
COLOMBIA CASE STUDY

Centering Women's Rights Organizations:
Evaluative Research on Oxfam's COVID-19
Response in Colombia

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Oxfam has been calling for the transformation of the humanitarian system to shift power to local/national actors. Concurrent with Oxfam's dedication to local humanitarian leadership (LHL) has been a commitment to women's rights organizations (WROs). This Colombia case study examines how well Oxfam has upheld its commitments to LHL in its COVID-19 response via its WRO partnerships. The study describes the challenges WROs are facing, the ways Oxfam supports them, and the areas where Oxfam can improve. This case study is part of a larger evaluative research project that includes a synthesis report and case studies from Iraq and Kenya.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Note: This case study is part of a larger evaluative research report, which includes a synthesis report and case studies from Iraq and Kenya.

Between 2018 and 2022 Oxfam Colombia, together with partner organizations, responded to the crisis of migration from Venezuela along the border, addressing the needs of women, girls, sexual diverse and gender identity populations, and other vulnerable migrants. The departments of La Guajira, Norte de Santander, Santander, and Arauca, all located on the Colombia-Venezuela border, face critical issues such as armed conflict and natural hazards, all exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Within this complex scenario, Oxfam Colombia and three other women's rights organizations (WROs)—Fuerza de Mujeres Wayuu, Fundación Mujer y Futuro, and Asociación de Apoyo al Desarrollo—are responding to the needs of communities in these areas.

This evaluative research examines the experience of these four WROs with implementation of the principles of local humanitarian leadership (LHL) in border areas, the gaps and challenges they face, and the importance of self-care in fulfilling humanitarian commitments. Relying on deep analysis of the experiences of these four organizations, this research provides an intimate look at the challenges and opportunities experienced by these WROs responding to the pandemic.

RESEARCH SCOPE

This evaluative research analyzed the commitment to LHL principles set forth earlier in this report by examining the work of and relationships between Oxfam Colombia in alliance with Fuerza de Mujeres Wayuu in La Guajira, the Fundación Mujer y Futuro in Santander and Norte de Santander, and Asociación de Apoyo al Desarrollo in Arauca, during the health emergency due to COVID-19.¹

RESEARCH METHODS

The information was obtained through a literature review, group and individual interviews, non-participant observation, and one national validation workshop. A total of 69 people participated in this research (56 women and 13 men) from the managerial and operational level of partner organizations and humanitarian coordination bodies such as the Grupo Interagencial Sobre Flujos Migratorios Mixtos (Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela) and the Equipo Local de Coordinación (Local Coordination Team).

2. WROS AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE IN COLOMBIA

On March 17, 2020, the Colombian government officially decreed a health emergency due to COVID-19, and measures were adopted to deal with the virus. Among other things, the government closed maritime, river, and land borders; suspended entry of foreigners into Colombian territory; suspended mass events; and closed educational establishments, child development centers, and community homes.

During this time, mixed migration flows from Venezuela to Colombia continued, but the closure of the borders internationally and between departments for nonresident foreigners left many people from Venezuela stranded, accentuating their vulnerability. Today people continue to leave Venezuela to flee violence, insecurity, threats, and lack of access to food, medicine, and basic services. According to the Platform of Interagency Coordination for Refugees and Migrants of Venezuela (R4V), as of November 2021, more than 6 million Venezuelans had left their country, and of these it is estimated that around 1.84 million people were welcomed in Colombia.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE BY WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS IN COLOMBIA

The evaluative research took place within the framework of existing relationships between Oxfam Colombia and three partner organizations throughout multiple projects underway when the pandemic began. Other proposals were jointly formulated to respond to the context of COVID-19 between 2020 and 2021. All actions before and after the beginning of the pandemic sought to respond to the differentiated needs and risks faced by migrant women, returnees, and host communities in these territories.

The alliances between Oxfam Colombia and these organizations were born from shared interests, specifically the commitment to embedding a feminist approach and defending women's rights in the context of a humanitarian response. The humanitarian actions of these four organizations are in the sectors of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) and protection. They have in common an approach that centers women's rights and the needs of the diverse migrant population and host communities, as well as a commitment to mutual trust and knowledge sharing between Oxfam Colombia and the partners.

