

LISTEN, PAY ATTENTION

**OUR APPROACH TO DEVELOPING CAPACITY
AND DOCUMENTING OUR WORK**



OXFAM

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This reflective piece focuses on two of these core intertwined threads of Oxfam's work: the capacity building initiatives that Oxfam has undertaken to strengthen and support partners and programs, and the documenting of the work of Oxfam partners and the communities they serve. The voices in this document are those of the Oxfam staff, partners and consultants, who were asked about their experiences of capacity building and documentation. Through their journey, we trace the changes in Oxfam's approach to capacity building and documentation and their key lessons learnt from this process.

"They came to hear." Michael Matanzima from Sophakama is clear about the core ingredient of Oxfam's capacity building success, explaining: "Their approach of working with us, with respect and care, it formed part of the capacity building to strengthen us and our systems. I think one of the first things is that they didn't come as a donor to say what Sophakama must do. They came to hear about what Sophakama needs and assist us with that. It was not about what Oxfam needs. It was about what Sophakama needs."

Concepts of learning, innovation and self-organisation are clearly at the core of Oxfam's understanding of how change happens. Here is what Oxfam staff had to say about why Oxfam engages in organisational strengthening, skills development and information sharing with its partner organisations:

Capacity building to achieve and live our rights:

"Development is in essence about facilitating the development of capacity. If development is even vaguely about moving towards enacting and achieving all of our rights, then capacity building has to be part of it. We all need the maximum capacity possible to ensure that our rights are achieved and lived."

Colin Collett van Rooyen

Capacity building is empowerment:

"Development tends to be about putting in taps and building schools; building capacity is considered the 'soft' side of development, yet it is often more difficult to do. When you work with communities it's called empowering and when it's with organisations it's called capacity building, but they are often the same thing. Capacity building is a critical part of the Oxfam framework because we are not implementers – we are partners."

Caili Forrest

Capacity building for responsible development:

"Capacity building is part of good development. It goes back to our main aim of being a responsible donor which is about strengthening civil society. It is vital to have a strong capacity building aspect to strengthen good governance."

Wendell Westley

Capacity building for greater efficacy:

“Things have changed, with a push from donors that NGOs need to be more efficient and effective, to demonstrate impact more clearly. NGOs have to operate in a more corporate manner with checks and balances. So capacity building is important in this day and age.”

Glenise Levendal

Capacity building for strategic use of limited resources:

“South African civil society is facing a major crisis regarding resources, and organisations are expected to do a lot more with less resourcing. That means looking at locally available resources and building on local communities of practice in order to deliver on their programs. Capacity building is about future-proofing organisations.”

Allan Moolman

Capacity building for advocacy:

“Through capacity building we strengthen organisations to link with government. In this way advocacy is not jargon – it is about the depth of the work that our partners do in creating change, linking the community with government.”

Wendell Westley

Capacity building means realising our strengths:

“Capacity building is not a patronising approach – it is around realising that our partners within themselves have capacities in terms of human resources and in other components in order to program better.”

Glenise Levendal

Capacity building for equality:

“Development is not stagnant – it evolves over time. So if you don’t look at strengthening the organisations that you work with, you won’t be able to achieve as much. Oxfam prioritises work with rural-based organisations which may have limited access to information and we hoped to bring them up to par with other NGOs who operate at a national level and who may have more resources.”

Pumla Mabizela

Partnership approach

Thanks to mutual learning from strong partners, Oxfam’s partnership model has increasingly become one which is characterised by a realness of equal and collaborative relationships. ‘Respectful’ and ‘caring’ are the words most commonly used by their partners in describing this hard-working team and these are qualities they exude in abundance.

“With respect.” Former Country Director for Oxfam Australia in South Africa, Allan Moolman explains the internal debate around the core ingredient of a relational approach when it comes to capacity building: “This means having high contact with people, for example, when you see them at an event we might say: ‘We hear you are experiencing staffing issues – can we help?’ We try to open up that relationship in the true sense of the word, where we build strong trust.

The capacity building is not only the activities that were defined as capacity building – it included a wide range of support provided to our partners, support provided by finance team, conversations around strategic ways of looking at programming, networking opportunities and connecting people specifically. There is a whole range of connecting work which doesn't always become very clear when you talk about capacity building from a traditional perspective – this is about the approach, how you manage the process and the relationships within the process.”

The relationships between Oxfam and its partners are not formal or hierarchical. Varied relationships are formed with different people on both Oxfam's side and partners'. Oxfam encourages contact through a variety of channels, to the point of saying that partners should feel free to pass criticisms through the consultants to Oxfam, or directly to staff.

Since the relational approach is considered central to development work, where people are often the primary instruments of change, this means working on one's self and one's own development as a professional practitioner. Engaging in capacity building therefore requires a self-reflective approach to nurturing the attitudes and mindset of the people involved in this work so that they enable development.

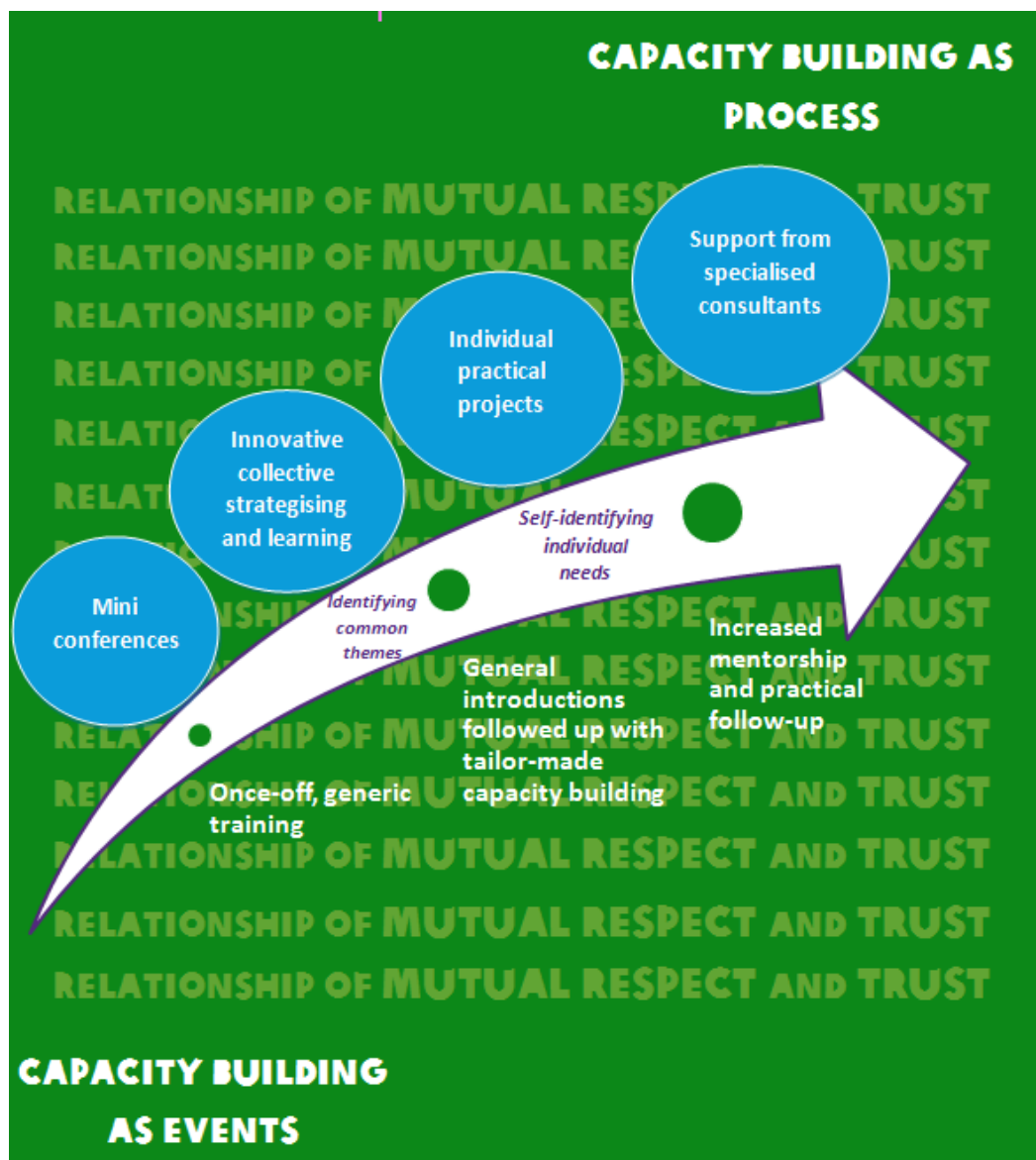
Learning processes are designed through consultative engagement, out of which a response and implementation plan is developed. These processes may take the form of once-off workshops or learning events or longer, more integrated accompaniment processes.

Partner organisations are encouraged to learn with, and from, their peers and like-minded organisations. In order to facilitate this, Oxfam sets up and manages a number of larger learning events, supports partner exchange visits, encourages the documentation and sharing of good practice, supports partners to attend local, national and global conferences relevant to their work and facilitates contact with other program partners and civil society organisations outside of the partnership.

The approach has changed over time and is outlined in Figure 1 below. The move from one-off generic workshops to very customised and fit-to-purpose learning processes are summarised in the diagram below, with the following key changes:

- A move from individual partner work to recognising collective trends and shared learning;
- A move from high level conference-type training to collective strategic discussion spaces;
- Offering a broad introduction to a new topic, with opportunities for individualised follow-up;
- Follow up with individual organisations on specific needs, directed at practical organisational changes with longer term support from specialised consultants; and
- A move from thinking about capacity building as once-off events to conceptualising capacity building as a process.

FIGURE 1: OXFAM'S EVOLVING APPROACH TO CAPACITY BUILDING



The changes in Oxfam’s approach to capacity building highlight key lessons learnt about undertaking this role in the development sector. The common learning points, based on a thematic analysis of consultations with Oxfam staff, partners and consultants, highlight the following important learning points about capacity building in the development sector:

- The assessment of partner needs is a process, which may involve both formal and informal strategies;
- It is important to spend time listening and paying attention, with care, to the needs of partner organisations as this yields important insights into their capacity development needs;

- It is useful to start with a general introduction to a topic, then follow up with tailor-made capacity building interventions with partners who are especially motivated and ready to engage in that topic;
- Where possible, work with the whole organisation and work on strengthening systems and leadership to benefit the organisation beyond one or two individuals;
- It is beneficial to offer long-term mentorship, with practical implementation of learning.
- Maintaining a flexible approach and being responsive to guidance from partners is important;
- Partners benefit from being connected so they may learn from one another;
- It is important to allow processes to be discontinued if they are not working; and
- Take care to focus on one's own internal development and capacity building as a development organisation, bearing in mind that one's own attitudes and learning may be mirrored with the partner and between the partner and the community in which they operate.

Listen, pay attention

“Listen. Pay attention. Care.” Program Advisor Wendell Westley explains the change in Oxfam’s approach from a ‘one size fits all’ to more tailor-made, partner-requested processes. These processes now include mentorships of six to eight months, rather than once-off trainings. She explains how capacity building processes are much more sustainable when the needs are self-identified by partners and when partners are ready to engage in a particular organisational strengthening process, rather than having this imposed on them. Adding to this idea, she says: “If the organisation is strong they can carry any community through that process.”

The relevance of capacity building to each organisation has become a key consideration in the design of any initiatives. Furthermore, the assessment process is not only to identify capacity building needs, but to listen for opportunities where a partner organisation could share their innovative approaches with other partners.

To avoid organisations ‘reinventing the wheel’, the capacity building process included a strong peer learning component, allowing learning from those who have tried and tested the methods. In terms of Oxfam’s capacity building through Link and Learn events and webinars, different, unlikely organisations are being connected. This supports the model of integration where each partner can still focus on their expert area but have the knowledge to bring other partners into their work where relevant. The aim is not to make everyone experts in everything but to strengthen interconnectedness and mainstreaming of important developmental considerations.

“They came back taller.” Oxfam partner Woza Moya especially appreciated the opportunities provided by Oxfam to network with other partners: “Them simply bringing all of us like-minded NGOs together, setting us up on exchange visits – they have left an incredibly rich heritage of networks for us. Right now I am working with two different groups of partners on practical issues. If it wasn’t for Oxfam bringing us together we would never have found each other in the same way.”

Oxfam combines the provision of funds with sensitive, ongoing collaboration between individuals within Oxfam and partner organisations, networking with other individuals and organisations, joint learning, the transference of skills and technical knowledge, coupled with appropriate research that develops partners' capacity. This combination approach ultimately empowers communities to take control of their own development (rights-holders), particularly through advocacy for government delivery (duty-bearers). It is also this combination that creates the flexibility to respond to shifting, integrated issues that undermine communities through a broad spectrum of program options and innovation. Oxfam's commitment to participatory, reflective capacity strengthening of locally based partners embedded in communities thus allows for a number of positive outcomes to emerge. Strengthened civil society organisations will lead to empowered communities, which will ultimately help transform society.

"As a small local organisation, one would never venture into such undertakings due to lack of resources, lack of knowledge, lack of experience, but to document a cause which is found to be worthwhile fills us only with deep gratitude and is a reminder to keep going even in difficult times."
HIV/AIDS Prevention Group (HAPG)

Oxfam sees a close connection between documentation and capacity building, which has been described as "forming two banks of the same river". Some of the documents have been produced as a result of the capacity building processes, while at other times, capacity building has been done on how to tell a good story, produce documents and make information live through social media.

There is a wide range of documents produced by Oxfam, which include more formal documentation, such as research conducted as well as case studies, vignettes and practical guides have been created to contribute to sharing and linking in the development sector. Some of the documents focus on personal stories, some on institutional history, and others on outlining a particular intervention model or approach to development. Digital and social media have been used to share development work, using video storytelling, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, blogging and other multi-media platforms.

The lessons...

Through trial and error, valuable lessons have been learnt in how to facilitate documenting processes. Some of these lessons are:

Process is important: The central ingredient of success, Oxfam has found, is to make documenting a relational and process-oriented approach. Oxfam prioritises the highest levels of respect and sensitivity in learning about and sharing their partners' work.

