
IV

Working at different levels

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Introduction to section IV

Multiple strategies, employed at various levels, are essential for the effective integration of a gender perspective into development work. There are many different levels at which gender issues are being addressed in Oxfam's work — from advocacy at the international level of the UN and the World Bank, to networking within and between regions, and national-level programme strategies. In addition to discussing these various kinds of work, articles in this section also explore what opportunities there are for links to be made between the different levels, and the importance of such linking, which enables like-minded organisations and individuals to achieve common goals by working together.

Kanchan Sinha's article focuses on Action for Gender Relations Asia (AGRA), an Oxfam GB staff network with branches in South and East Asia, which aims to share information, build capacity, and boost the morale of staff in relation to gender in development issues. Kanchan Sinha gives particular attention to suggestions of staff, revealed in a survey of AGRA's activities and impact, that the move to make gender issues the responsibility of managers may have undermined the momentum and enthusiasm for gender-sensitive work at the grassroots level, and the sense that gender-fair work is everyone's responsibility.

Between 1992–94, a major process of networking and dialogue between Oxfam GB's staff and partners, and representatives from the women's movement across the world, was in progress. The Women's Linking Project can be seen as a milestone along the road of putting Oxfam's Gender Policy into practice. However, it was much more than this: it was a brave attempt to abdicate power from Oxfam as an international funding NGO, in favour of an equal dialogue with women activists from the South. Co-ordinated by Oxfam's specialist gender unit, the Women's Linking Project was an ambitious, and risky, voyage into new ways of working. In her article, Candida March assesses some of the many challenges this innovative project presented for participants from South and North, and for Oxfam GB itself, and suggests possibilities presented by women linking together in pursuit of gender equality.

Like Candida March, Lina Abu-Habib and Omar Traboulsi in their article reflect on the importance of linking with and learning from feminist organi-

sations from the South, in order to develop a regional programme which has a commitment to gender equality at its heart. Their story recounts how Oxfam GB's programme in the Middle East has been transformed as a result of a central commitment to developing regionally-coherent programmes, and a regional commitment to understanding the common issues facing women in the Maghreb area. The account brings out the importance of relationships between country or regional offices and Oxfam's head office.

In her article, Lucy Muyoyeta, who worked for Oxfam GB in Zambia, discusses the personal and professional gains and costs of attending large international fora and advocating for change, based on her experience of the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in September 1995. She describes how she related her own work with Oxfam in Zambia, as well as her personal identity as a member of the Zambian women's movement, to various international debates, including the accountability of international financial institutions (IFIs). It was at the Beijing conference that the successful campaign 'Women's Eyes on the World Bank' was born, which involves women living in development countries in monitoring the activities of IFIs, and demanding transparency and accountability. Lydia Williams of Oxfam America discusses her organisation's involvement in this advocacy campaign. Women's Eyes has played a considerable role in ensuring that the World Bank turns rhetoric into reality regarding the adoption of a gender perspective into its activities. Oxfam America's involvement has also, in Lydia Williams' estimation, helped the organisation develop wider advocacy strategies on gender issues.

The Oxfam International network, developed during the 1990s, joins Oxfam GB with ten other like-minded organisations in an effort to increase their impact on poverty-alleviation and the promotion of justice. This strategy of working together as Oxfam International is referred to as 'harmonisation'. In their article, Ellen Sprenger of Novib (Netherlands) and Diane Biray Gregorio of Oxfam America examine the role of the inter-organisational Gender Working Group, which has set about integrating gender issues into the harmonisation process. In a separate article, Penny Plowman, an independent consultant formerly of Oxfam GB, and Josette Cole, who manages an Oxfam International fund for gender-related work in South Africa, describe some of the complex issues that have been encountered as harmonisation is implemented on the ground. It is part of the dizzying array of organisational changes taking place in different member organisations of Oxfam International, against the swiftly-changing political context of South Africa.

Regional cohesion and gender in the Middle East programme

Lina Abu-Habib and Omar Traboulsi

Introduction

Oxfam GB has been working in the Middle East since the mid-1950s. It funded numerous projects and programmes — in Egypt, Yemen, Palestine, Lebanon, and the Western Sahara — but until very recently there were no obvious thematic links between the activities funded in these countries. Recognising this lack of cohesion, Oxfam began to develop a strategic programme for the whole region in the early 1990s. Drawing on our experience of working for Oxfam in the Middle East, this article shows how Oxfam's process of regionalisation¹ has led to the creation of an innovative programme for the Middle East / Maghreb region, which has a primary focus on gender relations. We will look at some of the key moments in this process, and explore some of the opportunities and challenges for integrating a gender perspective into Oxfam's work in the region.

Both authors joined Oxfam GB in the late 1980s. At the time, setting up projects and programmes in the Middle East which specifically addressed gender inequalities depended very much on the interest and commitment of individual staff. This was in spite of the fact that Oxfam had been focusing explicitly on gender issues since 1985, when the Gender and Development Unit (GADU) was formed at head office in Oxford. Project documentation was mostly carried out in an *ad hoc* fashion, and did not require staff to tackle issues of gender relations. Managers who developed 'gender-blind' programmes were not penalised, and attempts to do otherwise were not rewarded. Oxfam was supporting many

projects 'for women', so perhaps the case for shifting the focus of our work and investigating imbalances in gender relations was not seen as justifiable.

GADU did not immediately succeed in establishing effective links or systematic working relations with the Middle East desk in Oxford and the field offices. As a result, we felt on the margin of debates on gender issues within head office. This marginalisation may have been exacerbated by perceptions within Oxfam head office of the Middle East as an isolated, Muslim region which presented particular challenges to work on changing gender relations. Such perceptions typically result in rifts and lack of communication.

The lack of expertise, skills, and analytical capacity in the region was another factor which constrained the incorporation of gender concerns into the Middle East programme. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, the region presented itself as being preoccupied with more 'important' debates. At the time, these were related to conflict and to the nature and depth of relations with our local partner organisations. Moreover, resistance to work on gender issues was strong, both at management level on the Middle East desk at head office, as well as in country offices in the region. These are examples of typical views we encountered: 'Gender is a concept from the West'; 'It is not up to a foreign agency to get involved in issues relating to the local culture'; 'Women over here enjoy a lot of advantages'.

Setting priorities and creating a regional programme

In the early 1990s, two innovations prompted Oxfam's staff in the Middle East to initiate a systematic assessment and analysis of its programme in the region, rather than in individual countries. One was the introduction of 'strategic planning' to Oxfam; the other was the process of 'regionalisation' in its international programme. This aimed to bring about a region-wide understanding of poverty and marginalisation and the development of a coherent programme to address these. While regionalisation made it possible for us to take a broader view, to analyse the links between poverty, gender, and development in the Middle East, strategic planning offered an opportunity to use systematic (albeit embryonic) gender-analysis tools to do this.

Our second strategic-planning exercise, carried out in 1995, resulted in a more coherent analysis of the regional situation and our programme, as well as a realistic view of Oxfam's role and impact. Regional staff met three times in one year in order to draft our first strategic plan, with an important outcome: our attention centred on gender power relations, which cross-cut poverty and inequality throughout the region. Specifically, Oxfam's analysis of poverty in the

Middle East identified legal and other institutional forms of discrimination against women as some of the root causes of poverty and inequality. Oxfam also recognised the growing incidence and the various forms of violence against women as a powerful means of excluding and subordinating women.

During strategic planning, Oxfam's Gender Policy served as a general guiding framework. Finally, we identified 'addressing the imbalance in gender relations with particular stress on gender violence' as a main strategic aim for the region. However, in order to develop the programme in accordance with our strategic aim, we had to prioritise our main areas of intervention. We drew on the expertise of external and internal advisers, notably from the Gender Team in Oxford,² to further the analysis and assist in programme planning.

A number of events and initiatives facilitated this process. Regionalisation heralded new ways of thinking and working, within and beyond the organisation. Oxfam's Middle East programme became more integrated and communicated more effectively within the organisation. As a coherent entity, we were able to engage in debates and processes on gender issues taking place at Oxfam House, and in implementing the Gender Policy in the region. These improvements were also the result of staff changes, at management level, on the Middle East desk, of the region's participation and input into the Gender Implementation Workshop organised by the Gender Team in 1996, and of the secondment of Lina Abu-Habib, a member of the Lebanon programme, to the Gender Team. Not only did this develop her expertise on gender issues, but it also allowed the Middle East programme to engage actively in debates within Oxfam House.

Oxfam's relationships with partner organisations in the Middle East and Maghreb also changed quite considerably with regionalisation. Western aid agencies have often assumed that they should respect the so-called 'local culture'. In practice, this has meant that everything connected with local culture (and consequently with Islam, as the region is predominantly Muslim), was considered a 'no go' area. The development of regional programme priorities meant that relationships with partners were re-examined and the question raised of whether Oxfam should intervene in 'local culture'. The answer was yes: Oxfam expanded its work relationships considerably, and actively sought the views of women's groups and organisations, individual feminists and human rights activists, various NGOs, research and training institutes, and regional networks. Although this development did not include a withdrawal from many of our very close partnerships with grassroots groups and NGOs, many perceived it as a radical, not necessarily positive, change in Oxfam's ways of working.

In fact, relationships with local partner organisations in Lebanon had already been changing before regionalisation. From late 1994, the Middle East Desk took a leading role in introducing, supporting, and at times pushing for this re-

examination and expansion of relationships, both in the field and at Oxfam House. One essential factor facilitating this change was the close working relationship with the Gender Team at Oxfam head office.³

A regional analysis of poverty, gender, and development

With regionalisation, Oxfam in the Middle East began to look at poverty and development in a different way. During the strategic planning process, external political, social, and economic trends were subjected to a gender analysis which used methods of institutional analysis, including the Social Relations Approach.⁴ This analysis identified imbalances in gender relations as one of the main challenges for development processes and programmes. It also pointed to the fact that Oxfam's interventions in various parts of the region only claimed to respond to women's needs, but had no transformative agenda whatsoever.

In other words, if our projects aim to improve women's status at the community level only, with no intervention at other levels (such as the state), their overall impact will be negligible. For instance, if we teach women to sew, without intervening in the markets through which their products must be sold, then they will still suffer discrimination in the market and there will be no change in their status. Institutional analysis enabled us to make the links between discrimination at different levels. We examined the structural basis of problems such as domestic violence — as a result, we decided to focus our interventions on the 'Family Laws', laws which maintain the artificial distinction between public and private spheres.

In addition, a gender-aware local consultant was commissioned to write a general paper on poverty, gender, and development issues, which provided the regional team with a good baseline analysis.⁵ Subsequent training workshops allowed the Middle East team to gain a fuller grasp of the Social Relations Approach, which can be used to assist an understanding of gender relations, and which has been used at all levels of analysis in the Middle East programme.

However, many have found this gender-sensitive analysis of poverty and development difficult to understand and absorb. Some felt that it was too threatening and judgmental, because it pointed to major gaps in Oxfam's past work, and to past interventions of doubtful quality. Our changing to this mode of analysis was difficult to accept, as it required questioning assumptions and prejudices. Some development practitioners found it hard to admit that the endless series of sewing courses for women which have been strongly argued for in the past were futile, in the sense that they had little, if any, impact on women's social and economic status.

Overcoming resistance

Some, both within and beyond Oxfam, have argued that the regionalisation process has negatively affected the Middle East/Maghreb programme. Within the organisation, there were a few raised eyebrows related to our work on gender inequalities. Here are two of the many comments made by staff at Oxfam House: ‘Is Oxfam in the Middle East / Maghreb turning into a *feminist* organisation?’ and ‘I am not sure that advocacy on women and family laws is an appropriate response to issues of livelihood and poverty...’

The clear focus on gender has been developed with support from and through close links with feminist women’s groups and networks in the region. Criticisms of such groups as Westernised, bourgeois, and removed from the grassroots were common in many countries that Oxfam works in, mainly arising from an inadequate understanding of poverty, gender and development, and the factors underlying male resistance to gender equality. In our opinion, this resistance can only be overcome by pointing out that in its official Gender Policy, Oxfam has a mandate to promote women’s interests. The implementation of an organisational policy is not negotiable. Our solid regional analysis, which so clearly pointed to gender inequalities as a cross-cutting issue of concern, also helped to overcome resistance. It became obvious that any development programme which lacks a gender perspective can only produce an inadequate response to poverty.

How we got there: developing a focus on gender

Establishing links with regional feminist networks

Many have long scoffed at the idea of Oxfam establishing links with women’s movements and groups in the Middle East/Maghreb region. The reasons put forward to justify this resistance were many. As mentioned above, activist women were generally perceived to be middle-class, educated, and often ‘Westernised’. They were therefore seen to have few links with ‘poor’ women at the ‘grassroots’ level. The women’s movements in the region were believed — in many cases rightly so — to be too fragmented and/ or politicised, and thus too risky to work with. (Oddly enough, such arguments did not hold in many other cases when Oxfam supported and funded NGOs whose leadership was by and large middle-class, ‘Westernised’, and/ or closely linked to political parties).

The role of feminist women activists and women’s groups on the wider social and political scene was little appreciated, even misunderstood. In fact, there was a clear reluctance to engage in dialogue or collaborate with feminist groups, because some women’s organisations perceived Oxfam’s agenda as diametrically opposed

to their own. However, this perception was slowly overcome by closer contacts, discussions, and exchanges with the representatives of various groups within the women's movement. While maintaining the individual identities of both Oxfam and the groups, it became clear that our concerns overlapped significantly.

The UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing: An opportunity for reflection and action

The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in September 1995, was a major landmark in building a gender-focused programme across the region. Unlike earlier world conferences on women such as Nairobi in 1985, the Beijing conference brought together a high number of NGOs and women's groups from the Middle East / Maghreb region, many of which had not formally existed ten years previously. Beijing was a catalyst for many activities within and across countries in this region, and helped create many alliances and networks. By choosing to engage in, support, and influence the preparations for Beijing, Oxfam's Middle East team took a strategic decision to engage in a region-wide process which had important long-term implications. In the case of Lebanon, for example, gender began to be effectively 'mainstreamed' within the programme.

A major initiative in this process was the identification, and subsequent support of, the Collectif Maghreb Egalité 95, a Maghrebian working group composed of 15 feminist activists and groups from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. This group formed three years before the Beijing conference in order to undertake 'shadow preparations' (in parallel with the UN's work), particularly with regard to violations of women's rights in the three countries, including violence against women. The Collectif presented a shadow regional report to the United Nations, and drafted and proposed an alternative and egalitarian regional family code. Oxfam saw in this group a strategic partner for collaboration on gender work as well as an interesting forum for learning and exchange with other countries of the Middle East. The relationship with the Collectif Maghreb has developed to form an important axis of the current regional programme.