OXFAM COLOMBIA

Oxfam has been present in Colombia since 1986, managing human rights-related projects in situations of humanitarian crises. Oxfam Colombia has worked to enable communities affected by humanitarian crises, such as environmental and climate disasters or armed conflict, to receive timely care and to guarantee their right to quality humanitarian assistance. Oxfam Colombia has also engaged in advocacy, coordinating with national and international civil society organizations on policy change related to humanitarian response.

In 2019, Oxfam Colombia formulated a "Response Plan to the Venezuelan Migration Crisis in Colombia," valid for one year (until May 2020) with a target population of 21,810 people in La Guajira, Norte de Santander, and Santander, in the WASH and protection sectors. This plan was updated for another year to serve 102,631 people in the WASH, protection, and food security and nutrition sectors, this time including the department of Arauca. In 2020, with the COVID-19 emergency, Oxfam

formulated a pandemic response plan with the aim of supporting the population, civil society organizations, and government entities in response to the crisis.

These plans express the organization's aim to strengthen the capacities of partner organizations and Oxfam Colombia's humanitarian team to engage in a comprehensive response to the country's multiple humanitarian situations by complying with the principles that Oxfam has long affirmed: LHL, community participation, application of feminist principles, and accountability.²

One of the main elements of Oxfam Colombia's COVID-19 response plan focused on the migrant population from Venezuela and its host communities. Oxfam sought to adapt existing programs and formulate new ones in partnership with Fuerza de Mujeres Wayuu, Fundación Mujer y Futuro, and Asociación de Apoyo al Desarrollo.

FUERZA DE MUJERES WAYUU

Fuerza de Mujeres Wayuu (FMW) was created in 2006 with the main objective of defending the territories of the Wayuu indigenous community, making visible the violations of human and ethnic rights in the department of La Guajira. FMW has been a partner and ally of Oxfam Colombia for several years. The relationship began with development projects, but in 2018 they began their first humanitarian project, focusing on mixed migratory flows. Since the end of 2020, Oxfam Colombia has had its own team in La Guajira that coordinates humanitarian affairs with FMW in the communities where they are present. Activities there have included work on safe water; hygiene practices; conflict management around water; and sexual, reproductive, and menstrual health, with an ethnic focus. FMW is part of the departmental Emergency Education Board and is a guest of the GIFMM of La Guajira.

FMW's response to the urgent needs of the population began in the first days of the pandemic. FMW carried out monitoring with the communities regarding their living conditions in the pandemic, as well as their needs. FMW also conducted a fundraising campaign and undertook communication to prevent contagion and encourage vaccinations with funding from UNICEF and later Oxfam Colombia. In conjunction with Oxfam Colombia, FMW reallocated funds to finance the purchase and distribution of food supplies, the implementation of workshops, the provision of biosafety kits, and the strengthening of the COVID-19 awareness-raising strategy. FMW credits their work with creating a foundation of trust in the communities for future interventions by humanitarian organizations, such as Oxfam Colombia.

FUNDACIÓN MUJER Y FUTURO

Fundación Mujer y Futuro (FMF) is a feminist organization that develops individual, community, and social actions with women, mainly in the department of Santander. FMF was created in 1989 by a group of professional women from various disciplines who were united by concerns about living conditions and discrimination against women living in Santander.

FMF has extensive experience in defending women's rights. Since 2019 it has worked with Oxfam Colombia to respond to the humanitarian needs of migrant women walkers³ and their families through a strategy called "Ruta de Protección," as a pioneer in humanitarian transport issues. Through the Ruta de Protección, FMF has incorporated accompaniment and comprehensive guidance on sexual and reproductive rights, menstrual management, and prevention of gender-based violence as part of humanitarian response services. During the pandemic, they continued work with the route, expanding coverage to vulnerable migrant women who were in transit or who remained in Bucaramanga.

FMF conducted a rapid needs analysis in the first phase of the pandemic and then established contact with partners and funders to make the necessary methodological, financial, and operational adjustments. In less than two months all projects were operating with the necessary adaptations to the new reality. FMF is part of the GIFMM Santander and Norte de Santander, participates in the ELC of both departments, and is in the Departmental Gender Board of Santander.