Focus on people and their stories: Oxfam has found that highly theoretical documents attract less interest and that people are more naturally drawn to human interest stories told by others. Focusing on a change process, the experiences of a particular person or the unfolding story of an organisation is helpful.

Ownership and involving people from the outset: The documenting process should be owned by the partner organisation, and it is important to keep checking that people are being represented in a way they would like to be represented, and which is dignified and respectful.

Pumla Mabizela reminds us to maintain clear developmental principles while doing documentation.

“It is when the project is owned by the people themselves – when they are stories from the people on the ground – that you see the most powerful effects. These case studies have even been used at a university level where people can interrogate and analyse the situation, based on the experiences of community members. When you take that product back to the owner and that person sees himself or herself in a document that is shared worldwide, where people can learn something from their story, that is empowering.”

It has become increasingly important for Oxfam to find the right consultants to work within this particular philosophical approach to both documentation and capacity building. Pumla explains: “It was important for us that the consultant will fit in with the organisation. Their respect of the organisation and what it has done was very important to us. They need to come in and understand where the organisation is, and ask ‘How would you like to be represented?’ and ‘Where do you want to be?’ not impose where they want the organisation to be. We try to find a local person to link with each partner, rather than helicoptering them in.”

Each process involves a lot of thought about portraying Africa in a different light internationally, and trying to put forward a more balanced approach to the context which includes challenges and positives, where people are at the centre of improving their situation.

Challenges

Implicit in this sensitive process-oriented approach to documenting are similar challenges as described in the capacity building work of Oxfam, such as the challenges of time, resources and dedication to the process. The inclusive approach, along with giving everyone a chance to edit and approve their contribution, can be protracted and expensive.

A further challenge in documenting the work of partners was that some of the new forms of communication were intimidating to partners. For example, video storytelling was seen as something quite difficult for partners to do themselves. Therefore, the process of video storytelling was broken down into smaller topics and smaller groups worked in developing their stories. A month later, partners were helped to develop their ‘shot list’ and then later how to edit their final product.

Further challenges encountered during Oxfam’s documenting work included:

- Finding ways to keep the momentum of digital sharing platforms going beyond the initial excitement of engaging in a new form of communication;
- Moving the discussions into more critical reflective spaces; and
- Convincing people who are community development workers and ‘do-ers’ of the value of documenting and reflection.

Partners express similar challenges, and Sue Hedden from Woza Moya adds that it is difficult for people involved in development to ‘see the stories’ in their work. “What you see as a story other people might not. Important moments of change are not always seen as significant by staff – trying to see the kernel of the story and why it is important and learning how to extract that. We are getting better all the time though at finding those stories. Oxfam’s capacity building with our media team and training on storytelling and how to see and extract stories added to a conscious process of how to tell a good story. They had storytellers come here and helped us in the process. It is about us growing in awareness.”

Outcomes

The outcomes of the documenting processes have been very rewarding for both Oxfam and its partners, and include:

- Generating small spaces where partners are able to step back from their work to reflect on it;
- Learning new lessons about the work and developing models which can be shared for further replication;
- Addressing collective issues in the sector and experiencing a sense of solidarity through the communal processes;
- At times the story-telling was an emotional healing process for partners and the communities that they work with;
- Gaining a sense of pride in what has been accomplished;
- Building confidence in partners;
- Gaining materials that can be used by both partners and Oxfam in promoting their work; and
- Widely disseminating Oxfam's documenting work such that it hopefully goes on to influence practice beyond the partnership.

"The institution is made of people, and if those people's beliefs and their heart, their principles and values are grounded, they will shape the institution and its culture. Oxfam Australia in South Africa had a lovely culture which will be missed dearly. We acted this way because the partners themselves opened their hearts, their work spaces and made themselves vulnerable to the team and in return we responded with humbleness, openness and vulnerability. I have a strong belief that good development should be based on listening and really listening carefully ... and in most cases we lose opportunities because we don't pay attention."

Pumla Mabizela

Combining funding with a sensitive approach to developing the capacity of partner organisations, the South African Country Office of Oxfam Australia made a sustainable investment in this country of ongoing development and hope. A legacy of respect, rich solidarity networks, shared learning and affirmation has been left by this remarkable, small team of dedicated people.



INTRODUCTION

“I wish the rest of the world could learn from Oxfam. I want their approach to be put up on a big placard and the whole world to see it.”

Woza Moya, partner of Oxfam Australia in South Africa

This is the story of a small country office and development organisation, and how it made a big difference to a group of partner organisations working to improve health, food security, livelihoods options and access to social protection/rights in South Africa. The story is about the Oxfam Australia Country Office in South Africa (Oxfam) and their approach to capacity building and documenting innovative approaches to development.

This reflective piece focuses on two of these core intertwined threads of Oxfam’s work: the capacity building initiatives that Oxfam has undertaken to strengthen their partners and programs, and the documenting of the work of Oxfam partners and the communities they serve. The voices in this document are those of the Oxfam staff, partners and consultants, who were asked about their experiences of capacity building and documentation. Through their journey, we trace the changes in Oxfam’s approach to capacity building and documentation and their key lessons learnt from this process.

“They came to hear”

Michael Matanzima is one of those humble people who makes you feel that he has all the time in the world for you, despite being hounded by many demands since he is a trusted leader in his community. He generously attributes much of his success to the investment that Oxfam made in his development and the development of his organisation, Sophakama Care and Support Organisation in the Eastern Cape. Laughing, he says “When we started ... Oh! I come from a union background and it was difficult for me to even engage in programs. But throughout the continuous trainings and workshops offered by Oxfam I was able to be whom I am today. Now – we are one of the best!”

Michael is clear about the core ingredient of Oxfam’s capacity building success, explaining “Their approach of working with us, with respect and care, it formed part of the capacity building to strengthen us and our systems. I think one of the first things is that they didn’t come as a donor to say what Sophakama must do. They came to hear about what Sophakama needs and assist us with that. It was not about what Oxfam needs. It was about what Sophakama needs.”

He describes the relief he experienced when Oxfam worked on strengthening systems in the organisation as a whole, not just in him as an individual. “One of the things they did which I liked is that they didn’t capacitate one person only. They looked at the organisation as a whole – the Board, the finance people, the admin. People used to say ‘Michael must do this’ and ‘Michael must do that’. Now everyone became involved. Some people come with funding, but Oxfam took care of our capacity building needs too.”

WHAT IS OXFAM'S APPROACH TO CAPACITY BUILDING?

Why does Oxfam engage in capacity building?

Concepts of learning, innovation and self-organisation are clearly at the core of how Oxfam understands change to happen. Here is what Oxfam staff had to say about why Oxfam engages in organisational strengthening, skills development and information sharing with its partner organisations:

Capacity building **to achieve and live our rights:**

Colin Collett van Rooyen: Development is in essence about facilitating the development of capacity. If development is even vaguely about moving towards enacting and achieving all of our rights, then capacity building has to be part of it. We all need the maximum capacity possible to ensure that our rights are achieved and lived.

Capacity building **is empowerment:**

Caili Forrest: Development tends to be about putting in taps and building schools; building capacity is considered the 'soft' side of development, yet it is often more difficult to do. When you work with communities, it's called empowering and when it's with organisations, it's called capacity building, but they are often the same thing. Capacity building is a critical part of the Oxfam framework because we are not implementers – we are partners.

Capacity building **for responsible development:**

Wendell Westley: Capacity building is part of good development. It goes back to our main aim of being a responsible donor which is about strengthening civil society. It is vital to have a strong capacity building aspect to strengthen good governance.

Capacity building **for greater efficacy:**

Glenise Levendal: Things have changed, with a push from donors that NGOs need to be more efficient and effective, to demonstrate impact more clearly. NGOs have to operate in a more corporate manner with checks and balances, so capacity building is important in this day and age.

Capacity building **for strategic use of limited resources:**

Allan Moolman: South African civil society is facing a major crisis regarding resources, and organisations are expected to do a lot more with less resourcing. That means looking at local available resources and building on local communities of practice in order to deliver on their programs. Capacity building is about future-proofing organisations.

Capacity building **for advocacy:**

Wendell Westley: Through capacity building we strengthen organisations to link with government. In this way, advocacy is not jargon – it is about the depth of the work that our partners do in creating change, linking the community with government.

Capacity building **means realising our strengths:**

Glenise Levendal: Capacity building is not a patronising approach – it is around realising that our partners within themselves have capacities in terms of human resources and in other components in order to program better.

Capacity building **for equality:**

Pumla Mabizela: Development is not stagnant – it evolves over time. So if you don't look at strengthening the organisations that you work with, you wouldn't be able to achieve as much. Oxfam prioritises work with rural-based organisations which may have limited access to information and we hoped to bring them up to par with other NGOs who operate at a national level and who may have more resources.

Oxfam draws on Rao and Kelleher's Integral Framework (2005)¹, as their theory of change and this approach may be read in Oxfam's Country Program Framework for South Africa.

Partnership approach

At the core of Oxfam's capacity building strategy is their partnership model, which is a particular approach to development and donor funding adopted by Oxfam. This is about investing in civil society organisations which are delivering integrated programs on health, food security and social protection. The ultimate goal? To ensure that the people who the partner organisations work with have their basic human rights met, with access to the broadest range of services and support that they need at the shortest possible distance to where they live and work. They aim to make sure that every person living in South Africa has a decent standard of living and can go about rebuilding their everyday life with dignity and grace.

But why work through civil society partner organisations and not directly with community beneficiaries? Oxfam's explanation is convincing: South Africa has a wealth of non-profit organisations which sprang up during (and in the aftermath of) the anti-apartheid resistance movement, often started by a pioneering leader with a heart for social justice, to address the gross injustices of the country. These organisations are ideally placed to have maximal impact at a community level. With integrated community networks, these organisations are able to find the people who may benefit most from support, work alongside culturally complex societies and stay with these communities for the long haul.

Nonetheless, this work at the coalface of providing support has its own challenges and dangers. The relentless hard work to help the vast numbers of people, risks of burnout and compassion fatigue and a tendency to be so engrossed in the challenges of others sometimes means that there can be a lack of strategic thinking. This can make it difficult to see how to strengthen systems to find points of strategic leverage and become increasingly effective in preventing suffering. Against this backdrop, Oxfam's approach is calm, organised, reflective and strategic in terms of its broad outlook over all development work in South Africa and even internationally.

¹ Rao, A. and Kelleher, D. (2005). "Is There Life After Gender Mainstreaming?", *Gender and Development*, 13(2):57-69.

Oxfam’s model of capacity development is therefore to facilitate a creative collaboration between the following:



Relational approach

Thanks to mutual learning from strong partners, Oxfam’s partnership model has increasingly become one which is characterised by a realness of equal and collaborative relationships. ‘Respectful’ and ‘caring’ are the words most commonly used by their partners in describing this hard-working team and these are qualities they exude in abundance.

With respect

Former Country Director for Oxfam Australia in South Africa, Allan Moolman explains the internal debate around the core ingredient of a relational approach when it comes to capacity building: “Some of the newer team members feel we should be more direct, but our experience is that we get more sustainable results through a more familial approach – when people know each other and have a relationship with each other. In practice we really try to live by the partnership approach.”

“This means having high contact with people, for example when you see them at an event we might say ‘We hear you are experiencing staffing issues – can we help?’ We try to open up that relationship in the true sense of the word, where we build strong trust.”

“The capacity building is not only the activities that were defined as capacity building – it included a wide range of support provided to our partners, support provided by [the] finance team, conversations around strategic ways of looking at programming, networking opportunities and connecting people specifically. There is a whole range of connecting work which doesn’t always become very clear when you talk about capacity building from a traditional perspective – this is about the approach, how you manage the process and the relationships within the process.”

Shared power

Building an equal and collaborative relationship is difficult when there is a real power differential between a donor and a beneficiary partner organisation. Allan explains that this requires conscious reflection about power, saying “You have to remember that you have power. You may not want to accept it, but every word that you say has an immense influence. Therefore, think about what you are saying. Back out of the partner’s space. We can listen and support but we cannot tell partners how to build a program because they are the experts in their field. Yes we are a donor, but we are also peers.”

“I have been there. I have shaken hands with those people.”

“Our partners know they are in an equal partnership. The partner is the expert” says Nick Molver, Oxfam Program Coordinator, who is a savvy techie with a heart for development.

Nick explains that “This was a process refined over years. The leaders like Allan and Colin had a ‘human first’ approach to understanding what it means to be a partner. They were never a donor, even though they held the money, they never used the power. The partnership was really genuine. We are together in this thing. We are family. It’s not a matter of ‘It’s your program’ – we are doing development together.”

“To sound a bit sappy, it is the human touch. If there was no investment in the relationship – if you were a large donor and you never saw the partners and the work that they are doing, it would be easy to make tough decisions. The way we are working here, we know the way the work is being done on a human level. I have been there. I have seen what is happening. I have shaken hands with those people. And I feel good about what is being done.”

The relationships between Oxfam and its partners are not formal or hierarchical. Varied relationships are formed with different people on both Oxfam’s side and partners’. Oxfam encourages contact through a variety of channels, to the point of saying that partners should feel free to pass criticisms through the consultants to Oxfam, or directly to staff.

Partners are experts

Oxfam recognises that their partners are experts in their field. They draw regularly on the expertise of their partners in understanding trends in the sector, bringing partners together to identify strategic direction and build capacity amongst one another.

Self as development instrument

Since the relational approach is considered central to development work, where human beings are often the primary instruments of change, this means working on one’s self and one’s own development as a professional practitioner.

“We bring all of ourselves into our work”

Consultant Rebecca Freeth from Strategyworks is a deep thinker when it comes to strengthening development practise. She believes that we need to invest more in our own development, as we are the core instrument of our work. She says “I think that if we are talking about the kinds of issues that the development sector is working with, perhaps the only tool over which we have moderate control is our selves. We are the instrument which we can hone and refine in order to be as effective as possible, in that way quite a lot of investment and energy should be going into our own development.”

She describes ‘ways of doing’ and ‘ways of being’ in development, cautioning that “If we are not paying attention to both the interior condition of the person who is wanting to intervene and their paradigm and skills set, we can do more harm than good.”

