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OXFAM NOVIB & PARTNERSHIPS

A Historical Perspective

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Over the last five decades, Oxfam Novib has built partnerships with thousands of civil society organizations in more than 80 countries around the world. During this time, the support of local partner organizations has been central to Oxfam Novib's development philosophy, which is based on the strong belief that local organizations are the prime actors in the struggle against poverty and injustice in their own societies. This paper reflects on the history of the relationships between Oxfam Novib and its partners. It examines how Oxfam Novib's approach has changed over the years and to what extent its underlying partnership principles were put into practice.

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PREFACE

Over the last five decades, working in solidarity with partner organizations and building their capacity was seen as a key ingredient of Oxfam Novib's identity as a development organization. Oxfam Novib's approach was based on its ambition to move beyond the narrow donor-grantee relationship and develop a genuine partnership based on values and principles such as trust, solidarity, equality, reciprocity and respect for autonomy. For a long time, these underlying values and principles were largely implicit. They were made explicit, elaborated and captured in 2009 in Oxfam's Partnership Principles.

The typical Oxfam Novib partnership approach was also based on certain working modalities, such as providing partners with long-term and flexible (core) funding and the monitoring of partners from the Headquarters in The Hague (distant support). In the view of Oxfam Novib, this way of working would give partners the maximum space, autonomy and opportunities to grow and become more effective.

In this article we critically reflect on the history of the relationships between Oxfam Novib and its partners. We examine how the organization's approach and the related principles were translated into practice during different periods. We believe it is important to explore these questions more deeply to help us, and others, better understand Oxfam Novib's philosophy and identity. When the organization celebrated its sixtieth anniversary, in 2016, there was a strong feeling that the time had come to document, synthesize and publish more of its history.

Oxfam Novib is changing rapidly as part of an interdependent Oxfam network. This paper is intended to contribute to an ongoing dialogue amongst colleagues and partners about where the organization comes from and might be heading. It is based on internal reviews, annual reports, multi-annual plans, partner satisfaction surveys, reports of partner seminars and other materials that shed more light on the partnership approach, its principles and practices.

This paper draws inspiration from some of the literature about the relationships between international NGOs and their local partners. There is a growing body of theoretical and empirical studies that try to unravel these rather complex and ambivalent relationships. The names of some of the studies are telling: "The Partnership Paradox" (Elbers, 2012); "The Unreality of North-South Partnerships" (Fowler, 2015); "Between Rhetoric and Reality: Essays on Partnerships in Development" (Malhotra, 1997). All these writers point to the tension in INGOs between the desire to live up to the principles of good partnership and the ways in which actual practice is often more problematic. We have used some of the insights of these writers in the last part of this paper, when we look forward.

After a first chapter introducing the Oxfam Novib partnership approach, we describe five historical periods, setting the scene by sketching both the development context and Oxfam Novib's organizational context, then exploring the partnership approach, principles and practice.¹ Strengths and weaknesses, dilemmas and tensions, and some recommendations for the way forward are presented in the final chapter.

¹ Until joining the Oxfam Confederation in 1995, Oxfam Novib was known as Novib. When discussing the historical periods before 1995, we refer to Novib, but for the sake of simplicity we use Oxfam Novib when talking about the overall history of the organization.

INTRODUCTION

Oxfam Novib has a long history of building partnerships with a wide range of civil society organizations in developing countries and at the global level. Over the last five decades, Oxfam Novib has supported thousands of partners, including (informal) grassroots organizations, intermediary organizations, advocacy groups, trade unions, think tanks, media, NGO networks, coalitions and social movements. In Latin America alone, Oxfam Novib has supported some 3,000 partners since 1970 (Lambregts, 2012). If we extrapolate this figure to the rest of the world, the total number could easily reach 10,000.

Oxfam Novib has always considered the support of local civil society organizations as both a means to an end and an end in itself. In terms of being a means to an end, local organizations were seen as the principal actors in the struggle to achieve positive social change. They were assumed to have the necessary capabilities, the legitimacy and the right values to fight against poverty and injustice in their own countries. They knew best how to organize and emancipate poor people, help to articulate their demands and press for pro-poor policies and practices. Working through local actors and building their capacity was seen as the best way for an external funder to help bring about change. The funding support was always meant to be temporary, with the aim to leave behind more effective and more sustainable organizations, with a positive impact on poverty and injustice.

The funding and strengthening of local organizations was also considered to be an end in itself: by supporting diverse civil actors and networks, Oxfam Novib aspired to contribute to the development of a strong civil society that would be able to balance the power of the state and the market. A well-organized, diverse and autonomous civil society was considered to be essential for a healthy democracy and a plural society. While it was understood that civil society evolves largely from below and within, Oxfam Novib strongly believed that external funders can play a positive facilitating role. Oxfam Novib's role was made possible by a flexible co-funding arrangement with the Dutch Government, which lasted for more than 45 years.

In its support of civil society organizations, Oxfam Novib always had the desire and ambition to move beyond the narrow donor-recipient relationship. It recognized that a relationship based on funding is inherently asymmetrical, and had the strong conviction that this should not prevent the building of genuine partnerships. There was always a firm commitment to building long-term and open-ended relationships with a high level of equality, based on solidarity and trust. The funding was flexible and could be used by partners to cover core costs, invest in capacity building and finance less tangible activities, such as research, networking and campaigning. Partners were allowed to experiment, grow and learn. Oxfam Novib was always careful not to impose or prescribe. In times of trouble, the organization stood by partners and gave moral and practical support.

