

Oxfam International Tsunami Fund  
Final evaluation series: Part 5

Oxfam International  
Tsunami Fund  
Final Evaluation:  
Downward  
Accountability  
Review Executive  
Summary

An evaluation  
of downward  
accountability  
to communities  
in Oxfam  
International's  
response to  
the 2004 Indian  
Ocean tsunami

by Catalyst  
Management Services



## Tsunami Evaluation series

As part of its ongoing aims to learn from experience and to hold itself accountable for its actions, Oxfam has commissioned a wide-ranging evaluation of its response to the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004. This comprises 14 thematic evaluations, 12 of the 14 studies have been conducted by independent consultants, while the remaining two conducted by members of Oxfam International Tsunami Fund secretariat (\*)

Recurring issues and key themes from the 14 individual evaluations are brought together in this evaluation summary report 'In the Wake of the Tsunami'.

The reports available in this series are:

Evaluation summary report: 'In the Wake of the Tsunami'

Thematic evaluations:

1. Livelihoods Review (Rajan Alexander)
2. Public Health Review (Pradeep Bharwad & Wim Klassen)
3. Shelter Review (Sarbjit Singh Sahota & Dave Hodgkins)
4. Gender Review (Annette Salkeld)
5. Downward Accountability Review (Ravinder Kumar & N. Raghunathan, Catalyst Management Services)
6. Corporate Accountability Review (John Chilver\*)
7. Advocacy Review (Alasdair Collins)
8. Disaster Risk Reduction Review (Man B. Thapa)
9. Partners and Partnerships Review (Stuart Kenward)
10. Monitoring and Evaluation Programme Review (Catherine Lowery)
11. Communications Review (Alex Wynter)
12. Funding and Finance Review (Clive Surman & John Chilver\*)
13. Management Issues Review (Simon Harris)
14. OITF Architecture and Structure Review (Geoffrey Salkeld)

The evaluation summary report and the executive summaries for the individual reviews can be found on the Oxfam website at [www.oxfam.org/emergencies/tsunami](http://www.oxfam.org/emergencies/tsunami). Full versions of the individual reviews are available on request from the Oxfam International Secretariat via [www.oxfam.org/contact](http://www.oxfam.org/contact)

Philip Horgan,  
Oxfam International Tsunami Fund Monitoring and Evaluation  
Coordinator, December 2009

Cover image: Anjali carrying a child, Karunagapally, Kollam.  
Credit: Rajendra Shaw/Oxfam

## Executive summary

The review framework was derived from Oxfam International's accountability policy<sup>1</sup> and from HAP International, MANGO, and Sphere standards. The review of accountability covered five major dimensions – participation, targeting, transparency and communication, monitoring and evaluation, and institutionalisation of accountability – and 21 explicit issues within these dimensions. The meta-review was based on synthesis of a large number of documents provided by the Oxfam International Tsunami Fund (OITF), discussions during three international workshops (on shelter, public health, and livelihoods), and on primary data collection by means of surveys and interviews with staff of OI and its partners. The review methodology was limited and did not seek feedback from affected communities.

OI framed a policy on accountability to local communities, partners, government, and the public very early in the response. OI staff and staff of affiliates generally understood the policy intent: OI carried out staff sensitisation and capacity building on accountability principles in all the main countries of its response (Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and India). However, major gaps were witnessed in practical ways of ensuring the accountability of response. For example, it was not possible to achieve operational integration of the policy and principles in terms of clearly stated activities in work plans (with budgets). Oxfam's response also saw some instances of management oversight and problems in accountability and governance, which highlighted the need to improve its grant management, accountability, and governance systems.

Participation rates varied across sectoral interventions and across the different stages of these interventions (beneficiary selection, planning, implementation, and monitoring). Shelter programmes in all countries succeeded in involving communities in needs assessments, programme conceptualisation, and construction of housing. In livelihoods, the participation of communities in Sri Lanka and Indonesia was noted as weak. Oxfam played a leading role in public health in all countries except India. The Green Coast project (in multiple countries) was an excellent example of participatory development.

Although OI's response was not always based on a thorough analysis of vulnerability, it was nevertheless able to address sections of the most marginalised communities affected by the tsunami and those left out of broad relief and rehabilitation efforts. In livelihoods interventions in India, for example, with many agencies assisting fishing communities, Oxfam focused much of its attention on the agricultural sector, where fewer lives were lost but where livelihoods were nonetheless devastated. In the Sri Lanka shelter programme, a community group selected the beneficiaries, with their choices approved by villagers. Oxfam's post-tsunami work in Thailand has focused on assisting Burmese migrants, coastal fishing communities (in livelihoods strengthening and disaster preparedness), and people involved in land disputes.

Oxfam's record on transparency and communication in its post-tsunami work was not of a very high order. Shelter (India), public health (Indonesia and India), livelihoods (Sri Lanka and Indonesia) all witnessed problems in transparency, communication, monitoring, and evaluation. There are also examples where the response was highly transparent and well co-ordinated (e.g. the Sri Lanka shelter programme).

Evaluation practice across Oxfam affiliates and partners was carried out more effectively than monitoring practice. However, there was little sharing of evaluation findings between Oxfam affiliates and with communities, in order to facilitate learning and action. Different Oxfam affiliates developed their own M&E frameworks and formats, which led to complexities in consolidation and synthesis.