“How we are as human beings and how we engage with other people and how we engage with the issues is key because we potentially bring all of ourselves into our work. If we come to development with unresolved issues about our own power and powerlessness, our own internal configuration of South African issues, like race, class and gender and sexual orientation – if we haven’t done that work on ourselves and we step into the development arena there is quite a high risk that we will unconsciously project that onto the work that we are doing and onto the people we work with. That can have quite serious negative consequences. If the interior condition is unhealthy, then I think that even with the best intentions, the work is affected. Being a development practitioner is a very powerful role, one which needs to be held with enormous awareness and sensitivity.”

Engaging in capacity building therefore requires a self-reflective approach to nurturing the attitudes and mindset of the people involved in this work so that they become enabling tools for development. The concept is that the relationship between the donor and its partners mirrors the relationship between partners and community beneficiaries, and attention needs to be paid to both dimensions to encourage constructive development.

TYPES OF CAPACITY BUILDING INITIATIVES UNDERTAKEN

Oxfam has creatively engaged in capacity building in a variety of forms, targeting a range of issues. These include:

- Collective Link and Learn events where partners have come together to present their work and discuss common trends and strategic direction in relation to specific issues in their work;
- Webinar series which use different internet platforms to engage in topical matters;
- Formal learning processes, both as a collective and with individual organisations;
- Individual projects and consultancies to develop organisational systems;
- Informal exchanges and field visits between partner organisations;
- Organisations coming together around a common issue to find solutions and share ideas; and
- Support, mentoring and accompaniment for specific processes

Learning processes are designed through consultative engagement, out of which a response and implementation plan is developed that may involve one or more combinations of the following options:

- Oxfam designs and delivers generic capacity building processes for clusters of partners, supported by external consultants;
- Partner organisations plan for and manage the capacity building response as a component of their overall program for which they are funded; and
- Oxfam contracts consultants to work with an individual partner to deliver customised programs funded through the Oxfam capacity building budgets.

These processes may take the form of once off workshops or learning events or longer, more integrated accompaniment processes.

Partner organisations are encouraged to learn with, and from, their peers and like-minded organisations. In order to facilitate this, Oxfam sets up and manages a number of larger learning events, supports partner exchange visits, encourages the documentation and sharing of good practice, supports partners to attend local, national and global conferences relevant to their work and facilitates contact with other program partners and civil society organisations outside of the partnership.

The topics addressed in Oxfam's capacity building processes are broad and include:

- Strategic planning;
- Succession planning and leadership strengthening;
- Financial management;
- Report writing;
- Social media and use of digital communication tools;
- Fundraising and marketing;
- Strengthening monitoring and evaluation;
- Skills in using evidence and research for effective learning;
- Gender and power analyses that promote women's leadership; work towards a broad awareness and promotion of women's rights; and addressing the gendered impact of HIV, food security and climate change on women;
- Gender identity and rights of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and intersex (LGBTI) community;
- Awareness of the needs and rights of people living with disabilities;
- Developing child protection policies;
- Developing HIV and AIDS policies;
- Technical skills on HIV and AIDS prevention and home-based care;
- Approaches to supporting orphaned and vulnerable children;
- Mainstreaming the WASH program (water, sanitation and hygiene promotion);
- Engaging in the National Health Insurance and Primary Health Care Re-engineering processes;

- Understanding the National Health Insurance with greater awareness of the substantial role the NHI will play in the public health sector in the future;
- Disaster risk management;
- Sustainable economic development approaches and enhancing trading initiatives, such as working with Fairtrade;
- Engaging government and holding it to account;
- Critical learning;
- Skills in more effective engagement (working with others/peers, and building networks); and
- Skills in programmatic integration and holistic approaches

“More than anything, the organisation needs to develop skills and experience within its ranks to bring about change”

“Striking a balance between financial support and practical interventions is key” says consultant Jill Cawse who worked with Sophakama in the Eastern Cape on strengthening their organisational capacity. “Organisations such as Sophakama need far more than just money. In every way, their challenges are huge – from having a strategic framework and funding strategy to practical issues such as having a container to operate from, a phone that works etc. Understanding these needs is key to capacity building. Understanding that more than anything, the organisation needs to develop skills and experience within its ranks to bring about change. Oxfam’s recognition that capacity building within the organisation is valuable was a refreshing experience.”

Jill summarises what she has learnt from this work with Oxfam and Sophakama:

1. It is important to recognise that beneficiaries need practical support to change and to improve what they are doing, beyond just receiving money.
2. Capacity building (and organisational development interventions) are essential interventions in resource constrained environments for real change to occur.
3. Capacity building must be conducted in a sustainable way – transferring knowledge and skills are key aspects.
4. Mentoring and guidance is important – working with people to see how they can do things themselves is critical.

I am most proud of Sophakama – they have made huge progress in many ways. Most obvious is the physical things like having a better container office to work from in Joe Slovo township, moving admin offices into a central city area, in general being more ‘strategic’ about the way they approach things. The more intangible aspect is the personal growth amongst the staff. There is more of a positive outlook that they can bring about change in the communities.”

HOW HAS OXFAM'S CAPACITY BUILDING APPROACH CHANGED?

"Don't just come in and spray"

Pumla Mabizela is a respected leader in development with her heart clearly in the communities that Oxfam serves. She describes the organic changes which took place in Oxfam's capacity building approach, explaining "It evolved – it went through a lot of changes and the changes were guided by our partners and through being observant of what is happening. At the beginning we had very few organisations that we were supporting. Mostly they were HIV organisations and prevention was massive at that time. The work was very individualised.

But then we saw common themes trending and we had opportunities to bring Oxfam partners together in partner platforms, for example we could discuss certain challenges of home-based care collectively. The partners played a role in guiding Oxfam on strategic decisions and direction around HIV planning. Later there were the 'Link and Learns', which were more about capacity building and training, pitched at a high level. We would bring experts and it would be like a mini conference focusing on the bigger issues that were happening politically in terms of development and HIV.

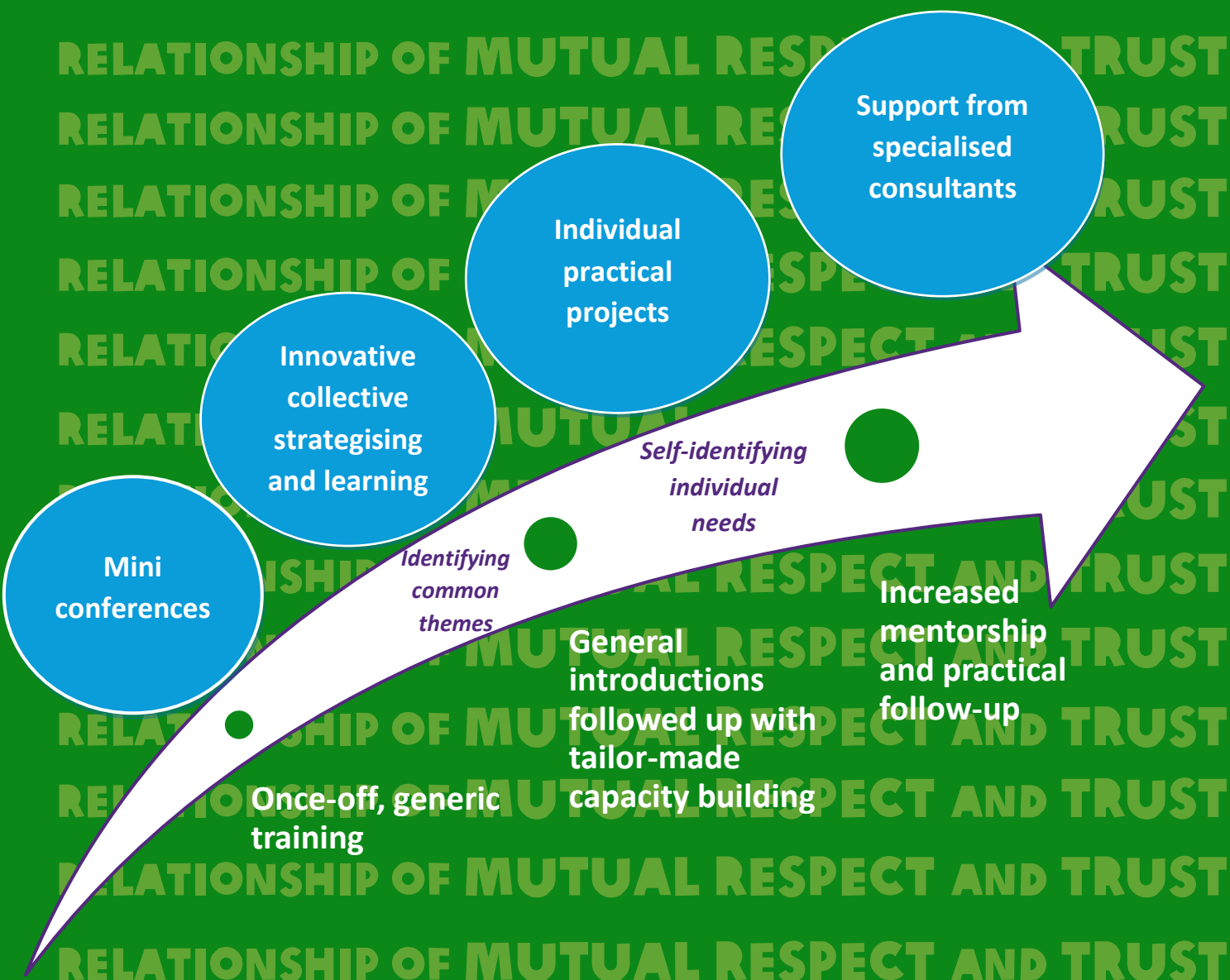
That is when the shift happened – from individualised capacity building of an organisation, to moving into more of a collective, finally offering specialised individualised follow up. We started looking at capacity building as a process, more than a once off workshop. We have seen disadvantages when you come in and just 'spray', rather than intensifying – going deeper into issues."

The shift described by Pumla is summarised in the next diagram, with the following key changes:

- A move from individual partner work to recognising collective trends and shared learning;
- A move from high-level conference-type training to collective strategic discussion spaces;
- Offering broad introductions to a new topic, with opportunities for individualised follow-up;
- Follow-up with individual organisations on specific needs, directed at practical; organisational changes with longer term support from specialised consultants; and
- A move from thinking about capacity building as once-off events, to conceptualising capacity building as a learning process.

FIGURE 1: OXFAM'S EVOLVING APPROACH TO CAPACITY BUILDING

CAPACITY BUILDING AS PROCESS

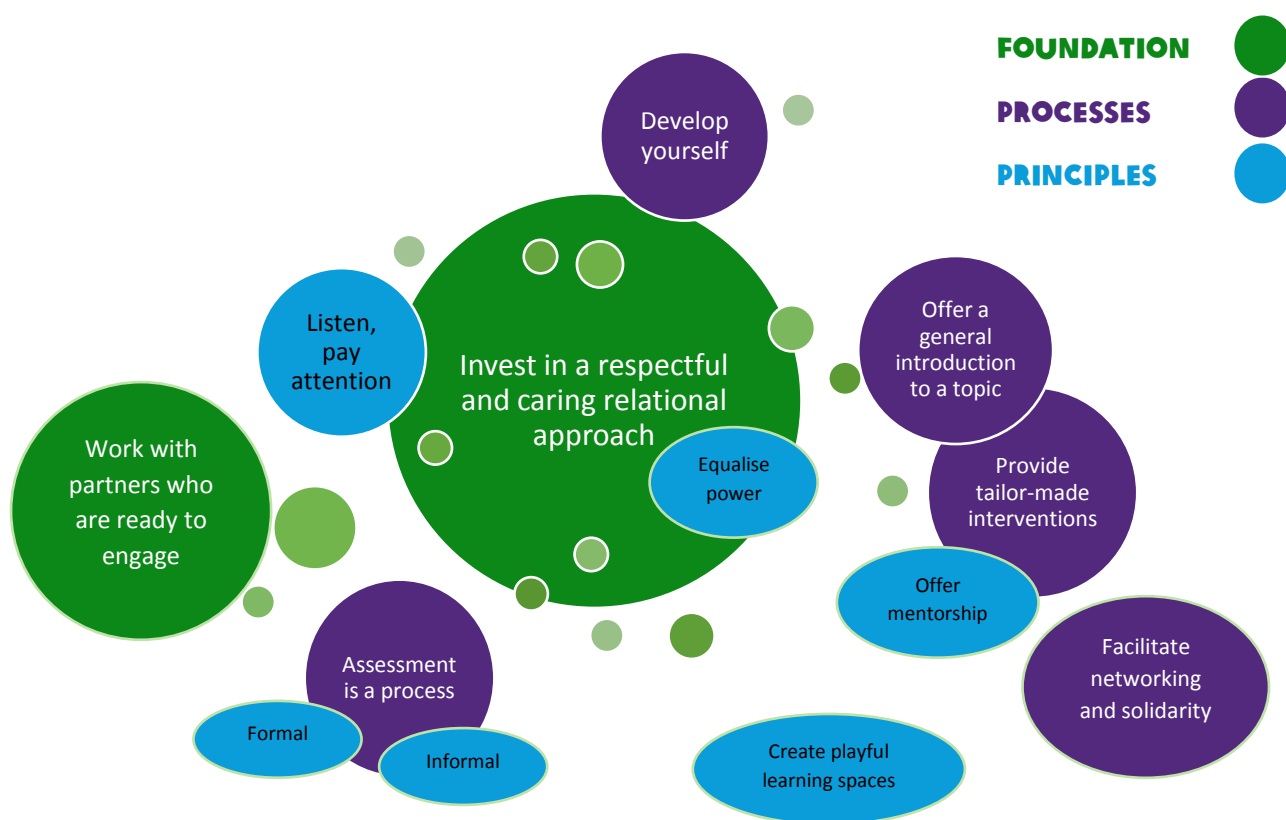


CAPACITY BUILDING AS EVENTS

WHAT ARE THE KEY LESSONS OXFAM HAS LEARNT ABOUT CAPACITY BUILDING?