Strategic civil society funding also meant there was an appetite to take risks and fund the work of (unregistered) organizations and individuals in highly complex and oppressive environments. In general, Oxfam Novib was never afraid to fund experiments and initiatives with uncertain and unpredictable outcomes.

In a way, Oxfam Novib also tried to be as invisible as possible. The main role of program staff was to facilitate the work of partners and stay behind the scenes. Oxfam Novib even had a sort of 'anti-branding' philosophy. When partners wanted to put the organization's logo on their cars or offices ("donated by our friends from Holland") they were told that its policies and principles would not allow this. In meetings with officials, Oxfam Novib staff would always put the partner in the spotlight and explain that their own role was simply that of a funder.

Oxfam Novib was convinced that funding and monitoring from a distance (The Hague) was the best way to guarantee the autonomy of partners. Even when the organization had offices in some countries in the eighties, this was understood to be a temporary arrangement. Long-term presence in

the field was not deemed desirable as it would perpetuate dependency and asymmetry and reduce the space of local civil society actors.

Overall, the centrality of this partnership approach to Oxfam Novib's development thinking was taken for granted for a long time. Its strengths and weaknesses were seldom seriously examined. Even when the funding context started to change, with more emphasis on short-term measurable results and value for money, less flexibility and more restrictions, there was always the desire to stick to the approach and the principles. The below history further explores how the Oxfam Novib partnership approach was driven by a specific development ideology and made possible by a very enabling funding environment.

1956-1970 – No partners, only project holders

Context

Novib was born in 1956, in the early days of Dutch international aid to 'less-developed nations'. It was founded as a broad-based development organization with a threefold mandate: to educate the Dutch public on the issues of global poverty and injustice; to lobby the Dutch Government; and to fund concrete projects in the developing world.

In those days, the dominant discourse about development was still largely technocratic and one-dimensional. It was believed that less-developed countries would eventually catch up with the rest of the world if they adopted free market capitalism, Western technology and Western values. Economic growth, driven by the export of raw materials, would automatically lead to the trickle-down of wealth and help to lift billions of people out of poverty. There was a lot of optimism about development, and a lot of confidence in the positive role of the governments of newly independent countries.

Novib

For Novib, international solidarity with less-fortunate countries and people was the prime motive for giving aid. The founding fathers of Novib – Simon Jelsma, Jan Tinbergen and Johannes Hugenholz – spoke about the need for global justice. They argued that extreme poverty and global inequality were unacceptable and posed a threat to world peace and security. The rich countries had a moral duty to help other countries achieve higher standards of living, as well as enlightened self-interest in doing so.

In its first 15 years, Novib did not have a partnership approach: there were no partners yet, only project holders. Money was raised among the Dutch public to fund concrete projects, such as the building of schools, clinics and water systems. Such projects were owned and carried out by Dutch missionaries, Dutch technical experts and local governments. Novib also provided a lot of food aid to mission hospitals, schools and other institutions in developing countries. The Dutch Government donated this food, in an attempt to get rid of the oversupply of dairy products – the notorious 'mountains of butter' and 'lakes of milk' – caused by generous EU farm subsidies.

In 1965, the so-called Co-Financing System was established. Under this system, a select group of Dutch development NGOs could apply for co-funding of projects. Approval by the government of the receiving country was one of the conditions for obtaining co-funding. Many Novib-funded projects were formulated in close collaboration with Dutch Embassies and local government officials. Unlike ICCO and Cordaid (both church-based), Novib did not yet have its own network of local organizations in developing countries. Interestingly, the 1968 Novib Annual Report suggests that "Novib should perhaps seek more co-operation with Oxfam staff in a number of countries".

1970-1985 – Unconditional solidarity

Context

In the early 1970s, the discourse about development started to change: 'Third World' countries became more outspoken and assertive about their subordinate position in the world economic system. They complained about falling commodity prices and unfair trade practices, and made proposals to establish a 'New International Economic Order'. They wanted more power over multinational corporations operating in their territories, and pressed for the establishment of mechanisms to stabilize the price of raw materials. The term 'development aid' was replaced by 'development co-operation': from now on, donor countries and recipient governments were supposed to be partners in development.

In the Netherlands, the Third World Movement became more vocal and visible, inspired by Marxist thinkers such as Andre Gunder Frank, Walter Rodney and various liberation theologians. These thinkers offered a radically different development paradigm: instead of embracing market capitalism and striving for integration in the world economy, Third World countries were urged to break away from this vicious dependency, strive to become more self-reliant and start to trade on equal terms with other socialist countries. During this period, liberation movements in Southern Africa and Central America were fighting against racist and oppressive regimes and were supported by international solidarity groups.

The new Minister for Development Co-operation, Jan Pronk (Labour Party), was highly critical of the conservative Co-Financing Agencies (CFAs). Nevertheless, he raised their budgets significantly as he wanted to ensure that another channel, alongside bilateral and multilateral funding agreements, would be available to strengthen local civil society. He urged the CFAs to adopt a more political view of development, giving them a new task and mission: instead of funding concrete and one-off projects, they were now to provide programmatic support to non-governmental organizations that could organize and emancipate the poor. Preferably these would be member-based organizations of the poor, but they could also be intermediate organizations working for the poor.

During this time, it was more widely recognized that development is a contested, non-linear and political process. Faith lessened in the trickle-down model and the benevolent role of Third World governments. In many countries, authoritarian regimes had come to power and elites had captured the benefits of the commodity boom of the 1960s and early 1970s.

Novib

Novib was challenged by the Dutch Third World Movement to adopt a more radical profile and support progressive groups and liberation movements. This led to serious tensions in the organization, with a struggle between the 'charity wing' and the 'political wing'. Novib survived this crisis, and from then on pursued a two-track funding policy: it continued with traditional food aid and mainstream charitable projects, but also started to establish relationships with more progressive organizations.