Violence against women: an increasingly prominent phenomenon

In June 1995, in the course of region-wide preparations for the Fourth World Conference on Women, a network of more than 20 NGOs (from Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Syria, Mauritania, Iraq, and Palestine) convened the first Arab Women's Tribunal on Violence Against Women. Victims of violence testified for the first time on their personal experiences of domestic violence, incest, child abuse, forced feeding, female genital mutilation, crimes of honour, and so on. This was indeed the first public condemnation of all forms of violence against women which prevail in the region. The tribunal also clearly demonstrated that violence against women is a huge obstacle to development.

The public acknowledgement of this fact meant that a state of denial had to be challenged. For example, people in the region had to be made aware of the fact that, contrary to popular belief, female genital mutilation is a significant issue here; and the barrier between the 'private' and the 'public' sphere had to be broken down so that domestic violence is no longer seen as a personal, family issue. There is ample research documenting the extent of gender violence and its different manifestations. Such evidence supported our arguments that the regional programme should address the issue of violence against women, which then became a stand-alone regional objective. Oxfam has also taken an active role in supporting and encouraging innovative initiatives, both regional and country-based, which address various aspects of gender violence.

A new regional initiative

Oxfam's relationships with partners have changed considerably with the creation of a coherent, gender-focused regional programme. As a result of our developing relationships with women's groups and networks, we have emphasised regional exchanges and learning, and boosted our advocacy work through regional links.

In late 1997, following a regional gender-training workshop on gender analysis and planning organised by Oxfam, the workshop participants⁶ met to discuss their needs regarding gender training and capacity-building. In order to break the isolation of women groups and networks, the project on 'regional linking, learning, and capacity-building on gender' was launched. Its member groups engage in regional and international debates and processes, disseminate and exchange information on gender work, thus maximising the impact of their advocacy work on gender issues. The network provides an open forum for ideas and points of view, and allows member groups to develop new resources on gender issues in the region. Although Oxfam functioned as the focal point and catalyst, the network is a collective creation, owned by its all members.

Conclusion

Oxfam GB is increasingly gaining a strong reputation in the Middle East/Maghreb region as an organisation seriously concerned with addressing unequal gender relations. This has come about gradually. Key factors in the success include Oxfam's close interaction with feminists, women's groups and NGOs, and the high quality of Oxfam's publications on gender issues, which add much to Oxfam's reputation and to the trust it enjoys of groups which it works with.

The Middle East team, like every other regional programme, have a responsibility to implement Oxfam's Gender Policy. Developing a regional programme

with a focus on addressing gender inequalities is indeed possible and feasible. However, it is a process which involves the input and support of all the people who are part of Oxfam, and requires a clear, stated will on the part of the organisation's decision-makers. Such a commitment entails the provision of appropriate resources and the creation of mechanisms which will ensure that both Oxfam and its partners can regularly review and evaluate progress, and consider the way forward.

Although each region must develop its own specific plans for implementing the Gender Policy, its essence and its stated aims must be universally applied. Judging from our experience, the idea of 'adapting' the Gender Policy to fit the need of one particular cultural context merely serves to dilute it. Indeed, adapting a policy to fit one particular region can be used as a tactic for rendering the policy itself meaningless. To draw a parallel, 'adapting' Oxfam's Gender Policy to the Middle East region is like ratifying CEDAW⁷ with reservations.⁸

Oxfam's Middle East/Maghreb programme is still in its early stages. Its focus on gender is developing fast; so is the expertise and experience gained. With continued monitoring of this programme's progress and committed fostering and support, it will sustain its distinctive nature and innovative work.

About the authors

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Omar Traboulsi is Syrian and resides in Lebanon. An economics graduate from the American University of Beirut and the Université Saint Denis in Paris, he has worked with Oxfam since 1986: first as South Lebanon Programme Officer, then as Deputy Country Representative, and, since 1988, as Country Representative for Lebanon. In 1994 he moved to Oxford as Middle East Regional Manager. He returned to Beirut in 1996 as the Middle East/Maghreb Regional Representative. Before joining Oxfam, Omar was a journalist, writing for various economic and political newsletters in Lebanon.

The experience of Beijing from a Zambian perspective

Lucy Muyoyeta

Introduction

The Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing, China, in September 1995. Alongside the inter-government conference, a separate venue was devoted to the NGO Forum, where 30,000 women and men from all over the world came together to 'Look at the World Through Women's Eyes'. This article is written in a very personal style, in order to emphasise not only my own commitment to women's struggles, but also to give expression to an experience that has affected both my personal and professional life.

My journey to the NGO Forum is rooted in the 1985 Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi. I did not attend this conference, but the preparations for Nairobi and my participation in the preliminary workshops sharpened my sense of gender oppression and injustices against women. This forms the background to my own commitment to women's struggles, and also to my work on gender issues within Oxfam GB. Ten years on, the learning I drew from the experience of participating in the Beijing conference has been born out of and contributed to all aspects of my identity as a Zambian woman committed to gender equity.

The 'Beijing process' in Zambia

Zambian women's preparations for Beijing were characterised by the consciousness that the activities leading up to the conference were as important as actually participating in it. We recognised that the Beijing conference was not the end of

our efforts, but part of a momentum to promote structural change within Zambia, in which all Zambian women had a role to play and which must be continued after Beijing. Many different activities were organised which Oxfam participated in. A march through Lusaka was organised in August 1995 to publicise the Beijing conference within Zambia. The Oxfam office in Zambia marched in solidarity with the Zambian women's movement under our banner 'Together for Rights, Together Against Poverty'.

Oxfam's Zambia programme also supported the Zambian government in its preparations for the conference. The government committed itself to developing a platform of action to be incorporated into the regional and international platforms of action in Dakar and Beijing. To co-ordinate this, a National Preparatory Committee (NPC) was formed in January 1993. Oxfam was the only international agency invited to sit on the committee, in appreciation of the role we have played consistently in supporting the cause of women in Zambia.

This commitment to the cause of women is at the centre of our work on basic rights and poverty, and this was emphasised through our participation in various events leading up to Beijing. I represented Oxfam's Zambia team and our work on structural adjustment at a national-level workshop which was part of this process. Oxfam's work on structural adjustment has provided a focus for our advocacy objectives in Zambia. For me, a vital part of our commitment to working with a gender perspective is ensuring that our advocacy work promotes an understanding of the different effects of structural adjustment on women and men.

This area of macroeconomic change and the effects of structural adjustment on women therefore gave focus to my participation in the NGO Forum in China as a representative of Oxfam in Zambia. But I was also participating as a Zambian woman and an African feminist with a personal interest in supporting the struggle of women in Zambia for economic justice and equality.

Participating in Beijing: linking my agendas

I arrived in China on 25 August 1995. Arriving a few days early allowed me to become acquainted with the geography of the site for the NGO Forum, where I would spend most of my time. It was a huge area, and most delegates suffered the difficulties of finding their way around the site.

Arriving early also allowed me to 'touch base' with the Gender Team and other colleagues from Oxfam offices around the world. My participation in Beijing as the representative of the Zambia field office was at the Gender Team's request, who co-ordinated our participation in keeping with Oxfam GB's overall advocacy objectives. Mention must be made of the Gender Team's effort to trace

the Oxfam participants and get some cohesion in the group. They must be commended for this, as communications were extremely difficult. But we struggled on and managed every other day to meet as the Oxfam group.

I was asked to make a presentation on the Zambian Oxfam team's advocacy work on Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs). This was an opportunity to develop our work on gender issues and SAPs, providing a wider scope for our advocacy work at the international level. But apart from this specific professional input, I was personally interested in following the theme of economic alternatives and supporting the Zambian delegation as much as I could.

On a personal level, I was happy to be at the NGO Forum to celebrate women's achievements. Women's achievements need to be celebrated, because in spite of the odds against us, still we achieve. Undoubtedly, the NGO Forum provided an opportunity to do so. From the splendour of the opening ceremony (which celebrated women's achievement in China and the world) to the many other art, music, and dance events that took place, to the colourful national costumes that were worn, there was no shortage of opportunities for celebration. Indeed we celebrated. Yet there is the sobering fact that the gains made by women and, indeed, by humanity have faced serious reversals in the last decade, as we grapple with all manner of forces acting against us, including economic crisis, growing poverty, militarisation, violence, and economic globalisation.

Beijing was also an opportunity for learning. There were perhaps too many opportunities, as it was difficult at certain times to make choices about which activity to participate in and which to forego. As can be imagined, activities of one's interest would sometimes be running at the same time in different venues.

Linking and learning — the personal and the professional

In my choice of workshops I made a decision to participate as much as possible in those organised by organisations and networks that I had previously not had much contact with. I wanted to gain new perspectives and ideas, both personally and professionally, on the issue of economic alternatives, but also expand my knowledge of organisations and networks working on similar issues.

Economic alternatives

A common thread running through the theme of economic alternatives is that the search for alternatives means a critical re-assessment and reshaping of economic theory and policy from a gender perspective (WIDE, August 1995). This is based on the idea that economics should serve people, rather than people serving economics. We need a new criterion for measuring success, which would

include the equitable distribution of resources within and across countries, between men and women, and between social classes. It would also reflect women's unpaid caring work in economic statistics such as GNP.

The search for alternatives is developing, although no single model has yet been produced (and perhaps the era of one economic model that everyone follows is/should be past). The main idea is that we must rethink our definition of what is economic (and therefore gets valued and paid for) and what is social (under-valued or not valued at all). Perhaps this is best articulated by the Wages for Housework campaign.⁹ This idea of a completely alternative view of economics, with women at the centre of our understanding, could have exciting implications for organisations working in Zambia, such as Oxfam.

It is certainly important for women such as myself who challenge dominant and restrictive economic thinking in our own countries. In Zambia, women suffer disproportionately from the dominant understanding of economics, because of its conventional distinction between unpaid and paid work. However, we have begun to challenge this, for example by supporting widows' rights to inheritance. Whether their work is waged or unwaged, women make a contribution to the social reproduction of their families, which must be valued by ensuring that they have the right to inherit in case of the husband's death.

In thinking about Oxfam's work at the community level, questions regarding the exploitation of women's unpaid labour must be raised. The work that Oxfam supports promotes community participation. Community work is mostly done by women and is unpaid. Perhaps the clearest example is that of AIDS home care, where Zambia is recognised for its pioneering work. In particular, Chinkankata Mission Hospital in Zambia's Southern Province is widely acclaimed for its programme of home-based care for people suffering from AIDS. But while the programme is indeed very good for AIDS patients, it places those who care for the patients at home (mainly women) under huge additional strain.

Reflecting women's unpaid work in statistics is an important first step, but statistics on their own do not feed people nor save them from being over-worked. Within the context of Zambia, this question arises for me: how do we put new economic thinking into practice? The issue is somewhat different for richer countries because, given the political will, their states have the resources to do it. In our case, reflecting and valuing unpaid work is certainly a valid principle to aim for, but we must acknowledge that it will be a long struggle before this is accepted in our country. The struggle for us is hard enough, even for those widely accepted social-spending priorities like education and health.

I also believe that alternative economic models cannot emerge without serious thought about the level of consumption. Excessive materialism is exhibited not only in the rich Northern countries, but also among the elite of countries such as

my own. The women's movement have not made sufficient linkages between their oppression, which is rooted in an unbalanced economic system, and our levels of consumption. For me, one of the least attractive aspects of the Beijing conference was the excessive materialism exhibited by many of the delegates. On the way back, when I saw the huge amount of shopping that women carried out of Beijing, I was reminded of Mahatma Gandhi's famous saying, which I paraphrase: 'It took the exploitation of half the world for a small island like England to develop, how many worlds would it take a country the size of India'.

Inter-generational dialogue

I heard a panel of older and younger women discuss inter-generational dialogue — another issue of great interest to me personally and to the Zambian women's movement — at the Beijing conference. The key question for me is how to strike a balance between celebrating older women's pioneering role and creating the space to allow younger women to grow into leadership roles. I must caution here that the issue is not a simplistic one of older women standing in the way of young women's advancement in the movement. Rather, the question is how the skills, knowledge, and experience of older women and the enthusiasm, idealism, and indeed the skills and knowledge of youth can best be used to strengthen the women's movement as a whole. Out of the experience in Beijing came just the same sentiment: the movement belongs to all, and we must harness our different strengths and not dwell on weaknesses.

I feel strongly that Oxfam's role is to support and not undermine the strong and effective leadership in the Zambian women's movement. Within the context of inter-generational dialogue, it is important that Oxfam is aware of some of the sensitivities in the women's movement. Zambian women are concerned about one aspect of Oxfam's role at both the national and international level: that some individuals who are no longer very active in (and who contribute very little to) the national context, remain credible in international networks, often using their international contacts in ways that frustrate the work going on locally. This is an important point for Oxfam to be aware of and sensitive to, because we work both at local and international levels. We can then ensure that our actions give the necessary support at all times.

Making sense of Beijing

I was looking forward to creating alliances with other women at the Forum, with great expectations of the strength that both I and the Oxfam office in Zambia would gain from this. While it is difficult to talk concretely about having built

coalitions and alliances at an individual level, the Forum certainly provided a chance to begin doing so. I identified some organisations whose work on alternative economics — my area of special interest — appeals to me; an important starting point.

However, the Forum's down side in this regard was its sheer size: 30,000 people are estimated to have participated. The huge numbers of people in each workshop hindered coalition-building in two ways: it was difficult to discuss issues in depth; and having met a person once, the chance of meeting again was slim.

After about three days of participating in workshops related to alternative economics and meeting with other people and organisations on this theme, it all became rather repetitive. My initial enthusiasm began to wane somewhat, and the dreary rainfall of course exacerbated this. With these feelings, I began to ask: What are we all here for? How does what I have done so far fit into the wider context of the official inter-government conference?

Sometimes it was difficult to see the link. A complicated system of caucusing has developed around UN conferences, which is difficult to understand by novices, such as myself. (I must also confess that I have an aversion to conferences in general, and bigger ones in particular.) I was later to discover that at Beijing, even without being an official conference participant, you were still able to make an input through the system of caucuses. You identify as many people as possible during workshops, from as many different countries as possible who share or sympathise with your concern. Then all of you endeavour to make this a concern of as many official country delegations as possible. The more countries voice a concern, the better its chance of making its way into the Platform of Action. There is, of course, a lot of compromising and, to some extent, dealing involved.

After Beijing

A major benefit of my participation in the Beijing Forum for the Oxfam office in Zambia is that we now have some direct knowledge of what UN conferences are like. We can therefore make better judgement about people we sponsor to attend these conferences, and brief them effectively.

