

Oxfam
International
Tsunami
Fund Final
Evaluation:
Livelihoods
Review
Summary

An evaluation of Oxfam International's livelihoods response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami

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Oxfam International Tsunami Fund
Final evaluation series: Part 1

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. Full versions of the individual reviews are available on request from the Oxfam International Secretariat via www.oxfam.org/contact

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

Cover image: Habsah Budiman, who lives in Kulee village near Sigli, Aceh Province, Indonesia, is a widow who has received a small loan or grant from Oxfam to help her to start making mats in order to earn an income.
Credit: Jim Holmes/Oxfam

Summary Report

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Acronyms and abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CBO	Community-based organisation
CCD	Covenant Centre for Development
CEE	Centre for Environment Education
CFW	Cash for work
CNFE	Coastal non-farm economy
DEC	Disasters Emergency Committee
DRR	Disaster risk reduction
FADS	Fish aggregating devices
FRP	Fibre-reinforced polytherane
IDP	Internally displaced people
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
INGO	International non-government organisation
IO	Intermón Oxfam
Oxfam	Refers to OITF, affiliates, and sometimes partners
MC	Micro-credit
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
MF	Micro-finance
MFI	Micro-finance institution
MSSRF	MS Swaminathan Research Foundation
MoU	Memorandum of understanding
NGO	Non-government organisation
OGB	Oxfam Great Britain
ODI	Overseas Development Institute (UK)
OI	Oxfam International
OITF	Oxfam International Tsunami Fund
PIP	Programme implementation plan
PO	Project officer

QIP	Quick-impact project
RCL	Rice credit line
SEEDS	Sarvodaya Economic Enterprise Development Services
SHG	Self-help group
SLF	Sewalanka Foundation
SRI	System of rice intensification
SL	Sustainable livelihood
TOR	Terms of reference
VO	Village organisations
WB	World Bank
WFP	World Food Programme

Acknowledgements

As its tsunami programme was drawing to a close, the Oxfam International Tsunami Fund (OITF) planned a final review of all sectors and cross-cutting themes, among them the livelihoods sector. There were three deliverables specified as outputs to this study: a detailed report, a condensed report, and a summary finding.

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Summary findings

1. Introduction

The Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004 was unprecedented in its scale, affecting 12 different countries. Oxfam responded in seven of the worst-hit areas: the province of Aceh in Indonesia, together with India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, the Maldives, and Somalia.

In terms of ambition, Oxfam's tsunami response was unprecedented. With sufficient money available to fund programmes for as long as they were needed¹, it was expected that programmes would not only restore livelihoods to pre-tsunami levels but would substantially improve them. In this respect, Oxfam's 'reconstruction plus' slogan echoed the 'build back better' ambition of the broader response.

2. Key Response Challenges

Underlining Oxfam's choice of response scale was the assumption that its organisational capacity had sufficient elasticity to meet challenges that could potentially limit the quality and

efficiency of its capacity to respond. These challenges arose from different sets of significant risks, which often occurred simultaneously and reinforced one other.

Aid flows reflecting principles of Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD) need to be embedded within commitments that are proportionate to existing donor resource strengths and capacities. This is one of the prerequisites to ensure that aid flows are efficient and compliant with accountability standards.

Re-engineering existing systems to meet the demands of an abrupt and significant scale-up of organisational capacities is not an easy task, even in normal times. This was exactly the organisational challenge demanded by the scale of the tsunami response. While Oxfam by and large measured up to the challenge, its response proved to some extent inadequate in terms of administrative and programming capacity in the implementation of livelihood programmes.

3. Sector: Fisheries

The largest increases in income facilitated by Oxfam's livelihood interventions were seen in the coastal fisheries sector, which saw household income levels rise by at least 100–200 per cent compared with pre-tsunami levels. Average assistance per person in fisheries was also the highest of any sub-sector. Combined, these factors supported coastal fishing communities and helped to lift them out of poverty. The strategic focus of the response, however, was more on eliminating transient poverty than on bringing about structural changes to mitigate long-term problems such as chronic poverty, a goal that was clearly stated from the outset in Oxfam's policy directive.

With plenty of funds available within the broad tsunami response, the preferred intervention was to replace damaged boats. However, in Sri Lanka Oxfam partner NAFSO, a trade union, was able to set up its work yards to successfully repair boats within a week. NAFSO's boats were the first to return to sea and were widely praised for their seaworthiness.

