of information and ideas on topics that interest Oxfam. The evidence provides little information about Oxfam trying, failing, or succeeding to be perceived as a thought leader (or to act as a supportive thought follower) among these groups. In addition, with its position at the intersection of theory and practice, Oxfam can deliberately work to challenge traditional hierarchies of whose knowledge, ideas, and solutions are valued in the world. Our thought leadership (and thought followership) should help us not only lead as Oxfam but also place the knowledge of the global south and of traditionally marginalized groups front and center.

It is often difficult to know which promising areas of work to invest in, or which ones will grow beyond excellent practice into true thought leadership. One way to mitigate the uncertainty is to **learn from both success and failure**: from instances when Oxfam succeeded in becoming a thought leader (we have some examples) and when it failed (we know very little), so that we can make well-informed investments in thought leadership.

Partnership

Oxfam's 2020 pillar of global balance brings renewed commitment and vision to partnership. Unfortunately, the sobering results from the independent partnership survey carried out by Keystone earlier in the OSP period were not offset by a more recent survey examining partnerships with women's rights organizations.

Nonetheless, the evidence shows that Oxfam and partners have evolved in some partnering practices. Examples include alliances with women including social organizations and female parliamentarians across the political spectrum to open policy change opportunities, and engaging with the private sector along value chains. In the past, Oxfam pressured private companies, exposing misdeeds and inequities; today, Oxfam is just as likely to generate solutions with companies, alongside civil society groups. Still, evaluators assessed gains as partial, tentative and/or fragile. Today, Oxfam's partnerships should no longer be limited to traditional funding mechanisms but enriched with co-created purpose and more equitable relations. We need to understand and treat our **partners as peers and collaborators in the creation and sharing of knowledge and solutions**.

In addition, no matter the sector or the actors, the need for Oxfam to address risk has increased. Backlash, from legal to physical, from intimidation to action, has been ominously present in Oxfam's work during this OSP period. Oxfam bears a responsibility to address risk explicitly, and to recognize that—like the risk itself—the discussions and decisions must be shared.

Impact at scale

Oxfam's goals in the OSP imply an ambition to achieve impact at scale. However, we do not have a framework on what scale means (breadth of scope with people reached or depth of systemic change) or guidance on when and how to consider taking a model to scale. Yet, our evidence suggests two lessons: we cannot reach scale without designing and planning for it; we cannot reach scale with either implementation alone, or with influencing alone. Our 'sweet spot' on impact at scale seems to be in designing and planning implementation that results in scalable models and solutions. For example, Oxfam's R4 program in Ethiopia invested in piloting and learning from on-the-ground service delivery: it used the resulting evidence in public, non-profit and private sector spaces for influencing. From the design phase, staff aimed for integration of the R4 model into government policies and systems; R4 was later absorbed into Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme reaching millions of poor farmers.

As Oxfam considers impact at scale in the next OSP, a step back from dichotomous thinking—direct delivery or influencing, scale as large numbers of people or scale as influenced systems—is in order, because all are factors in success. A hard-learned lesson from the evidence on impact at scale is that, if left to serendipity, impact at scale will not be achieved consistently. We must plan, implement, choose partners and learn as we pursue it. In other words, impact at scale requires either the **application of existing knowledge** on what and how to scale up, or **a testing and learning approach for new solutions***.

Program Approach and theory of change

Our evidence set demonstrates that when we practice our program approach well, we win. When we invest in sound context analysis and research; dialogue with an array of actors; analyses of power, risk and gender; a solid but dynamic theory of change; and a reflection on Oxfam's added value, we achieve outcomes in the world and we respond knowledgeably and nimbly to opportunities. The program examples are multiple and from many different contexts. However, we do not always do this, consistently or well. Oxfam's use of theories of change, for example, is mixed and uneven. Some evaluators use the word 'inadequate.'

After examining this approach, one lesson rises to the top: we must learn how to **continuously test and review our theories of change to close our learning loops***. Investing in improving our theories of change is not an academic exercise: better theories of change mean better programs, which help Oxfam raise 'better money,' which generates better knowledge, which leads to better theories of change. A renewed emphasis on theories of change, and on our overall program approach, must be a part of Oxfam's future strategy.

Knowledge and Learning

Oxfam's OSP clearly recognizes knowledge as an ingredient that contributes to achieving its objectives. Oxfam2020 recognizes "knowledge" as one of the drivers of the change process and pillars of our vision.

In various parts of the confederation, Oxfam has made numerous investments in living this ambition of being a knowledge-based organization. One evaluator noted that knowledge bodies are, in some ways, surpassing the contributions of standard evaluations and case studies in terms of organizational learning. In addition, the change goal reports offer examples of knowledge and learning initiatives at program level, ranging from research to inform programs, annual impact reflections with Oxfam staff and partners for program improvement, real time reviews in humanitarian response, and reflection processes to grapple with issues such as working effectively with youth. There are also examples where Oxfam seeks to amplify impact by pursuing regional or cross-country strategies for learning and innovation, or where a carefully planned learning journey can bring together colleagues from multiple regions around knowledge gaps that need resolution.

What is less evident is how these initiatives are mainstreamed, and how lessons are carried to other parts of Oxfam or externally, to add value to the work of others. A knowledge-based organization understands that the knowledge it generates is part of its value-add in the world, and strategizes, plans, and invests accordingly. There was not a lot of evidence that Oxfam understands this contribution.

To move forward, Oxfam must ensure that its knowledge and learning efforts are more inclusive: we must better support knowledge centers (hubs, networks, and others) whose agendas and investments are decided in and by the global south. Individually, we must better support staff, across all geographies and parts of the confederation, to understand and value their contributions to Oxfam's knowledge and learning work. Institutionally, we need to move out beyond our organizational walls, starting with partners, to learn with and from others, to challenge the imbalance of whose knowledge is valued. We must ensure that our positions and commitments on global balance and disrupting traditional north-south power relations also apply to our knowledge agenda.

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Oxfam is an international confederation of 19 organizations networked together in more than 90 countries, as part of a global movement for change, to build a future free from the injustice of poverty. Please write to any of the agencies for further information, or visit www.oxfam.org.

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