The Zambian women's movement has returned from Beijing with incredible motivation and strength. A lot has since happened: collectively and individually, NGOs have organised report-back sessions for colleagues who did not participate in Beijing. They have held a visioning session which we did not attend, but reports reached us speaking of vibrancy, frankness, and a renewed strength. The National Women's Lobby Group organised a National Convention on the Role of Women in Politics, in which I participated, and which examined the

Beijing Platform of Action — especially those parts of relevance to the role of women in politics. A draft Charter of Women's Rights in Zambia, produced by the Women's Lobby, was also considered at this workshop. Within the context of Oxfam's lobbying on structural adjustment, we see a lot of scope for supporting work that is both an outcome and follow up of Beijing. The Beijing conference and the resulting document have provided a framework for the Zambian government's commitment to the cause of women, giving us a starting point from which women can campaign for their rights.

Conclusion

It is extremely difficult to try and capture something as large, diverse, and colourful as Beijing, with both its highs and lows. Nagging doubts remain about whether I have done justice to Beijing in this article. Since returning, I have been asked questions such as: What do you think of the Chinese people? What about the chaotic organisation of the conference we heard about? And what about all the excessive security measures? Really, in trying to report an event like Beijing one could go on; but I end here.

About the author

Lucy Muyoyeta is a Zambian. She worked for Oxfam for 12 and half years until May 1998. Her last post was as Oxfam's Acting Regional Representative for West Africa, but she has mostly worked in Zambia and Malawi. In her own right, Lucy Muyoyeta is a social activist on women's and basic human-rights issues, working on a voluntary basis with a number of Zambian organisations. Currently, she is a consultant for ActionAid.

Women's Eyes on the World Bank: Integrating gender equity into advocacy work

Lydia Williams

This article focuses on Oxfam America's experience in integrating a commitment to gender equity into our policy advocacy programme. In particular, it uses Oxfam America's role in the campaign Women's Eyes on the World Bank (US) as a case study to show how the agency has turned its commitment to women's empowerment and human rights into action.

The mission of Oxfam America

Oxfam America's mission is to create lasting solutions to hunger, poverty, and social injustice. Oxfam America has a three-pronged approach: support for development work of community-based partner organisations, policy advocacy, and education of the North American public about the issues faced by our partners. Rather than operating its own programmes, Oxfam America has always sought to build partnerships with community-based organisations. Partnership means more than just providing funding to local organisations; it means making a long-term commitment to organisations with whom we have developed reciprocally beneficial relations based on mutual respect, common goals, solidarity, and shared risk.

Central to Oxfam America's mission is a belief that poverty will be eradicated only with the removal of structural barriers — including gender discrimination — that deny people basic rights and access to the skills, resources, and power to become self-sufficient. Over the years, Oxfam America has funded organisations that seek to meet the practical needs of women such as credit, literacy training,

and health education. But by listening to partners, the agency came to understand that gender equality would be realised only if the cultural, legal, and political systems that perpetuate women's inequality were broken. Thus, Oxfam America has tried to support organisations that attempt to meet women's 'strategic' needs, with efforts to transform gender relations and remove obstacles to women's equal access to productive resources and decision-making. This is done through funding and technical support for local initiatives for leadership development, consciousness-raising, awareness of gender violence, and, increasingly, policy advocacy at national level to protect women's rights through government intervention and legal reforms.

The link between grant-making in the South and policy advocacy in the North

As economic and political decision-making has become more globalised, advocates for sustainable development have realised that grant-making targeted at the local level is not enough. Support for grassroots strategies must be accompanied by action to influence actors who are often half-way around the world. Responding to structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) instigated by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank is perhaps the most powerful example of the need for global action to transform systems of inequality. As SAPs began to take their toll in the 1980s, many of Oxfam America's partners mobilised against cuts in budgets and wages, deregulation and privatisation of state-owned industries, removal of subsidies and trade barriers, and other economic reforms that were hurting the poor. It was women who were often the harshest critics, arguing that, given their subordinate position in society, it was they who frequently paid the highest prices for adjustment, in the form of lower wages, heavier workloads, and rising rates of domestic violence.

Given the tremendous power of the US government in the international arena, Oxfam America has always felt a deep responsibility to speak out when US policies negatively affect its partners and their communities, from the Vietnam War, to military aid to El Salvador, to the politicisation of foreign assistance. Through encouragement from its partners, the agency has in recent years increased our ability to affect the policies of the United States and international institutions that affect people around the globe. Since the mid-1980s, Oxfam America's policy advocacy unit has grown from one to five people. In 1995, we opened a Washington DC office (in addition to the programme office in New York), staffed with two policy advocacy coordinators, including myself. This office affords us much better access to policy makers at the World Bank, the IMF,

and the US government, and improves our collaboration with other NGOs also based in Washington DC. This proximity has provided an important tool in our advocacy work with these institutions.

Oxfam America defines policy advocacy as the implementation of a range of activities designed to change the actions of government institutions. Our advocacy takes many forms: some are direct, such as letter writing and face-to-face meetings with decision-makers within institutions we are trying to influence; some are indirect, such as research to document negative effects of a policy on partners and to make a case for an alternative approach, or education of the American public about the policy through our newsletter, public events, or use of the mass media.

While Oxfam takes its own independent positions on issues, its commitment to partnerships means that one of the most important functions of the Washington office is to amplify the voices of Southern civil-society groups. A key critique of SAPs is that these policies are designed without input or consent from civil society. A focus of our advocacy in Washington has been to establish formal mechanisms for input from civil society into the decision-making processes of our own government's foreign policy as well as those of the international institutions. The lobbying of Oxfam America staff is supplemented by the facilitation of occasional visits by partners who meet with Washington-based policy-makers, and constant information-sharing with partners. The value placed by Oxfam America on maintaining its independence and speaking out against the US government when necessary is illustrated by the agency's tradition of not accepting US government funds.

The Beijing conference as a catalyst for Oxfam America's gender-justice advocacy

The Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995, provided a global Forum for women's groups and non-government organisations to bring concerns about the impact of SAPs to the international stage and advocate for change on a global level.¹⁰ Oxfam America sponsored the participation of over a dozen female partners at Beijing, organised workshops on gender and the economy, and participated in the NGO Economic Caucus, which sought to influence the conference documents on economic issues affecting women.

This Economic Caucus became a catalyst for action by women to challenge the role of the World Bank in maintaining the status quo of women's subordination. Seizing on the opportunity presented by Bank President James Wolfensohn's enthusiastic participation in the conference, members of the Economic Caucus drafted a petition to be delivered to Wolfensohn and managed to gather the

signatures of 1,000 NGO conference participants. The petition took the Bank to task for ignoring women's needs and demanded that the Bank take specific steps to bring its policies in line with the Beijing Platform for Action. These included efforts to engage grassroots women as full partners in the Bank's economic policy-making; mechanisms to institutionalise a gender perspective in Bank policies and programmes; increases in Bank investments designed to improve women's access to and control over productive assets and services, including health care, education, financial services, and land; and increases in the number and diversity of women in senior positions at the Bank.

Upon receiving the petition, James Wolfensohn pledged to engage in dialogue with women's groups to implement the petition's demands. To ensure that the demanded reforms would become a reality, Economic Caucus members launched the campaign known as Women's Eyes on the World Bank. Volunteers from each region agreed to act as focal points for organising to promote the campaign's goals within their countries and regions. While the campaign was conceived as an international effort, since the Beijing conference, chapters have emerged only in the United States and Latin America.

Member groups from seven countries in Latin America have begun to monitor the Bank's operations in their countries from a gender perspective, and a number of workshops have been organised to train women's groups in how to monitor Bank projects. In the United States, Oxfam America and a dozen Washington-based gender activists sought to establish a more formal structure for Women's Eyes in the months following Beijing. Seeing the campaign as an opportunity to complement the grassroots organising for economic justice of many of its partners, Oxfam America agreed to act as the focal point, and I volunteered to act as the convener of the US Chapter as part of my duties as an Oxfam America Advocacy Coordinator. In the US, a variety of NGOs with experience in monitoring the World Bank worked in collaboration with organisations with expertise in international women's issues. The campaign has benefited hugely from the different strengths that each member group brings.

The US chapter of the Women's Eyes campaign

Given our physical location, the United States chapter identified its primary function as that of monitoring the actions of the Bank's headquarters in order to implement the demands of the 'Beijing petition'. Soon after Beijing, the Bank announced the formation of an External Gender Consultative Group, which meets annually with Bank officials to discuss the Bank's progress on gender equity. Fourteen prominent feminist leaders from around the world serve on it.

With our proximity to the World Bank headquarters in Washington, DC, the US chapter of the Women's Eyes Campaign has been able to provide the Consultative Group (which includes a member of Oxfam America's Southern Africa team) with timely information about the status of gender-related issues within the Bank, as well as help in developing strategies to use the Group's annual meetings to win agreement from Bank management to move faster to mainstream gender concerns throughout the agency.

In addition to monitoring, we are also committed to direct lobbying of Washington-based World Bank officials to open up space for greater participation of grassroots women in Bank operations, and sharing information with networks that are concerned about gender and the World Bank.

Monitoring

Effective advocacy for change must be backed by solid documentation of the problem. Thus, Women's Eyes identified monitoring and documentation of what the Bank was actually doing with regard to gender as its first priority. In March 1996, the Bank released its first 'Progress Report on Gender', outlining in rather glowing terms its progress towards implementing each of the demands of the Beijing petition. Acknowledging that some progress had indeed been made, Women's Eyes nonetheless found the Bank's report to be over-optimistic about the agency's progress and determined that an independent analysis of the Bank's record was needed. A team of ten members of the US chapter embarked on a project to document the progress and problems of the Bank's gender policy.

The results of the survey were released in a October 1997 report, 'Gender Equity and the World Bank Group: A Post-Beijing Assessment'. The report — the most comprehensive external review of the Bank's gender policies — found that, while worthwhile initiatives have been launched, the Bank has yet to address concerns about gender equity systematically across the various sectors in which it operates, and continues to promote macroeconomic policies without regard to the gender implications of those policies and without women's participation. The report ended with 13 concrete recommendations to Bank management on how to better integrate gender equity into its operations.

Lobbying

Once the report was completed, it was distributed widely to Bank managers and staff responsible for gender. The report's recommendations then served as the campaign's lobbying agenda for the coming year. Women's Eyes members engaged in direct meetings with various World Bank managers, as well as the United States Executive Director to the World Bank, to press for action on the recommendations.

The US Executive Director to the World Bank has been both a target of our lobbying and an ally. Because the US holds a 17 per cent share of the votes on the World Bank board, maintaining a relationship with this office is very important. The US Director has been helpful in pushing a gender-equity agenda on the board, for example, by raising questions about gender when projects come up for consideration at board meetings.

Outreach

While monitoring and direct lobbying have been the key advocacy strategies of Women's Eyes, outreach to other NGOs has also been important in educating the broader NGO movement about the campaign, and demonstrating to the Bank that a wide range of civil-society organisations share the goals of Women's Eyes.

Use of the internet has been an important outreach tool. Women's Eyes has developed an e-mail 'listserve' through which information about World Bank gender policies is shared with broader NGO networks. Upon completing the October 1997 report, we used the listserve to invite NGOs around the world to endorse the report's recommendations. Over 300 gender advocates, development NGOs, environmental groups, women's groups, and other NGOs responded, and their names were signed to a letter to Mr Wolfensohn which was printed as an annex to the report. Presentations at NGO forums have also been successful in bringing other activists into the campaign. Women's Eyes has also made limited use of the mass media to get our message out to a wider audience.

Key signs of progress for Women's Eyes on the World Bank

While the Women's Eyes on the World Bank is just one strategy for change, a number of lessons can be drawn from the experience of the campaign. By employing a mix of advocacy strategies, ranging from research, direct lobbying of Bank officials, media, and outreach to the wider NGO community, Women's Eyes has been successful in pushing for a number of new initiatives at the Bank.

It is clear that Women's Eyes succeeded in using the Beijing conference to capture the attention of the Bank, particularly its president. While James Wolfensohn was taken aback by the criticism voiced by NGOs at Beijing, he moved quickly to create openings for dialogue with Bank staff at all levels, to improve the Bank's performance on gender. The campaign's strategy of 'constructive engagement' has resulted in fruitful debates about gender with the Bank.

By producing a solid report, which balanced acknowledgement of progress with a hard critique of the Bank's overall record, the campaign is taken seriously within the institution. In a seven-page letter responding to each of the findings

and recommendations of the October 1997 report, the Vice President responsible for the Bank's gender policy, Masood Ahmed, called the document 'a valuable contribution to the Bank's efforts to mainstream gender' and agreed to work with Women's Eyes to implement the recommendations. Perhaps most significant is the fact that gender issues have caught the attention of the World Bank's Chief Economist, one of the most powerful members of Bank management, who has announced a major new research initiative on gender, called a Policy Research Report. This research is intended to establish a set of analytical underpinnings necessary to develop a Bank-wide conceptual framework for gender. Women's Eyes has acted quickly to seek agreement with Bank management to work with the Women's Eyes campaign to establish a consultative process for the development of the conceptual framework, engaging a broad array of gender advocates, grassroots women's groups, and academics from around the world.

In Latin America, the campaign is also producing promising results. As a result of aggressive lobbying, the Latin America chapter has won agreement by the Bank to increase the number of gender specialists in the region and to work with the campaign to conduct an in-depth analysis of the Bank's operations 'through a gender lens.' Collaborative action between Women's Eyes members has also succeeded in country-specific issues. For example, when members learned that the Bank's Mexico Country Assistance Strategy failed to integrate gender or women's participation in a meaningful way, over a dozen US and Mexican NGOs drafted a joint letter to the Bank's Mexico Country Director to complain. As a result, the Director has agreed to hold regular dialogue with Mexican women's groups to look for ways to improve the Bank's treatment of gender in future.

Challenges for Oxfam America and Women's Eyes

Support for partner advocacy for gender equity

One of the hard lessons of Women's Eyes on the World Bank, however, is the reality that there is a very limited number of Southern NGOs which are actively engaged in analysis, monitoring, and advocacy targeted at the Bank's policies on gender. This is evidenced by the failure of Women's Eyes to become established in Africa and Asia. As a result, many opportunities to influence Bank policies are missed. Several women leaders have told me that, while they understand the tremendous influence of the Bank in their country, faced with limited capacity and challenged by the need to focus on meeting women's basic needs and to react to actions by national and local governments, lobbying the Bank is a luxury they cannot afford. In addition, these groups often lack the technical expertise to take on a giant like the World Bank.