Most of the boats destroyed by the tsunami were wooden catamarans. However, Oxfam, like other donors, funded boats that were mostly made of fibre-reinforced polytherane (FRP) and which were fitted with high-powered outboard motors.

While most boat production was outsourced, boats built in yards owned by Oxfam partners (such as PREPARE in India) or built outdoors (such as by WOCA in Somalia) had a clear edge in terms of quality. However, partners generally gave low priority to the safety of boats.

The fact that the value of a specific asset often depends on other complementary assets was not always fully appreciated. Consequently, there were instances where boats were distributed without adequate nets or where boats and engines were mismatched.

Requirements for sustainability of the fisheries sector demanded that labour be shifted out of the sector. Instead, some Oxfam partners did the exact opposite, attempting to encourage labour shifts into fisheries.

Similarly, the strategy of encouraging a shift from fishing to fish farming was not adequately pursued, and where it was, it yielded mixed results. This strategy was devised to avoid over-exploitation of limited marine resources, as the increased number of fishing craft post-tsunami resulted in increasingly small catches per craft.

Greater market access was promoted by three strategies of differing scale; overall these strategies were very appropriate, but the lack of focused application limited their potential impacts. At the simplest end of the scale, Oxfam attempted to provide greater mobility for fish vendors (who traditionally carry the catch as a head load) by promoting solutions such as rickshaws, bicycles, scooters, and motorbikes. The medium-scale strategy focused on providing infrastructure such as refrigeration trucks and fish stalls.

A few Oxfam interventions were on a scale that enabled a much wider reach. In Nias, Indonesia, Oxfam constructed a docking facility that provided safe ocean access for an entire town,

significantly boosting the community's capacity to trade in fish and also agricultural produce.

In the area of inland fisheries, Oxfam's strategies highlighted gaps in the overall response; they also demonstrated a better contextual understanding than was the case with its interventions in coastal fisheries. Inland fishermen use different kinds of boats from coastal fishermen – smaller and with a different design. They also use different kinds of net. Oxfam partners such as the Dhan Foundation and Shruti in India and Ehed in Sri Lanka provided boats and nets designed to meet the particular requirements of these fishers.

4. Sector: Farm

Average increases in income in the farm sector were claimed to be between 50 and 100 per cent, very much higher than those achieved in the non-farm sector, but considerably less than those claimed by the fishery sector. This would seem to imply that Oxfam's performance was better in the fishery sector than in the farm sector. However, the organisation's objective was to promote sustainable livelihoods and in this context farming better met its objectives as (unlike in fisheries) its emphasis on low-input organic agriculture resulted in a high degree of eco-sustainability.

Programmes in different countries contributed to Oxfam's successful performance in the farm sector – focusing, for example, on advocacy in Aceh (Indonesia), system of rice intensification (SRI) cultivation in India, home gardens in Sri Lanka, and land rights in Thailand.

SRI could be considered to have had the greatest impact of any of Oxfam's livelihood interventions. Its success can probably be attributed to a convergence effect, where most Oxfam partners worked within a common SRI framework, acting as a force multiplier for the promotion of a technology that was closely aligned with government policies. Elsewhere, in Thailand and in Aceh province, Oxfam was able to significantly influence government policy.

What worked – as seen in India and Sri Lanka – were low-input models built upon local capacity and knowledge. Most Oxfam partners employed a variety of low-input biological methods, such as composting and vermicomposting, to flush salinity out of the soil. The green manure crop *dhaincha*² is traditionally used in Tamil Nadu, and dhaincha was so extensively promoted by Oxfam partners and others that its seeds were in short supply throughout the state.

The strategy to promote SRI was based on farmer-to-farmer methodologies and so the rate of uptake was less dependent on the project itself, relying more on practical demonstrations of the technology. In Aceh, where a different model was adopted, agricultural programmes struggled.

Similarly, in marketing, the rice credit line (RCL) largely succeeded in India as it was kept at a scale and level of simplicity that could be managed by village women using community-based organisations as a platform, and involved only a single product line. Village self-help groups (SHGs) purchased rice in bulk from wholesalers at discounted prices and sold it on to members.

C Camp in Sri Lanka was a similar initiative, though this was scaled up (multi-product) and incorporated greater logistical complexity (multiple markets). Despite operating for a number of years, however, it has failed to break even and remains project-dependent for its daily operation.