In this era, Novib started actively to look for organizations with a more progressive mission and development approach. Concepts such as 'target groups', 'emancipation' and 'countervailing power' emerged in policy papers and reports. Concrete support was provided to liberation movements such as the ANC, Frelimo and SWAPO in Southern Africa. In Latin America, strong links were established with labour unions in countries such as Colombia and Chile. In Indonesia, the focus was on human rights and the defence of political prisoners. In 'progressive' countries such as Tanzania, Mozambique and Cuba, Novib started to work on projects with socialist governments.

Partnership approach

The relationship between Novib and its partners (sometimes also called ‘counterparts’) was characterized by a strong desire and commitment to build relationships of trust and solidarity. The division of tasks between Novib and partners was clear: Novib’s job was to educate the Dutch public, raise funds at home, and lobby the Dutch Government to provide more aid and contribute to a more just world order. Partners were the drivers of development in their own societies and were assumed to have superior knowledge about their own culture and political reality: they needed only sympathetic and dedicated friends to support their struggle against poverty and injustice. For Novib, any expression of Western arrogance or well-meant paternalistic advice was to be avoided at all costs. Novib staff often had a strong sense of ‘collective guilt’: the North had exploited the South for centuries, and it was now pay back time. Unconditional solidarity with oppressed people and exploited nations was the only right attitude.

In reports from this era, it is striking that partners often express the strong desire to develop a very close relationship with Novib staff. Only through frequent and lengthy face-to-face contact would it be possible to build a genuine relationship of trust and equality: according to partners, it takes a lot of time to really understand where the other party comes from, what their true intentions are and how they are embedded in their own society and culture. It is easy to say that we all share the same values, but what does this really mean in different contexts? To what extent can we really trust the other, the outsider, the former ‘oppressor’? Is genuine solidarity between North and South really possible? Is the North really willing to share power? Those were among the pertinent questions partners raised in meetings with their funder (e.g. “From Banker to Partner”, report of regional seminars, 1982).

Partners demanded a minimum of bureaucracy and a maximum of flexibility and solidarity. They often explained that they worked in very difficult, volatile and unpredictable environments and needed to be sure that Novib would stay with them through thick and thin. Many NGO leaders faced personal harassment and threats, and Novib was often regarded as a friend and patron that could provide some form of protection. When NGO leaders got into serious trouble, Novib would do everything to help them and their families, often with concrete material support.

Some of the larger partners asked for more influence over Novib’s policies and funding priorities. The so-called Commissions of Dialogue (CD) were established as a mechanism to achieve more equality. With partners and Novib represented in equal numbers, the CD would meet twice per year to discuss a lengthy agenda and advise the Novib Board on how to improve the relationship and work more closely together. The first partners to benefit from this arrangement were the umbrella of trade unions in Chile, the Sarvodaya Movement in Sri Lanka and the farmer movement in Bolivia (Policy Paper Commissions of Dialogue, 1980).

Conclusion

Altogether, the era of solidarity was perhaps the least bureaucratic period in Novib’s history. The organization was able to work with exceptional organizations and leaders in a very flexible and personalized way. Novib was willing to take risks, including political risks, and there was a genuine effort to create relationships of trust, solidarity and equality.

One could also call this a rather naïve period: there was perhaps too much trust, too few checks and balances and too little control. The untested assumption was that civil society organizations were good and charismatic leaders should be given the maximum freedom to run their organizations as they saw fit. Because those leaders often became close friends of Novib staff, it was difficult to ask pertinent questions about internal governance and financial integrity.

1985-1995 – Checks and balances

Context

From the mid-1980s onwards, the dominant discourse about development took a new direction. This was the era of structural adjustment programs and TINA (“there is no alternative”). Many Third World Countries were confronted with falling commodity prices, a growing debt burden, fiscal deficits, widespread poverty and sharp inequalities. Governments were forced by international debtors to abandon their socialist and self-reliance projects: they had to liberalize the economy, privatize their parastatal companies, cut subsidies and social programs, slim down the bureaucracy and open the doors for international investors and free trade. The market was supposed to do the job, and governments had to step back.

The end of the Cold War in 1989 brought an opening of political space in many countries around the world, as one-party governments and autocratic regimes gave way to more pluralistic systems of governance. This new space provided opportunities for civil society to emerge and organize itself, which led to a massive increase in civil society organizations and opportunities for Novib to identify and support partners. Especially in urban areas, there was a new NGO wave: human rights organizations, media groups, women’s organizations, think tanks, anti-debt campaigners and other progressive organizations were established. In rural areas, old and new self-help groups and intermediary organizations tried to fill the service delivery gap left behind by a retreating government. There was also a rapid increase in the number of quangos and ‘briefcase NGOs’.

The concept of an autonomous civil society gained widespread prominence. In the eyes of many Northern donors, civil society organizations in the South would be able to counter the forces of the state and the market and compensate for their failures. Most bilateral donors increased their funding for Southern NGOs, both directly (through their embassies) and indirectly (through Northern NGOs such as Novib).

Novib

Under the new Co-Financing System, Novib no longer had to submit individual projects for approval, but received a programmatic grant for a period of four years. This grant was based on a broad strategic plan. The plan contained no targets or indicators, but only offered a general description of the Novib partnership approach and the choice of countries, themes and partners, and ended with a short paragraph about the proposed evaluation approach and methodology (Multi-Annual Plan, 1980).