In the absence of strong, organised Southern monitoring and advocacy groupings, Northern NGOs and coalitions, including Women's Eyes, are open to criticism for being Northern-driven. For Oxfam America and Women's Eyes US one of the most important challenges is to make sure that we do not dominate the policy dialogue on gender and development, but promote space for marginalised groups in civil societies, including women, to take control over decisions that affect their lives. Given the nature of policy-making in Washington, where there are often very small windows of opportunity for influencing decisions, Washington-based NGOs frequently feel compelled to act quickly, with no time for careful consultation with partners. While Northern NGOs like Oxfam have a responsibility to challenge the international financial institutions, and to speak from our own our experiences, we must be clear that we do not speak 'on behalf of' Southern NGOs and must be prepared to step aside in the policy making arena and make room for our partners.

There are several ways in which donor organisations like Oxfam America can help accelerate the integration of grassroots women into policy-making fora. We should be prepared to offer a range of support for groups dedicated to women's empowerment, including capacity-building, leadership development, economic literacy, advocacy-skills building, as well as networking and sharing of information on advocacy strategies. Because information is power, donors should prioritise support for translation and dissemination of policy information, and for increased access of NGOs to the internet. Equally important is support for networking and sharing of innovative and successful advocacy strategies, such as the Women's Budget Project in South Africa, which analyses the national budget from a women's perspective and promotes women's spending priorities. Support for intensive training in advocacy, seminars on how to influence the World Bank, economic literacy training, and media-skills building are all important.

The experience of Women's Eyes on the World Bank demonstrates the potential impact of strong North-South coalitions to promote sustainable development on a global level. In the coming year, together with our Women's Eyes colleagues, Oxfam America hopes to focus more attention on creating synergy between our advocacy in Washington and our grant-making to partners in the South in the pursuit of a more global and effective movement for social and economic justice.

Incorporating a gender perspective into other advocacy initiatives

Another challenge is to ensure that gender considerations are fully integrated into all advocacy campaigns, rather than compartmentalising our gender work in the same way that we have accused the World Bank of doing.

All of the Oxfams and many of our partners have been mobilising for years for debt forgiveness. Oxfam International (of which Oxfam America is a member)¹¹ lobbied hard for the establishment in 1995 of the historic Highly Indebted Poor Country Initiative — which aims to reduce multilateral and bilateral debts of the poorest countries — and have monitored implementation of the agreement. While gender issues *per se* have not predominated in Oxfam's call for debt relief, we have had some success making the links between gender equity and debt relief. We must seek new ways to highlight the gender implications of the debt crisis and to build alliances with gender advocates, including members of the Women's Eyes on the World Bank campaign, in this effort.

While campaigning on World Bank reform must continue, Oxfam America and the broader NGO community must rise to the challenge of confronting other important actors in the global economy who affect poor women and men. Advocates in the North and South must build capacity to influence the macroeconomic policies of the IMF and press this enormously powerful body to be more accountable to citizens and more committed to equity. As private investment increasingly outstrips official aid in many parts of the world, Oxfam America must work to ensure that the globalisation of trade and investment protects the rights of marginalised populations, including women.

At Oxfam America, we must also continually ask ourselves whether we are practising what we preach. As we bang the drum about the Bank's need to mainstream concerns about gender equity throughout its operations, we must ask if we are succeeding in this regard within our own agency. While the agency may be recognised as a leader, it cannot rest on its laurels: we must ensure that gender equity been ingrained into our agency culture and personnel policies, so that Oxfam America staff receive sufficient training, and that accountability mechanisms are in place to ensure that gender and women's participation are fully integrated into all of our programme planning, implementation, and evaluation, and that mechanisms are in place for systematic consultation with partners across the continuum of our advocacy programme.

About the author

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Gender and diversity in Oxfam International

Ellen Sprenger and Diane Biray Gregorio

Introduction

Oxfam International (OI) is a network of 11 Oxfams working towards the eradication of poverty by addressing the structural causes of social and economic injustice. Founded in 1995, it is a network of like-minded affiliates in North America, Europe, and the Pacific Rim region¹² striving to increase efficiency, effectiveness and impact on the lives of poor communities through collaboration in areas such as long-term development, urgent humanitarian need, advocacy, public education campaigning, and fund-raising.

This article looks at the role of the Oxfam International Gender and Diversity Working Group (OIGDWG) in promoting the integration of a gender and diversity analysis and practice into OI's work.¹³

The foundations of a strategy

Even before Oxfam International was formally established, individuals working to advance gender equity in the various Oxfams had been exchanging materials, examples of best practice, and strategies. The founding of OI in 1995 allowed increased opportunities for linking and learning, including the formal establishment of the working group in 1996. The Working Group consists of representatives from each of the affiliates who are working for gender equity in their own organisations. In the first few years, the OIGDWG struggled to formulate an effective strategy for working together.

What kind of 'animal' is Oxfam International?

Before the working group could identify ways to facilitate change, we had to understand the large and complicated system that Oxfam International is. Who founded OI, and for what purpose? What are its values and beliefs? What are its structures and practices? What strategic opportunities does it provide? To what extent is management committed to gender equity and diversity?

In exploring these questions, the working group found that the character of OI could help advance a gender and diversity analysis and practice. OI's fundamental belief is that collaborative efforts contribute to improved efficiency and impact, both individually and collectively. We felt that, as a network, OI would be open to linking and learning about gender and diversity, especially as it increases the quality of our work as development agencies. The working group was asked to act as an advisory body to the OI programme directors' committee (PDC), an alliance which promised to be a powerful one, because the PDC is a respected, vocal, high-profile advocate and decision-making body within OI. Within the PDC, there is a critical mass of senior managers who are proactive and outspoken on issues of gender and diversity and thereby help greatly to establish credibility for these issues.¹⁴ We concluded that this was a truly unique opportunity to help shape the work of the network at this early stage.

One factor that complicated the discussions about the OIGDWG's mandate and role was that each individual Oxfam is at a very different stage in its work on gender and diversity. Although all affiliates are in their own ways becoming more gender- and diversity-aware, there are significant differences in the levels of implementation, whether in the workplace or in their programme, advocacy, and fund-raising work. When positioning the 11 Oxfams on the continuum from gender-blind¹⁵ to gender-aware¹⁶ to gender-responsive,¹⁷ we can conclude that all are recognising the importance of a gender analysis and can be classified as gender-aware. However, interpretations of the meaning and the consequences of a gender analysis differ considerably. On the issue of diversity, most Oxfams are in the early stages of deepening their own understanding of the issue; interventions primarily address recruitment and internal organisational culture. Due to these differences it was to be expected that the definition of quality in relation to both gender and diversity would be a point of debate and negotiation.

Another challenge informing the discussion of the OIGDWG's mandate and role was the range of its members' perceptions of their sphere of influence within their respective Oxfams. For some, the momentum generated by the working group would provide very useful leverage to promote progress on the issue within their Oxfams. For others, who are already engaged in major change processes, the challenge is more to determine how the OI work can complement and support these existing processes.

Clarifying the working group's mandate and role

Once the working group had a better sense of the 'landscape' of OI, we began to discuss our mandate and role. The programme directors had given the OIGDWG a broad mandate: to provide them with proposals to ensure the integration of gender perspectives into OI collaborative activities. Acknowledging the limitations of staff and resources, we felt that more clarity and focus were necessary. We asked ourselves the following questions: Where would the group's efforts have most leverage and long-term impact? What activities would allow deeper mainstreaming of gender issues into the work of OI? Where was the energy and attention of senior management? Where was there already strong support for gender? What could this group realistically propose and carry out? And, last but not least, how could the activities of OI at an international level help to advance ongoing learning and improved performance within each Oxfam and its work? Gender and diversity policies and practices could not be confined to programmes only—this was both an issue of principle (to practise what you preach) and quality.

Statement of common purpose: building a common vision

In order to unify the efforts of the Oxfam International affiliates, a Statement of Common Purpose on Gender and Diversity was drafted as part of the first OI strategic plan (1996–98), in the form of a single statement that 'gender inequalities and other diversity issues will be addressed in [Oxfam International] actions and programs'. In 1997 this statement was further elaborated to also include individual Oxfams' internal policies and practices and areas for action. While the various Oxfams were at different stages of implementation, we were surprisingly consonant when it came to outlining the ultimate desired outcomes of our work in these areas. This is evident in the statement, which was approved as an official OI working principle.¹⁸ The following are excerpts from that statement.

OI is committed to equal rights and opportunities in our work and in our workplace, and a belief that quality is enhanced when individuals of different gender and different backgrounds are engaged in decision-making processes.

In striving to achieve diversity and equal opportunity it is recognised that disadvantaged groups, such as women, start from very different and unequal positions in society relative to others. Therefore actions to redress this inequality include proactive measures and other practices where equal rights and opportunities are the goal, and which seek to end discrimination on the basis of gender, race, religion, age, ethnicity, sexual preference, or disability.

Oxfam International pursues diversity and equal rights and opportunities in three related ways. First of all, its activities (marketing, advocacy, program work, fund-raising, and education) are designed to promote pluralistic and just

societies around the world and to increase the opportunities available to historically disadvantaged groups. Second, recognising that without internal diversity Oxfam International member Oxfams are constrained in their ability to achieve excellence in their individual and collaborative activities, therefore they strive for broad representation in their own boards and staffing compositions. Finally, the Oxfam International member Oxfams seek to encourage the same diversity in board and staff composition, and activities of all counterparts.

While appropriate strategies must necessarily vary according to the particular constraints and possibilities present in different societies, Oxfam International member Oxfams are committed to working with each other and with counterparts to promote these efforts and to ensure their success.

Undoubtedly, much more discussion will take place about how to interpret and implement the statement. These debates will reflect the diverse organisational cultures, approaches, and traditions as well as political and strategic interpretations of our role as change agents within our Oxfams.

Establishing a role: strategists, not watchdogs

Given this mandate, the OIGDWG then reflected on the role that we should play in supporting the implementation of this common purpose. It emerged very clearly that the members of the working group were not going to act as watchdogs, policing the entire scope of OI activities. Not only would that be impossible, due to time and staffing constraints, but it would also go against the principle that every individual and programme is responsible for working on gender and diversity. Instead of imposing activities to make Oxfams more gender- and diversity-responsive, we would aim to inform the heart of OI decision-making from the outset.

In order to act strategically and move the basis for the gender debate from a small group of individuals to one shared by all staff members, we needed a tool for systematically assessing the state of affairs; for identifying areas of strength and areas in need of improvement; and for creating a framework to generate learning and share best practices within both the Oxfams and across the network.

This mechanism needed to be based on a set of principles for improving quality, identifying critical quality areas, and achieving agreement on indicators and variables, while acknowledging and allowing for differences among affiliates. The next stage would be to assess each Oxfam's performance by gathering information from multiple sources, and involving reflection, discussion, and learning among staff members. One of our longer-term goals is a comparative analysis of the relative strengths and weaknesses of each of the Oxfams and presentation of the main findings; this includes the idea of lateral accountability and open discussion among OI management in the form of peer review.

Managers must take responsibility for implementing the recommendations and measures for each Oxfam and at the level of OI collaboration.

Ideally this mechanism, also called competitive benchmarking, should be repeated over time. Also, the critical quality areas identified need to be reviewed and reflected upon at a regular basis. With this in mind, the OIGDWG created the 'gender and diversity mapping tool'. At the time of writing, the Oxfams have gone through one mapping cycle, with a second one on its way.

Lessons from the first gender and diversity mapping cycle

The gender and diversity mapping tool consists of a series of strategic questions arranged under six rubrics. These categories encompass all aspects of member Oxfams' work, both internal and external: policies and procedures; human resources; organisational culture; programme learning, networking, and external relations; media, communications, and fund-raising; and OI collaboration.

In 1996–97, the OIGDWG conducted the first cycle of the mapping exercise. Even at this initial stage, the tool has helped OI to establish a baseline for future comparisons. Although each affiliate is in its own way becoming more gender- and diversity-responsive, the exercise helped us to identify areas for individual and collective improvement. The following are examples of the comparative data generated by this first mapping exercise.

Allocation of Financial Resources:

- Five Oxfams apply gender criteria to their funding decisions: three do so on a rather *ad hoc* basis and two more systematically. Almost all of the Oxfams use checklists or guiding questions in approval, monitoring, and/or evaluation processes. The use of those checklists seems to depend on individual initiative.
- Four Oxfams make explicit efforts to allocate funds, provide other forms of support to, and form alliances with women's organisations.

Staffing and organisational culture:

- While men still hold the majority of decision-making positions (for example, all Executive Directors are men), women are well represented in most of the Oxfams. Most report an increase in the number of women at decision-making levels; for example, 60 per cent of the Programme Directors are women.
- Data on staff diversity is limited across the Oxfams, mostly due to a lack of systemised record-keeping. Most of the data relates to ethnicity, but such information has limited comparability, in part because definitions of ethnicity and what would constitute ethnic heterogeneity varies in local contexts.

- Five Oxfams have affirmative action and/or equal opportunity policies for women and peoples of diverse backgrounds. Three other Oxfams have more limited policies; one Oxfam is developing them; and only one recorded no policies in these areas.
- All Oxfams make efforts to promote women and diversity-friendly working environments, ranging from attempts to use non-sexist language to complaint and/or sexual harassment procedures (six Oxfams). Two Oxfams point to implicit organisational norms (such as having to be 'on call' because meetings are scheduled without notice, or the expectation to be flexible and work overtime) which limit or negate the expressed intent of encouraging progressive ways of working, such as flexi-time and other family-friendly measures. Other Oxfams record information about extensive efforts in field offices to adapt work and travel schedules to take into account women's family responsibilities and to address traditional norms about women's roles (which discourage women from working and/or travelling).

Capacity-building, training, learning, and networking:

- In six Oxfams, internal capacity-building and training are being promoted and seem fairly well institutionalised. Where it is not promoted (four Oxfams), it appears that capacity-building and training on gender-awareness is extremely limited or non-existent.
- All Oxfams are involved in sharing learning and networking with partner organisations and also facilitate such processes among counterparts. One Oxfam, for instance, initiated communication/information networks for East and South Asia in which many other Oxfams have participated over the years. Other examples include a shared involvement in lobbying activities, for example on the Convention to Eliminate all Forms of Discrimination against Women, or on the occasion of the Fourth World Conference on Women.

Fund-raising and educational campaigns:

- Data clearly shows that women's visibility in fund-raising and education has increased steadily. However, the integration of gender analysis in fund-raising is problematic, partly because existing tools for fund-raising encourage the simplification of complex issues and are analysed on the basis of their 'saleability'. Conveying complex issues of power relations remains a big challenge.

In most Oxfams, the data-gathering was a consultative process, involving reflection and discussion with those responsible for decision-making and implementation. Several working group members have reported that the exercise helped to create new momentum for advancing gender equity in a number of ways. For example,

one Oxfam reported that the mapping resulted in the development of a policy on gender. In another Oxfam, the exercise led to special efforts of affirmative action for women, resulting in the recruitment of a woman manager.

