

# USING COMMUNITY-CENTRED APPROACHES TO BUILD RESILIENCE AT SCALE

EVIDENCE FROM OXFAM'S RESILIENT DEVELOPMENT PORTFOLIO



OXFAM

Oxfam's approach to building resilience is community-centred, but this doesn't mean that the work stops at community level. Oxfam works to empower local communities at risk from disasters and the impacts of climate change to become resilient, while at the same time shifting power and creating impact at sub-national and national levels. This includes work to secure and enhance livelihoods and increase connections and accountability between communities and government so that resilience is built in communities and at scale.

## KEY LESSONS FOR RESILIENT DEVELOPMENT

1. Resilient development outcomes, in particular those that are transformative, are stronger when projects use a range of targeted 'building blocks' and social change processes.
2. A community-centred approach, grounded in local, participatory context analysis and planning, is effective for building resilience and promoting local empowerment and sustainability.
3. Building relationships between communities and government is effective not only for building community capacity and promoting local empowerment, but in increasing replication of successful models, government accountability and sustainability.
4. Efforts to build livelihood resilience are most effective when projects have a sound context analysis, a clear theory of change, and interventions that are appropriately targeted.



Sri Lanka: Oxfam brings together food producers so that they get a fair price for their produce. Photo: Pavithra Joyan de Mello/Oxfam

## INTRODUCTION

Oxfam has been implementing resilience-building programs across the Asia-Pacific region for more than a decade. Evidence from research and evaluations demonstrates how these initiatives support women and men, as well as governments and communities, to build resilience at scale.

**Oxfam defines resilience as the ability of women and men to realise their rights and improve their wellbeing despite shocks, stresses and uncertainty.<sup>1</sup>**

This Evidence Brief synthesises evidence of how Oxfam is working to support community-centred approaches to climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction, delivering outcomes for people who are at risk from disasters and climate change. It highlights how such efforts have improved accountability between communities and governments to achieve impacts beyond the local level, influencing government policies and practices at national and sub-national scales.

It is one of a series commissioned by Oxfam Australia that identifies where, how and why **Oxfam's approach to resilient development** has created impact. The findings and lessons are intended to influence discussions among Oxfam staff, Oxfam partners, and the broader development community (in particular, development partners) about how to achieve resilient development outcomes.

## Community-centred resilience

Community-centred resilience is an approach and process in which at-risk communities are actively involved in the identification, analysis, planning, monitoring and evaluation of disaster, climate change and other risks in order to build their individual and collective resilience to shocks, stresses and uncertainty. Local people are at the heart of decision-making, with a key emphasis placed on participation, empowerment and capacity strengthening so that people and their communities can advocate for themselves. It is designed to not only address local issues, but by using a systems approach, which recognises the need to change social systems that create risk, fragility and vulnerability, it addresses systemic, longer term issues.

# FINDINGS

**Key finding 1: Using a variety of ‘building blocks’ and social change processes, Oxfam projects are building capacity to absorb shocks, adapt to longer term changes and transform the social and political systems that make people vulnerable. Outcomes are stronger where they employ a range of social change processes.**

With over a decade of programming focused on supporting women and men to build resilience in diverse contexts, Oxfam and partners have delivered outcomes across all three of the capacities (absorptive, adaptive and transformative) outlined in Oxfam’s Framework for Resilient Development (OIFRD).

Oxfam has used a range of programming areas or ‘building blocks’. Examples of how building blocks and social change are working

together to contribute to resilience outcomes are presented in Table 1.