Because the available co-financing funds of the Dutch government grew rapidly, Novib could afford to be generous and flexible. The new co-financing modalities made it easy to give partners long-term security of funding and enable them to hire and keep staff, invest in offices and equipment and concentrate on their work instead of running around to raise funds. Novib was always willing to provide core funding – unlike many other donors – and give money for less-tangible activities such as networking, training, learning, lobbying, advocacy and campaigning. Some partners were given a ‘block grant’ covering 4-5 years, with a maximum of flexibility and freedom to use the money for programs and organizational development. This practice grew especially in Latin America, where partners were supposed to be strong and mature enough to handle this responsibility.

Within many country program budgets, there was also room for Small Project Funds and Rapid Response Funds. These were used to respond quickly and flexibly to requests for the funding of new initiatives that emerged from within civil society in response to events such as new elections or campaigns. Civil society organizations greatly appreciated this kind of support and Novib quickly became known as one of the more enabling and innovative donors.

There were some experiments with the decentralization of grant making, in particular in Latin America: a few partners were selected and given the authority to manage funds on behalf of Novib. In some African countries, Small Project Funds were managed by local partners, who had some decision-making power over approvals. But these experiments remained small and were not taken further. Partners often felt that their mandate was too limited, or that their new role as a donor negatively affected their relationships with other civil society organizations in their country.

Partnership approach

With the rapid increase in available funds, Novib staff acquired a new sense of responsibility. The generosity and flexibility of the funding could be justified only when partners had the capacity to utilize the money wisely ('absorption capacity') and properly account for it. Rapidly growing budgets increased risks such as overfunding, cost-inefficiency and corruption. Head Office hired more staff to be able to process much larger grants in a responsible manner. In some countries (such as Nicaragua, Zimbabwe and Uganda), Novib had temporary field offices and worked with 'senior consultants' who better understood the realities on the ground and had networks that staff in the Hague lacked.

Altogether, the relationship between Novib and its partners gradually became more businesslike but continued to be driven by the principles of solidarity and equality. We were still committed to stay with our partners through thick and thin. Partners could experiment, make mistakes, learn and improve. When partners went through a leadership crisis or other sort of organizational dip, Novib would offer assistance to help bring about healing and transformation.

In each country, Novib had iconic 'star partners', large and influential organizations that could show results and played an important role in their civil society. Novib was often crucial in helping these organizations to grow and establish themselves as strong civil society actors. Many of these organizations were (and still are) at the forefront of the struggle against poverty and injustice in their respective countries, such as the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, the Tanzania Women Media Association (TAMWA), BRAC in Bangladesh (and now globally), and IBASE in Brazil.

In many respects, the power relationship between Novib and these 'star partners' was quite balanced: both Novib and the partner realized that they were dependent on each other. For partners, the flexible Novib funding was important; they also received money from other donors, but under more stringent conditions. For Novib, such partners were important to show results and impact. Their work could be used for fundraising purposes in the Netherlands and in public campaigning.

In this era, Novib continued to organize regular country platform meetings. These were used mainly to discuss the country context, the Novib country strategy and related funding priorities. Partners were given the opportunity to discuss the plans for their country and could suggest changes in priorities and allocations. This sometimes resulted in revisions of the plan.

The 'Critical Dialogue'

During project visits, Novib staff had to find a delicate balance between respect for the autonomy of partners and the duty to do due diligence. They had to step into the grey area between trust and control, explaining that it was now necessary to peep into the kitchen of charismatic leaders and their organizations and ask sometimes tough questions about internal governance and checks and balances.

This process was called the 'critical dialogue'. Novib staff came with a checklist of issues that had to be discussed, and were sometimes seen by the partner as overly bureaucratic. Of course, Novib was still primarily interested in discussions about programs and policy, but also needed to know if the partner had the necessary capacities, procedures and mechanisms to properly manage their human and financial resources. Novib staff had to find a new balance between discussing the contents of the work and the necessary organizational preconditions. Perhaps the partner was overstretching itself?

Perhaps its Board was not independent enough? Perhaps the organization was not very cost-efficient?

At the end of a dialogue, Novib staff often concluded that the organization was doing great work but showed a number of weaknesses that needed to be addressed. It took skill to discuss these issues in a respectful and constructive manner, navigating the thin line between interference and respect for autonomy. This could become awkward, especially because Novib staff were not supposed to advise or propose solutions – they could only observe, point out and perhaps suggest. Some partners were rather puzzled by this approach: “you notice that we are doing things in the wrong way, but when we ask you how we can improve ourselves, you tell us that we should seek our own solutions and get external advice” (Scheffer, 2012).

From the mid-1980s onwards, the critical dialogues with partners started to cover the issue of women in development. In particular, the UN Conference on Women in Nairobi (1985) led to a greater awareness in Novib about this issue. The organization started to examine its own internal policies and practices, and also wanted to know if partners were trying to involve women in their programs and if they intended to hire more female staff.

In most cases, the critical dialogue would result in a series of conditions and a plan of action with concrete, time-bound steps to tackle weaknesses. Novib would usually fund the necessary training of staff, management and Board, and pay for technical support to develop more manuals, systems and tools. This kind of one-off technical assistance would later evolve into a broader concept of capacity building and organizational development.

Evaluations

From the late 1980s onwards, there was a growing emphasis on more systematic evaluations of partners and their programs, but such evaluations were still largely qualitative and process-oriented. In evaluation reports from this era, numbers are often lacking: there is a lot of information about the internal dynamics of the partner organization, the development approach and the participatory working methods, but little systematic information about the results of the work measured against a baseline. This was not yet the age of objectively verifiable indicators, let alone pre-defined outcomes.