After the first year's experience, the OIGDWG refined the questionnaire as well as the gender-mapping methodology. For instance, working group members noticed that the time allocated for the first round of mapping had been limited. In planning the second annual mapping cycle, we made it a high priority to provide ample time to encourage reflection and discussion.

Although the working group was successful in generating and comparing data on gender and diversity, we have yet to realise the more ambitious goal of the mapping exercise: the promotion of lateral accountability and the institutionalisation of the recommendations.

Challenges for the future

Small Oxfams, large Oxfams: What is useful and achievable?

Member Oxfams vary greatly in terms of budget, and have different capacities to staff OI collaborative activities. Smaller Oxfams may only have a single person assigned to cover several of the OI focal areas, whereas larger Oxfams are able to dedicate one or more full-time staff members to OI activities. As a result, there is a constant tension and negotiation about what is useful and achievable.

The gender- and diversity-mapping exercise is an example of an OI activity which is considered valuable, but which represents a significant investment of time. Ultimately, each Oxfam will have to make its own trade-offs. Whether working in smaller or larger Oxfams, working group members observed that this tension is minimised when the areas covered in the mapping tool closely match the ongoing change processes within the Oxfam, or when the change agent uses the tool strategically to create new momentum and excitement for learning.

Global information technology: potential and constraints

As with any group attempting to work across continents and time zones, communication is paramount. The OIGDWG was among the first OI working groups to establish an e-mail mailing list in 1996. However, this electronic communication tool is by no means without its difficulties. In the beginning, many working group members were unfamiliar with the use of e-mail, and a third did not have their own address. Technical problems also hampered the process. Due to collaborative efforts between the Oxfams, most of these technical problems have been solved, and staff members in general have become much more comfortable with e-mail. This has greatly improved communications

among working group members, but e-mailing seems to work best between people who already know and understand each other, to follow up on the implementation of agreements which were reached face-to-face. This is especially the case in situations where participants are from different cultural backgrounds and have different communication styles, so multi-layered interactions are still very much needed.

Moving from mapping to benchmarking

Perhaps the biggest challenge for the OIGDWG in improving our approach to gender and diversity, is making the transition from merely mapping our progress to benchmarking Oxfams against each other and perhaps against other NGOs. The ultimate aim of benchmarking is to raise OI's overall performance by encouraging all Oxfams to move towards the highest standards of best practice. This transition represents several challenges for OI.

Accountability and competition for quality as welcome traits. The mapping exercise is a valuable tool for quality improvement within OI only to the extent that leadership is willing to hold each other accountable. This is of course related to the extent that the OI affiliates are open to discuss their strengths and weaknesses. This is easier said than done, as such openness requires a sense of trust and an ability to give and accept constructive criticism, both of which require time and investment in relationships to develop. The role of the leadership in modeling these behaviours becomes paramount. In making the transition from mapping to benchmarking, we also need to welcome a certain level of friendly competition to encourage each other towards higher performance. As NGOs, the idea of competition carries many negative connotations. However, in the case of benchmarking, competition in a benign form is a necessary aspect of encouraging higher standards.

Identification of critical quality areas. Because the Oxfams are at different stages in the implementation of gender and diversity perspectives, and have different priorities, agreeing on specific areas for quality improvement has proven to be a great challenge. Also, the mapping tool in its current form looks primarily at whether technical procedures and regulations are in place (such as the existence of policies, criteria for funding, the occurrence of networking and capacity-building, or the availability of gender-disaggregated data). What the tool fails to cover are the organisational dynamics required to make those technical measures work. These dynamics include the role of management; the level of participation in an organisation; staff attitude; organisational culture and the organisation's willingness to learn from others, to be transparent, and to be self-critical. The

experience of the OIGDWG seems to indicate that quality in the field of gender and diversity is more appropriately seen as a constantly evolving continuum, rather than as a static definition of minimum standards or procedures.

Availability of reliable data: with whom do we benchmark? As we found in the first cycle of the mapping exercise, one of the key constraints on comparative analysis is the availability of reliable data, especially regarding programme impact. Most of the smaller Oxfams lacked systems for collecting gender-disaggregated and diversity-relevant data. Improving information systems thus becomes an important element of benchmarking. Moving beyond the Oxfam network, ultimately the OIGDWG would like to benchmark member Oxfams' performance against other NGOs internationally. Which organisations would be appropriate to benchmark against? What characteristics would make the comparison relevant?

Computer programmes: new modalities for benchmarking. As we become more sophisticated in our mapping and benchmarking, there may be innovative ways to collect data, both on more technical aspects of an organisation (the 'hardware' of an organisation) and on the factors and variables that enable these procedures and mechanisms to work (the 'software' of an organisation). Some Oxfams and consultancies are experimenting with the use of computer programmes for organisational self-assessments. The potential to apply this technology to the work on gender and diversity benchmarking is an exciting one: such an interactive tool will generate comparative data on both the 'hardware' and 'software' of organisations, and it can be used by each of the individual Oxfams to formulate practical, tailor-made guidelines and proposals for improved quality.

Evolving role of the change agent. The role of the change agent, especially that of the working group members, will also shift. Moving from mapping to benchmarking will require less emphasis on putting gender and diversity on the agenda, and more emphasis on organisational self-assessment and formulating proposals for doing things differently.

Conclusion

It is still too early to predict the impact of the OIGDWG's work on Oxfam International. Although the working group has only been active for two years, we believe that several aspects of our work have broader relevance for other networks, international and otherwise. One strong lesson is the importance of conducting an analysis of factors and an emphasis on variables conducive to advancing

gender and diversity. A collective organisational culture based on transparency, self-criticism and openness has proven to be very important for the success of the working group. We hope that the strengthening of this culture within OI will create an increasingly favourable environment for challenging and encouraging each other towards higher-quality performance.

The OIGDWG's experience also teaches the importance of an alliance between an expert group and key decision-makers in promoting change. There are many examples of networks where expert groups on gender or diversity spend most of their time 'watchdogging' and fixing, but ultimately failing to contribute to gender equity and diversity. In this case, the working group was given the space to work at the heart of OI decision-making. As a result, we could build a tool which, once it is fully matured and institutionalised, will be sustainable and self-generating.

On the one hand, the OIGDWG has made an important start in systematically promoting gender and diversity within OI. On the other hand, there are still many areas for improvement. The reality remains that, despite the advances made, women and people of diverse backgrounds throughout the world are still over-represented among the poorest of the poor and under-represented at decision-making levels. The challenges which Oxfam International faces are reflective of the task facing organisations everywhere that strive for the promotion and respect of human rights. The challenge is great, but the vision is inspiring: to build, throughout our Oxfams and as a network, a global humanitarian response to poverty and injustice, and to do so in a way that results in equal rights and opportunities for all segments of the world's population.

About the authors

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Harmonising gender and development: The GAD fund in South Africa

Penny Plowman and Josette Cole¹⁹

Introduction

This article reflects on a joint initiative by Oxfam Canada and Novib in South Africa, the Gender and Development (GAD) fund. This positive collaboration between two Oxfams has some useful lessons for the wider task of building a gender perspective into Oxfam International (OI).²⁰ Although the GAD fund has made important contributions, its institutional and programme experience remains marginal to current OI debates and processes. We hope that this article can contribute to the current debates on integrating gender into all OI programming.

The broader context for this article is the process known as 'Oxfam harmonisation' which Oxfam GB initiated in 1990. It aims to find new ways in which the member organisations of OI can work together more effectively and efficiently to end world poverty and injustice. As the different Oxfams have explored new ways of working together, they have developed a range of models. It is clear that there is no one blue-print for how we collaborate. We approach the issue from an analysis of how best to integrate a gender perspective into development work. This leads us into the now familiar debates about 'separate' versus 'integrated' gender approaches. We believe that the development of a gender framework for the whole of OI needs to take into account both approaches. However, by setting up a separate GAD fund, without an overall gender framework for OI in South Africa, there is a danger that gender will remain marginalised. People tend to assume that because there is a GAD fund, member Oxfams are integrating gender into their programmes. This is problematic, because the commitment to development with gender justice demands much more.

Gender issues in South Africa

The GAD fund, which was initiated in early 1996, must be understood in the context of South Africa's democratic transition. The fund's short history coincides with the establishment of a much more visible and vibrant institutional base for emerging women's and gender issues in South Africa. It operates within the contradictory transitional context where the principles of basic needs and gender equity, enshrined in the new South African constitution and in the government's Reconstruction and Development Programmes (RDP), exist alongside the tough structural-adjustment imperatives of the government's GEAR strategy (Growth, Employment, and Redistribution).

During 1994–96, while the government struggled to establish new policy and institutional frameworks, in the end failing to meet the delivery targets it set itself in 1994, South Africans experienced a number of different social trends. These included escalating violence against women and children and rising poverty, but also the increased political representation of women and the establishment of new statutory bodies (the Office on the Status of Women, the Commission of Gender Equality, and Gender Desks in some ministries and local councils). All of this has contributed in some way to placing gender issues (practical and strategic) more squarely on the South African political and development agenda.

Within the development sector, gender issues have certainly gained a higher profile in the last few years. Combined with the window of opportunity in the South African context, this has assisted the Oxfams' work in developing gender programmes. However, it must also be said that for all the politically correct rhetoric, gender analysis continues to be sidelined. Building gender awareness is a good starting point, but the integration of a gender perspective into all aspects of development theory and practice requires much more than this.

Before reflecting on the GAD fund in more detail, it is useful to look at the different approaches to gender in the three main international Oxfams working in South Africa: Oxfam Canada, Novib, and Oxfam GB.

Similarities and differences in three Oxfams' approaches to gender

An in-depth analysis of the Oxfam programmes by Penny Plowman (October 1995) showed that although there were some differences in gender programmes, there was a great deal to gain from a joint approach to gender and development. While the original concept was a 'pilot', and quite limited in its vision (only two Oxfams joined at the beginning), it was believed that it had the potential to grow.

Novib and Oxfam Canada's concept for establishing a joint gender and development funding mechanism (the GAD fund) came about in the mid-1990s, a time when a number of other processes were taking place simultaneously within different Oxfams. These included restructuring in a number of Oxfams, debates between its members on how to turn the theory of 'harmonisation' into practice in the field, and the development of different institutional strategies on how to address gender at a programme level.

Since the early 1990s the three Oxfams have been developing their own gender programmes; support to women's organisations (for example, those working on women and violence) and gender training for project partners have been common objectives. However, different strategies were developed to meet these objectives. Novib and Oxfam Canada set up separate women and gender programmes, whilst Oxfam GB integrated support for gender issues into its main programme. Moreover, in addition to funding, each Oxfam has developed a range of other support strategies. These have included exchange visits (with Oxfam Canada and Novib); in the case of Oxfam GB, a programme officer worked for a South African national network against violence against women.

There have also been a number of different responses in the area of gender training, including support for local gender trainers through a gender-training network, and building local gender-training units in educational institutions (Oxfam Canada). A more hands-on approach was a donor-initiated and supported gender network set up by Novib, which involved six project partners.

The GAD fund: Working on the margins

The GAD fund started with a limited funding base and modest objectives. Its institutional structure was also lean, with a part-time co-ordinator and a small co-ordinating committee. The programme's focus in 1996 was on women and violence, women and finance, gender training, and on strengthening women's organisations. This focus was broad enough to capture and respond to the gender-specific issues emerging out of South Africa's democratic transition. The GAD fund was also flexible enough to respond to other priorities as they became clear, including HIV/AIDS. The GAD fund has also been part of an exciting new development in South Africa, the establishment of the Donor Network for Women (DNW), which began as a loose network of women programme officers from Northern NGOs working on gender and development in South Africa. These women came together on an ad hoc basis to discuss and review respective project proposals and new developments on gender issues in South Africa. The DNW now meets every two months, and has developed a joint activity plan for 1998.²¹

Although the GAD fund was set up primarily as a new funding conduit for two Oxfams (with the view that other Oxfams could join), both Oxfam Canada and Novib believed that the pilot fund should provide access to new kinds of projects. This is exactly what the fund has achieved; but as it has developed, we believe it can play a much bigger role in the Oxfam 'harmonisation' process.

It has become clear in the fund's relatively short history that certain trends are emerging in South Africa. For example, the increasing number of initiatives which address the issue of women and violence highlights the way it cuts across boundaries. Violence against women and children cannot be neatly boxed into the 'women's sector'; it affects every aspect of development. Similarly, trends in HIV/AIDS, and awareness of how it affects women and men differently, must be understood in the broadest development terms. Therefore OI programmes in housing, land, and urban development must each be imbued with a gender analysis rooted in the South African context. It is our view that the GAD fund could assist a great deal in conceptualising and implementing OI programmes. Both organisations and individuals involved in the fund represent an important knowledge base, which can provide a deeper understanding of the broader environment and how it affects women and men differently.

However, the kinds of initiatives which the GAD fund has been involved in remain relatively marginal to other gender processes taking place in the OI 'family'. These include Novib's parallel GAD initiatives taking place in South Africa; strategic thinking on OI harmonisation; and gender initiatives taking place in the Northern offices of the different Oxfams, including Novib and Oxfam Canada.²² Practitioners in the field, including gender-sensitive development practitioners in South Africa, seem to be unable to find points of entry into current OI debates and discussion. We remain unsure of who makes decisions, of where power lies. This is not something peculiar to the gender programme, but it raises important questions about how and with whom communication takes place.

Although we are aware that there are many interesting and important opportunities to debate these issues in the North (for example, through the OI gender and diversity group²³), we know of no institutional mechanism that can bring us together. We have yet to agree on a strategic gender and development framework that can guide and inspire us in our work in the North and the South. Because of this, none of us can ensure that gender concerns do not slip off the OI agenda — we in the South have concerns that they may.

OI's apparent inability, thus far, to strategically assess and make use of its own institutional and human resources, is worrying. It has resulted for example, in a set of sectoral reviews which failed to come up with any serious gender analysis and strategies. While these reviews are now being revised, it is questionable how feasible it is to inject a gender analysis as an afterthought. We believe that it must

be carried out from the beginning. These fundamental gaps in thinking remain, despite years of work and experience in OI on mainstreaming gender at institutional and programme levels. It is therefore clear that there is a lack of understanding about how a gender perspective can be applied to programme planning and implementation.

The starting point is a much more serious look at how a gender perspective can be built into the whole of the OI programme in South Africa. It is clear that this is not going to happen by osmosis: a framework must be set up and adhered to, and effective links must be made between North and South, in order to share and build on our different models and approaches. At the same time we cannot assume that there is a shared understanding about what gender and development means. Raising gender awareness at a personal level is the key, because only then can links be made at a programming level. At the same time, we need to institutionalise gender in all OI programmes, South and North. This is not solely the responsibility of women who are passionate about the issues; it is everyone's, men's and women's.