During the first days of lockdown, FMF led a rapid care strategy for migrant women travelers who had been stopped in Bucaramanga. It adapted content and methodologies from the Ruta de

Protección and other FMF work areas. FMF provided direct face-to-face accompaniment for these women in the hotels where they were staying. Staff members complied with all of the relevant biosecurity measures during this process. Support consisted of dignified and safe accommodation; psychosocial support; health, hygiene, and food support; and information about documentation and regularization processes.

To respond to other needs, FMF worked with humanitarian organizations. In an interview, an FMF staff member said:

We also realized that there were a lot of needs in terms of children, girls, health, so we said we were going to coordinate. We had already been working a little on coordination, so we invited organizations to work with us here. There are six hotels where the women are staying, so we set up the whole schedule: on Monday at this time we are going to visit this hotel. We set up a small center of operations there. Action Against Hunger visited at a certain time; they weighed the children, and the underweight children received nutrition and growth support that they did not previously have. In terms of documentation, we called UNHCR as we had identified this as a need, which is not one of our areas of expertise. So we called UNHCR, which has expertise in this area, and we complemented their response for a month. Then things became more flexible, and people were allowed to go out more in public, with people allowed to go out every second day, so we closed those physical spaces and set up our virtual support mechanism.

As the staff member mentioned, when the initial response was completed and lockdown restrictions began to relax, FMF implemented a virtual assistance mechanism known as "Without Borders," adapting the Ruta de Protección to the needs of the pandemic. This virtual strategy was expanded to mitigate the risks of discrimination and xenophobia for a group of more than 800 women, who also received food support. Karina Estefany Rincón, a staff member with FMF, said:

It is important to highlight the team's capacity to adapt to all contingencies. We stopped working in the hotels, and we converted this support into a virtual assistance mechanism, which meant that we had two phases (...). We worked exclusively with women and also focused on issues including violence, self-esteem, and access to rights. We worked with migrant women, women with a vocation to stay, and Colombian women. It was a very interesting exercise. I think in this emergency (COVID-19), women's workloads for care activities increased and the rates of violence against women increased, because women were at home all day and were responsible for childcare and housework and were in lockdowns with their aggressor. In that context our support represented an escape for these women, so I think we had a very positive impact on these women's lives.

In October 2020, the Ruta de Protección was resumed in person, enabling humanitarian transport with biosecurity protocols developed with Oxfam Colombia. The number of people per bus was limited to 15, biosecurity supplies were distributed, and stations for hand washing and personal protective equipment were established. The experience gained and lessons learned during the most critical stages of the pandemic helped FMF strengthen its protocols for coordinating actions with other organizations to assist women living with high levels of vulnerability.

The proposal for the Sex Truck (Mobile Unit for Sexual and Reproductive Rights) was implemented during the pandemic but had been designed in 2019 in conjunction with Oxfam Colombia based on an idea from FMF. The Sex Truck is a mobile unit that promotes the sexual and reproductive rights of migrant women and women from host communities. Incorporating the Sex Truck as part of its humanitarian response represents added value for FMF's work during the pandemic and is still relevant to the organization's work.

FMF complemented its immediate responses with additional actions that addressed the increase in gender-based violence cases during the pandemic. For example, what began as capacity building on the topic of remote information collection in September 2021 evolved into the consolidation of an information strategy. A team was formed to systemically collect, analyze, and share quantitative and qualitative information about women's protection and gender needs based on their reported experiences. This information facilitates decision making in the program and informs FMF's advocacy work.

ASOCIACIÓN DE APOYO AL DESARROLLO

Asociación de Apoyo para el Desarrollo (APOYAR) was created in 2001 to prevent gender-based violence, advocate for the inclusion of indigenous people and the LGBTQIA2s+ population in the Arauca public agenda, provide early childhood care, and deliver humanitarian assistance in the response to the migratory crisis. APOYAR's relationship with Oxfam Colombia is based on a shared agenda in response to mixed migratory flows in the department. While initial contact was made before the pandemic, it was not until the end of 2020 that both organizations were able to formally combine their humanitarian response actions, which were already focused on COVID-19.