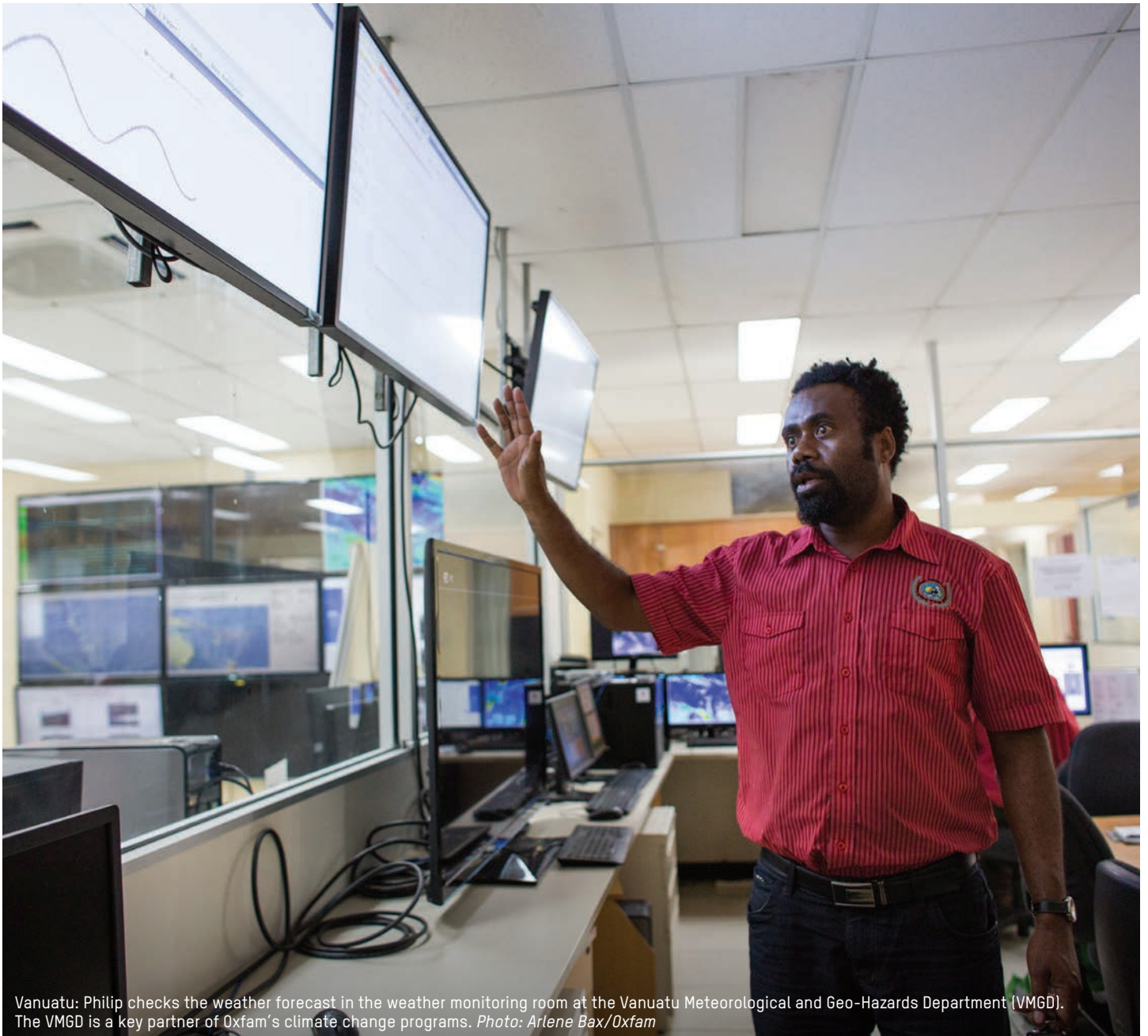
There is strongest evidence of increases in absorptive capacity, likely because the majority of projects reviewed are disaster risk reduction projects that focus specifically on building capacity to manage shocks. However, many projects are contributing to adaptive and transformative capacity, particularly in relationship to women’s empowerment, and national-level policy change.