The changes in Oxfam’s approach to capacity building highlight key lessons learnt about undertaking this role in the development sector. This section draws out the common learning points, based on a thematic analysis of consultations with Oxfam staff, partners and consultants.

FIGURE 2: CAPACITY BUILDING LESSONS



Listen, pay attention

“Listen. Pay attention. Care.”

In listening to Oxfam’s Wendell Westley’s gentle reflections on Oxfam’s changing ways of assessing partner needs, one wonders how she got so wise so young. She weaves a textured image of assessing partners’ capacity building needs, saying “It starts with our program coordinators being in touch with partners – to listen to the needs and gaps and comments that come through, either formally or

informally. We have learnt to ask questions, not make assumptions” she reflects. “Then we sit as a team and bring what we have heard into the decision-making processes of the organisation.”

And through this listening, she explains the change in Oxfam’s approach from a “one size fits all” to more tailor-made, partner requested processes. These processes now include 6-8 months of mentorships, rather than once-off trainings. She explains how capacity building processes are much more sustainable when the needs are self-identified by partners and when partners are ready to engage in a particular organisational strengthening process, rather than having this imposed on them. She adds to this idea that “If the organisation is strong they can carry any community through that process.”

Wendell humbly adds “We take advantage of the position we have as donors to provide a service to partners – the role that we play is to support and facilitate. It is our role to link into a partner’s vision and be responsive to their immediate needs with long-term development outcomes in mind.”

Assessment of needs is a process

Oxfam increasingly uses both formal and informal assessment processes for identifying partner needs for capacity building. The formal processes include an in-depth and holistic appraisal at the start of any partnership and at annual intervals. This is followed up with regular reporting, visits to the partner organisations and audits. Informal assessment opportunities include interactions during networking events and ongoing communication with different people in the organisation. Partners are actively engaged in the identification of their own needs for capacity development.

“We all get very flustered when we hear the word ‘audit’ ”

Even when it comes to the strict controls employed by Oxfam regarding financial management of donor funds, Arthi Harisinker, Senior Business Services Coordinator, explains: “Regarding the relationship between us and the partner, it is very important to have respect when we assess partners’ financial systems and capacity. We all get very flustered and worked up when we hear the word ‘audit’ and someone will always pick up something that you left out. It is important to have the attitude and communicate it that we are not here to put you in trouble, but to help you so that it doesn’t happen again. Finance people are often not exposed to the outside world as much, and they are not as confident. I was also one of them as well and I know what it is like.”

Arthi describes the assessment process taken by Oxfam in understanding their partners’ capacity building needs holistically. “We don’t have formal stages of development. We each take the report and share it with the partner and reflect on the areas which need capacity development.”

“We do annual audits and we pick up any shortcomings then we help to identify the capacity building needs. We do one-on-one capacity building – it is more cost-effective – and in this way you can work on the actual systems of the organisation, because each organisation may have different kinds of methods and capacity. Some of them use different systems and some don’t even have systems or basic filing and you have to start from scratch.

To Arthi, the most important qualities for this type of work are respect, patience, an eye for detail, accuracy and flexibility – a difficult balance to achieve. “You need to have an idea of the way an organisation actually works. You need to know the processes. It takes time to learn this and it doesn’t happen in a day.”

Relevance of capacity building to each organisation has become a key consideration in the design of any initiatives. Furthermore, the assessment process is not only to identify capacity building needs, but to listen for opportunities where a partner organisation could share their innovative approaches with other partners. Nick Molver adds “We are the spider at the centre of the web and we have access to all of their ideas. We feel the vibrations coming from all sides. We can see a partner doing something innovative, for example the Program Coordinator picks up a stray word and asks more about this. They hear about an innovative campaign and then take this idea to a partner on the other side. This is the ideal model behind the Link and Learn events – you see the links and say ‘I think you have a mutual interest with that partner over there.’ It helps us. So the innovation often comes from partners.”

Introduce a topic broadly, then follow up with individuals

“Sometimes you have to wait until an organisation is ready”

“We have grown a huge amount since Oxfam has shifted us into this new role” says Sarah Rule of CREATE in KwaZulu-Natal. She is a quiet person with a smile behind her eyes, deeply committed to advocacy for the rights of people living with disabilities, and she dreams of making all communities and organisations welcoming and integrated spaces for everyone. She describes how Oxfam has been mainstreaming a focus on disability, requesting CREATE to engage Oxfam partner organisations in capacity building. The opportunity to conceptualise this type of work was seen as a privilege, and Sarah mentions that CREATE are now being approached by other donors to do the same. “Oxfam opened doors for us.”

While experienced in community rehabilitation, doing capacity building with partner organisations was a new learning for CREATE and not always a smooth process. Sarah remembers how some organisations, like Woza Moya in KwaZulu-Natal, embraced this idea from the beginning. With other organisations it sometimes felt uphill. “One partner pulled out of the process – it felt like working with them was a complete imposition. Another organisation took about a year and then suddenly went for it.”

As with most development processes, one learns as much from the struggles as from the successes, and Sarah reflects “One of the really important things that we learnt through this process is to work ‘where the organisation is at’. You can’t have a ‘one size fits all’ approach. This individualised approach may not seem that cost effective, though in many ways it is because it leads to more sustainability. So we have tailored our work to each organisation.”

Now CREATE starts with general awareness-raising and helping partners to develop organisational policies to mainstream disability. Following a baseline assessment, they adapt their intervention to the needs of each organisation. Sarah says “We give an initial nudge but then we are led by the organisations and what they want to do.”

Thanks to their evolving understanding of capacity building, Oxfam has adopted this approach of introducing thematic areas to its partners, then following up with individualised opportunities for further development. They describe that some partners don't always immediately recognise or take up the opportunity, and there can be a lag time of anything up to two years before they begin paying more attention to that theme and are ready to make use of the opportunity. Allan Moolman explains, “Sometimes you introduce an idea and then simply wait until the topic feels less scary for people.” Oxfam now plans their capacity building in a 3 year cycle, as a rolling process with different stages and levels of engagement.

Customised training

Oxfam has increasingly devised customised interventions for partners. In keeping with the idea that the partner brings professional expertise from their sector, customised training is advantageous because:

- It may take place within the organisation, thereby addressing the specific needs and systems of the organisation;
- More people from any one organisation may be involved, leading to greater systemic change and potentially more sustainable impact;
- It is possible to work on-site to develop the organisational systems, which contributes to sustainable change;
- One may bring together people with similar levels of experience so that you are not pitching your training to two different audiences;
- One is able to provide on-site technical support and practical implementation of the learning, with immediate and ongoing opportunities for practise;
- One is able to provide both proactive and reactive support, depending on the situation of each organisation; and
- There is an opportunity to look at the practical daily working of an organisation and work with the organisation to strengthen this.

Working with the whole organisation

In offering customised training, Oxfam has increasingly shifted towards focusing on the whole organisation in capacity building, not just the directors or team of people such as finance staff. This is about strengthening organisational systems and policies, rather than investing skills within one person. For example, Oxfam worked with several partners to develop policies, such as a Child Protection Policy or an HIV and AIDS Policy, together with everyone in the organisation.

Working with the organisation as a whole is also about harnessing the potential in a range of people in the organisation and encouraging partners to realise the resources that already exist within their

organisation. This relates to the topic of succession planning, where partners were engaged in thinking about their future beyond the role of one charismatic leader, as described in the example below:

Strengthening future leaders

“What I have appreciated is the openness of Oxfam to helping their partners – identifying promising leaders and being willing to support the training for these partners which is quite unique” says Amon Kasambala from the Global Advisory Planned Services (GAPS) who has been working with Oxfam on a consultancy basis to assist partners with succession planning. “The corresponding openness of the partner organisations has also been touching – they are free to say ‘We need help’. This is particular to the Oxfam partners and it is a testament to the relationship that Oxfam has built with them over years – it has been quite deep. They were not defensive. There came a point where they operated like one organisation.”

“I have seen how much potential these organisations sit with in terms of human resources. With limited input you can make a significant investment in their future. Already I have seen the executive directors feeling empowered to deal with some of the risks. You could see the lightbulbs going on. Some were almost at the point of giving up and now a new vibe has come up. Right then and there some of them identified future leaders of the organisation which was a great moment.”

Longer term process with mentorship

A shift took place in Oxfam from short-term training to longer term capacity building processes with mentorship. “Partners may have found the workshops interesting but when they got back to their offices their daily life took over and they didn’t always have time to integrate the skills and learnings into their practice” the Oxfam team reflected. Through experimenting with different strategies, Oxfam found that if people were able to engage in smaller pockets of information over a longer term, and were supported to integrate this in their practice more meaningfully, the results were more sustained.

PACSA’s Mervyn Abrahams goes on to describe “The nature of Oxfam’s support to partners has been such that it automatically becomes capacity building processes. For instance, their monitoring visits – normally you don’t think of those as capacity building. But the kinds of questions they ask during those visits alert you to new possibilities. What has been most useful to PACSA has been their level of support and engagement with us.”

Standalone training therefore yielded less results than longer processes with mentorship, and Oxfam found that it takes at least one year of ongoing support for a new practise to be integrated in an organisation. For greater chance of success, the process should include facilitating engagement from the organisation – working with the director and the rest of the organisation to understand the value of the new skill or methods, rather than leaving it as a technical competence that sits outside of the organisation.

“It is like having a favourite relative”

Diane Pieters, Director of Siyavuna Development Centre says “The highlight for us has been Oxfam’s help to us in terms of succession planning. This was something very different to us and very useful – apart from their normal support to us which is superb. I absolutely loved their approach that if you have strong leadership, the organisation will go well. They invest in the strength of the organisation, looking beyond the life of the current staff so ensure that this organisation will still be around even when these people move on. They take a long term view and really believe in the organisation. It is like having a favourite relative.

When I sit here and face a challenge and I think ‘who can I ask to help me?’ then I always think of Pumla. Once I called her for help – it was something that was not even her job but she helped me for two hours. I had to go and do a presentation on Siyavuna’s Model at a high level business development conference, to government people and people from all over Africa and as a small local project I did not know what was appropriate for such an audience. Pumla coached me. Their support is so flexible and do you know why I feel that I can do this? It is because they are committed to the long term profile of the organisation.”

Flexibility

Non-government organisations have a unique opportunity to pioneer new methods of development, being closely connected to community needs and resources that can be harnessed and strengthened. Being small and flexible, once these organisations have tried, tested and adapted these strategic methods, they may be shared with other development organisations and governments, and even scaled up into national and regional initiatives. One example in which this may be encouraged is to have a bit of flexible money set aside for creative ideas that come up from partners. This is not about loosening the strict controls required to account for the money, but it is about having the flexibility to respond to emerging issues. Development work should mean trying new approaches and constantly learning about how to do development better. Pumla explains “It has been a privilege for me to be part of an Oxfam that allows you to experiment. If you don’t do this, your program won’t grow. Yes there have to be some things that are locked in and we have to be strict with this. But allow some aspects to be less restricted. For example a partner may say ‘I want to do research and to network with a higher level institution’. Most grants will not allow you to do this valuable networking and exchanging, learning and growing, bringing people into your organisation to develop new systems.”

Linking partners through formal and informal learning spaces

To avoid organisations ‘reinventing the wheel’, the capacity building process included a strong peer learning component, allowing learning from those who have tried and tested the methods. In terms of Oxfam’s capacity building through Link and Learn events and webinars, different, unlikely organisations are being connected. This supports the model of integration where each partner can still focus on their expert area but have the knowledge to bring other partners into their work, where relevant. The aim is not to make everyone experts in everything but to strengthen interconnectedness and mainstreaming of important developmental considerations.

Oxfam supports both formal and informal or organic learning spaces where knowledge is shared amongst partners, creating opportunity for self-organisation and linkages. In a recent Oxfam partner survey, it has been found that 90% of them spontaneously make follow-up contact with one another. Wendell comments that “A lot of the most significant learning has taken place when partners get together. We try to provide an interesting platform where people can engage and meet. As much as we do these programs with multiple streams and different things to attend – the best part of it all is where you see partners having a cup of tea and a great discussion and then two months later you hear that people have done something together out of the Link and Learn process. As much as it is about learning new ways of working, it is also about creating those connections with others.”

“They came back taller”

Oxfam partner Woza Moya engaged in a wide range of Oxfam capacity building initiatives. Sue Hedden explains: “We are at the early stages of that journey which will be ongoing. Oxfam offered technical support and revolutionised some of our programs. The Woza Moya team appreciates that Oxfam has allowed some of the capacity building to take place here in rural KwaZulu-Natal in the valley of Ufafa. “It makes more sense to work with us in our context and it means that more of us can attend.”

She further explains a cascading model of skills development. “One can never underestimate the importance of capacity building in projects like ours. It has become our most important wing – if we don’t build ourselves, we don’t bring the knowledge and skills to the ground. The needs arising from our community are passed on to us, and Oxfam responds. In turn, the knowledge and skills are passed on to the community. We try to get the information and become a kind of channel to get the information into the homes. Anyone who goes for any training, they come back and share the training with our team and then we pass it on to carers in the homes.”

Woza Moya especially appreciated the opportunities provided by Oxfam to network with other partners. “Them simply bringing all of us like-minded NGOs together, setting us up on exchange visits – they have left an incredibly rich heritage of networks for us. Right now I am working with two different groups of partners on practical issues – if it wasn’t for Oxfam bringing us together we would never have found each other in the same way.”

Oxfam sponsored Woza Moya to travel to Cape Town to learn from other partners and Sue reflects “You can go to a conference and listen to a presentation, but when you do a site visit it is a completely different experience. We learnt so much from the exchange visits. It is a growing, maturing process on every level. It broadens people’s horizons and they see a bigger world. We sent a community-based grassroots person to an international conference and they came back taller and wider – they grew on so many levels and now see the development field in a different zone.”

Capacity building therefore includes promoting learning amongst partners, and is found to be a powerful source of relevant information, practical methods and inspiration. The partner exchange visits have yielded a rich sharing of ideas. In a sector which is stressed by limited resources and huge

workloads, development organisations can become competitive and territorial. Yet when partners collaborate, their collective efforts can be so much greater than their individual struggles. And when organisations come together over a common struggle, there is an experience of solidarity and support which transcends even the issues being addressed, bringing hope and renewed energy to make the world a better place for all. Through their gentle and encouraging linking initiatives, a tangible network culture was created amongst Oxfam’s partners which is an invaluable contribution to the sector.