The organization is a guest of the Arauca GIFMM and sits on the Arauca ELC. APOYAR was co-leader of the Communication with Communities Group in the National GIFMM during the pandemic and co-leader of the Accommodation Group in the Arauca ELC. Since 2006, APOYAR has been a partner organization with UNICEF, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the World Food Programme (WFP), Lutheran World Federation, and Social Prosperity to deliver humanitarian projects in the areas of gender, migration, armed conflict, and natural hazards.

The relationship with APOYAR began as the result of Oxfam Colombia's need to expand its humanitarian actions to another territory as part of its response to the mixed migratory flows. APOYAR was recommended by other international humanitarian agencies working in the department. Through a needs assessment carried out by both organizations at the end of 2019, common agendas were identified and used in the design of proposals. The pandemic began during this process, and to date, APOYAR and Oxfam Colombia have agreed to jointly implement several projects that respond to migrant women and host communities, diverse populations, and other vulnerable groups, using a feminist approach and providing COVID-19 assistance.

When the pandemic emergency was declared in March 2020, APOYAR adapted its work areas to respond to the needs of the population in Arauca that participated in its projects. APOYAR incorporated its projects with Oxfam Colombia into this dynamic, resulting in the provision of a more comprehensive response to the population. These actions included the provision of basic services. For instance, APOYAR provided food assistance in collaboration with UNICEF and WFP and provided trainings on hand-washing techniques for communities in Arauca. APOYAR also worked to highlight the needs of marginalized communities such as LGBTQIA2s+ people, sex workers, and homeless people. In an interview, an APOYAR staff member, Rubén Camejo, described how APOYAR successfully worked with WFP to address the needs of such populations:

During the pandemic we wrote to the WFP because the trans and LGBTI population was starving, and we needed them to expand their coverage. We organized a meeting with all the LGBTI organizations and gave them information. I am speaking specifically about this sector; our concern was that this population of gays, queers, lesbians all of whom were in the middle of a pandemic, without work and going hungry! So, we wrote to the WFP, and the WFP said that it was a good idea, that they were expanding their coverage and looking at the number of people we attended to. We also supported the women who are sex workers. So for us the pandemic was a fantastic thing in our lives; we were able to help people, help others, we were able to do it.

In September 2020, and within the framework of the relationship with Oxfam Colombia, APOYAR conducted an assessment of needs and capacities of migrant women and host communities using a gender gap analysis. As a result of this process, APOYAR strengthened its efforts to develop protection mechanisms for women migrants and women in host communities in Arauca. This work included the provision of biosafety kits, protection mechanisms for COVID-19, as well as responses to gender-based violence issues in the community.

The escalation of the armed conflict and the occurrence of natural disasters has required budgetary, methodological, and operational adjustments. An essential element of this process has been the close relationship between Oxfam Colombia and APOYAR. For example, in Arauca during the most critical moment of the pandemic, biosecurity elements and tarpaulins were provided to displaced people, complementing the deliveries made by other organizations. According to Carmen Alicia Egué of APOYAR:

All of the problems were in Arauquita: armed conflict, pandemic, heavy rains. We made adjustments to one of Oxfam's project budgets and bought tarpaulins, sleeping mats, and other items for the people who were in Arauquita. In coordination with other projects, we were also able to provide supplies. As a result of this situation and taking into account the analysis of everything that we already mentioned, we were constantly informing Oxfam about the context and what was happening on the ground.

3. EVALUATING OXFAM'S RESPONSE IN COLOMBIA: WROS AT THE CORE

PARTNERSHIP

As part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Oxfam Colombia committed to shifting its operations to integrate feminist principles, using a partner-led response, prioritizing trust and flexibility, building partnerships based on a shared agenda, integrating self-care, and safeguarding⁴ in partners' ways of working.

TRUST AND FLEXIBILITY

Oxfam Colombia promotes local leadership by building trust with its partner organizations. This is evidenced in the way the relationship has evolved, not directly linked to a project cycle, but based on permanent and continuous observation of the territory, analysis of needs, and the joint formulation of proposals to respond to or anticipate the needs of communities.