Indonesia: Maritje Tamara is the teacher of Pelangi Satu Atap Kindergarten, and is also one of the many women leaders supported by Oxfam through our resilience programming. *Photo: Eka Nickmatulhuda/Oxfam*

Table 1: Examples of the contribution of ‘building blocks’ and social change processes to resilience outcomes

BUILDING BLOCKS	SOCIAL CHANGE PROCESSES	RESILIENCE OUTCOMES
<p><b>Disaster preparedness and community planning:</b> including risk analysis; formation and training of community preparedness and response structures; formulation of community action plans and family disaster plans; establishing or improving early warning systems; training for community, government and local partners; and strengthening relationships between stakeholders.</p>	<p><b>Accountable governance:</b> strengthened relationships between communities and government; enhancing civil society’s ability to lobby for local change.</p> <p><b>Informing:</b> supporting communities to access climate change, disaster risk and early warning information.</p> <p><b>Flexible and forward-looking planning:</b> combining scientific information with local knowledge to develop disaster risk management and climate change adaptation plans.</p> <p><b>Gender justice and empowerment:</b> prioritising and developing women’s agency and leadership in disaster preparedness and response.</p>	<p><b>Absorptive capacity</b> In Pakistan, Oxfam and partners assisted communities and local authorities to establish early warning systems. Communities supported by the project received early warning information two days before the 2010 floods — a full day before comparison communities. This allowed people to take early action to evacuate community members, and secure and protect household and livelihood assets.<sup>2</sup></p> <p><b>Adaptive capacity</b> In Bangladesh, awareness from the participatory vulnerability and capacity analysis (PVCA) instigated a number of people to raise their homes to protect them from floodwater.<sup>3</sup> In Solomon Islands, people have moved food production sites further away from rivers and opened up multiple garden plots to spread risks from flooding and pests.<sup>4</sup></p> <p><b>Transformative capacity</b> In Vanuatu, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Solomon Islands, women are stepping into leadership positions within community organisations, including community emergency response teams and savings groups. This is causing a shift in gender norms and giving women a greater voice in decision-making.<sup>5,6</sup></p>
<p><b>Food security and income generation:</b> including livelihood diversification, new practices, new income sources.</p>	<p><b>Securing and enhancing livelihoods:</b> diversifying and developing new practices and income sources to manage the impacts of climate change.</p> <p><b>Learning:</b> stimulating processes of local experimentation and innovation.</p>	<p><b>Absorptive capacity</b> In Timor-Leste, an impact evaluation found that 80% of households had improved food security as a result of project interventions.<sup>7</sup></p>
<p><b>Small business, financial services and insurance:</b> including savings and loans groups; small business insurance linked to business continuity planning; and weather index insurance.</p>	<p><b>Flexible and forward-looking decision-making:</b> using approaches that allow poor households to manage disaster risk.</p>	<p><b>Absorptive capacity</b> In Indonesia, income for small business owners supported by Oxfam increased by 167% over the course of the project. Due to increased savings, insurance and measures in their business continuity plans, small business owners feel that they can recover faster following a disaster.<sup>8</sup></p>
<p><b>WASH:</b> including water management committees; WASH in emergencies; and resilient infrastructure.</p>	<p><b>Gender justice and empowerment:</b> addressing gender equality and shifting gender roles and accountability.</p> <p><b>Learning:</b> supporting community education on water management and infectious disease risks.</p>	<p><b>Transformative capacity</b> In Vanuatu, communities in informal peri-urban settlements have access to treated water, addressing a key adaptation deficit. No longer reliant on river water, this initiative has lowered the burden of disease, and changed gender dynamics by reducing women’s workload.<sup>9</sup></p>
<p><b>Government planning and accountability:</b> including civil society alliance building, advocacy and influencing with government.</p>	<p><b>Multi-stakeholder relationships:</b> building alliances among civil society.</p> <p><b>Accountable governing:</b> increasing civil society capacity to advocate for change.</p> <p><b>Gender justice and empowerment:</b> advocating for women’s voices in decision-making; and supporting women’s and disabled people’s organisations to engage in DRR and DRM.</p>	<p><b>Transformative capacity</b> In the Philippines, Oxfam provided advocacy and media training and regional support to organisations that were lobbying the government for the creation of a “People’s Survival Fund”. Creating a broad coalition of civil society organisations, academics and celebrities, the campaign contributed to the passage of legislation to create the AUD \$26.4 million fund, which provided important finance for community-level activities to build resilience.<sup>10</sup> In Nepal, the Oxfam-provided financial support and advocacy training to the National Network of Community Disaster Committees (NCDMC) which played a critical role in the passage of the Nepal Disaster Management Bill.<sup>11</sup> In Sri Lanka, extensive outreach to government officials by project partners and community organisations resulted in a district’s annual development plan highlighting DRR and CCA as one of seven sectoral priorities.<sup>12</sup></p>