“I love those moments of partners coming together and learning from one another”

Nolucky Nxasana, Oxfam Program Coordinator, becomes visibly delighted when she describes bearing witness to partner networking and exchange, both formal and informal. She says “I still remember when we used to organise partner platforms where all our partners came together and they would talk together about their successes and achievements, and network and learn from one another – in the early days we called them Imbizos and Partner Platforms. I love those moments of those partners coming together and learning from one another.”

“There was one time when our partners organised a meeting to discuss how they can continue to work together beyond Oxfam. It was an ‘aha’ moment for me.”

Philosophy of “What is meant to happen will”

“Letting go is an important aspect”

There is a contemplative quality to Colin Collett van Rooyen, former Country Director of Oxfam Australia in South Africa, as he describes their approach to capacity building, saying “Where possible we encourage partners to self-identify and self-select how capacity building will happen so that it is always context-appropriate. Every time I watched partners and Oxfam team members step forward with pride and courage I was reminded that people HAVE capacity, they just need the space to explore it, grow it and nurture it.” He describes rich moments of seeing partner representatives talking at international forums as equals to others from across the world and having this sense that “it is working” .

And about the times when capacity building did not take place quite as expected? Colin philosophically adds “Letting go is also an important aspect of this work – respecting people and processes enough to allow them to do it themselves and to learn from it themselves. They can and will. Moving on is okay and good for everyone.”

Oxfam has adopted an increasingly flexible and process-oriented approach, with a ‘what is meant to happen will’ patience to their work. They no longer have any mandatory capacity building processes.

This requires a tolerance of uncertainty which is recommended in capacity development². “Those that come, come. Unless it was a specific risk, in which case we prefer to manage the issue directly with the partner” explains Allan.

THE CAPACITY BUILDING EXPERIENCE OF OXFAM AND ITS PARTNERS

Challenges experienced

The most commonly described challenge is that this long-term and organic process of capacity building is very time-consuming. It requires a significant investment of time on the part of everyone involved. Secondly, because of the time commitment and the individualised nature of Oxfam’s capacity building approach, it relies on extensive resources, including financial resources. The third challenge, which relates to the previous two, is that the process requires a high degree of organisational ownership and active involvement. Other challenges were for partners to choose the right people in their organisations to be part of the process, and for Oxfam to find the right service provider.

Oxfam staff all report that one of the most challenging ventures in their capacity building work has been on improving the quality of reports written by partners. Despite numerous and varied attempts, the Program Coordinators say that they are still struggling to help partners share suitable stories and report on outcomes of their valued work with vulnerable communities. The reports were still not showing the incredible work that partners were doing. Rather, what has been more successful is to work with individual partners on documenting their outcomes to add breadth to how their work is seen, which is the focus of the second half of this reflective document.

Observed outcomes

In reflecting on the outcomes which have been observed as a result of capacity building work with partners and Oxfam staff, the following results were described:

- Increase in technical skills relating to their program work;
- Increase in administrative and organisational technical skills;
- Increased leadership confidence and improved organisational governance;
- Shared ownership and strengthening of potential leaders in the organisations;
- Improved strategic thinking;
- Improved monitoring and evaluation systems;
- Strengthened reputation as a responsible organisation with increased access to additional sources of funding;

² Folke, C., S. R. Carpenter, B. Walker, M. Scheffer, T. Chapin, and J. Rockström. 2010. Resilience thinking: integrating resilience, adaptability and transformability. *Ecology and Society* 15(4): 20. [online] URL: <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol15/iss4/art20/>

- Improved awareness of the needs and rights of minority groups, such as people living with disabilities;
- Increased protection of the rights of children, and ensuring that children are not stigmatised or discriminated against;
- Improved gender awareness and inclusivity;
- Increased appreciation by partners for their achievements and a sense of hope in their work; and
- Greater collaboration and a strong emergence of a network culture amongst partners.

As a result of ongoing capacity development and grappling collectively with the issue of effective influencing work with government, integration of advocacy in partner programs became highly advanced and also extremely effective. Partners show increased results in terms of their ability to engage with power structures to influence change, the impacts of which reached beyond the realm of their direct activities. These ranged from engagement with institutions such as local, provincial and national government, along with structures such as traditional and religious leadership.

“Imagine those days we were not even able to talk about these issues”

John Nyamayaro, Oxfam Program Coordinator, is tall and serious and at first seemed a bit intimidating. However, this impression falls away instantly when he talks about the outcomes he has seen from Oxfam’s capacity development work with partners. His face breaks into a broad smile and he becomes animated, saying: “Take, for example, clean water supply and hand washing which we mainstreamed during our WASH program. Now you see taps and you see little children at a preschool going to the bathroom and then going to wash their hands! It is becoming part of the culture.”

In reflecting on other outcomes observed, John says “To me it is very rewarding to see confident, strong organisations who are able to face government and donors and challenge them. They are able to stand up on behalf of their target groups and demand for issues.” For example, recently we brought in CREATE and they gave orientation to all the partners about becoming more inclusive spaces for people with disabilities. All of a sudden you see access ramps being created. It may not be a beautiful ramp, but it is there.”

“Another example is gender – this is a big issue in SA and Africa, but little by little we have been able to integrate it into programs and now people are able to talk about it without being offended. People are beginning to embrace it. Change happens in small pieces. It is not all of a sudden that there is acceptance of issues – it needs to be done, bit by bit as a strategy. Ten years from now we will say “Imagine those days we were not even able to talk about these issues.”

John sighs. “Even if I leave today I am going to take that with me. It will influence the way I am working in other organisations. The way we are working with funders as partners, can this be the way of doing development and funding?”

Nolucky adds to John’s observations saying “I think capacity building has even had an impact on us as Oxfam. Take disability for example – the first thing you look for now when you visit an organisations is to see whether it is wheelchair friendly. The capacity building has also touched us.”

Oxfam staff reflect in their program reports:

Oxfam combines the provision of funds with sensitive, ongoing collaboration between individuals within Oxfam and partner organisations, networking with other individuals and organisations, learning jointly, the transference of skills and technical knowledge, coupled with appropriate research that develops partners' capacity. This combination approach ultimately empowers communities to take control of their own development (rights-holders), particularly through advocacy for government delivery (duty-bearers). It is also this combination that creates the flexibility to respond to shifting, integrated issues that undermine communities through a broad spectrum of program options and innovation. Oxfam's commitment to participatory, reflective capacity strengthening of locally-based partners, embedded in communities, thus allows for a number of positive outcomes to emerge.

Strengthened civil society organisations will lead to empowered communities, which will ultimately help transform society.

WHAT IS OXFAM'S APPROACH TO DOCUMENTATION?

"Did we really do this?"

On the day of this interview, Cecile is very pleased. She explains that one of her patients who was too sick to walk the previous week has managed to walk 3km by herself to the clinic for her check-up. This is the type of person Cecile Manhaeve, from HIV/AIDS Prevention Group (HAPG), Limpopo province, just is. Her care for the dignity and self-worth of people living with HIV and AIDS comes through in every aspect of the series of posters, video and website that Oxfam helped HAPG produce for the International AIDS conference in Melbourne in 2014.

Delicately asking how they approached HIV positive people to be involved in the video and poster production, Cecile replies simply, "Oh people volunteered – they wanted to tell their stories." One realises that this documentation process is the result of many years of dedicated work with the community in Bela Bela, where Cecile explains that stigma towards people living with HIV and AIDS is now practically non-existent. It is thanks to the tireless work of HAPG that people are able to be so open and it is thanks to such documentation processes that even more people are able to find hope in disclosing their status. Inquiring how they managed to achieve this she explains "People telling their story is a benefit – because they are not feeling alone. Usually, when you get your diagnosis you think, one, 'I am going to die,' and two, 'I am alone'. By sharing their stories they realise that they are not alone. We are helping people to form friendships and educating them to run their own household, preparing them for the future. That helps them to become more firm – they were not so scared anymore, their self-confidence was built. Nobody even talks about stigma anymore in this community because it has become so open. People bring friends along to their testing. We never had a problem anymore because the openness was there. We have overcome that."

“Bringing the booklets and the videos to the people who had worked and featured in it was like bringing an immense treasure to all of them. No one had ever hoped or dreamed that this could be done. But all were extremely proud of all the undertakings and the end product. Each person regards it as his/her own, saying ‘look what we did’ and ‘did we really do all this?’”

And the impact of doing this documentation work on HAPG and Cecile? “We would never have been able to do it ourselves”, she explains. “We are so busy helping patients that we don’t have time to think. We really appreciated it – for us to put something on paper was very difficult. We were not used to talking about ourselves. But when someone else comes in and looks at what you are doing it helps. The organisation becomes stronger because we are showing people that we are doing well.”

Cecile feels that the process of doing this documentation was in itself healing and encouraging, bringing back many memories. She says “It made us think about what we are doing to look forward and backwards – it keeps your vision going. It motivates us all to keep on doing what we have been doing.”

Why engage in documentation?

“As a small local organisation, one would never venture into such undertakings due to lack of resources, lack of knowledge, lack of experience, but to document a cause which is found to be worthwhile fills us only with deep gratitude and is a reminder to keep going even in difficult times.”

HIV/AIDS Prevention Group (HAPG)

The ordinary and heroic people in development often dedicate a huge part of themselves and their lives to improving the conditions in which other people live. Documenting the work of Oxfam partners is about celebrating their dedication to, and successes with, effecting change for communities in South Africa. Documenting development work has advantages of:

- ‘Giving back’ to hard working partners and community members, to acknowledge and publicly celebrate how much of themselves they give to development or the difficulties they have overcome in their communities;
- The process of documenting encourages reflection and deeper thinking about development work – it helps those involved in development to step back and strategically review their approaches and methods;
- It draws out key learnings to improve development approaches;
- It shares these learnings with other organisations working on similar issues locally, nationally and internationally;
- The stories shared through the process of documenting inspire hope in others supporting development, and the documents produced are a way of expressing gratitude to the many people who give of their personal income and time to support development in places like South Africa; and
- Documenting can be a way of connecting partners and promoting solidarity, which has been a core aspect of Oxfam’s approach, as explained by Oxfam’s Glenise Levendal below.

Extending the rich life of solidarity

Clearly passionate about connecting partners in solidarity, Glenise explains “With the realisation that we are all interdependent and connected, especially in the South African development context, it is important to show solidarity in order to understand the issues. In our integrated model, documenting and learning can happen with individuals or groups of organisations around our partnership approach of linking and connecting. For example, we brought together women workers, including farm workers, commercial sex workers and home-based healthcare workers. We asked these women “What are your particularities and common threads that you can identify as women?” Their responses were incredible, and we were able to mobilise joint action on common ground. That always stands out for me as a powerful aspect to documenting – where there is the possibility of fighting together for an issue.”

Glenise describes how one can take a moment of solidarity like this and extend its impact beyond the immediate group involved. “We produced this three year series into a book. Beyond this, we can think of ways of how to make it into an opinion piece, into academic studies, a newspaper or magazine article, turning it into a blog, reflecting it on partners’ websites – there are many strategies we can use to make it a live continuous piece. There is a real richness in there and we have to keep it alive.”

“The world has shifted a lot” adds Glenise “and in this fast-paced world, development organisations need to put themselves out there and build a profile through social media. It is about raising awareness about what is happening in the development sector. It is hard for NGOs to balance their day-to-day work with limited human resources and to keep up with all the latest developments. This brings in Oxfam’s national and international perspective.”

TYPES OF DOCUMENTATION UNDERTAKEN

Oxfam sees a close connection between documentation and capacity building, which they describe as “forming two banks of the same river”. Some of the documents have been produced as a result of the capacity building processes, while at other times, capacity building has been done on how to tell a good story, produce documents and make information live through social media.

There is a wide range of documents produced by Oxfam, which include more formal documentation, such as publications that Oxfam has done on research conducted. Case studies, vignettes and practical guides have been created to contribute to Oxfam’s role of sharing and linking in the development sector. Some of the documents focus on personal stories, some on institutional history, and others on outlining a particular intervention model or approach to development.

Regular email discussions and news items encourage partners to meet, talk and work with each other directly in the process of capturing their learning and finding solutions for common challenges. Oxfam has pioneered the use of digital and social media to share development work, using video storytelling, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, blogging and other multi-media platforms for exchange.

The Oxfam Policy and Practice site is an open and free repository of Oxfam publications which is promoted to academic institutions and other specialist repositories and databases. This easily accessible site provides broad exposure of the Oxfam publications to further the reach and accessibility of the documents produced.

For example, the story of women in leadership roles in development was captured in the document called 'They made me brave'. It features stories about women from different organisations and illustrates their contribution to development and their reflections on what makes a successful leader in this sector. (<http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/they-made-me-brave-reflections-on-women-in-leadership-604045>)

The three-part series by Umzi Wethu (www.umziwethu.org) looks at their model, replication and research around the impact of their approach. A case study approach was used to document learnings and share innovative practices developed by the organisation. A short video was produced with moving stories of young people whose lives were changed by Umzi Wethu (<http://youtu.be/6z8sjCA4ydU>).