Trust is integral to partnerships. FMW shared that it could better respond to needs in its communities owing to this partnership based on trust with Oxfam Colombia. Together with Oxfam Colombia, FMW was able to adapt projects to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as by creating biosecurity kits and developing a COVID-19 awareness-raising strategy.

APOYAR shared a similar reflection, with an emphasis on how trust translates into increased flexibility on the part of Oxfam. According to Rubén Camejo of APOYAR:

In the relationship with Oxfam, the important thing has been the process and that they understand the dynamics in the territory. We can propose a project based on these dynamics, but during its implementation we find things change. Oxfam allows us to be flexible; that is something that I admire about them, it is a co-equal relationship, a relationship of equals that allows us to talk. Beyond being a partner, Oxfam is an ally here in the territory; we are building a solid relationship, a very strong friendship that is enriching us and also enriching them. It's mutual learning.

This quote emphasizes that trust and flexibility go hand in hand and are key success factors for an equitable partnership. Flexibility can be manifested in different ways such as flexibility over project purpose, timelines, and budgets. Carlos Mejía, Executive Director of Oxfam Colombia, noted that trust does not mean that the organizations share everything eye to eye, but that

there is mutual recognition, there is trust, and there is a solid relationship that allows us to talk about things frankly. This means that we have become closer because there are no hidden agendas. We recognize that sometimes we don't connect, but it's not a reason to stop what we're doing together.

SHARED AGENDAS

Oxfam Colombia and the partner organizations have common agendas regarding the feminist and rights-based and defense approach, and they seek more sustainable and transformative processes in the lives of women, girls, and diverse population. They have collaborated in the humanitarian sector based on their responses to the migration crisis and their interest in accompanying migrant and host women in this process, providing comprehensive services that are not provided by other humanitarian actors: services related to sexual and reproductive rights, menstrual management, access to safe water, gender-based violence, and humanitarian transport.

Unlike Oxfam Colombia, its partners APOYAR, FMF, and FMW were not created with a humanitarian objective, but they have incorporated humanitarian work in their agendas. In Arauca, APOYAR supports the sexual and reproductive rights of a diverse population in the context of humanitarian emergencies. In Santander and Norte de Santander, the FMF's Sex Truck strategy, which combines sexual and reproductive health with responses to migration issues, demonstrates that these concerns must be part of humanitarian response services because they contribute to women's vulnerability in the context of migration. In La Guajira, the Wayuu authorities recognize that FMW's work has helped make more visible the needs of vulnerable communities to other humanitarian actors and has opened the door for aid to reach their territory. According to the Wayuu Authority:

FMW is the intermediary between the communities and the Oxfam NGO because they [FMW] reach the communities, and so that means Oxfam reaches them. So, they are like an intermediary because they help us receive these benefits, like a communication bridge. They are the ones who know the problems we are facing because they do their research, and they already know what problems there are in each community and which is the most important, the most urgent, at the time.

INTEGRATING SELF-CARE AND SAFEGUARDING IN PARTNERSHIPS

Oxfam Colombia has centered self-care and safeguarding in its relationships with the partners, as well as among its own staff, in a way that allows it to assess risks and develop action plans to reduce, mitigate, and even make strategic decisions during the operation. Oxfam Colombia prioritized the safety, well-being, and protection of its team, by providing support for and monitoring of physical and mental health, flexibility in working hours and workloads, training, and improvement of conditions for work at home, among other things. In an interview, Mejia of Oxfam Colombia said:

Working in the pandemic required undertaking a collective transformation process. It was a demanding process that forced us to communicate more, to listen to each other more, and to get to know one another. Through this approach we were able to create internal dynamics based on mutual care, and we made progress in defining Oxfam's work. This process transformed us all and continues to do so. It sounds very easy, but we had debates, we ended up furious with each other at times, we had to hang up and take deep breaths, then to return to the issue and resolve what had happened. We did this collectively in small groups. So the days were 28 hours long because there was a lot of listening, understanding, taking care of ourselves, and letting go.