One of the key strategic deficiencies in Aceh (one that was largely avoided in India and Sri Lanka) was that of weak linkages between cash-for-work (CFW) activities and cash grant beneficiaries, which led to rehabilitated land being left idle:

- Often where land was cleared through cash-for-work projects, these were not followed up by cash grants for farmers.
- There were poor linkages between cash-based programmes and the expansion of water infrastructure and irrigation.

Programmes that aimed to increase the water retention capacity of the soil and enhance irrigation potential often also made it

easier to flush salinity out of the soil. As a result, agricultural recovery was fastest in India, as most land restoration activities were completed in time to take advantage of the first monsoons and subsequent floods.

Many economists believe that agricultural growth can be up to four times more effective than growth in other sectors in reducing poverty. Agriculture acts as an engine of growth for other sectors, and thus Oxfam's strategic focus on the farm sector was well placed.

Agricultural development generates a virtuous cycle, in which the expansion of the farm sector fuels growth in the coastal non-farm sector. Outcomes in the latter therefore can be expected to have greater sustainability prospects in India and Sri Lanka, where Oxfam's interventions gave visible support to agriculture.

5. Sector: Coastal Non-farm Economy (CNFE)

In most developing countries, CNFE is part of a diversified livelihoods portfolio, and accounts for 45–60 per cent of the labour market. The sector encompasses any activity associated with waged work or income generated from self-employment (including in-kind) which is not agricultural but which takes place in coastal areas. It also includes micro-enterprises, small or medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and trade activities. Farmers and fishers are in part dependent on it, as a means of reducing risk and increasing returns on their labour.

The great majority of Oxfam's livelihood beneficiaries were from this sector and, compared with fisheries and farming, it was where the organisation expended the most energy, time, and human resources. In particular, Oxfam almost exclusively targeted women in the CNFE sector. Since women's capital requirements were low, the assistance per capita provided by Oxfam was only a fraction of that provided in either the fishery or farming sectors.

However, despite successfully re-establishing most of the livelihoods lost in this sector, there was little tangible to show

for it. Prior to the tsunami, most CNFE livelihood activities were low-skilled, low-income, and distress-driven i.e. they were only adopted because of a lack of alternative opportunities in the farming or fishery sectors or in other growth sectors such as construction. Incomes are much lower in CNFE than in these other sectors. Its typically small-scale activities employ little capital, are low in productivity, and offer low returns, often little better than farm labouring.

By working to recover these livelihoods, Oxfam's focus was on rebuilding mostly low-skilled and low-income activities. Scale expansion of distress-driven livelihoods sometimes generated higher per capita income in the short term, but due to various supply/demand-related factors this is unlikely to be sustained during the medium term. The low-return activities prevalent in the sector are not likely to maintain households above the poverty line, as they do not usually foster growth. Nevertheless, the intervention undoubtedly helped people to cope with the reality of poverty much better.

There were very few successful outcomes to Oxfam diversification strategies led by demand i.e. responses driven by new market or technological opportunities that would enable CNFE growth. Among the reasons for this were failures to adequately leverage multiplier effects flowing from the farming sector and to address all the bottlenecks present in the supply chain.

The best practices were demonstrated by partners who had livelihoods as part of their core competence, while the biggest gaps were seen with those for whom this was a new experience. Oxfam carried out many market studies but these were often published late, diminishing their usefulness.

6. Intervention: Cash Programming

Despite the many challenges faced by Oxfam, the outcomes of cash programming interventions across different countries were largely positive.

The multi-country Green Coast programme achieved a fair amount of success. An external evaluation considered that, of the projects funded through the Small Grants Facility, about 10 per cent might fail, 70 per cent were performing well, and a further 10–20 per cent had the potential to grow into full-scale micro-enterprises.³

Cash-for-work (CFW) programmes were largely appropriate, primarily because they provided short-term employment opportunities. Projects gained in appropriateness depending on the value placed by the community on the social infrastructure, long-term productivity of livelihood assets, or enhanced market access they created. Grants proved more suitable for the most vulnerable beneficiaries while loans were more suited to better-off households.

Transitioning between one type of intervention and the next (from relief to recovery to development) often proved a challenge for Oxfam, particularly in Aceh.

However, in Sri Lanka and India it conformed more closely to this ideal sequencing of transition. Unlike in Aceh, there were many Oxfam partners in both these countries which had substantial experience in micro-credit, while a few well-established micro-finance institutions were also present. This enabled an easier transition to longer-term development.