Conclusions

Translating the guiding principles of 'harmonisation' into practice has been extremely challenging and difficult. At a Novib meeting of South African project partners, the question was raised: 'Are the time, effort, money, and resources going into harmonisation really worth it? Why not just carry on giving us the money from the individual Oxfams?' This sense of doubt is shared by many of us who are involved in a process which does seem very complicated and painfully slow.

What is the value of harmonisation? The Oxfam International Advocacy Office in Washington is an excellent example of increased co-operation making sense. The power of OI as opposed to individual Oxfams, has been much more effective in lobbying the World Bank and the IMF on critical global concerns, such as world debt, poverty, and structural adjustment policies. However, the assumption is that 'harmonisation' means common programme areas and shared development approaches. This has had to be thoroughly examined: although everyone works under the same Oxfam banner, there are many differences in terms of programme content and management structures. The process of harmonisation has opened up a myriad of consultative processes in which, for the first time, people who representing Oxfams from different cultures and contexts have had to share information about their programmes in a formal, structured way. This has not been easy, and it has taken time. As in any change process, this has meant confronting difficult issues of power and control as well as

building trust. It was to be expected that a change process of such complexity and scale would inevitably result in some disharmony as well as harmony.

At an operational level, albeit in a limited way, the GAD fund has begun to set the agenda on 'harmonisation' in the field. It provides a flexible, cost-effective and, responsive, mechanism for Novib and Oxfam Canada to address emerging gender and development initiatives in South Africa. The GAD fund's ability to respond strategically to emerging gender issues and needs (institutional and project-related) is not only due to its institutional flexibility. It emerges out of a context where the kinds of issues which it was designed to address became more visible, and were accompanied by increasing political commitment to address issues of gender inequality. With limited resources and limited institutional support from the North, the fund has been able to establish a potential way forward for OI programme collaboration in the field.

At the same time this experience, together with other lessons emerging out of the OI 'harmonisation' process, challenges us to address gender relations at a number of different levels — personal, institutional, and in the development and implementation of programmes. We need to understand the difficulties in trying to build a gender perspective into all aspects of OI and its programmes in South Africa. Why do people find it so difficult to integrate a gender perspective into programme planning beyond the GAD fund? Is it a lack of understanding of what needs to be changed and how, or is it a lack of commitment at a deeper personal level to bring about an end to gender inequalities? The experience in South Africa forces us to confront a key question: how do we design a strategic gender framework and implementation plan which can begin to institutionalise gender principles across OI, North and South? At the same time it is clear that this in itself is not enough — it must be accompanied by a personal commitment to a development agenda within a framework of gender justice.

About the authors

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Gender means doing things differently: Lessons from Oxfam's Women's Linking Project

Candida March

This article focuses on some of the learning points arising from Oxfam's Women's Linking Project (WLP), which ran from 1992 to 1994. Effective work on gender issues requires doing things very differently from conventional, mainstream ways of working. While this point is echoed by many of the contributors to this book, it was also a message that came with almost overwhelming clarity from the participants of the WLP.

The WLP was an ambitious and trail-blazing project, designed and co-ordinated by Oxfam GB's Gender Team (formerly GADU) as a key activity for Oxfam in the run-up to the Fourth UN Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995. It was part of a NGO process of enabling Southern women's voices to be heard in international forums; it was also part of an internal agenda within Oxfam, aiming to support gender work and to influence development policy and practice. The WLP ran virtually concurrently with the process of writing and agreeing Oxfam's formal Gender Policy, which had started in 1991 with a two-year consultation within Oxfam, and culminated in May 1993 with the ratification of the policy by Oxfam's trustees.

This article draws on my experience as the second co-ordinator, after Dimza Pityana, of the WLP, and on the review of the WLP carried out by De Beuk in 1994. Not only the tangible outputs and achievements of the WLP, but the actual process of the project, with its associated intangible outcomes of capacity-building and building solidarity, have valuable lessons to offer to Oxfam and other Northern funding agencies which aim to contribute to gender-equitable development. In the discussion which follows, I have therefore chosen to focus on the lessons to be learned from the project's methodology.²⁴

Setting the scene

A central aim of the WLP was to stimulate linking and networking between women working on gender issues within and outside Oxfam, as an important first step in building mutual understanding and shared strategies. The project aimed to bring different constituencies together and begin to break down the barriers between North and South, between regions, between funding agency and women's organisations, between practitioner, activist, and academic, between feminist and mainstream. Those of us involved in planning and implementation were convinced that such a process is crucial to strengthening the momentum for development that promotes gender equity.

When the WLP began in 1992, Oxfam worked in over 70 countries world-wide. In our country programmes, work on gender issues varied enormously. In terms of quality, while some offices had put tremendous energy into working for gender equity, and many had valuable experience to share and were exploring new ideas and strategies, others had few reference points and were looking for support.

There was also considerable variation between country offices in their allocation of responsibility for gender issues. In some programmes, whole teams had taken responsibility for ensuring gender-fair development; in some, managers were actively promoting it. In others, gender issues were one of many responsibilities for a delegated project officer; or a project officer was appointed with a special remit to promote gender equality. The experience of gender-specialist project officers was patchy: many felt isolated within the team, some faced open hostility. In Asia, the Action for Gender Relations in Asia (AGRA) network was initially established as a support mechanism for staff, but became a key channel for work on gender and induction of new staff into gender analysis and concepts. In Africa, a network never got off the ground, so individual project officers were dependent on their managers for support. Many project officers reported that their gender-related activities seemed to be seen as peripheral to the office's main programme. They felt unable to influence central policy-making structures at Oxfam, since they felt excluded in terms of position and subject matter, and frequently language as well. It was clear that Oxfam's gender work could only become more effective and central when the position of those working on gender issues in international offices was strengthened, and their isolation reduced.

We in the Gender Team also wanted the WLP to be a catalyst for bringing staff from the country programmes into closer contact with women's organisations in North and South, with the international women's movement, and with feminist organisations. The build-up to the Beijing conference meant that it was particularly important that Southern organisations promoting gender awareness were supported in creating their own lobbying strategies. In some regions

where Oxfam worked, the women's movement was nascent or weak; in others, there were organisations working at the cutting edge of policy and practice on women's rights, building on years of experience with a depth of understanding and analysis of the issues and ways of working that development organisations, still fairly new to working on 'women in development' and 'gender' issues, could rarely emulate. In a few Oxfam country offices, links with the women's movement were strong and mutually supportive, but in the majority of offices, women's organisations with a rights-based as opposed to needs-based, analysis were seen as outside the orbit of legitimate development: they were labelled too feminist, too urban, or too middle-class. Links with research institutions and resource centres focusing on women's issues also tended to be poor.

Related to the aim of increasing contact between overseas staff and the women's movement was that of strengthening ties between the Gender Team itself, situated in the Oxford head office, and women's organisations in both South and North. It was extremely difficult for us, at the time, to have direct contact with Southern women's groups, because such contact had to be brokered by hierarchical 'line management', stretching from Oxford, through our regional desks, to the country offices, before Southern organisations could be approached. Meanwhile, although we were linked with women's organisations in the UK which worked on international development issues, our relations with women's organisations working on UK and Irish issues were limited by the Gender Team's positioning and role as an advisory unit within Oxfam's International Division.²⁵

From the outset, we recognised the incredible diversity of all our colleagues working on gender issues. We wanted the process of working together in the WLP to an affirmative and strengthening one, while offering challenges at an appropriate level. We were aware of the difficulties of crossing geographical and hierarchical distances, but we hoped that the process of working together through the WLP would forge a shared analysis that could be used to promote better work on gender, grounded in the experience of Oxfam and its partners, and influenced by Southern feminist analyses. Within this analysis, we aimed to compile a set of recommendations useful to all working on gender issues within Oxfam's orbit: recommendations that would contribute to developing gender-fair policies and programmes that would be sensitive to Southern women's interests.

Methodology²⁶

The WLP initiated two processes. The first was a process of linking between Southern women's organisations, Oxfam staff, and UK-based women's groups. At the start of the WLP, eight Southern women visited over 20 UK organisations,

including women's refuges, local-government information centres, and development agencies in March 1992. The process then led to four regional meetings at the end of 1993 in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, giving women's organisations and Oxfam partners the opportunity to share their work, their aims and hopes, and make recommendations for change. Ten regional meeting representatives attended a global meeting and an international conference for Oxfam staff and partners. Both of these were held in Thailand in February 1994.

The second process in the WLP was a review by Oxfam of its development practice. All participating Oxfam country offices were asked to review their gender work to date and the external context of their work from a gender perspective. In addition, they were asked to contribute a case study to the conference in Thailand, sharing lessons they had learned and their ideas on 'best practice' on gender work in their part of the programme. At the Thailand conference, 109 participants met to share their experiences, discuss best practice, assess Oxfam's work from the perspective of Southern women, and to make recommendations to Oxfam and like-minded agencies. Participants comprised gender project officers and other staff from country offices, staff and senior managers from Oxfam House, staff from sister agencies, resource people and delegates from Southern organisations. The conference drew on the insights not only of those present, but on seven world-renowned activists and researchers, who were asked to write key-note papers on their areas of expertise, to be used as a stimulus to discussion at the international conference.

Three models of change management

De Beuk's evaluation of the WLP usefully identified three models of change management. The first is the top-down approach: it holds that change is a rational, analytic process (De Beuk 1995, 44), involving pre-planning with clear objectives. Many working in Oxfam in the early 1990s perceived the organisation to be relying increasingly on this form of management, although in some respects the senior managers adopted a converse attitude of *laissez-faire*. This combination was particularly problematic in terms of trying to increase awareness of gender, which has both personal and political elements; where resistance to change can be so very strong. The second model of change identified in the evaluation saw change as a political process: 'The organisation consists of several parties with their own interests, who act politically and tactically in order to serve their own interests' (*ibid.*, p.44). Finally, De Beuk argued that 'between these two extremes there is a third view, in which the objectives of the organisation are clear, and in which these objectives are translated to every level in

the organisation. The different stakeholders in the organisation have their own interests, and they integrate these in the objectives' (ibid.). In this view, 'not only the objectives, but also the process are important parts of the strategy of change' (ibid.). This third model poses the general direction or framework and then facilitates and supports people to meet these objectives. Key to this is respecting different ways of doing things, and making the shift from prescription to participation. The project team's role then becomes that of levelling differences of opinion, building consensus, and facilitating change. De Beuk viewed the WLP as fitting into this third category, as a political process with clear objectives.

The challenges of the project methodology

Setting a general direction

As the De Beuk evaluation pointed out, process-orientated projects can be non-linear and difficult to plan. The WLP aimed to initiate dialogue between women from different constituencies on gender issues and identify ways in which we could work together for change. It pushed into uncharted territory. The WLP had a set of questions which themselves were open to being questioned, and which could not be answered until a later stage of the project. We recognised that one may enter dialogue with a particular aim, but that any successful dialogue means treating this aim flexibly. Dialogue is a continuous process, whose timetable and outcomes cannot be firmly predicted. It was important that the process should be shaped by the participation of the various interest groups. This needs a lot of time for debate, for reflection and realignment, for reviewing progress, re-checking the validity of initial assumptions, and changing strategies.

We also had another set of realities to deal with in the design of the WLP. We were working within an institutional context that limited the extent of mutual decision-making and designing. For example, proposals for methodology needed to be firm enough to allow for funding decisions to be made and resources allocated, and sufficiently well-formed to give participants and observers confidence in the project. We had to provide enough shape for people to decide whether they actually wanted to participate, and in what form; once we had made this clear, there were high risks associated with changing the proposal. The investment of time and energy needed to manage such a process was easy to underestimate, especially when planning across continents, cultures, languages, and hierarchical divides. Our success at consensus-building around objectives and strategies varied. One attempt to plan the project jointly with a core group of women from Southern organisations failed after all involved had put a lot of effort into it. This was very distressing for all involved.

In an organisation which was used to receiving messages in one of two forms (top-down instruction from the head office, or a *laissez-faire* support for the status quo), the more flexible methodology of the WLP was sometimes confusing for people. As the subsequent evaluation indicated, some participants felt over-directed and controlled, while others were uneasy, fearing that if they took up the challenge to do things their way, the WLP, or the Gender Team which was steering it, might then deem it 'wrong'. De Beuk's evaluation commented that such a project needed 'to respect people doing things in ways which are not its ways, as long as they led to the joint objectives ... to shift from prescription to participation is a process as well and takes again time and effort.' (De Beuk 1995, p.47). Although this principle was extremely important, there were in practice many discussions and internal tensions within the Gender Team about what did constitute working towards the joint objectives, and how much diversity of approach we could really accommodate.

Even when we had been very clear about the boundaries, we needed to be open to being challenged like this. For instance, the regional meetings were intended as an opportunity for women from Southern organisations to meet to identify their priorities, and create their own strategies. It was not envisaged that Oxfam staff should take part. A general framework for the regional meetings was set, comprising clear criteria for participation, and guiding aims for the meetings. In addition a very non-directive facilitator's guide was written. The host offices were invited to choose external facilitators. The Latin America team considered the proposals, and felt that they wanted to change the profile of participants for their regional meeting, so that it was jointly for Oxfam staff and Southern women's organisations. We then had to debate the issues with them, and investigate whether this could still work in the overall co-ordinated efforts. It was decided that it could, and the meeting was extremely rewarding, starting some very interesting joint activities which had real momentum.

Complexities and 'mixed messages'

Projects like the WLP deal with change, which implies complexities and contradictions. These lead to 'mixed messages' which are difficult to deal with, and can cause a lot of tension; yet, according to De Beuk, they are part and parcel of the third view of change. Where these messages can be untangled through further thought, attention must be given to ensure that this actually occurs. We learned that where this cannot happen straight away, instead of trying to claim coherence, it is important to admit openly that the messages are mixed, to accept the fact, and to allow time and energy for debating the problems. Where possible, it is important to make the various actors' priorities and assumptions explicit, and to define the boundaries that determine each actor's freedom to challenge the process.

The regional meetings required us to put a lot of thought into 'unmixing' messages. While, as stated above, these meetings were intended as an opportunity for women from Southern organisations to prioritise and devise strategies for change, at the same time, participants were invited to spend time considering what Oxfam in particular should be doing to support their efforts further. It was important to identify that there was a potential tension between the two messages. After debate and discussion with the core group who were steering the planning of the meetings, we agreed that the priority at the regional meetings was to ensure that the participants had freedom to use the opportunity as they saw fit. To support this end, they were led by Southern facilitators who were external to Oxfam. In making this decision, we had to be prepared to accept the possibility that making recommendations to Oxfam would not be seen by the participants as an appropriate thing to do.