This premise of centrality of protection was transferred to the partner organizations, and the joint process of adapting projects that were in progress helped reduce uncertainty in the organizations' administrative and technical management teams. María Claudia Velandia of APOYAR said:

With Oxfam, we learned a very important tool, which is the safe programming matrix. We use it at the project level, where we are asked to identify logistical and environmental risks for different outcomes. Through this planning exercise we identify and develop alternatives during the beginning stages of projects. We have seen how risks have increased, primarily related to the armed conflict, so it has turned into a daily work tool and fundamental planning tool for us. The fact that there is no eagerness to see the results but the processes instead. This allows us to have flexible planning to reduce, or at least mitigate, the risks and prevent unfortunate situations in the field.

Oxfam Colombia's commitment to care translated to its relationships with communities. Because of restrictions in travel, Oxfam Colombia maintained communications with communities through telephone calls. According to Ana Flor Ipuana of Oxfam Colombia, "The communities never stopped believing in us. During the pandemic they always saw that Oxfam was very serious with care, for them as for us, and they never restricted us, saying, 'We don't let anyone into the community but you.'"

FUNDING

Flexible funding and support for partners' ability to diversify funding sources and interact with donors were identified as key to supporting the funding needs of WROs.

FLEXIBILITY

Flexibility was noted as an important component of the funding relationship. Oxfam Colombia and the partner organizations carried out needs assessments in the relevant communities, which allowed them to adjust the budget and methodology of ongoing projects and to formulate new proposals that responded to emerging needs during the pandemic.

COMMUNICATION WITH DONORS

This flexibility implied, in turn, the need to diversify funding sources and communicate with other donors to carry out the needed work in sectors neglected by other organizations or by government bodies, such as the sexual and reproductive health of the migrant population, food security and protection of diverse populations, and the increase in cases of gender-based violence. This capacity to adapt and the diversification of donors made it possible to respond to the needs of stakeholders in the context of the pandemic.

Oxfam Colombia quickly mobilized to carry out budgetary and technical adjustments with donors, working hand in hand with partner organizations. While partners awaited donor authorizations, Oxfam Colombia maintained transparent and close communication with them.

CAPACITY SHARING

Technical and administrative support from Oxfam Colombia has strengthened partners' knowledge and their capacity to lead the humanitarian response. This support occurs not only in formal spaces for monitoring projects but also in the framework of a permanent relationship of trust and open communication. Oxfam's technical assistance involves supporting partners' interactions with the coordination channels of the humanitarian system in general and supports the strengthening of partners' internal capacities. According to interviews with partner organizations, learning exchanges and ways of prioritizing self-care were identified as capacity sharing needs.

LEARNING EXCHANGES AS CAPACITY SHARING

The exchange of experiences and knowledge takes place bilaterally between Oxfam Colombia and each partner organization but not between partner organizations or between them and other organizations and humanitarian bodies. The organizations highlight the value of meeting with other partner organizations and recommend providing more spaces that allow this exchange.

SELF-CARE

Oxfam Colombia provided important capacity support to local partner organizations by emphasizing emotional well-being. The flexibility in adapting interventions and budgets meant that local organizations and their staff could focus on self-care as a priority. According to a staff member from APOYAR:

The first thing we did was to inform Oxfam of the situation that was occurring. We told them "We cannot continue with the activities, we have to suspend them for the well-being of both the participants and staff from the organization." These changes were immediately approved. Then we received psychosocial support from Oxfam, which involved a meeting and a meditation and support session. In these sessions there were colleagues from the municipality of Saravena who had been experiencing much more extreme and direct violence toward them. Oxfam was the only funder of projects that supported us in the middle of the pandemic and helped us manage all of its complexities at the socio-emotional level.

INFLUENCING

Partner organizations reported that they continue to be at a disadvantage compared with other international organizations and agencies that participate in forums such as GIFMM and ELC. Although they have a seat there, their voice has less weight and their impact on decision-making is minimal. Similarly, the conditions for accessing resources that are channeled mainly through these platforms or through international intermediaries are unequal. However, partners highlighted that Oxfam's support has helped lessen some of these difficulties. A staff member from FMW said:

We joined the GIFMM, but it has been slow. Thanks to Oxfam we got in. Oxfam said to GIFMM, "I want you to know who our partners are here, they are FMW," that is what Oxfam did. As far as I know, other organizations recognize that other Venezuelan migrant organizations work here, but the first one to arrive was FMW because Oxfam publicly recognized our relationship as partners working together.