Vanuatu: Philip checks the weather forecast in the weather monitoring room at the Vanuatu Meteorological and Geo-Hazards Department (VMGD). The VMGD is a key partner of Oxfam's climate change programs. Photo: Arlene Bax/Oxfam

## SCALING UP IMPACT IN VANUATU

The Building Resilience Program\* which took place in Vanuatu in 2014-2017, included interventions and approaches that increased collaboration between communities, NGOs and government authorities. The program's focus on working with government at different levels (national, provincial and district) through the creation of disaster and climate change committees has been transformational. By building the capacity of government agencies to establish and register Community Disaster and Climate Change Committees (CDCCCs), the development and implementation of the Provincial Disaster Response Plan, and by increasing linkages between CDCCCs, their Area Secretaries and Provincial Disaster Offices; this has transformed community preparedness and response measures and the government's own governance capacity. Subsequent to the project, Oxfam and other NGOs are now working with the government to massively scale up the number of CDCCCs (with the aim to have committees in every community), as well as setting up and strengthening Provincial Disaster and Climate Change Committees (PDCCCs).

'When I came to the NDMO in 2011, government and NGOs worked very separately. [Now] we work together more, we have permanent clusters, and we see the benefit of working with partners.'

Staff member, National Disaster Management Office, Vanuatu

Elevating local concerns to sub-national and national levels has been achieved through the work of the Vanuatu Climate Action Network (VCAN) and the Vanuatu Humanitarian Team (VHT), which play a crucial role in building local civil society capacity on climate change and disaster issues, including linking with and influencing government policy and practice. Their work is highly valued by the government, with requests to increase collaboration not just in convening inter-cluster groups, but in the implementation of government priorities.

\* The Building Resilience Program was supported by Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies.

## Key finding 2: Oxfam projects have contributed to important changes in government policies and practices, including replication of successful models and increasing the accountability of governments to communities. Better approaches for capturing Oxfam’s contributions will further build the evidence base.

Taking a community-centred approach to resilience means the primary participants of Oxfam’s projects are women and men in local areas. To support these local efforts, Oxfam’s resilience projects link communities with government, and advocate to officials at sub-national and national levels to respond to local rights and needs. Working across these scales contributes to the impact of Oxfam’s projects. Influencing and advocacy are important components of projects that seek to build transformative capacity — the ability of local actors to change the social and political factors that lead to vulnerability to climate change and disasters. Donor support is needed for these efforts.<sup>13</sup>

### Finding 2a: Oxfam has used a range of effective strategies at sub-national and national level to build relationships and engage with government.

Strategies have included supporting sub-national governments to develop climate change and DRM policies and plans, secondment of staff to sub-national government agencies, supporting participation of government staff in community activities, and supporting communities to advocate for their priorities in sub-national planning and budget processes.