The lack of quantifiable and verifiable information was noted by an impact evaluation carried out by the Ministry in 1991: most partner organizations of Novib and the other CFAs did not have systems and tools that could provide more objective evidence of results. This was seen as a serious problem that was undermining the credibility of the NGO development sector. Other weaknesses pointed out were partners' lack of cost awareness and cost efficiency.

Conclusion

Looking back at this era, there was still a strong emphasis on the long-term and open-ended character of the relationship between Novib and partners. As long as partners needed Novib financially, and as long as they booked results (albeit qualitative and anecdotal and not yet objectively verifiable), both parties were happy to continue the relationship. As long as the Novib budget was growing, it was possible to continue supporting existing (and often large) partners, while also adding new ones to the portfolio. On average, the funding relationships with partners lasted for almost 20 years in Latin America and 15 years in East Africa.

Novib's commitment to open-ended and long-term funding was greatly appreciated by partners, because it gave them the freedom to follow their own development path, grow and learn and become more mature. However, it sometimes kept them too dependent on Novib funding: there were perhaps too few incentives to diversify sources of income. Many partners were intermediate organizations that could not easily raise funds through the market or membership fees and remained largely dependent on foreign donations.

1995-2005 – Networking and results

Context

The closing years of the millennium saw a new wave of optimism about development. There was more economic growth in several countries – including the BRICs, a term coined in 2001, and some African countries – although most developing countries were still facing economic hardship and an unsustainable debt burden.

In 1995, at the Social Summit in Copenhagen, almost 200 world leaders committed to tackle global poverty and invest more in social development, health and education. Governments in the South promised good governance and pro-poor reforms, and governments in the North promised more aid, debt relief and a more enabling global environment. In 2000, the Millennium Summit launched the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This was the first time a comprehensive global plan had been formulated with measurable goals to reduce poverty and improve social indicators.

Global civil society became better organized and more visible and vocal, as evidenced by widespread demonstrations against the WTO and a successful campaign on global debt. In 2003, the first World Social Forum – a colourful assembly of all sorts of anti-globalists and other-globalists – made ‘another world’ seem possible. Networking and campaigning at all levels took on a new dynamism, enabled by the ICT revolution and increased political freedom in many countries. At national and regional (e.g. Pan Africa) level, there was a rapid increase in the number of coalitions and networks around issues such as anti-corruption, civic education and election monitoring, natural resource management, land rights, women rights, debt and trade.

While all these exciting developments were unfolding, the Dutch public and media became more critical about the results of development co-operation. Scepticism grew about claims that Northern NGOs were indeed able to help reduce poverty in a sustainable manner. The sector was challenged to become more transparent and honest about their results, or lack of them. More doubts were raised about the added value of INGOs and their role as intermediaries in the aid chain.

In 2004, the special status of the four CFAs (‘the cartel’) came to an end, and the system was opened to allow more Dutch organizations to apply for funding.

Oxfam Novib

The new system gradually changed the dynamics between Oxfam Novib and partners. Resources became scarcer and it became more difficult to guarantee long-term funding. Oxfam Novib had to become more explicit and transparent about the results it wanted to achieve in collaboration with partners, and the ‘exit strategy’.

Having joined the Oxfam Confederation in 1995, Oxfam Novib adopted the ‘rights-based approach’ in 2000. It took steps to professionalize its work on inclusive finance and introduced the ‘Toolbox’ (see page 13) as an improvement on the critical dialogue approach.

Partnership approach

Networking and campaigning

As it adopted the rights-based approach and became involved in its first major Oxfam campaigns – the Coffee Campaign (“Mugged”), Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP) and Make Trade Fair (“Double Standards”) – Oxfam Novib soon recognized that the new trend of networking and campaigning also called for a new sort of partnership, especially at the global level. In 1995, Oxfam Novib was instrumental in initiating the global Social Watch Coalition, and this became the beginning

of the so-called Global Programs Unit – management decided to establish a new funding program to support a wide range of global networks and coalitions. In some instances, Oxfam Novib was both a funder and a member of global coalitions, such as the Global Campaign for Education. This double role had to be carefully managed.

Global Programs was the beginning of a new type of partnership with a far more equal power balance between Oxfam Novib and recipients: of course, there was often a ‘North-South issue’, but this was more openly debated. While some global partners were old friends, such as Third World Network and Inter Press Service, others – such as Focus on the Global South and La Via Campesina – became either new friends or new critics. Global partners were not afraid to challenge Oxfam Novib and question its policies and practices: for example, some collaborated with Oxfam in the Trade Campaign, while others were openly critical. Even networks dependent on Oxfam Novib for their funding were confident that they had enough negotiating power: “we know that you know that you need us as much as we need you” (Walden Bello, from the critical dialogue with Focus on the Global South, 2005).

Humanitarian work

Joining the Oxfam Confederation led to a far greater investment in humanitarian work, which required the development of new capacities, systems and structures. In 2005-2006, Oxfam Novib decided to establish so-called Humanitarian Hubs in Nairobi and Islamabad. This would become the beginning of the decentralization process, described in the next section.

Country programming

The adoption of the rights-based approach led to a new way of structuring country programs. In each country, Oxfam Novib would now work along basic rights (‘Aims’) and formulate so-called Strategic Change Objectives and related Policy and Practice Changes. Sometimes this was only a case of re-labelling existing work, but it also led to working with new organizations in new ways. More funds went into building the capacity of partner organizations in areas of policy advocacy and campaigning.