During the pandemic Oxfam Colombia maintained training on humanitarian issues with partner organizations and kept open communication channels with potential donors, expanding partners' capacity to directly manage alliances and resources for humanitarian response. According to a staff member from FMF:

Last year, Oxfam invited us to participate in the "Europe Believes in Colombia," forum, as well as an international fair of funders and actors in the humanitarian response area. That's when we realized that there were no local organizations there. There was UNHCR talking about what they were doing, but we knew that it was CIDEMOS that was really implementing those actions, or CORPRODINCO, i.e., local partners, our local colleagues that were implementing the actions but with UNHCR resources. Then UNHCR says, "Look at what we do in Bucaramanga and Cucuta." UNICEF too. All the big organizations and NGOs, along with a whole diplomatic corps of ambassadors, were there. The Oxfam tent was for FMF and the mobile unit (Sex Truck). We filled an entire parking lot with the deployment of the mobile unit and everything else. Everyone was involved with the mobile unit, so I believe that Oxfam has a very clear strategy in this regard. That day I left with the business cards of many funders.

Other relationship scenarios are fostered by Oxfam Colombia to facilitate partner organizations' contact with potential donors, governments, and other international cooperation actors.

Although at first glance it seems that international organizations are transferring power related to humanitarian response to local organizations, a contractual relationship still prevails that limits the possibility of decision-making and autonomous planning with the resources that the humanitarian system can provide. They remain implementers, as opposed to decision-makers. In this regard, the organizations reiterate a clear difference between their relationship with Oxfam Colombia and their links with other similar organizations. The partner organizations have taken advantage of the good relationship with Oxfam Colombia and of its prominence in the humanitarian system to make themselves visible as political actors in these spaces and to make visible the rights of women in humanitarian contexts.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Colombian partners found that Oxfam Colombia accompanied them closely in their engagement with donors and communication processes. Oxfam Colombia continues to facilitate spaces for partner organizations to directly interact with donors. In addition, Oxfam Colombia has publicly highlighted the role of its partners, such as producing a video showcasing [FMF's Sex Truck](#), coauthoring and co-branding a [report](#) on the Ruta de Protección with FMF, and highlighting the role of FMW's community work on its [website](#) and [Twitter feed](#).

4. CONCLUSION

The organizations involved in this study criticize the pace at which the humanitarian system moves. The rapid responses to humanitarian emergencies do not give rise to processes that generate longer-lasting impacts on people; they become assistance. Working within the nexus model, partner organizations counteract this dependency problem with continuous processes that respond to the reality of their territories and the people within. The barrier to sustaining these processes remains more financial than technical.

While projects and resources are focused on responding to specific and short-term situations, armed conflict, violence, and disaster risk are permanent and increasingly deepen the conditions of vulnerability of people in peripheral territories, generating a complex and prolonged crisis. Financing this permanent humanitarian action is increasingly difficult and very costly in economic and human terms for local organizations.

In this way, a vertical structure is perpetuated. Humanitarian organizations (including Oxfam) continue to have greater decision-making capacity regarding how the response should work and where in this humanitarian structure they will put local actors, sometimes unintentionally ignoring what local organizations see or want to be. Partner organizations have their own agenda and uphold the values on which they have been constituted. This situation does not represent conflict with Oxfam Colombia, but it raises the need for Oxfam to reflect on whether to remain involved in humanitarian response and how to achieve it without compromising the mission and identity of feminist organizations, such as those examined in this research. According to Evelin Carolina Acosta of FMW:

From civil society we can have a very different concept of humanitarian because when you enter the humanitarian architecture, the humanitarian system, there are a series of rules, regulations, protocols, of taking on a humanitarian seal. It is a number of technologies and protocols. We cannot pigeonhole ourselves all because our position is to be civil society, a defender of human rights versus this technical approach. If one enters humanitarian architecture as such, we become pigeonholed, we lose our name and more than the name, the essence, and that is what worries us. It has already happened to us, and the community is not seeing us as defenders but as those who distribute wells, those who give hygiene kits. They say to us, now you have become humanitarians, you have lost yourself.