- In Indonesia, Oxfam has worked at sub-national level to create local risk reduction networks — to strengthen collaboration of district level DRR actors. These networks have led the creation of district level contingency plans for key hazards. District government representatives stated that the networks have been effective in creating a paradigm shift from reactive to proactive disaster risk management — cementing a process that had begun following the Indian Ocean Tsunami.<sup>14</sup>
- In Vanuatu, Oxfam supported the establishment and coordination of the Vanuatu Climate Action Network and the Vanuatu Humanitarian Team. These networks provided critical input to National Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction Policy and the National Sustainable Development Plan, and supported greater collaboration between government and civil society.
- In Pakistan, Oxfam supported the national government to establish an Emergency Resource Control Centre to coordinate emergency response.<sup>15</sup>

### Finding 2b: There is evidence that community-centred resilience priorities have been integrated into sub-national and national planning and budgets.

Oxfam has supported communities to undertake participatory vulnerability and capacity analysis (PVCA) and resilience planning, integrating information about climate and disaster risk with local priorities. Oxfam has supported communities to build links with government activities and seek support of these local activities.

- In Vietnam, actions to address climate change and disaster risk has been included in district socio-economic development plans, including measures prioritised by communities in participatory planning processes.<sup>16</sup>
- In Sri Lanka, Women’s Disaster Management Committees have obtained funding for implementation of risk reduction action plans. This indicates their ability to influence and access funds from local government, and also the commitment of city governments to the needs of communities.<sup>17</sup> After extensive

outreach to government officials, the project resulted in the district’s annual development plan highlighting DRR and CCA as one of seven sectoral priorities.<sup>18</sup>

- In Myanmar, communities have strengthened linkages with the local offices of the Agriculture Department and the Veterinary Department, and are receiving improved services, including seed supply and vaccination of livestock.<sup>19</sup>

In a further indication of the success of these projects, district governments in Sri Lanka are replicating the approach of forming community disaster management committees.<sup>20</sup>

### Finding 2c: More needs to be done to understand advocacy and influencing processes at a national and sub-national level.

Oxfam’s efforts in the area of government influence are reflected in many projects having advocacy and influencing objectives. However, many of the documents reviewed for this evidence brief lacked robust analysis of the contribution of Oxfam’s projects to national and sub-national policy change. This is partly due to evaluation methods and scope, particularly quantitative approaches which often focused on household level change.<sup>21 22</sup>

Given the growing recognition of the need for transformative change for climate change adaptation, more needs to be done to understand advocacy and influencing processes at a national and sub-national level.



Timor Leste: Two women in Oecussi show how their crops have improved since being involved in Oxfam’s Community-based Adaptation Program. Photo: Joao Corbarfo/Oxfam



Bangladesh: Monika collects drinking water from the solar-powered pond sand water filter in Shatkhira. "We had to collect water from a long distance before and wasted a lot of time. But now we can easily get better water from this tube well and living better than before," she said. Photo: Abir Abdullah/Oxfam

### Key finding 3: A community-centred approach, grounded in local, participatory context analysis and planning, is effective for building resilience and promoting local empowerment and sustainability.

Localised community-centred approaches to resilience empower people to take action in anticipation or response to shocks and change. These approaches strengthen relationships and accountability with government, other service providers and representative groups, so that their needs and priorities are addressed.

**Finding 3a: Participatory, bottom-up planning processes and solid context analysis build the knowledge base of community and Oxfam staff and partners in risks and change, while promoting local empowerment.**

The majority of resilience building work in this review took place in rural communities, including on remote islands. However, there were also examples of effective practices in peri-urban communities in Indonesia and Vanuatu<sup>23,24</sup> and poor urban communities in Bangladesh.<sup>25</sup> The entry point for many of Oxfam's resilience projects are participatory vulnerability and capacity assessments. In diverse contexts, communities, project staff and government representatives come together to understand risks faced by communities. This is followed by an action planning process, to identify responses to both disaster risk, and longer-term risks from climate change.<sup>26</sup>

A participatory approach is more than just "doing what communities want" — participatory processes are empowering communities to learn and take active steps to manage risks. Community-centred approaches require activities to be tailored to the local context.<sup>27</sup> It also allows for awareness raising and capacity strengthening, if facilitated well.