Where institutional and other administrative requirements were lacking, the use of cash grants as a strategy led to some low-scale corruption. Despite the widespread employment of cash programming as a tool, the design of Oxfam's grant programmes often lacked contextual appropriateness.

Overall, Oxfam tended to somewhat dogmatically promote cash grants, even when large-scale cash injections into local economies created high rates of inflation. Since Oxfam cannot dictate the actions of other players, it could have pursued different strategies of its own that would have mitigated inflationary trends, rather than exacerbating them.

Due to large-scale investment in reconstruction of houses, there was a very high demand for construction workers, both skilled and unskilled. This created large wage differentials across sectors and skills, leading to shortages of labour in other sectors, such as farming.

Cash programming also took a toll on traditions of community volunteerism (in Aceh, gotong-royong) and reciprocal assistance (tolong-menolong). Such practices of mutual help are prevalent in all the countries involved.

7. Intervention: Micro-credit/Micro-finance

Micro-credit/micro-finance activities mopped up excess liquidity in local economies by channelling cash into various savings mechanisms. By doing so, they provided the perfect antidote to inflationary pressures driven by cash programming.

In places such as Aceh, however, Oxfam introduced micro-credit/finance activities only very late in the response. Cash programming, being so large in scale, assumed a life of its own, making it difficult to make a transition to longer-term programming. In Aceh, Oxfam also lacked experience and skills in micro-credit/finance, unlike in India or Sri Lanka.

Within the CNFE sector, micro-finance institutions (MFIs) clearly demonstrated the highest levels of competence of all of Oxfam's partners in restoring livelihoods. Not only did they go about the task in an organised way; they also had better outreach, even though many of them entered the response late in the relief or recovery phases.

Oxfam's micro-credit/finance activities were conditioned by two contrary philosophies. In Aceh, for example, Oxfam partner BRAC made financial (institutional) sustainability the cornerstone of its strategies. The policy of affiliate Oxfam Australia was just the opposite. 'The objective is not to create a financially sustainable system of revolving loans, but rather relief with financial incentives to beneficiaries in improving their livelihoods,' it reported.⁴

They were also differences in perceptions regarding the long-term impact of loans. Some of Oxfam's micro-finance partners were not keen to use loans for fear that 'individual grants would increase community dependence and reduce community commitment to loan schemes in the future'.⁵

The opposite view – which was held by a large majority within Oxfam – was best articulated by an ODI workshop in Colombo: 'Aid agencies believe that assets lost in a disaster should be replaced for free, using the principle of retrospective insurance. Where MF [micro-finance] cannot target the poorest of poor because of their lack of savings (and therefore ability to repay loans) grants should be provided... MF should be available for better-off households from the beginning of an emergency response as they might prefer this option.'⁶

A mixed grant/loan model was also found to be appropriate for middle-income households, as the experience of the Sewalanka Foundation (SLF) demonstrated: 'Grants are fine if used to supplement a lack of equity, but never to bolster a lack of feasibility. Very often, donors talk of owner equity. This is hard to come by in poor communities. Projects based on loans only can work, but loan plus grant works much better.'⁷

Although the self-help group (SHG) model was adopted by all partners, there were differences in operating models for micro-credit/finance activities. Under the first approach, MFIs such as BRAC collected and managed all the repayments and interest themselves. The potential for empowerment was low under this model, while logistics costs were higher, leading to higher interest rates.

The second approach, adopted by the large majority of Oxfam partners, was one in which all repayments were retained within the community. Empowerment potential was high under this model and logistics costs were lower. Consequently, such schemes were able to offer more competitive interest rates than the first model.

In countries such as Sri Lanka, micro-credit/finance activities were based on monthly repayments. In Aceh, however, the

BRAC model introduced a weekly repayment system that proved controversial, as weekly payments were inappropriate for many households who depended on infrequent or seasonal income flows.

In addition, the size of loans offered by Oxfam was not quite adequate to lift families out of poverty, even though some MFIs, such as the Dhan Foundation in India, were flexible on loan amounts: 'The amount is dependent on the activity that the group is going to implement'⁸. Others such as BRAC were more rigid, with a bureaucratic standardisation of loan amounts that hindered their impact.

Interest rates were found to have a direct correlation to achieving the aim of targeting the poorest people. The higher the interest rate, the less this target was met, and vice versa. At the same time, the evaluation studies conducted found that repayment rates did not necessarily reflect the profitability of a client's business, for a variety of reasons.