Process and outcome

Those of us involved in planning the WLP aimed for both 'hard', visible outputs (for example, in the form of case studies or recommendations to Oxfam), and 'soft', intangible outputs (for example, increased cross-regional learning and support) throughout the process of the project. The key was to find the appropriate balance at each stage of the project between planning for hard outputs, and building a process which encouraged and supported participants to take on the aims of the project and work with these themselves, in their own way.

An example of how we tried to balance tangible and intangible outcomes is the way in which in-country reviews of programme work and case studies of best practice were conceptualised in the project. These were seen not only as the basis of learning and creating best practice, but also as support to enable staff in our country programmes to build their own capacity to work on gender issues. The methodology for the case studies and reviews was designed in the hope that both new and seasoned 'gender campaigners' would benefit from the exercise. Each would have a chance to reflect and research, to be stretched in a way that suited their own professional development. The De Beuk evaluation found that this aim had been met on the whole: most of the country offices reported that doing the reviews had been very helpful. However, we were very aware in the planning that a natural consequence of this process would be that the reviews and case studies would be subjective and of variable quality, which would make it harder to meet an aim of creating a unified output, since the information given in them could not easily be compared or drawn together.

At the regional meetings we invited the representatives from Southern organisations to recommend ways in which funding agencies could contribute to furthering North-South co-operation. By asking women who had a relationship

with our country offices, we were looking for greater accountability on the part of our field offices, who would be expected to respond to the recommendations and put some of them into action. In addition, although a unified set of guidelines would be useful for centralised processes, we were also acutely aware that gender issues vary greatly in different contexts. It was important that the process strengthened a contextual understanding as well.

Working with difference and power differentials

The central rationale for the WLP was that dialogue was needed between different constituencies working on women's issues, to tap into the huge potential for mutual learning and support. The WLP was notable for the rich variety of perspectives, experiences, and beliefs held by its participants. Participants from both inside and outside Oxfam represented so many different nationalities, languages, cultural contexts, constituencies, and working styles that it was essential to see diversity of identity as a key to the project.

But this meant dialogue across power divides: funding agencies and Southern organisations; men and women; people from the South and North; different races and religions; Oxfam corporate management and project officers. For many involved in the project, dialogue across these power divides was very new and uncomfortable. There was a legacy of misunderstandings, or even mutual mistrust. To enter into dialogue means to face the mistrust, the differences, and the challenges: to discover areas where it is not possible to work together as well as areas where co-operation is possible. It is not cosy, nor predictable.

An awareness of these issues informed the planning of the project. For example, not only did the facilitators at the global meeting and international conference themselves each come from different cultures, but they were all skilled in managing diversity. This led to a conference methodology which used a range of techniques to encourage participants to step outside their experience, to expand their own willingness to respect other's learning processes, and their willingness to learn from each other and to discuss their own values. Techniques such as role plays, personal testimonies, and mixed group discussions were all used to facilitate opportunities for participation through listening and speaking, giving power to all to join in in their own way, in their own time. (For a full account of the methodology of the international conference, see Suarez 1994.)

In every activity and communication, we had to try to create a feeling of the project as a neutral borderland between established territories. Each individual and constituency needed to feel that their views were validated, in order to be able to listen to others without becoming defensive, or to revise long-held beliefs and strategies if needed. Even with forethought, we in the WLP sometimes did not achieve the right balance, which brought feelings of suspicion, anger, or

misunderstanding to the surface. At times, we were over-keen to get agreement in order to achieve a concrete result, and so pushed too hard.

In addition, there were apparent disparities of power, given the fact that the project was co-ordinated by the Gender Team at head office, and set within a Northern funding agency. In retrospect I think the Gender Team needed to communicate more about the role of the team in co-ordinating the WLP, about our perspectives as well as the project itself. In particular, we needed to be clear about the tensions between the relative powerlessness of the Gender Team as an advisory unit (which did not have management status) and the fact that we were located at the centre of a Northern funding agency. It was the latter which tended to dominate the perceptions of the country offices and Southern organisations.

Constraints on openness

This last point brings me to the final set of issues concerning transparency. For the the WLP's potential to be fully realised, I felt that we needed to be very open about the difficult issues we encountered: failures, weaknesses, uncertainties, and unresolved issues. But the very learning and openness that I wanted to promote created difficulties. Tina Wallace confirms in her article in this book that this issue is familiar to anyone who works on challenging issues within organisations. For us in the WLP, there were a number of easily identifiable reasons for the difficulty:

The project's very size and high profile were part of its strength: involving people who would not otherwise be involved, giving a sense of momentum for change, creating a strong message. However, it also increased the pressure to be seen to be right. We felt we needed to 'talk' up the project to the organisation, in order to secure funding for the project and follow-up, and increase the chances of having the work of all the men and women involved taken seriously.

Confidence in sharing failures needs an environment which encourages and supports risk-taking and genuine learning, and which honours lessons learned from failure of innovative approaches as much as those learned from success.

In order to distil many of the lessons learned, we needed time for reflection on such intense processes after the event, and then we needed time to promote those lessons. For this, considerable follow-up was needed.

Evaluating projects focusing on 'process'

The WLP evaluation stated: 'to do justice to the WLP strategy a new, more dynamic view on measuring the output of this project has to be developed ...' (De Beuk, p.48). A theme throughout work on gender issues (repeated in many of the articles in this book) is the need to measure the impact of development projects.

While the impact of any particular development intervention is extremely hard to measure, social development is particularly slow, complex, and difficult to analyse. Consequently, pushing for the production of short-term, tangible measurements as an essential part of impact assessment can have very negative effects on interventions which aim to do the lengthy work of changing gender relations.

Due to the long-term nature of social development, projects like the WLP should perhaps be evaluated several times after the project's official ending, in addition to monitoring during the project's life. Without this type of measurement, how can we judge the effectiveness of such processes, of networking and linking, of starting dialogue and building staff capacity? However, with so many urgent demands on the funds available for development which are administered by organisations such as Oxfam, it takes a very serious commitment to and belief in the value of the project to agree a continuing evaluation of a project which has no current life (even where this evaluation can be embedded in an existing process such as strategic planning).

Who defines the criteria for evaluation?

Who determines the criteria for evaluation, and how? Focusing a project on linking people to exchange information and strategise is a long-term investment in building capacity and in empowerment, rather than a direct 'tool' of development which will deliver tangible results in a measured period. Such projects are an investment in the future. De Beuk suggested that in order to assess the impact of the WLP, success criteria identified by different participants of the WLP should be used as the starting point. In this way, the method of impact assessment would reflect the commitment to enabling participants to determine their own goals: 'one of the basics of the WLP is that it is important to work from a basis of strengthening institutions, and the position of women in them. This means to facilitate and not to impose. To do this, Oxfam needs to have respect for, and pay attention to, helping people to secure their own goals' (De Beuk 1995, 48).

Handing over responsibility to participants to determine success against their own indicators is, of course, particularly challenging if the funders are unsure about the participants' indicators of success. For example, the De Beuk evaluation showed that the solidarity provided within the WLP for many project officers was highly valued by them, but much less valued by top decision-makers. More generally, those involved in the WLP at all levels within Oxfam felt that it succeeded in strengthening voices that were marginal to Oxfam. These voices called for change, and were in many ways challenging the decisions of senior managers in Oxfam. Should Oxfam count that as a success? The more that an issue like women's subordination highlights needs that are misunderstood by decision-makers or viewed as of marginal importance, the more acute this problem becomes.

Evaluating innovation and risk-taking

The WLP moved into many uncharted areas for Oxfam, and combined many accepted ways of working. An important lesson is that, in addition to measuring the outcomes of a project, development workers need to consider how to evaluate the cost of innovation and risk-taking. This would identify the time, cost, and energy spent on a project that is exploring new or difficult issues, and introducing untried procedures. The WLP was a pioneer project in terms of fostering information-sharing and learning across the regions where Oxfam works, rather than channelling information up to head office and down into another region. As these new ways of working become more accepted within Oxfam, procedures will develop to facilitate them, a body of experience will be accumulated, and cross-regional learning will become easier to understand for participants.

Also to be evaluated would be the time, cost, and energy needed for working 'against the grain', in terms of overcoming resistance to certain types of change. As the different stages of the WLP got underway, an enormous amount of the gender Team's energy and resources was used in this way.

To make a project like the WLP a success, support and co-operation within the already existing organisation is imperative. However, this same organisation often experiences innovative projects as threatening and as criticism upon their own work. When the topic is gender, people become defensive even more quickly. The innovation is seen as not only criticism upon their work, but also against their whole person ... In gender projects, the same struggle has to be fought for over and over, every step of the way. (De Beuk 1995, p.52)

Resistance to change is inherent in any organisation. Before an organisation or the individuals in it will shift certain beliefs, it seems that much energy is expended without achieving any apparent change. But where a critical momentum is gained, there will be a dramatic shift, and what was formerly counter to the culture is suddenly accepted as common sense. Issues such as opposition to violence against women, and the need for cross-regional learning appear to have begun to make that essential shift within Oxfam. How can we measure the degree to which the WLP, which championed those causes among others, contributed to that shift?

Conclusion

'Changes in an organisation are generally about one or more of the following issues: methods and means; strategy and goals; culture and ideology; and identity' (De Beuk, p43). The WLP worked for change across all these fronts. It was about building on the diversity of experience, identity, and perception that makes up

the context in which we work. The project was about learning and linking across hierarchies and geographical boundaries. It was a project which emphasised process as much as outputs, at a time when there was increased emphasis on short-term, visible achievements. It reached out to new constituencies for development agencies: feminist organisations and women's movements; groups often viewed with open animosity. It explored new forms of North-South co-operation, partnership, and horizontal accountability (particularly to Southern organisations). It was an attempt to empower and give a platform to the marginalised, and strengthen the impact of groups and ways of thinking that had little leverage on Oxfam's learning or policy-making fora. It explored issues such as women's human rights, women's reproductive rights, and violence against women, at a time when they were still not accepted by many as legitimate development issues.

The evaluation stated that the strategy of the project was innovative and challenging for Oxfam and clearly contributed to its formulated objectives. So not only do messages, outputs and achievements of the project have importance, but the strengths and weaknesses of the project itself offer an enormous amount of institutional learning about processes within agencies like Oxfam in general, and about the process of challenging unequal gender relations.

About the author

Candida March read engineering at university and trained as a manager. She joined Oxfam's Gender and Development Unit in 1989, and worked in a number of jobs: editor, writer, researcher, gender adviser, and co-ordinator of the Women's Linking Project. She now combines freelance work on gender and development with facilitating and managing change in a health and safety company. She is co-author of *A Guide to Gender-Analysis Frameworks* (1999, Oxford: Oxfam).

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Participation and management in South Asia: Gender transformation in the AGRA South network²⁷

Kanchan Sinha

Introduction

There have been, broadly speaking, two separate 'streams' through which Oxfam GB has undertaken its internal gender sensitisation. The first may be called the 'participatory stream', in which attempts were made to involve the staff and create an environment in which our objectives to address gender concerns could be achieved through participatory fora and networks, such as Action for Gender Relations Asia (AGRA), which have enabled staff to debate the issues. The other 'stream' could be called the 'management stream', denoting the integration of goals which incorporate gender concerns, and the institution of appropriate practices into line-managers' responsibilities. Both streams are inter-related and complementary, and both are necessary. While both are to be credited with remarkable successes, each has run into its own set of barriers and constraints. I cannot undertake a comprehensive review of the entire experience in this article. Instead I will be selective, and focus on staff perceptions of some of the main problems which have emerged. Most of these focus on the management stream.

AGRA is a central component of the democratic and participatory stream of work on gender in Asia. It began in 1986 as a grassroots network, run by and for Oxfam staff working on gender issues. All staff members of Oxfam in the Asia regional offices are automatically members of AGRA. AGRA's aims are to foster equal relations between men and women within Oxfam; within Oxfam regional offices in Asia; and in the communities with whom Oxfam works. Its intention

has been to provide a broad-based forum to address gender issues. Activities have included information-sharing and staff development through thematic workshops, opportunities for networking, and documentation on gender issues. In 1988, AGRA was divided into AGRA East (for staff in East Asia) and AGRA South (for those in South Asia),²⁸ mainly to reduce technical difficulties such as travel.

Like AGRA itself, this article has its origin in the participatory stream. It is based on the findings of a research survey which was conducted among Oxfam staff as part of the restructuring of AGRA South. Restructuring AGRA South was first discussed in 1995, because the group felt that it was losing steam and needed rejuvenation. Oxfam GB's shift to a decentralised organisational structure provided further impetus for change from the management stream. A comprehensive survey of the entire AGRA South membership in India was undertaken in 1997.²⁹ This gave us a picture of how Oxfam staff in India viewed gender issues. Through a detailed questionnaire and discussion meetings in all the regional offices in India, issues such as Oxfam's Gender Policy and its implementation, processes to internalise gender analysis, the role of AGRA South, and the interface between AGRA South and Oxfam's management, were discussed. The questions were broad, and the discussions were allowed to flow freely.

The discussions were the most effective part of the survey, because (after some prodding) they brought the real issues into sharp focus. One-to-one discussions with those who were willing were particularly important, and in a number of cases provided insights that were impossible to obtain during group discussions. The whole process, which required 15 days of 'quality time' spread over little more than a month, was a revealing experience. The findings of this research survey were not confined to the experience of AGRA South: many of the issues raised related more widely to the issues of management and participation, and I will focus on these in the following.

The flip side of mainstreaming gender

Staff recalled that there was a time, not so long ago, when gender issues were peripheral concerns, and talk of gender analysis was more likely to invite an amused response, if not outright ridicule. How things have changed! Gender inequalities are now a 'mainstream' issue which no one in Oxfam, or indeed the development sector, can ignore. The survey confirmed that everyone approaches the issue of gender with due care and attention, and speaks about it in a politically correct manner. This transformation in behaviour has come about through a complex and multi-faceted process, which has unfolded through many twists and turns. Formulating Oxfam's corporate Gender Policy, and setting in motion

mechanisms to implement and internalise it, have resulted in successes which are commonly acknowledged, not least in this book.

There is, however, a flip side. Paradoxically, our survey findings point to a widespread feeling among staff in India that the situation on the ground may have worsened in many respects. This apparent contradiction has disappointed those members of staff who invested time and energy to ensure that gender concerns were fully integrated into the organisation. In a number of instances, the gender activists who took part in the India survey (who were often the 'gender lead persons' of respective AGRA chapters) expressed their dissatisfaction with the prevailing atmosphere. Gender policies and implementation strategies have sometimes resulted in a formalised commitment to address gender concerns, flaunted without being internalised or put into day-to-day practice. While at the grassroots, 'gender' was now a much better-known and commonly used word, some felt that there was hardly any improvement in the way the actual issues are addressed. Added to this, they perceived a diminished interest in the affairs of AGRA South. The survey findings particularly highlighted a feeling among staff that at managerial levels, concern about with gender issues was not translated into actual practice.