- In Indonesia, participatory processes were used to select female participants in a business development program, and identify appropriate measures to support business owners to manage the risks that disasters pose to their businesses.<sup>28</sup>
- In Vanuatu, participatory community planning processes shaped the way that the project worked with peri-urban communities. The communities, who relied on river water for household use, identified that securing access to piped water was a critical development priority, and an important step to building community resilience. The project was able to work with multiple stakeholders over more than a year to broker community access to piped water. This was transformational, and was particularly important for women, who were largely responsible for their family's water needs.<sup>29</sup>

**Finding 3b: Strengthening community organisations, while building links to government policy and plans, contributes to local absorptive capacity and potential for transformation.**

Oxfam has supported a range of local institutions and community-centred organisations. Work with these institutions (including disaster and climate change management committees, savings groups, women’s empowerment groups and business support groups) includes training and capacity strengthening.

- In Vanuatu and Pakistan, evidence from reviews of emergency responses suggest that because Oxfam and partners and partners invested in the capacity of local institutions — informing them of risks and undertaking forward-looking planning — communities received early warning information and acted on it more quickly. They used the information and took steps to protect life and assets. This resulted in less damage and a quicker recovery than in non-project communities. Through improved relationships and accountability, they were then able to more readily engage with the government response supporting quicker recovery.<sup>30</sup>
- In Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, community members felt that the project helped bring together different groups to work together to design and implement the activities in spite of difference between families (for example, land conflicts).<sup>31</sup>

- There are also multiple examples where training and quotas set by projects have supported women to take leadership positions in local institutions — often for the first time. This resulted in greater involvement of women in decision-making at community and household level.
- However, the effectiveness of local institutions can depend heavily on local context and leadership. In India, communities often expect immediate material benefit or welfare and are not used to self-organising, or fail to see the value of investing time in local institutions.<sup>32</sup>

While local capacity is important, some of the outcomes in key finding 2 demonstrate the value of linking community disaster management groups to local government — both the local authorities, such as village committees or councils, but also the agencies responsible for disaster risk management and climate change adaptation. This support builds accountability and increases good governance. It also recognises that while communities may often be first responders, disasters can exceed their capacity to cope. During disasters, these groups can be effective conduits between the government structures and communities.



Solomon Islands: A family from Niu Birau enjoy a picnic. Oxfam works with villagers to increase their awareness of, and preparedness for disasters and climate change. Photo: Vlad Sokhin / Panos/Oxfam

**Key finding 4: Oxfam has used a range of context specific strategies to strengthen livelihood resilience, and this work was most effective when the objectives and intended outcomes were clear, based on context analysis, and the interventions were appropriately targeted.**

Many Oxfam climate change and disaster risk reduction projects have a central focus on securing and enhancing livelihoods in the face of change. The outcomes of these initiatives vary, but evidence from programs suggests that they are most effective when they are guided by a clear theory of change.

**Finding 4a: Projects were most effective when livelihood activities were linked to a clear theory of change and grounded in a sound analysis of the local context.**

Resilience projects use a range of strategies to secure or enhance livelihoods, but some projects faltered when this component of a resilience project wasn't linked to a clear theory of change.<sup>33</sup> This review identified that linking development outcomes (such as food security, women's economic empowerment, increased income, and small business development) with resilience outcomes (absorptive, adaptive and transformative capacity) can support:

- Food security — in Timor-Leste and Solomon Islands, where communities depend on subsistence agriculture to meet the majority of food demand, success has come from activities including the use of kitchen and household gardens, as well as introducing irrigation alongside household water and sanitation, and food storage and preservation.
- Women's Economic Empowerment — addressing gender inequality at the household and community level is important to Oxfam projects. Many projects sought to use economic activities as a way to build women's individual agency and access and control of assets, as well as collective empowerment through livelihood activities. This supports absorptive capacity and also has the potential to bring about transformative change in the status of women.
- Increasing income — in Indonesia, support for small enterprises increased income, which may then be invested into education, saved for time of disasters or used to open up future opportunities.<sup>34</sup>