More efforts went into creating synergy among partners working on the same issues and encouraging them to form and join broader coalitions. Linking and learning across levels and country borders rose on the agenda. This led to increased efforts to pro-actively scout new organizations and renew country portfolios. In some cases, Calls for Proposals were used to get to know new organizations and identify promising initiatives.

Microfinance rapidly became an important sector for Oxfam Novib investments, which led to more awareness in the organization about ‘value for money’ and a more business-like approach to funding in general.

Conclusion

Overall, this era saw two main (and somehow contradictory) trends in Oxfam Novib.

On the one hand, there was now far more emphasis on measurable results, outcomes and impact. This led to investments in developing better information systems and M&E tools. Oxfam Novib staff became less interested in the internal dynamics of partners and less eager to support deep organizational transformation and healing processes. This change was seen in the organization as a healthy development: it became easier to focus from a distance on essential risks and results, and to define an exit strategy and timeline.

On the other hand, Oxfam Novib wanted to remain flexible and support less-measurable ventures such as Global Programs and the World Social Forum. There was more investment in coalition building, support of social movements, networking and campaigning. It was realized that Oxfam Novib had to “go with the flow”, riding the wave of the new global movement for change. Political acumen,

flexible funding and risk-taking were necessary ingredients if the organization wanted to contribute effectively to these new dynamics.

The Toolbox

Introduced in 2003, the Risk and Opportunity Appraisal Toolbox changed the way in which Oxfam Novib appraised and monitored partners and programs. It led to a more transparent way of discussing risks and opportunities with partners. Previously, appraisal of partners and programs was done by Novib staff behind their desk, and the result was not fully shared with the partner. With the introduction of the Toolbox, this practice changed.

The new methodology resulted in a stronger focus on the appraisal of essential risks and opportunities. In the 'critical dialogue' period staff would have, for example, looked into the composition of the Board and its relationship with the Director, but now this was seen as an issue only if it would pose a serious risk of undermining the outcomes.

There was also more emphasis on measurable and pre-defined results, the need for baseline information and better systems of data collection. Oxfam Novib led more discussions with partners on how to become more specific and realistic ('SMART') about the results that could be achieved within a certain period and with a certain investment.

2005-2015 Decentralization and the new funding reality

Context

The development landscape continued to change drastically. A growing wealth gap opened up between fast-growing middle-income countries and a large group of 'Least Developed Countries' (LDCs) that remained trapped in vicious circles of poverty, fragility, conflict and failing governance. Geographical patterns of poverty shifted, with more poor people living in middle-income countries than in poor countries. While middle-income countries have growing domestic resources and capabilities to tackle poverty at home, the LDCs continue to rely to a large extent on foreign public funding.

After the 'golden era' for civil society in the 1990s, this period witnessed an alarming rise in restrictions placed on civil society's ability to operate (Oran and Duane, 2017). Some authors suggest that perhaps the voice of citizens became too successful, with explanations for shrinking civil society space including the rise of authoritarian and populist governments and the misuse of counter-terrorism discourse after the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Repressive measures by governments range from constraints on freedom of assembly to imposing excessive red tape and limitations on NGOs receiving funding from foreign donors.

This decade saw the emergence of a multi-polar world, in which rising powers – notably Russia, China and India – became more assertive and started to challenge the domination of the West and the post-Second World War global institutions. The Arab world experienced a short-lived democratic wave, as the initially promising 'Arab spring' was quickly suppressed, leading to more civil strife, insecurity and humanitarian tragedies in countries such as Libya, Egypt and Syria.

Although the International Panel on Climate Change had been formed as long ago as 1988, it was in this decade that climate change emerged as a major global challenge and a rallying point for a growing movement of concerned citizens, progressive companies, local governments and enlightened national leaders. The inter-relationships among climate change, food security, resource conflicts,

migration and insecurity became steadily more apparent. In 2015 the Paris Agreement was reached and the Sustainable Development Goals launched, succeeding the Millennium Development Goals and offering the most comprehensive agenda to date for a more equitable, secure and sustainable world.

The narrative on international development co-operation started to change, with more emphasis on funding global public goods (such as security, climate, water and health) and mobilizing domestic resources in developing countries. The number and diversity of development funders from North and South increased, with new emerging donor countries, private foundations, social investment funds and large corporate funders. Many new players entered the development field, with different agendas, motives and values. Oxfam and other international development NGOs embraced a new reality in which the private sector emerged as the most important non-state actor in development.

Oxfam Novib

In general, Oxfam became more explicit and sophisticated in its analysis of power relations (from local to global) and in designing strategies to influence those powers and bring about change.

Consequently, there was a gradual shift away from direct poverty alleviation towards more policy advocacy and campaigning. There was also a shift away from primarily acting as a funder to becoming an 'actor in change', as part of a 'worldwide influencing network'.

New allies and partners were sought to address issues such as land grabbing, unfair global value chains (in palm oil, cocoa and aquaculture), tax evasion and climate change. It became obvious that many of the most urgent issues needed to be tackled primarily in the North (where most of the global power resides), in close alliance with actors in the South (where most of the negative impact is felt).

Within this changing international context, Oxfam Novib was confronted with new organizational challenges. A new funding reality appeared, with a gradual decline in the amount of unrestricted and flexible government support and a greater dependency on funding from other institutional donors. This inspired the introduction of a programmatic approach, as described below.

The Oxfam confederation increased collaboration in multiple ways. The first Oxfam Strategic Plan came into action in 2013: its six external and six enabling change goals became a guide for Oxfam Novib's strategic direction. The organizational change programme, Oxfam 2020, was launched the same year. Oxfam moved towards a single management structure at country level, aiming for more cost efficiency, harmonization of approaches and portfolios, and ultimately more development impact.