The three documents in the series can be found online on the Policy and Practice website:

An Extraordinary Journey: Umzi Wethu training academy for vulnerable youth
<http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/an-extraordinary-journey-umzi-wethu-training-academy-for-vulnerable-youth-322346>

The Journey Continues: Umzi Wethu Training Academy for Vulnerable Youth
<http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/the-journey-continues-umzi-wethu-training-academy-for-vulnerable-youth-578596>

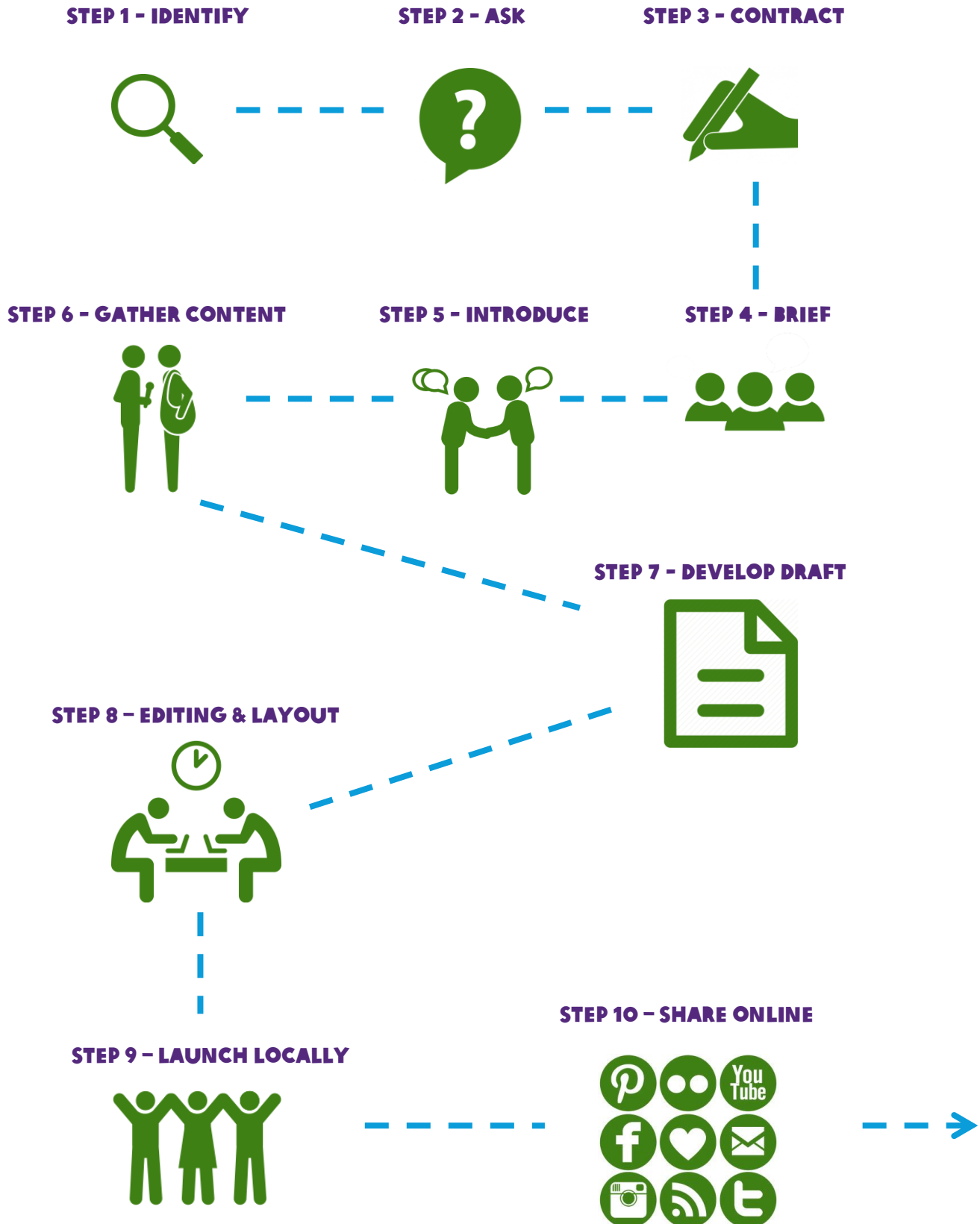
Nurturing Through Nature: The socio-economic impact of Umzi Wethu on rural Eastern Cape communities
<http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/nurturing-through-nature-the-socio-economic-impact-of-umzi-wethu-on-rural-easte-600637>

The short video, website and posters are a collection of documents about the inspiring work of the HIV/AIDS Prevention Group (HAPG) in Limpopo and were prepared for the International AIDS conference in Melbourne in 2014 (see <http://www.hapg.org.za/>).

With the help of Oxfam, the Hillcrest AIDS Centre Trust facilitated storytelling by carers themselves. Without any prior formal writing experience, consultant Gladys Ryan assisted these community workers to describe their experiences of caring for people living with HIV and AIDS. The document is called Building Hopes and Dreams: stories of positive change from Hillcrest AIDS Centre Trust (www.hillcraids.org.za).

THE PROCESS OF DOCUMENTATION

The process of producing a document with a partner or a group of partners has been developed by Oxfam over time and is summarised in the following 'step-by-step' description.



- The start of a documenting process is usually based on a request from a partner organisation, or through the Oxfam team identifying an emerging issue. For example they may hear that a similar issue is coming from several organisations, or they may recognise a valuable model or lessons learnt which would be helpful to share with others. If there is an important issue coming through from several partners, Oxfam will approach a cluster of partners.
- The second step involves asking the partners if they would be interested in documenting the identified issue. At this point Oxfam will talk to the partner about possible approaches to documenting the work, see if they are comfortable to be involved and inquire how they would like their work represented.
- Next, Oxfam will develop terms of reference and look for a suitable consultant or team of people with various skills to develop the document. Oxfam takes care to try to find a match between the style and personality of the consultant and the partner organisation(s). After identifying a possible consultant, Oxfam will check with the partner(s) if they are happy with the consultant.
- Oxfam will then bring the consultant in for a briefing to discuss the approach and commence with contracting. Oxfam does a thorough briefing to explain the approach of the organisation in terms of respecting partners' work and the communities and individuals involved in the documenting process.
- Thereafter, an introductory conversation and email is sent to link the partner and consultant, whereafter the consultant makes direct contact with the partner organisation(s).
- Content gathering takes place and this may happen with a team or an individual going out at different times. Oxfam has a clear policy that the partner organisation should lead the content gathering and any liaison with community beneficiaries.
- In close consultation with the partner organisation, the consultant develops a draft of the document or article or video or website which will be produced. A draft is sent to the partner and all contributing beneficiaries to check accuracy and that they are represented in a way that they are happy with, before Oxfam does their own review.
- The document then goes to Oxfam for editing, review and layout, whereafter it is sent back to the partner again for checking and further suggestions.
- A local launch of the document may be organised, inviting everyone who contributed to the process, as well as strategically selected stakeholders, to participate in the launch. For example, government officials may be invited to establish more relations. Partners working in a similar field may be included, building connections between partners and creating space for dialogue to take the learning process further.
- The life of the document is extended through social media and sharing of the document on various local and international platforms. Discussion groups and debates are encouraged to draw out particular learning aspects and further action.

“Do the research in a way that is helpful”

“We had a very nice documenting process with Oxfam around the National Health Insurance (NHI) research” says energetic and insightful PACSA Director Mervyn Abrahams. “We were very critical of the process as Oxfam got a large scale national research centre involved and this centre was very clear about how they wanted the process to go. We challenged them because we were convinced that if we follow that kind of research project the research output would be very low and not useful at all. The second problem was that the process of research would have distanced people from us rather than engaged them in the issues with us. They came here and gave us training and then asked us to go and tell people what to do. This is not helpful from a perspective of respect. We agreed to only participate if the manner of research could be changed. To Oxfam’s credit they said go ahead – you do the research in a way that is helpful.

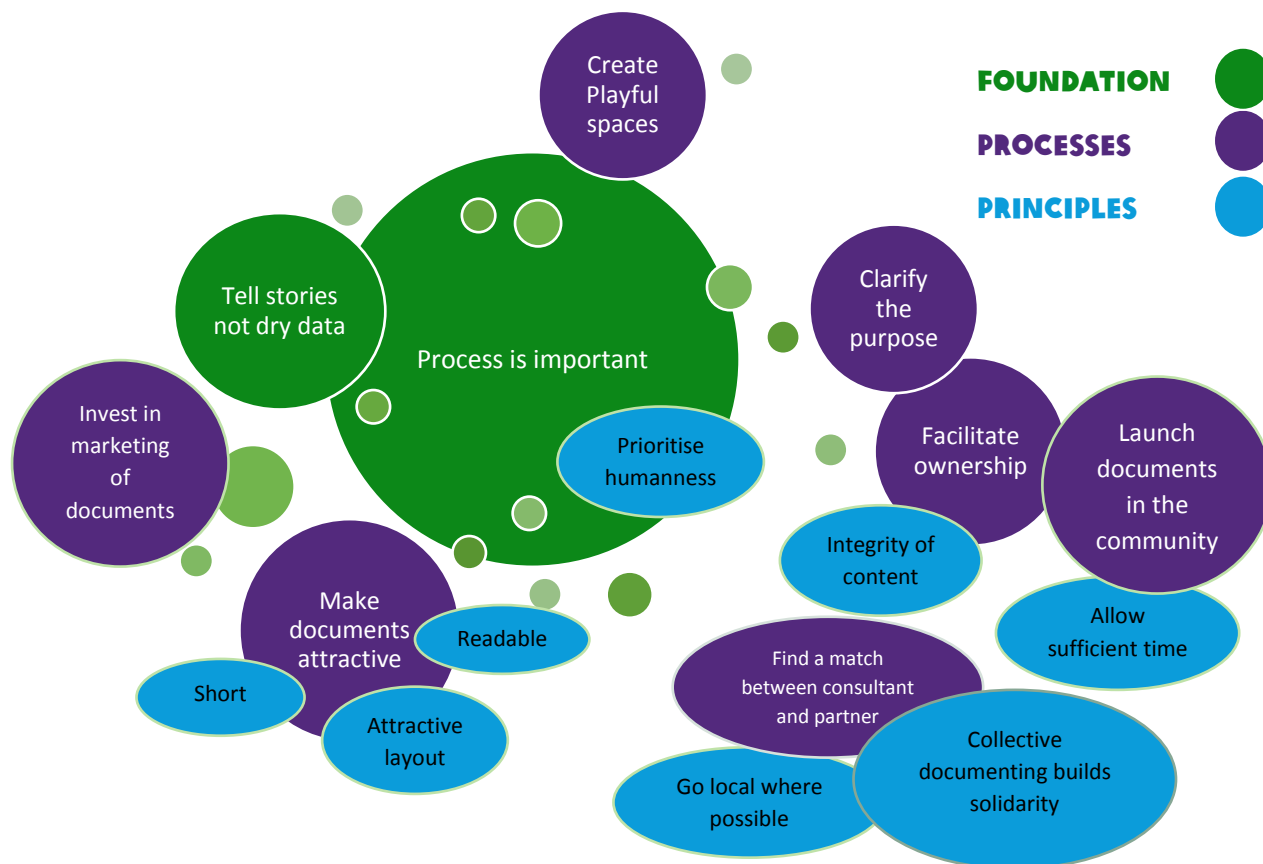
We were able to bring people together and everybody was able to talk and bring their experiences of health care. We took it to the next level and asked people what they would like to see. Only then did we introduce the proposed NHI policy and asked people if this matched their own experiences and needs. They were able to critique the NHI in a balanced way, finding the strengths and gaps. We learnt a lot from that process. For any kind of documenting or research process that is how we would like to operate in the future. That was captured well by Oxfam’s Larry Stillman, and it is a useful piece of documentation for us because it helps us to take that step further in terms of community-led research, rather than PACSA ‘doing’ the research in the community. That research group continues and they are conducting their own research and monitoring the NHI implementation to this day.”

Mervyn’s point is clear as he says “One of the things I would like to highlight is that when we collaborate, Oxfam always allow us a freedom to do it in the way that we feel is better for our approach. They respect that, as long as we can reach the objectives of the work. It is important to allow partners to shape their engagement with such work and at a community level in a way that is valuable in the long term.”

WHAT ARE THE KEY LESSONS LEARNT ABOUT DOCUMENTING?

Oxfam has developed a wealth of creative and beautiful documents reflecting the work and stories of their partners in development. Through trial and error, they have learnt valuable lessons in how to facilitate documenting processes. These are illustrated in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3: DOCUMENTING LESSONS



Process is important

The central ingredient of success, Oxfam has found, is to make documenting a relational and process-oriented approach. Oxfam prioritises the highest levels of respect and sensitivity in learning about and sharing their partners' work.

Focus on People and their Stories

Oxfam has found that highly theoretical documents attract less interest, and that people are more naturally drawn to human interest stories told by others. Focusing on a change process, the experiences of a particular person or the unfolding story of an organisation is helpful.

Prioritise the humanness

When you talk with Caili Forrest, Coordinator for Learning, Sharing and Reporting at Oxfam, you may also find yourself spending a distracting amount of time guessing her age. She looks young and funky, with her dreadlocks and neo-hippie style threads, but her youthful look is contradicted by the depth

of wisdom as she reflects on Oxfam’s approach to documenting. Caili says reflectively “Documenting is like a lot of things in life – it is like sewing a seed. You don’t know who is going to see it. It can have far-reaching impacts that you can never be aware of. That is the nature of these things which are about ideas. So I don’t know if we could know the full impact of what we do. That is why, for me, the process is the most important thing. Humanness is very important, especially in development work.”

Caili explains that when an affirming approach is adopted, the documentation process can contribute towards burnout prevention, allowing people to step back and see the successes of the work with the support of another appreciative person. This is important for the people confronted by the suffering of others on a daily basis, where they may not always see the impact that they are having in alleviating the distress of others. Caili explains that “Sometimes it can be a bit of an uncomfortable space because people are more used to the daily grind and they are not used to being put into those spaces where they are affirmed. But it can be valuable for those people who make those organisations work. In the day-to-day no-one ever gives themselves enough time to reflect.”

She goes on to suggest that the documents themselves capture the focus on human beings and their stories. “When you prioritise the humanness of the stories when documenting, then you also have a product which may be used in a variety of ways. Partners post things on the website, launch their documents in the community, have posters up in the clinics, photo-exhibitions and lots of things. It becomes a positive affirmation for everyone.”

Some of her favourite documents are the two case studies of Umzi Wethu in the Eastern Cape and the video and posters produced with HAPG in Limpopo, both of which were launched in the beneficiary communities and were picked up by high level government officials as potential models to use in future health work. “If they didn’t have that actual product to show and discuss, it would have been harder to highlight those things” says Caili.

Ownership and involving people from the outset

The documenting process should be owned by the partner organisation, and it is important to keep checking that people are being represented in a way that they would like to be represented, and which is dignified and respectful. To this aim, Oxfam has found it helpful to encourage partners to take the lead, especially when consultants are gathering the content from staff and community members.