- Protecting livelihood assets and minimising disaster loss — using early warning information (in Nepal, Indonesia, Pakistan and Vanuatu), and increasing access to insurance by small business owners and farmers (in Sri Lanka and Indonesia) helped preserve crops and livestock during times of stress and extreme weather events.<sup>35</sup>

**Finding 4b: Combining income-generating activities with business management training and financial services amplifies project contributions to absorptive capacity.**

Evidence from Oxfam projects suggests that increases in income alone are unlikely to be a determinant of household resilience. The impact of improved income is manifested when it is invested in savings for emergencies, investing the income in further productive enterprises, or into key family needs.<sup>36</sup> In certain contexts, improved access to loans and credit, and other financial services such as insurance, can also support absorptive capacity.

- In peri-urban areas of Indonesia, Oxfam and partner Jemari Sakato provided small business owners, particularly women, with business management training, business continuity plans for disasters, and also supported these business owners to access bank accounts and disaster insurance from private sector providers.<sup>37</sup>
- In Sri Lanka, where farmers lose an average of 40% of their crops to floods and other climate-related hazards, weather index insurance reduced barriers (including literacy) for insurance payouts.<sup>38</sup>
- In Timor-Leste, Oxfam and partners have supported savings and loan groups.<sup>39</sup> These groups have played an important role in helping families cope (by buying food) and in sustaining livelihood activities during disaster. 91% of evaluation participants said that, as member of a savings and credit group, they had more food to eat, while 86% said that it had increased their income.<sup>40</sup>



Philippines: Theodora learned about inter-cropping and making organic fertilisers at Oxfam's Climate Resiliency Field Schools. "We've managed to improve our lives through growing vegetables," she said. Photo: Tessa Bunney/Oxfam

# CONCLUSION

Oxfam's programs focus on building the resilience of poor women and men, using community-centred approaches to build resilience. There is strong evidence that Oxfam projects have built absorptive, adaptive and, to a lesser degree, transformative capacity for these people.

This is supported not only by technical interventions or "building blocks", but also through facilitating social change processes, and building relationships between stakeholders from local to national level. Grounding projects through local, participatory context analysis and planning promotes local empowerment. Likewise, support to local institutions, while building links to government policy and plans, builds local absorptive capacity and potential for transformation.

Oxfam projects strengthen relationships and accountability between government power holders and local communities, and influence at national level has contributed to the passage of legislation related to climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction. These advocacy efforts are strengthened by voices from local communities, demonstrating that community-centred approaches extend beyond the local level. However, evaluations need to use better tools and approaches to capture Oxfam's contribution to some of these national level changes.

All of these findings validate the Oxfam International Framework for Resilient Development. The effectiveness of this suite of approaches across multiple contexts and countries suggests that findings have the potential to be transferred, especially when projects remain grounded in local context analysis.

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## RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