Oxfam Novib decided in 2012, for reasons enumerated in the below box, to start a process of decentralization, transferring the core functions of the Projects Department in The Hague to Oxfam country offices. It reduced the number of countries in which it was active from 65 to 25, focusing more on LDCs. This was a painful process, because many partners were suddenly confronted with a much shorter funding horizon. Although Oxfam Novib tried to implement the phasing out in a careful and responsible manner, many partners complained that it was basically a top-down exercise. It brought home the reality that partners have only limited power to influence major institutional decisions of their donor.

Four drivers of Oxfam Novib's decision to decentralize

1. To improve our accountability to partners, stakeholders and other actors, both in the Netherlands and in the countries where we work, involving them more closely in planning, implementation and evaluation of projects and programmes, and becoming better able to be actor of change, alongside financing programmes.
2. A growing focus on working in fragile states, which demands more knowledge of the local context, the linking of emergency relief to structural development and a more intense monitoring of partner organizations.
3. An ambition to diversify our income base and become less dependent on the Dutch government's subsidy: institutional donors are decentralizing their funding, and local presence is very important for building relationships with these donors and accessing their funds.
4. Intensifying collaboration with the other Oxfam affiliates, bringing programme work in each country together in a coherent country strategy and under a single management structure.

(From: *Oxfam Novib Decentralisation Primer, Version, June 24, 2011*)

Partnership approach

Organizational change

The decision to decentralize was hotly debated within the organization. Underlying these debates was often the question of whether we were working *with* or *through* partners.

On the one hand, for decades it was an unwritten principle that the funding and monitoring of partner organizations was best done from a geographical distance. Although Oxfam Novib had field offices in the past in some countries, it was always understood that this was to be a temporary situation as physical presence as an INGO in the field could distort the process of autonomous civil society building. After investing for decades in partners to make them stronger and more independent, the move to establish offices in the field was seen by critics as a step backwards: Oxfam Novib staff might start to interfere too much in partners' affairs, and thus perpetuate dependency and asymmetry. Concerns were raised about occupying local actors' civic space – keeping a healthy distance was supposed to be good for both parties.

On the other hand, the disadvantages of geographical distance between staff and partners were also recognized. Oxfam Novib staff often felt isolated from events in their program countries, although this lessened with the advent of the Internet, Skype and social media. During field visits of 2-3 weeks, they had little quality time with their partners. They could not easily participate in civil society events and were not able to network on a regular basis.

Partners had (and have) mixed feelings about the pros and cons of working with a distant funder. In partner satisfaction surveys, held regularly since 2000, partners often expressed the desire to have more frequent and lengthy face-to-face interaction with Oxfam Novib staff to develop a deeper and stronger relationship. Others, however, appreciated the breathing space they had and were wary that international organizations opening offices in their countries would tend to compete for donor funds and qualified NGO staff. The fear that this would be a step backwards in the evolution of an autonomous local civil society was strongly expressed by the late Wangari Maathai of the Green Belt Movement: she felt that Oxfam Novib and other funders were moving further away from the principles of trust and solidarity and assuming more control over the local development process.

Programmatic approach

Beyond the challenges of decentralization, Oxfam Novib was confronted with a drastic decrease in government funding. Over the last four decades, Oxfam Novib's block grant funding from the Dutch government has significantly reduced. This new reality urged the organization to become far more pro-active in the development of new, often multi-country programs that are eligible for funding by other institutional donors. It called for a new way of working, the 'programmatic approach', whereby organizations together create a program based on a common power analysis and theory of change.

This approach encourages collaboration between Oxfam Novib and a wider range of development actors than civil society organizations: academia, (local) government and the private sector can also be members of such a program consortium. The idea is that these new partnership arrangements create synergy as each organization brings its own expertise and network. Complex development challenges called for new ways of working and requires new skills, building transparent partnership arrangements in which all parties are accountable to each other.

The new funding reality and new ways of working have certainly affected the relationship between Oxfam Novib and its traditional development partners, civil society in the South. Those partners can no longer count on long-term and flexible funding. They are now made co-responsible for implementing often complex programs that are funded by sometimes very demanding donors. Planning and reporting formats and requirements are often rigid, detailed and time-consuming. Oxfam Novib and partners now have to negotiate together with donors about the terms and conditions and push back when they find them too stringent.

Private sector engagement

Oxfam Novib started to realize that companies can play a positive role in development, if they are properly regulated and adopt voluntary codes of corporate responsibility. Multinational companies are very powerful actors that can be moved in the right direction through consumer mobilization, naming and shaming, peer pressure ('race to the top'), lobbying and dialogue. In previous eras, Oxfam Novib largely saw companies as detrimental to people and planet, but now the organization adopted a more nuanced position and role: as a watchdog, but also a critical partner in programs on the ground and in multi-stakeholder initiatives.

Oxfam Partnership Principles

In 2012, all Oxfam affiliates acknowledged the importance of working in partnerships by formalizing six explicit partnership principles:

- Shared vision and value;
- Complementarity of purpose and value added;
- Autonomy and independence;
- Transparency and mutual accountability;
- Clarity on roles and responsibilities;
- Commitment to joint learning.

The partnership principles were introduced with this explanation: "Oxfam aspires to make a sustained and significant positive impact on global poverty and injustice and believes that it is only through the collective efforts of many actors that this goal can be achieved. We think of this as a 'global movement for change'". The same paper emphasized Oxfam's belief that local civil society organizations are crucial in supporting the actions of poor and marginalized people and communities in the development of lasting, locally-owned solutions, and in raising their diverse and locally grounded voices for equitable development at home and worldwide.