Pumla reminds us to maintain clear developmental principles while doing documentation, explaining “It is when the project is owned by the people themselves – when they are stories from the people on the ground – that you see the most powerful effects. These case studies have even be used at a university level where people can interrogate and analyse the situation, based on the experiences of community members. When you take that product back to the owner and that person sees himself or herself in a document that is shared worldwide, where people can learn something from their story – that is empowering.”

A further aspect of ownership is that Oxfam has been careful to give credit for the documents produced to partner organisations, avoiding doing too much branding when working with partners

on producing their websites, stories or publications. It has remained a priority to showcase the work of the partner and their organisation.

Matching consultants with partners

It has become increasingly important for Oxfam to find the right consultants to work within this particular philosophical approach to both documentation and capacity building. A key learning based on feedback from Oxfam partners, especially where consultants were interacting directly with partners and the communities they support, was to find a match in terms of style and approach, as well as personality of the consultants and partners. The respectful developmental relationship Oxfam aimed to have with its partners needed to be mirrored in the consultant partnership, following a similar underlying thinking and values. This relationship could be critical, without judging, or pushing partners too hard, rather stretching the partners' world view than declaring something as right or wrong.

Pumla explains that "It was important for us that the consultant will fit in with the organisation. Their respect of the organisation and what it has done was very important to us. They need to come in and understand where the organisation is, and ask "How would you like to be represented?" and "Where do you want to be?" not impose where they want the organisation to be. We try to find a local person to link with each partner, rather than helicoptering them in."

Allow sufficient time and resources for the process

As with anything where the process is prioritised, it takes time. Wendell comments "It is not a short, quick and easy process – it takes time to do a proper representation of a partner or an issue. It is quite demanding on partners as well – spending time with consultants, taking people around to see the people in their programs. It requires a big commitment of time." The process requires extensive commitment from Oxfam too, in terms of editing, design, sharing and promoting the publication. It is recommended to have a dedicated person who looks at these aspects and consults with the team.

Clarify the purpose of the document

Oxfam has a global identity, and the process of gathering consent and clarifying the purpose and use of the document is an extensive process. A balance needs to be found between the international and local objectives. A document may have multiple purposes and people's stories may be told in a way that shapes people's thinking in different ways. For example a case study of an organisation may address the objectives of that organisation and Oxfam's strategic objectives, while giving pride to the people who contributed. Ideally it should add to the body of knowledge globally, both within the Oxfam confederation and more broadly within academic and development spheres. It is hoped that the document could be picked up by anybody and they would learn and enjoy reading and hearing about Oxfam and partners' work

Integrity of content and process

Hopefully, gone are the days of bringing in international media teams to show the horror of a person dying of a disease in terrible conditions. Oxfam is particularly strong on this point: telling stories in a

way that brings hope and shows the dignity, courage and resilience of the people living in difficult times. This is about taking an image of a person, editing a video, telling their story and how one gets feedback from a partner on documents to make sure people are represented in a way they would be happy for others to see them.

Allan says it beautifully “What we have always focused on is the integrity of the content – it must preserve the integrity of the people making the contribution. We got better and better at this. This is not an extractive process, where we take what we want from people. The process involves high consultation and making sure that the voices of individuals are captured properly. It is about making sure that at every corner we are respecting the people generating the learning for us.”

People should be pleased with how they are represented

Engagement with community beneficiaries is a process that is always led by the partner organisation, to ensure sensitive interaction and representation. Consultants are encouraged to play a more passive role than they might usually play, for example paying attention, listening, being aware of different tones and nuances of the individuals being interviewed.

Care is taken to avoid using labels which people would not necessarily be comfortable ascribing to themselves. A guiding principle is to describe the context, not the person, as adverse or challenging. For example, “this is a child living in a context of HIV and AIDs” or “this is a person living in an under-resourced context.”

All beneficiaries involved in any documenting process are once again engaged in the editing process to ensure that they are comfortable with the way they are represented.

Constructive portrayal of Africa

Oxfam has taken quite a firm stand in terms of not using images of children affected by HIV or of people who are sick or who are shown in a light that is not respectful to them. The images should portray energy and movement, vibrancy, change, hope and optimism. “The context shows the challenges that people face, we don’t need to show people who are upset or unhappy – we have had lots of debates as a team about evoking pity and emotions from people but we strongly go in the opposite direction, to portray people in a positive light so that people are seen to be empowered and not disempowered.” For example, because of the sensitivity of identifying refugees, Oxfam made creative use of lovely patterns and graphics from the continent instead of images of people, as they may be placed at risk if their identities were shown. In communicating about people affected by violence, Oxfam might take photographs of people’s hands, or a silhouette, in order to protect people’s identity.

A lot of thought goes into each process about portraying Africa in a different light internationally and trying to put forward a more balanced approach to the context which includes challenges and positives where people are at the centre of improving their situation.

Collective documenting processes

A sense of solidarity may be built through collective documenting processes. Mervyn from PACSA says “For example the reports we write, and in our eNews letter we put out a round table discussion about monitoring the NHI and Oxfam offered to be involved. They linked us with other partners and brought them into the initiative and then we thought of the possibility of a network. The fact that Oxfam found it important enough to engage with it has raised possibilities. This model of documenting and sharing builds the capacity of both PACSA and the other partners, purely by bringing us together. For example, they brought us together to share case studies about our work. The challenging questions asked by peers who are familiar with the context and also experts in the field really benefitted us. Those kind of issues are often not named as capacity building, but they have been very valuable to us and has been an important aspect of Oxfam’s work.”

Go local where possible

Oxfam reflects that the approach of locals gathering information tends to be more respectful. They usually have a connection with the community and understand how to tell people’s stories in a dignified way. Where possible, Oxfam encourages partners to tell their own stories, or they work with local consultants with an understanding of developmental approaches and the local context.

“We used to feel isolated”

Sphamandla Mzobe from Thulolwazi Uzivikele says that being based in far northern KwaZulu-Natal, their organisation used to feel isolated, but thanks to Oxfam they now feel part of a network. “Oxfam gave us an opportunity to learn through their linking and learning events where partners come together to share. I very much enjoyed that. It gave us an opportunity to learn from other partners. They allowed us to network and create networks, encouraging us to do things on our own without babysitting us. This helped us to establish our own networks. During the partner exchange visits we visited other projects in Malawi and we came back with many ideas of how they are implementing their program. With the storytelling and video documenting we got an opportunity to tell our stories – the stories of the community their success stories, which we would not have told if there was not training.”

Colleague Kobus Meyer adds: “Oxfam never imposed the way they did things – they simply let people use this knowledge in different ways and allowed us to decide as an organisation how to participate. It wasn’t a one-sided process. For example, with the video work, we chose to have all staff involved, which made it complicated, but the trainers allowed for that. It created better understanding amongst us all. They create opportunities to learn at your own pace. Like when we made the videos we even learnt about ourselves and what our colleagues are doing.”

Dudu Biyela concurs, saying “Yes like seeing how people were assisted in one area where people cross the river to another area to help people. We appreciated the challenges that people are facing in working in that area. It inspired us to do even more for others when we saw what our colleagues were achieving. Another good example was where one person was able to get an ID document and...another person was not able to get one. It showed us all what a difference that makes – one person was able to progress in school and the other person did not. Sometimes we work next to each other but we don’t see the bigger picture as individuals. Now we are able to say “I was able to contribute to improve this person’s life.” It helped us see the value of our work.”

Sphamandla adds “It enabled us to showcase our work to others” and Kobus agrees “Yes it gave us confidence because the video launch was the first event which we hosted. And we went on to show the video to many others.”

Forcing the four team members to express some challenges that they have experienced in relation to the capacity building and documentation work with Oxfam, colleague Dumiseni Biyela finally admits “To be quite honest, there were many workshops arranged by Oxfam which were fruitful, with highly relevant and well qualified speakers. But at some stage it was hard to interact and catch up with the facilitator, based on the language and the accent of someone who is of a very high calibre. Maybe if Oxfam could look at that very closely in terms of the environment in which the facilitator facilitates. Maybe they could send someone more relevant who could share a more similar experience, not necessarily reducing the standard but someone who could connect with language and relevant experience.” Kobus agrees saying “There was one instance where we did not agree with the service provider appointed. The person was not appropriate and then it never really happened, but Oxfam allowed us to stop activities when they are not working. They allowed us to move at our own pace, allowed us to make mistakes, which is different from most international funders who have a ‘one size fits all’. They are very accommodating in their tailor made approach.”

Representing multiple voices

When documenting the work of an organisation or several partners, Oxfam tries to be inclusive of comments, approaches and opinions from multiple partners and other members of the team in an organisation. This is so that not only one voice is reflected in the document but rather it is about collectively gathering and representing input. Wendell explains that “This can be very challenging because we all have different ways of thinking about things. But we try to be conscious of how we and others are represented.”

We are learning together

A further dimension to integrity of content is to bring an honesty into the reflecting and writing, acknowledging that we are learning together and grounding the experience in the issues we are learning about.

Keep documents short and readable

On a more concrete note, Oxfam staff members explain that in the world of today, being accessible and concise is very important. Keeping documents to a few pages has been more effective, making them exciting to read, with stories rather than dry data. They recommend using an accessible writing style, a descriptive tone that does not use too much jargon, calling this ‘non-development speak’. People should be able to read and understand the documents, making knowledge accessible without having to look up long words.

Glenise explains “I guess the X-factor these days is short, pungent, succinct documents which tease people to read the longer document. Maybe that is just a reality of our time. If you have a punchy line, it starts a conversation which is not necessarily about the content of the document and the headline. This is about the nuances of the context within the publication that looks engaging. It’s

about how to bring in that combination of heavy text, beautiful pictures and eye-catching sentences.”

Make documents visually appealing

“Oxfam straddles the line between development and art – this engages people in processes which are creative rather than heavy” concurs Caili. Layout contributes significantly to the accessibility of the documents and it is helpful to use lots of diagrams and graphics and colours, bringing people’s attention to the vibrant work of partners. Oxfam tries to use lots of beautiful photographs, with people at the centre.

Developing a colourful and optimistic brand helped Oxfam to portray this hopeful stance. “We push our brand guidelines to the limit and we try to do the most exciting things with our brand guideline” says Wendell.

Invest in marketing of documents

At times a beautiful and relevant document may be produced, but it does not get the attention that it deserves. Oxfam has learnt that promoting and marketing their documents is important so that the valuable stories being told may be widely heard. The life of a document may be extended by sharing it across different media platforms. Oxfam shares its documents on a policy and practise website, emails copies of all documents to its partners and the Oxfam confederation and sends it to other funders and stakeholders both locally and internationally.

Creating playful spaces

Formal writing and documentation (and capacity building) can be intimidating for organisations used to engaging in community development, and Oxfam has deliberately tried to create playful learning and documenting spaces. An innovative example of this was the capacity building and documenting work on the digital influencing stream of work, where Oxfam was encouraging partners to express more of their work online through digital and social media platforms. A creative industrial space was hired and different forms of communication stands were set up. Partners were able to visit these and be inspired by what fitted well with their organisation. Caili describes this saying “It was like a feast for someone who would like to be more involved in the online space. It made everyone think a bit differently about their online presence.” Dynamic and different spaces have been found to bring forward different ways of thinking and interacting.

After this initial fun exposure, Oxfam listened out for partners who wanted to follow up on specific forms of communication. Support was offered through the webinar series, which showed people’s commitment to the process – several partners wanted to engage further and this was the most efficient way of doing this with people from diverse locations.

Demystifying the writing process

Passionate about promoting writing in the development sector, Gladys Ryan of Communicating Simply says Oxfam is one of her favourite clients, for several reasons which are close to her heart. “What I appreciated is their open-mindedness about documenting – they are willing to allow the processes to be an exploration. They trust one and allow one to play, letting what needs to be expressed come out.”

Gladys’ favourite type of documenting processes take place when community members are helped to write their own stories. She explains “We were allowed to encourage people’s ability to write and to demystify the process of writing. More often than not Oxfam ended up with even better quality because they allowed one to be organic, and because of the way they engaged with some of their partners. Their partners are also willing to learn from each other and Oxfam is willing to learn from their partners. They give you freedom to explore the issues deeply, while supporting you all the way.”

“I loved the Stories of Change process. The partners were gentle and supportive and made me feel so welcome. Like when my 3-year-old son walked in and said ‘It’s my turn to facilitate,’ one of the men said ‘Mum stop – it’s his turn to facilitate!’ And he gave him the pen and let him have his turn. There were people of all different levels involved, from academics to fieldworkers. There was complete respect for one another and engagement from everyone.”

The tone in Gladys’ voice takes a steely turn when she says “Very rigid reporting formats don’t result in quality reports and this just puts everyone under pressure to perform, without getting the information you need. The key to people writing better is to help them make the link between their experience and what is being reported on. The rigid formats completely get in the way of that – partners feel they must use fancy language and write to outcomes. The best way of getting people to write is to work with their hearts and draw on their knowledge.”

“Oxfam has pioneered innovative approaches to documenting – what they achieved in social media is amazing, like what Woza Moya achieved. Oxfam gives people support – they get very involved – but at the same time they allow partners to dictate what that end result will be. This is a fine balance and you find that there is lots of learning along the way.”

THE DOCUMENTING EXPERIENCE OF OXFAM AND ITS PARTNERS

“When you are very close to the action, you don’t appreciate the work that you are doing”

“Somehow when you are very close to the action you don’t appreciate the breadth and depth of the work that you are doing. But then when someone comes in to get a perspective of your work it is a gift to be given that time of reflection and allow other people into your world and put it into their words” says Paul Longe, Counselling Psychologist and former Program Manager at Umzi Wethu. He

says the process of creating the Umzi Wethu documents with Oxfam was a very rewarding experience and that Oxfam “offered the right amount of support and guidance but allowed us a lot of flexibility.”

Paul’s criticism of the process was that it was very drawn out, from start to finish and he would like to see the documents having more impact in terms of effecting changes with local government and leveraging funding for his organisation. “We plan to do more of this in future, and it is very helpful to have the backing of a reputable donor and a formal piece of research done to promote our work.” In term of key learnings of engaging in such a process, he says: “We learnt the importance of having an excellent writer, a high impact photographer and letting the beneficiaries guide the process which enriched the work. We allowed students to tell their stories rather than staff saying the usual things about the programs.”