Oxfam Colombia is advancing hand in hand with its partners in the transformation of the humanitarian system, based on a non-hierarchical relationship of respect and mutual learning that favors being closely attentive to the needs of communities. By adopting a feminist approach during COVID-19, the response of partner organizations together with Oxfam Colombia has added value, as it sets its sights on the conditions, needs, and risks of women when other humanitarian actors do not address them. Especially relevant is the emergency approach to issues related to sexual rights, reproductive rights, menstrual management, and gender-based violence, as well as the timely response to the needs of the diverse population (LGBTQIA2s+), which were invisible during the pandemic.

Oxfam Colombia and partner organizations have understood the value of self-care for organization staff. In a close and warm environment, they were able to look beyond fulfillment of results to identify strategies for weighing the effects of the pandemic on the work teams. Both Oxfam Colombia and partners have since adopted some of these measures as a permanent, non-negotiable practices that resist the accelerated pace of the humanitarian system and allow more humane attention to be provided to populations at risk.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following overall recommendations from the Colombia case study connect to the LHL principles. These recommendations target international actors, such as INGOs, donors, and UN agencies. Several of them are specific to Oxfam and will be specified accordingly:

PARTNERSHIPS

- Maintain *respectful and horizontal relationships* with partner organizations that provide humanitarian response. Give more voice to women from the territory, women who make humanitarian response, and women in vulnerable conditions.
- Incorporate *self-care as a policy* within organizations and as a budget line in humanitarian proposals.
- Continue to promote the *transformation of the humanitarian system at all levels*. For this, it is important to involve partner organizations as political actors in this change, based on their experience, their feminist agendas, and their perception of the form that the humanitarian response should have in each territory.
- Diversify relationships with other local organizations to promote greater local humanitarian response capacity. This is most evident in La Guajira, where it would be helpful to interact with organizations that also serve the non-indigenous population.
- Strengthen the transfer of power to partner organizations, ensuring that they have the capacities needed to make their organizations and their humanitarian actions sustainable.
- Actively involve partner organizations in analyzing, implementing, and monitoring local humanitarian leadership commitments.

FUNDING

- Diversify *funding sources* to ensure the sustainability of partner organizations after crises, continued capacity building, and sensitive, timely, relevant humanitarian action.
- Assess the expenses incurred by partner organizations in the processes and stages of project formulation.

CAPACITY SHARING

- Ensure *time and space to learn and exchange knowledge* based on experience.
- Promote relationships and exchanges of knowledge between partner organizations and international actors as a permanent and horizontal exercise.
- Recommendations specific to Oxfam Colombia:
 - Integrate the nexus approach more within Oxfam Colombia and the Oxfam Confederation. This coordination on the ground is essential to reduce tensions with local organizations with different roles, such as FMW, which acts as a partner in development programs and as an ally in the humanitarian program.
 - Within Oxfam Colombia, promote a better understanding of the principles of LHL and how they are addressed in daily relationships with local organizations, especially partners, and promote greater adoption of those principles.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

- Promote the broad visibility of local partner organizations as key actors in the humanitarian response in front of other humanitarian and cooperating actors and seek better relationships between them for the coordination of humanitarian responses.

INFLUENCING

- *Strengthen advocacy processes* based on common agendas shared by international actors and partner organizations, so that the voices of women and diverse populations, the situations and risks they face, and the alternative responses that emerge from the territories have their rightful place in the humanitarian political dialogue.

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NOTES

- 1 When we refer to “partner organizations,” we also include Fuerza de Mujeres Wayuu, although formally it is an “ally” under the criteria of Oxfam Colombia.
- 2 <https://www.oxfamcolombia.org/nuestra-apuesta/>
- 3 Walkers, or *caminantes*, refer to Venezuelans fleeing their country on foot (Broner 2018)
- 4 Safeguarding in Oxfam is a set of procedures, measures, and practices to ensure that Oxfam upholds its commitment to prevent, respond to, and protect individuals from harm committed by staff and related personnel.

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