OI achieved a responsible exit from its tsunami response in many areas. There are instances also which showcase OI's continued commitment to development in certain locations e.g. it continues to support the Save Andaman Network (SAN) in Thailand. Many Oxfam interventions had elements of sustainability built in e.g. mangrove/casuarina plantations on the coastline, adherence to Coastal Regulation Zones, construction technology that saved steel, fertile soil, firewood, etc. Some of OI's initiatives during the response were not sustainable, however, as highlighted by an evaluation in India.

Overall, Oxfam ensured reasonable accountability in its tsunami response. Upward accountability to donors was delivered reasonably well (except for some instances of financial irregularity, detailed assessment of which was beyond the scope of this review). Downward accountability to beneficiaries was delivered well in some sectors and in some countries, while not so well elsewhere (see detailed analysis in the full report). Horizontal (lateral) accountability within affiliates and partners remained one of the weak areas across both sectors and countries (except in the Sri Lanka and Indonesia shelter sectors).

Analysing Oxfam's performance on HAP 9 principles suggests that OI managed to uphold primary principles (humanity and impartiality) to a very large extent (score of 4 on a scale of 0–5) and secondary principles (informed consent, duty of care, witness) to a large extent (score of 3). Tertiary principles (transparency, independence, neutrality, and complementarities) were upheld to a lesser extent (score of 2).

Moving forward from here, the key recommendations of this review are:

#### **Assuring accountability (through design):**

1. Accountability by design: Communication of formal principles of accountability to staff, early on in the response cycle, is the key to sensitising field staff and giving them clarity during the response. This is a necessary condition, but is not sufficient on its own. To design accountability into the response, operational integration of the policy and principles is required, in terms of clearly stated activities in work plans (with budgets) and including specific responsibilities in the job descriptions and performance objectives of all staff.
2. Model of engagement: Being operational (direct implementation, without local partners) is unavoidable in a humanitarian response situation. However, as a principle, Oxfam can, to the extent possible, work through credible partners or in partnership with credible institutions (while itself being directly engaged) so that large-scale responses can be handled well, with knowledge of the local context and with local capacities scaled up to carry on the task afterwards.

3. Cadre of humanitarian workers for accountable response: An accountable response requires skills and experience in humanitarian field work, in specific sectors (livelihoods, public health, shelter, etc.), and in the systems and procedures of humanitarian agencies. Oxfam needs to continuously create and upgrade skills both internally and within partner organisations, even in non-emergency times, so that emergency situations can be appropriately responded to.

#### **Enabling accountability (through practice):**

4. Working with partners: The long-term presence of partners in a given location is one of the key deciding factors in the quality of delivery, impact, and sustainability. This should be borne in mind when selecting partners. Partners' value systems and ways of working are also crucial in ensuring accountability. It is advisable to design and implement accountability assessments (customised, based on MANGO and other ready-made tools) every two years or so with a mix of partners in all the countries in which Oxfam has a presence. These periodic assessments can either form part of programme evaluations or be separate, independent exercises.
5. Management oversight and governance mechanisms: The mandatory process of thorough background checks on partners before selection and appropriate governance mechanisms (to prevent corruption and fraud or to detect them at the earliest opportunity) both need to be improved. Setting up robust third-party mechanisms is one of the ways this can be achieved.
6. Targeting: An initial rapid assessment of vulnerabilities, followed by more thorough assessments, can be used to guide the targeting strategy of humanitarian response; without this, errors of exclusion and inclusion can be expected. Practical realities on the ground and attempts to avoid friction among communities may mean that targeting remains less effective than desired, but nevertheless to steer an accountable response constant endeavour is required (through community-based monitoring systems) to identify and to reach out to

people who have been 'left out'. Furthermore, blanket approaches may not succeed in addressing different vulnerabilities in the wake of a disaster.

7. Responsible exit: The decision to engage in a particular area and the decision to exit it should ideally be taken together with communities and local institutions. Essential to ensuring a responsible and accountable exit is the continued involvement of key stakeholders in the process, primarily beneficiaries, partners, and local authorities and agencies.

#### **Assessments and corrective actions (through monitoring and evaluation):**

8. Externally facilitated monitoring and evaluation: Independent (third party) supervision and support to Oxfam and its partners can go a long way to improve the time it takes to generate information, the detection of problems early on, the identification of fault lines or failures in governance, and the guidance of partners and communities in evidence-based reflection and planning. Various models of externally facilitated M&E have been successfully applied in the tsunami response, as well as in other spheres of development activity. The mechanism of external facilitation is supplementary to the internal M&E systems of OI and its partners and is not intended to replace them. External facilitation channels information, thought processes, and decision-making systems in the direction of evidence-based, results-based management.
9. Transparency and communication: An accountable response shares successes and best practice, and it should do the same with failures. This is not easy, but is something that is demanded by the tertiary principles of internationally recognised humanitarian standards (HAP-2007, to which OI adheres). Instances of irregularities in governance and financial management should be subjected to thorough public scrutiny, with all relevant details shared with the key stakeholders.

### **Learning incorporated and institutionalised:**

10. Replicate successes: By all accounts, the Green Coast project was an excellent example of participatory development. The project built mostly on local capacities and on the involvement of community groups at all stages of the response, helping them to rebuild their livelihoods and to restore coastal ecosystems. Similarly, some of the processes and approaches employed in the Sri Lanka and India shelter programmes and in the India livelihoods programme are worth emulating.
11. Institutionalise best practice: The use of information and communication technology (ICT), advocacy, gender monitoring, and disaster adaptation and preparedness initiatives can become part of an accountability assurance package. This requires that post-disaster programme design takes these best practices into consideration.

## References

<sup>1</sup>OI Policy Compendium Note on Humanitarian Accountability, December 2006.

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