“Oxfam has always been a partner where their capacity building and documenting work has been more important to us than even the financial contribution. They really walk alongside one and build one up.”

Challenges

Implicit in this sensitive process-oriented approach to documenting are similar challenges as described in the capacity building work of Oxfam, such as the challenges of time, resources and dedication to the process. The inclusive approach, along with giving everyone a chance to edit and approve their contribution can be protracted and expensive.

Partner Mervyn explains that “Oxfam has so many initiatives and we have always only attended where we felt it was necessary. This is almost the other side of the coin of them responding to our initiatives. It can become quite intensive and there can be too many processes. So we felt we had to be clear about only being involved in processes that benefit us. In part, this is our responsibility to identify what is useful but some organisations might feel that they have to go to everything because of a dependency.”

A further challenge in documenting the work of partners was that some of the new forms of communication were intimidating to partners. For example, video storytelling was seen as something quite difficult for partners to do themselves. Therefore, the process of video storytelling was broken down into smaller topics and smaller groups worked on developing their stories. A month later, partners were helped to develop their ‘shot list’ and then later how to edit their final product.

Nireshnee and Viroshen Chetty from Jetty filmmakers describe the challenge of working with a diverse set of partners with very different levels of video and storytelling experience. They describe how “In Mtubatuba we worked with ‘gogos’ (grandmothers) in their 70s, who didn't speak English and had zero experience filming. Other diversities were rural versus urban; language; and capacity to absorb technical details, etc.”

Further challenges encountered during Oxfam’s documenting work included:

- Finding ways to keep the momentum of digital sharing platforms going beyond the initial excitement of engaging in a new form of communication;

- Moving the discussions into more critical reflective spaces; and
- Convincing people who are community development workers and ‘do-ers’ of the value of documenting and reflection.

Finding a balance between the international marketing and fundraising needs and the sensitive and empowering representation of partner organisations and beneficiaries is an ongoing challenge. But Oxfam vehemently believes that one does not need to elicit pity or painful emotion in order to attract interest in their partner’s work.

Oxfam staff agree that stopping a documenting process when it is not working is as important as starting a new one – otherwise it creates too much frustration. Caili reflects “Sometimes there is a right time for something and it is wise to be able to say it’s not working.” Nick adds “I think it is never an outright failure or a complete success. There are always elements that we can improve on. It is not always clear-cut. It is a good idea to do documentation and capacity development in an open line. You are always learning and moving forward.”

Partners express similar challenges, and Sue Hedden from Woza Moya adds that it is difficult for people involved in development to “see the stories” in their work. “What you see as a story other people might not. Important moments of change are not always seen as significant by staff – trying to see the kernel of the story and why it is important and learning how to extract that. We are getting better all the time though at finding those stories. Oxfam’s capacity building with our media team and training on storytelling and how to see and extract stories added to a conscious process of how to tell a good story. They had storytellers come here and helped us in the process. It is about us growing in awareness.”

“Throw out the facilitator’s guide”

Nireshnee and Virosheen Chetty from Jetty had the enviable task of helping Oxfam partners to produce video stories illustrating their development work. They describe this process of working with Oxfam on this documenting process.

“Oxfam was always grounded on the objective at hand – in this case the objective being to build video storytelling capacity for whatever use the partners had, be it for reporting, advocacy, awareness, marketing, education and/or documenting projects. Ultimately the success of the project was based on sustainability – whether partners had ‘tools and skills’ after the project. The focus was never on the final video partners produced at the end of the project. Partners were made to understand that their video must work for them and relate to their community and that they did not have to strive for a ‘Hollywood aesthetic’ i.e. the look and feel of their video story was determined by the partners’ taste and intuition. It was, after all, their story to tell. However, the film-screening day was a fantastic incentive and motivation and all partners did eventually screen one or more films on the day. And what great video stories they were too.”

“Therefore the key learning is that the facilitator has got to be intuitive and sensitive to the learning curve in the room. Sometimes you have to throw out the facilitator’s guide. What we also learnt is to allow lots of time for people to discuss their learnings and challenges in the room – this helps those

who feel the same, but could not express it, to catch on by learning it from their peers. It also makes people think 'I'm not the only one who has this problem' and in that way it is reassuring. The workshops have to be practical – in fact the more we rolled out these programs the more we cut back on the theory/technical aspects.”

“Another 'aha' moment was to get people to work in teams and then get people to express what their strong areas are and divide production responsibilities according to people's strengths.”

Outcomes

The outcomes of the documenting processes have been very rewarding for both Oxfam and its partners, and include:

- Generating small spaces where partners are able to step back from their work to reflect on it;
- Learning new lessons about the work and developing models which can be shared for further replication;
- Addressing collective issues in the sector and experiencing a sense of solidarity through the communal processes;
- At times the story-telling was an emotional healing process for partners and their beneficiaries;
- Gaining a sense of pride in what has been accomplished;
- Building confidence in partners;
- Gaining materials that can be used by both partners and Oxfam in promoting their work; and
- Widely disseminating Oxfam’s documenting work such that it hopefully goes on to influence practice beyond the partnership.

On shaggy dogs and teddy bears

“Participants are able to innovate ways to suit our unique South African situation” say Nireshee and Virosheen Chetty from Jetty in describing some of the outcomes observed in their video work with Oxfam partners. “There were times when participants adopted a guerrilla style of movie-making, for example one organisation needed a ‘shaggy dog’ – this is a cover for the microphone – and they were able to make one using an old toy teddy bear and cutting and stitching it to suit their needs. One organisation hung up bed sheets on a make-shift line as an ultraviolet filter to diffuse the rays of the sun. Another group used a wheelchair as a dolly for tracking subjects on the move and one partner made a portable projection screen out of bamboo and calico which a local seamstress in the community sewed.”

“We were equally impressed with some of the people who were initially daunted by the technical process of editing, but stuck to it and eventually achieved a commendable level of competence. The fact that people from rural areas, who had never held a camera, are able to make a video – from script to screen in just 4 or 5 workshops is something we are also very proud of. One participant said he was so nervous before the first workshop because he thought he was too old to learn how to use a

camera. At the end of the first day, he joked about it and said he realised that there was no reason for him to be nervous and that it was actually fairly easy. Participants were able to apply what they learnt in other aspects of their work, such as story writing skills for report writing or interview techniques or how to capture the most appropriate image that communicates their message most effectively.”

Wendell adds “If I look at some of the feedback from partners and how they are doing – the video storytelling has been lovely to be part of. We had video screenings where we came together and showed one another the videos that had been made. It was rewarding to see that partners recognised that their voice was important. Sometimes voices get lost in the bigger narrative and it is lovely to hear those voices and have them acknowledged.”

Glenise agrees, saying “The HAPG documenting process made so many people in the Bela Bela community happy and feel rewarded for what they had done in the past years to make the community less vulnerable. The long, winding process to recall and re-think the past history was also joyful because it brought so many good memories back into the open.”

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Combining funding with a sensitive approach to developing the capacity of partner organisations, the South African Country Office of Oxfam Australia made a sustainable investment in this country of ongoing development and hope. A legacy of respect, rich solidarity networks, shared learning and affirmation has been left by this remarkable, small team of dedicated people.

“The institution is made of people, and if those people’s beliefs and their heart, their principles and values are grounded, they will shape the institution and its culture. Oxfam Australia in South Africa had a lovely culture which will be missed dearly. We acted this way because the partners themselves opened their hearts, their work-spaces and made themselves vulnerable to the team and in return we responded with humbleness, openness and vulnerability. I have a strong belief that good development should be based on listening and really listening carefully...and in most cases we lose opportunities because we don’t pay attention.”

Pumla Mabizela

WITH THANKS

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Sophakama Care and Support Organisation

(from www.sophakama.org.za)

Sophakama has its roots deep in the Joe Slovo community in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan area of the Eastern Cape. Going back to 1999 when Namhla Sineke, Founder and Director, began her search for volunteers to assist with an aftercare program for orphaned and vulnerable children at the Joe Slovo Primary School. Sophakama is a community-based organisation which strives to make a difference in this impoverished community through a range of community services which include Health Services (Disease management), Health Communication (Prevention), Children Services (OVC's) and Advocacy (Accessing Social Services) and Improving Livelihoods. From humble beginnings, Sophakama has emerged as a well-respected organisation that makes a difference to the lives of community members in Joe Slovo.

Umzi Wethu

(from www.umziwethu.org)

The tragic paradox of Southern Africa's economy is that there exists simultaneously a great demand for skilled customer service workers on the one hand, and massive unemployment on the other. Umzi Wethu has two parallel ambitions: to close the skills gap that exists within Southern Africa, and to provide hope and employment to some of the region's most vulnerable people.

The program, established by the Wilderness Foundation, has achieved initial success within the hospitality and eco-tourism industry, but it has been designed to benefit a far wider spread of industries. By harnessing the economic promise of eco-tourism, the Foundation hopes to help break the cycle of poverty and unemployment that many young people are faced with.

The "Umzi Wethu Training Academy for Vulnerable Youth", to give the program its full name, is a dynamic intervention model that offers skills development and job placement to youths who, despite incredibly adverse circumstances, have shown resilience and ambition. Denied opportunities

to access training and jobs due to circumstances generally beyond their control, Umzi Wethu transforms these youths, many of whom have been orphaned as a result of the HIV and AIDS epidemic, into highly employable young adults.

Woza Moya

(from the Woza Moya 15 Year Celebration Report - www.wozamoya.org.za)

In the peaceful rolling hills of the Ofafa Valley, an organisation is slowly, steadily making a difference to the lives of people. Woza Moya was born out of the extreme and urgent need for a response to HIV and AIDS in the area. They began by providing home-based care and support to those in need of it but soon realised we could not focus on health care without also attending to other issues related to poverty – because poverty and food insecurity have a direct bearing on the impact HIV has on people’s lives. Over the past 15 years the organisation has grown organically, making every attempt to respond to these issues with the resources they have. Today, their integrated and multifaceted approach includes the following programs: Home-based Health Care; Child and Youth Care; Food Security; Paralegal and Advocacy Services; Youth and Media; Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) and Early Childhood Development (ECD).

CREATE

(from www.create-cbr.co.za)

CREATE is a non-government organisation based in Pietermaritzburg, the capital of KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa. CREATE focuses on advocacy for disability rights and community-based rehabilitation in its broadest sense. CREATE works with disabled people’s organisations, parents groups, communities, municipalities and government departments as well as other NGOs and businesses.

CREATE’s expertise is in training and advocacy work. Skilled at developing participatory training courses, and educational initiatives are supported with interactive materials for participants at a variety of literacy levels in both English and isiZulu. Various advocacy and lobbying activities take place at local, provincial, national and even international levels.

HAPG – HIV and AIDS Prevention Group

(from www.hapg.org.za)

The Art of the Possible: The HIV/AIDS Prevention Group (HAPG) is the embodiment of the possibility of providing appropriate HIV and AIDS services in difficult conditions. It has proved that, even in a context of poverty and social exclusion, community residents can access a well-administered health and antiretroviral program, staffed and run successfully by a cohort of laypeople. HAPG has led the way in Limpopo in pioneering layperson-managed clinics supervised by an HIV and AIDS specialist administering antiretroviral treatment, and all this in a province where the government is still struggling to provide an effective primary health care system.

HAPG has allowed a network, composed mainly of volunteers, to see that, through the power of their own deeds, they can turn around a situation of death, despair, fear and shame, and allow people to come forward and claim the right to stay alive. It has revealed that the “art of the possible” is very powerful and that through collective agency an effective health care system can be created.

Siyavuna Amalima Development Centre

(from www.siyavuna.org.za)

Tackling poverty by stimulating local economic development, Siyavuna implements a program called Agri-SCIP (Sustainable Community Investment Program). Smallholder farmers grow fresh produce organically, feed themselves and their families first and sell excess produce on a weekly basis for cash. This assists them to build livelihoods out of their small scale agricultural enterprises. Organic practices are adopted as they produce food of superior nutritional value and encourage small holder farmers to develop healthy eco-systems that are highly beneficial for the environment as well as the long term sustainability of their home garden.

Working with ten rural communities in Ugu, Kwa-Zulu Natal, the livelihood development aspect of this program lessens the dependency on grants and leverages the untapped resources that these families have – namely land, labour and traditional know-how of agriculture.

PACSA

(from www.pacsa.org.za)

PACSA is a faith-based social justice and development NGO that has been in operation since 1979. PACSA operates in the uMgungundlovu region of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa and focusses on socio - economic rights, gender justice, youth development, livelihoods and HIV and AIDS. Our work and our practice seek to enhance human dignity. We are convinced that those who carry the brunt of the problem must be a part of the solution – at the heart of PACSA’s core strategy is the notion *“nothing about us without us.”*

PACSA understands accompaniment as critical solidarity with those who suffer indignity; that through this solidarity we strengthen each other as we construct a new world. PACSA uses the strategy of Process Facilitation to catalyse change. PACSA acts in its own name to build social justice activism in the broader society, reaching out to the broader community to grow consciousness and support for justice issues.

Tholulwazi Uzivikele

(from www.tuproject.org)

“Empower yourself through knowledge” says Tholulwazi Uzivikele, an NGO located in rural northern KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. It was started in the mid-90s to address the overwhelming HIV epidemic affecting 1 in 8 people in its community and leaving over 3,000 orphaned children in its wake. Over the last few years Tholulwazi Uzivikele has grown in both capacity and experience and has become an organisation that strives to increasingly guide the community in its empowerment. The organisation has expanded its response to the needs of orphaned children and their caregivers, sick and dying patients and their caregivers, schoolchildren, young adults and other vulnerable people, through its various programs. Tholulwazi Uzivikele has recognised that it is not enough to respond to the needs from the community only. Prevention in the spread of the disease has therefore become an added organisational objective.

Tholulwazi Uzivikele is based in Manguzi, KwaNgwanase and operates in the Umhlabuyalingana District, the most remote part of the uMkhanyakude district in far northern KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

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