In course of the research survey, many among the staff reminisced about the 1980s and early 1990s, when they said debates on gender issues had been more lively, involving, and practical, including diverse aspects of life and work. There used to be attempts to integrate the relatives of staff into the discussions. There used to be meetings and get-togethers. Of course, staff also remembered other less positive aspects: many a time, advocates of gender concerns were ridiculed or ignored, while the attempts to bring family and household matters into the discussions on gender issues sometimes caused friction. But overall, staff remembered lively concern, informality, and spontaneous activism, which had a positive impact. They felt that AGRA had played a very important role in fostering an atmosphere which encouraged informal modes of gender activism and interaction. In one of the offices, for example, a male staff member mentioned a woman project officer who had shown care and concern for his wife, and had made sure that she attended the family get-togethers of the staff and felt at ease.

Staff involved in the survey felt that this contrasted with the current situation. Now, Gender-Policy implementation is the responsibility of line management: it is part of evaluations and performance reviews, and managers are accountable to their managers. As the implementation has become more mechanistic, the process is being perceived as over-bureaucratised. The survey found that, as a result, staff have tended to dissociate themselves from responsibility for implementing the policy. Women staff, who have suffered and continue to suffer on account of gender inequity and insensitivity, feel frustrated because they perceive that

conditions are hardly changing. Oxfam's policies and systems have succeeded in making gender relations a subject on which most people try to speak correctly, but they say that this has sometimes resulted in driving the real problems underground. Staff committed to addressing gender issues in their work and in the workplace feel pressurised and vulnerable to rumours, and are resentful because their expectations are unmet. Some other staff members, particularly at lower grades, feel that one more weapon has been placed in the hands of managers, which can be used against them. Some male staff have a growing sense of resentment that a process of reverse discrimination has begun against them. There is muted, resentful talk of gender sensitivity being traded for incompetence, and of people being appointed to coveted posts just because they wear sarees or skirts, so that Oxfam can display its gender sensitivity through its employment statistics.

Oxfam's programme work, too — namely the relationship with its partners and their joint intervention on the development scene — is not free from such paradoxes. The research survey reported that as Oxfam's emphasis on addressing gender issues in development projects has become well-known, the partner organisations' leadership have quickly adapted by formally proclaiming their gender sensitivity, and changing the organisational structure. It seems that such gender sensitivity has become a practical imperative for those who have to run NGOs and hunt for funds. The situation on the ground, however, is changing relatively slowly, and there is growing cynicism among staff in partner organisations, particularly women.

To manage or to lead?

The above should not be taken to imply that participants in the AGRA South survey in India felt that Oxfam should not have formulated a Gender Policy, or that the line management should not have been entrusted with the responsibility to implement it. Both these decisions have had a very positive impact on the way in which gender issues are addressed within Oxfam. I have deliberately chosen in this article to focus on some of the more negative aspects of this process, and examine their specific sources.

At least one of the major sources of contradiction highlighted in our survey is not related to gender issues alone: this is the perceived gap between management and programme staff, which seems to be rooted in doubt about the changing nature of Oxfam as an organisation. In common with other international funding agencies, over the past decade, Oxfam has put a higher premium on efficiency, which some staff fear may discount or de-emphasise the value of grassroots activism and participation. There is no simple answer to how this fear

has come about, but certain contributing factors are clear enough and were highlighted in the research survey. It is common sense that it is not possible to preach to others what one does not practise oneself. Although terms such as corporate management, business plans, and so on are prevalent within Oxfam, it is far from being a regular kind of corporation. Altruistic goals cannot be pursued by the same methods which are employed in the pursuit of profits and self-interest. Managers in organisations such as Oxfam must be leaders, committed to the value-system and the goals of the organisation.

In course of conducting the AGRA South survey in India, I came across numerous examples where mistrust between managers and their staff, fuelled by perceptions of differences between stated values and actual behaviour, seemed to have harmed the promotion of the Gender Policy.

Another lesson from the survey was that a manager's inaction where action is required can also be extremely damaging. In any kind of organisation, but particularly in organisations like Oxfam, complaints which are brought to the managers of any form or degree of sexual harassment, must be cleared up in a clean, transparent, and just manner. If such a matter is not dealt with, the office atmosphere is harmed for a long time: the parties concerned either have to resign and leave, or continue to face each other in an atmosphere of animosity, prejudice, and hypocrisy. It is worth noting that although there undoubtedly have been instances of sexual harassment, even if mild ones in many people's opinion, there has not been, according to the responses to our survey, a single example of transparent punishment and reprimand.

Face to face with reality 'on the ground'

One of the major findings of our survey points towards a particularly painful aspect of reality 'on the ground'. Often, the instances of gender-related insensitivity or misconduct reported in the survey come from staff at lower levels of the organisation, who do not work directly on Oxfam's programme. In some ways, it is simpler to deal with the case of a manager or a senior staff member who displays insensitivity to gender issues. We all reflect the values of surrounding society, and the working atmosphere in organisations like Oxfam, in spite of the shortcomings one often points out, is like an island of relative sensitivity and awareness. Peculiar problems seem to arise at the interface of such organisations and the surrounding society.

One instance may be mentioned to illustrate this kind of problem. The survey meeting in one of the offices was effectively held up for half a day because one of the participants insisted that first the word 'gender' must be explained to him, and

that a vernacular equivalent must be provided. On the face of it, this may appear a perfectly legitimate and honest demand. But it was clear enough that things were not that simple. This person went on to be the most vocal participant in the meeting, dominating everyone else and heaping ridicule on 'urban, woolly-headed, liberal gender-mongers' who would never understand the culture and traditions of the people. He made frequent references to the 'foolishness' and 'naivety' of two female project officers and some gender trainers. While ostensibly sounding earthy and pragmatic, he seemed to me to be putting up a resolute defence of his own gender insensitivity.

It is difficult to deal with such problems, and more so for a foreign funding agency working in a society where it has to pay special attention to popular sensitivities. This difficulty, however, should not stop us from acknowledging the problem. Only after this may understanding follow, and a thoughtful approach may emerge which can help in planning effective interventions. If we ignore reality and indulge in wishful thinking, problems only get further complicated.

Gender rights and affirmative action

During the research, some examples of unexpected effects of the Gender Policy were cited. One question that arose in a number of contexts was whether the facilities and concessions provided to women staff on account of their needs as mothers and carers for their families do actually meet their desired objectives. As stated earlier, all of us live in societies where gender issues remain largely unaddressed. If a woman faces discrimination and exploitation in her household, how can Oxfam ensure as her employer that facilities and concessions offered to her on grounds of her gender identity do not benefit the perpetrators of gender inequality in such households? One participant in the survey raised the question of 'paternity leave'. If the man gets paternity leave as a right, but is of no help to his wife in this period, can it be said to have served a useful purpose? Other examples were cited, including the case of nuclear families where both husband and wife work, and are conscious and vocal about their rights concerning gender issues. There was a view that the burden of running their household (taking care of their children and so on) should not be transferred indirectly to their workplace. What was coming through loud and clear from such examples was the fact that if the question of gender equity needs to be considered in an unselfish and enlightened manner. If the prevailing conditions in wider society are not taken into account, Oxfam and other similar organisations will carry the burden of gender insensitivity and gender-blindness alone, and may end up being exploited by those who assert their rights in a self-centred manner.

Concluding remarks

I have pointed out some of the complexities of gender transformation in an organisation such as Oxfam. As stated previously, I do not purport to have given a comprehensive review of Oxfam's experience of gender issues — which is far from being a tale merely of difficulties and limitations.

I have concentrated on four aspects of the findings of the AGRA survey of Oxfam's India staff. First, with gender equity emerging as a universally recognised concern within Oxfam, a flip-side has also begun to appear, endangering the cause with dilution, resistance, and subversion. Second, staff have moved from considering gender issues as their concern via participation, to a somewhat one-sided reliance on the 'management stream' for achieving gender objectives. This carries with it severe limitations and constraints, and I suggest that there are lessons here for both managers and staff. Implementation of the Gender Policy through line management must be accompanied and complemented by efforts to release the creative energies of the 'participatory stream', through democratic structures like AGRA. Third, the complex interface between organisations like Oxfam and surrounding societies, particularly in the Third World, must be mapped carefully in order to devise effective strategies for intervention. Finally, it is my view that women in organisations like Oxfam need to pursue an enlightened course and refrain from narrow and self-centred assertion of their rights as mothers and carers, in the interest of the larger cause. Otherwise, the counter-winds of resistance and subversion will gain strength.

I can inform the reader that the process of restructuring AGRA South, of which this research survey was a part, has yet to reach a successful conclusion. The challenge before managers is to take the initiative and assume leadership by empowering and strengthening the 'participatory stream'; if this eventually limits managers' own rights and responsibilities, that should be taken as its success and as a desired and happy outcome.

About the author

Kanchan Sinha joined Oxfam GB in 1993 and is its Regional Representative in North India, based at Lucknow. She is also the co-ordinator of AGRA South. She has been active in the women's movement in India since 1984, working for a number of women's organisations in Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh. She holds a PhD in Philosophy and has taught at Gorakhpur University, India; from 1978–79, Kanchan was a Research Associate at Boston University, USA.

Notes to section IV

- 1 'Regionalisation' is a process of decentralisation, in which decision-making power is devolved from Oxfam House to the regional offices. In this article, the process of regionalisation refers to the shift in Oxfam's ways of working from a country-based approach to one which encompasses a wider geopolitical region (in this case, the Middle East/Maghreb) and focuses on clear issues which cut across the region.
- 2 Formerly known as the Gender and Development Unit (GADU), and currently referred to as the Gender and Learning Team (GALT).
- 3 This close working relationship has weakened as a new structure has emerged at Oxfam's head office, in which advisors no longer have specific responsibility for a region. This has resulted in the loss of commitment and support which was such a vital part of the transformation which has taken place in the Middle East programme.
- 4 The Social Relations Approach, developed in Naila Kabeer (1994), *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*, London: Verso.
- 5 See A. Ammaoui, 'Overview of Middle East/Maghreb region', paper prepared for the Middle East Regional Conference, December 1995.
- 6 Representing women's groups and NGOs from Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, Algeria, and Morocco.
- 7 The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979).
- 8 To ratify a convention with 'reservations' is to agree to abide by the convention with the exception of certain clauses or sections that a government finds disagreeable — a tactic often used by resistant governments to render the convention meaningless and impossible to implement.
- 9 See Sue Smith's contribution to this book, 'Making Visible the Invisible', for further discussion of this.
- 10 For a further discussion of Beijing as a forum at which many concerns were discussed, please see the article by Lucy Muyoyeta in this volume.
- 11 For further discussion of Oxfam International, please see Ellen Sprenger and Diane Biray Gregorio's article in this volume.

- 12 As of mid-1998, the following Oxfams are affiliates: Community Aid Abroad (Australia), Intermón (Spain), Novib (the Netherlands), Oxfam America (United States), Oxfam Belgium, Oxfam Canada, Oxfam Hong Kong, Oxfam New Zealand, Oxfam Great Britain, Oxfam Ireland and Oxfam Quebec. Special focal areas include: programme harmonisation in a select number of countries and regions; humanitarian assistance and emergency relief; international advocacy; joint marketing and media strategies and the piloting of information technologies. In an effort to be truly international, OI is seeking to include affiliates from the global South.
- 13 With 'diverse backgrounds' we mean people who have unequal and disadvantaged positions in society on the basis of sex, race, age, religion, ethnicity, sexual preference, physical ability, or other. Although the OI group agreed that diversity is a significant issue, it also pointed out that to address diversity properly requires a base of knowledge which sometimes (but not always) coincides with gender expertise. The working group adopted the issue of diversity, but at the same time emphasised the need for individual Oxfams to explore the issue.
- 14 The OI decision-making body to which the working group on gender and diversity reports is also the OI body with the largest number of women. Although it is difficult to prove, it would be very interesting to find out whether there is indeed a relationship between quantity — the number of women in a group, and quality — the proactive role this group plays in promoting gender equity and diversity in OI.
- 15 Gender-blind: an organisation with no recognition of gender differentials; where assumptions include biases in favour of existing gender relations; in which hardly any change, or learning, is taking place.
- 16 Gender-aware: an organisation where there is some awareness of gender issues and commitment to include women's needs and priorities into analysis, planning, and programming; but which lacks systematic implementation; where a process of change and learning is taking place, but is limited to a small group of people.
- 17 Gender-responsive: an organisation whose interventions intend to transform existing distributions to create a more balanced relationship between women and men; an organisation which can show evidence of good gender practice; where a process of institutional learning and change is taking place.
- 18 As endorsed by the OI Programme Directors (Brussels, 13–17 October 1997) and Executive Directors (The Hague, 30–31 October 1997).
- 19 The authors work in the field of organisational change and development, with a specific focus on women and gender issues. This article provides an opportunity for both practitioners to reflect on their experiences of working

on the development and implementation of a joint fund, the Gender and Development (GAD) fund, supported by Oxfam Canada and Novib. The views expressed in this article are based on the experiences of the two authors and are not the official views of Oxfam Canada and Novib.

- 20 For more on Oxfam International and its member organisations, see Ellen Sprenger and Diane Biray Gregorio in this volume. See also note 12.
- 21 The DNW currently consists of representatives from: FORD, C.S. Mott Foundation, Interfund, Oxfam Canada-Novib (via the GAD fund), the Transitional National Development Trust, the Open Society Foundation and the British Council.
- 22 Where linkages have been made (visits of the GAD fund co-ordinator to Oxfam Canada and Oxfam GB) these have been initiated from the South and not vice versa.
- 23 See Ellen Sprenger and Diane Biray Gregorio in this volume.
- 24 The results, messages and outcomes of the project are written up elsewhere: see references at the end of the article.
- 25 At the time of writing, this situation has changed, because Oxfam GB now has an anti-poverty programme in the UK (see Geraldine Terry's article in this volume).
- 26 The methodology of the WLP is described more fully in 'Women linking for change: Oxfam's Women's Linking Project' in *Focus on Gender* Vol. 2, No. 3, 1994, Oxfam (UK/I).
- 27 AGRA: Action for Gender Relations in Asia, an Oxfam staff network.
- 28 Within South Asia, AGRA has chapters in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Within India there are nine chapters, one in each office of Oxfam's programme in India.
- 29 The survey is intended to reach the entire membership of AGRA South, but has so far been completed only in India and later in Nepal.