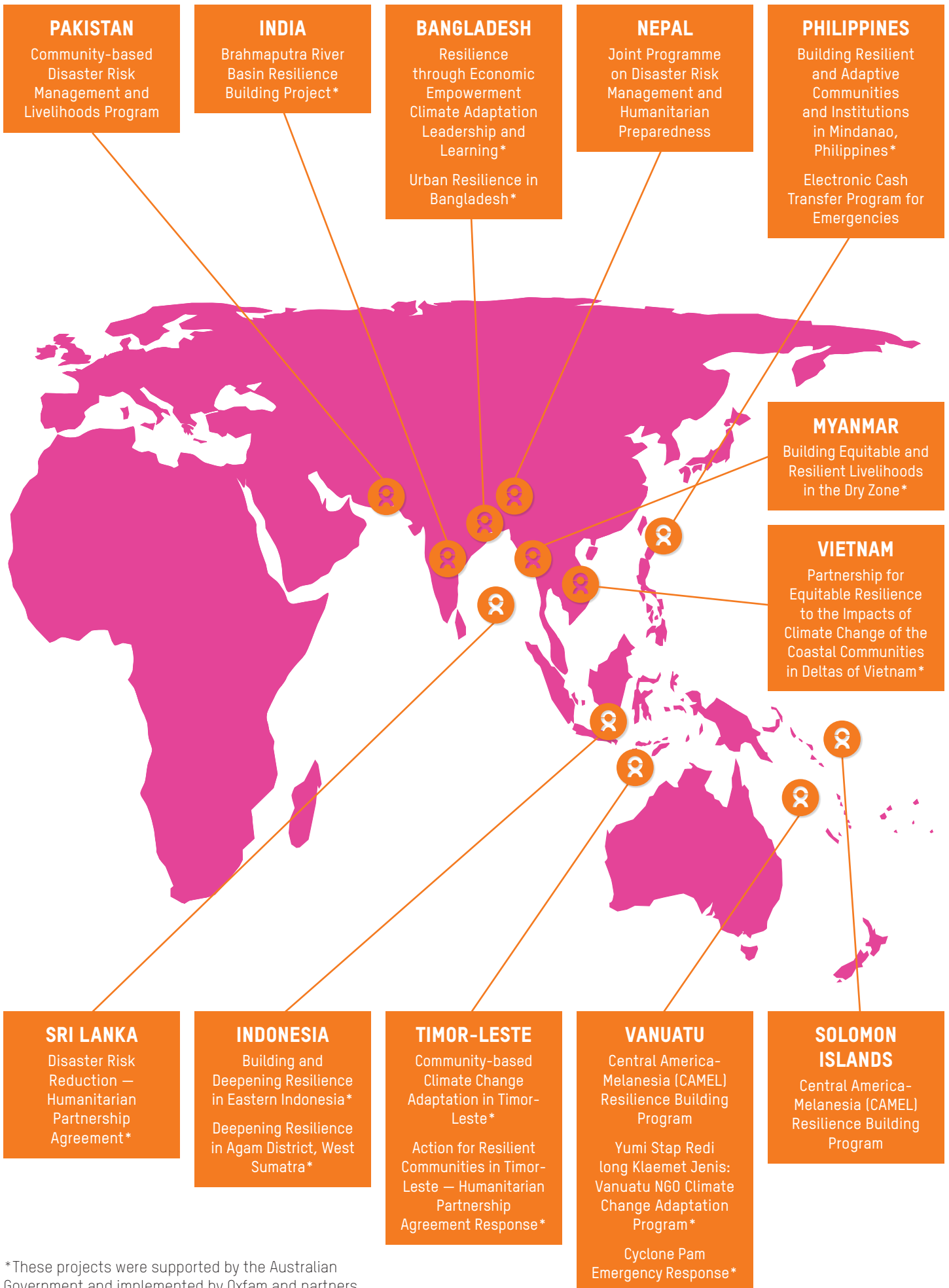
The following questions were based on Oxfam's conceptual frameworks, relevant academic literature, and discussions with Oxfam staff.

1. What impacts have Oxfam's community-centred projects had on the resilience of women, men and people living with a disability?
2. What impacts have Oxfam's community-centred projects had on government policies and practices, including on building government accountability to communities?
3. What has been learned about how to address climate change in diverse cultural, political, economic, environmental and development contexts?
4. What has been learned about strengthening livelihood resilience in a changing climate?

35 evaluations and research reports from Oxfam projects from the Asia-Pacific region were used to inform this brief. Findings were qualitatively coded against each research question and emergent sub-themes, and assessed for quality of evidence.

A detailed methodology, including limitations, is available from Oxfam.

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\*These projects were supported by the Australian Government and implemented by Oxfam and partners.

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This evidence brief was written by Edward Boydell, Julie Webb and Charlotte Sterrett, with valuable inputs provided by Wayne Gum, Ula Majewski, Simon Bradshaw, Liz Hogan and Elsa Carnaby.

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