From: [Oxfam Statement of Partnership Principles, 2009](#)

Conclusion - Looking back and forward

Oxfam Novib's history of working with partners stems from the strong conviction that local civil society actors are the prime agents of change in their own society. They are at the forefront of the local struggle against bad governance, human rights abuses, poverty and injustice. INGOs are there to support this domestic struggle in the spirit of solidarity and equality and can help to address the root causes, especially those which are international.

Oxfam Novib's history in working with partnerships points to the continuous struggle to adjust practices to internal and external change, while adhering to principles for collaboration with local actors. The development context and funding environment have changed over the decades, presenting different dilemmas and requiring alternative solutions. Inspired and forced by external changes and organizational decisions, Oxfam Novib altered approaches but remained guided by the implicit and explicit principles behind working with partners.

Looking back

In summary, this paper has described three main trends:

From open-ended, long-term funding to a results-based and time-bound approach

This shift has been gradual, and most partners have been able to adapt to a new way of appraising their programs. It has been informed by debates on principles such as mutual accountability and trust. While partners appreciated the Toolbox methodology – in which risks, opportunities, outcomes and milestones are discussed and agreed upon – they also sometimes stated that they found it difficult to translate their work into 'measurable indicators of success', especially when they are involved in policy advocacy. They warned that Oxfam Novib should remain politically sensitive and not become 'too technocratic'.

From supporting individual actors to coalition building

Before the era of networking, Oxfam Novib funding went largely to individual civil society organizations at the local level, enabling them to grow, expand, learn and innovate. As these organizations grew more numerous and strong, starting in the early 1990s more of Oxfam Novib's funding went into supporting networks, coalitions and campaigns. In the early days, this was a clear niche for Oxfam Novib, because many donors were reluctant to finance networks, especially at the global level. The co-financing structure with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs played a crucial role in allowing Oxfam Novib to provide both long-term support to local partners to grow stronger, and financial support for networks and coalitions.

From distant facilitator to actor in change

The most recent change has involved decentralization, introduction of the 'programmatic approach' and Oxfam Novib's new role as an actor in change, with a focus on influencing power relations. Since 2010, Oxfam Novib has more and more been taking the lead in developing new (multi-country) programs, together with a range of development partners. These programs are based on a joint power analysis and theory of change that explains how a series of interventions will lead to the desired outcomes. Many address issues that need to be tackled in North and South by a range of actors. This means that local civil society organizations are now co-responsible for the design and implementation of multi-actor programs. This new role has to be managed carefully, to avoid partners becoming sub-contractors.

Looking forward

Oxfam Novib has always believed it is essential to strengthen the capacities of local organizations and give them maximum voice, visibility and influence in programs, campaigns and humanitarian work. This requires willingness to involve local partners in all stages of an intervention, from inception to evaluation. Joint analysis and shared decision making are essential.

For decades, the co-funding mechanism of the Dutch Government provided Oxfam Novib with generous resources to take risks and create space for an organization to define their own agenda. The programmatic approach provides ample space for co-creation and shared ownership of projects. At the same time, the new funding reality puts stress on partnership principles such as complementarity of purpose and value added, autonomy and independence, transparency and mutual accountability. **A key question to discuss will be: How can Oxfam Novib continue working with partners, instead of through partners?**

This spirit of solidarity and equality has become even more important now that civil society is under threat in a growing number of countries around the world. Authoritarian regimes are on the rise and many governments are trying to silence independent media, opposition leaders, human rights activists and other critical voices. This worrying trend also affects Oxfam's room to manoeuvre in affected countries. While the 1990s allowed civil society organizations to blossom, the growing restrictions raise questions about the risks we are willing to take to fight with partners to protect and maintain civic space. **How can Oxfam Novib best protect and maintain civic space with and for other actors?**

Within the confederation, awareness has grown over the years about the importance of giving local development actors maximum space, visibility and influence in interventions. The partnership principles and the Southern Advocacy Principles have been accepted as guiding framework on the way to One Oxfam in 2020. In the humanitarian sector also, the relationship between local and international actors has gained more attention. Oxfam Novib has been a frontrunner in the confederation in promoting 'localization' and enhancing the role of local actors in humanitarian aid. Oxfam International is one of the signatories of the Charter for Change, a set of guiding principles that aim to give Southern-based national organizations a more prominent role in humanitarian aid. These are lofty principles and commitments and it is important that Oxfam strives to live up to them, not only in humanitarian work. **How can Oxfam Novib best promote Southern voices and local actors in humanitarian and development work?**

Lastly, Oxfam Novib's work is likely to be carried out increasingly in its own society and other countries of the North, where most of the global power resides. As the development landscape has become even more complex, with a more fragmented South and North, it has become even more important to explain to the (Dutch) public and other supporters that international, rights-based solidarity and co-operation remain relevant. Mobilizing more public resources to tackle the big issues of inequality, conflict, migration and climate change is essential, especially to assist risky interventions and the most vulnerable countries. Oxfam (Novib) has to continue explaining that narrow, protectionist, anti-globalization and anti-immigration policies are not going to work and will not keep us safe. This will demand that Oxfam Novib re-evaluates its position and partners in The Netherlands. **How can Oxfam Novib work together with other (Dutch) actors to increase public support for fighting inequality, conflict, and climate change in The Netherlands?**

This brings us back to 1956 and the reason Novib was founded.

According to the founding fathers of the organization, extreme global inequality breeds conflict and insecurity and is threat to all of us. Generous development aid is therefore a question of social justice and enlightened self-interest.

That was the case in 1956 and it still is.

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