The most innovative contribution made by Oxfam's tsunami response in the area of micro-credit/finance was the BioRights model, where repayment was made by contributing labour for eco-restoration activities.

8. Cross-cutting: Chronic vs. Transient Poverty

Oxfam's policy directive was very clear from the outset: that, apart from restoration objectives that addressed problems of transient poverty, its response should aim to remedy problems that were more structural in character – chronic poverty being one of the dimensions to be addressed.

The overall perception within Oxfam was that, for the most part, its response maintained a clear focus on low-income and marginalised populations, and that it reached out to the most marginalised people, such as small farmers, landless labourers, etc.

In Thailand, one view was that the objective of removing chronic poverty led to successful advocacy efforts and policy changes with regard to the land rights of stateless Burmese refugees. In Sri Lanka, a 2007 government survey indicated that chronic poverty had decreased – although NGOs, including Oxfam partners, did not share the government's optimism.

There was also an internal perception within Oxfam that its livelihood strategy aimed more to restore existing livelihoods than to encourage new entrepreneurship. Here lies a contradiction: the unjust social structures and systems responsible for chronic poverty are embedded within existing livelihoods. Consequently, chronic poverty cannot be ended simply by restoring existing livelihoods: this can only be achieved when people are empowered to use their entrepreneurial spirit in new businesses and vocations.

Constraining forces that pulled the implementation focus away from chronic poverty to concentrate on transient poverty included the following:

- The promotion of alternative livelihoods on a large scale meant that communities also needed to build large-scale capacity. In contrast, according to one evaluation, 'wherever project intervention was directed at strengthening the existing livelihoods, it yielded better results and resulted in enhanced income post-tsunami'⁹.
- When it came to the most vulnerable communities, such as dalits or tribal people, engaging in new enterprises, failure rates were higher¹⁰. In contrast, 'beneficiaries with a higher pre-tsunami economic status demonstrated greater ability to choose a livelihood activity which could be sustained and provide a level of supplementary income useful to the family'¹¹. Pressures to generate results led to a tendency, particularly among MFIs, to reach out to higher-income households as this reduced the risk of defaults and led to faster outreach growth.

- The removal of chronic poverty was a time-consuming challenge. Many Oxfam staff and partners felt that a more lucid vision of the response as a four-year programme could have helped them to focus their strategies more clearly on combating chronic poverty.

9. Cross-cutting: Gender

Just as disasters are said to have gendered impacts, affecting men and women differently, humanitarian responses can also end up being gendered. Despite a strong policy intent, a weak cohesive strategy for translating ambition into practical action affected the potential impact of the gender dimension in Oxfam's livelihood interventions.

The Gender Parity Index (GPI)¹² of Oxfam's cash programming and in-kind assistance showed a bias in favour of men. In Aceh, for instance, it was estimated that only 38 per cent of cash grant recipients were women.

In the tsunami-affected countries, high-value productive assets such as boats and agricultural land remain traditionally in the ownership of men. Women, on the other hand, control low-value assets such as sewing machines, which they often purchase with their own income. Within this context, the GPI of Oxfam's programming ended up being even further skewed in favour of men in terms of per capita assistance.

Attempts to socially engineer existing ownership structures of livelihood assets and to change gender stereotypes had mixed outcomes. A project aimed at giving women boat ownership ended up with the women being called names and ridiculed. Some of the strategies used were too simplistic, given that gender inequality is a long-entrenched cultural reality.

However, some innovative attempts to break gender stereotypes, such as encouraging women to take up professions such as painting, driving, stone masonry, etc., met with more success – even though these were exceptions rather than the rule.

The participation rates of women in CFW programmes, though high, were not uniform at country level. In addition, programmes failed to overcome the challenges of formal divisions of labour on gender lines, particularly in Islamic countries.

Even though Oxfam prepared comprehensive guidelines and toolkits to enhance the inclusion of women in livelihood strategies, in the field this often took the form of 'playing the numbers game'.

Women were almost exclusively the beneficiaries in the rehabilitation phase of the CNFE programme. This phase was also marked by a strategic shift to 'long-term development' approaches that revolved mostly around savings and credit groups and micro-finance programmes; in all countries, these were almost entirely targeted at women.

Consequently women beneficiaries had to settle for mostly small loans, with interest rates as high as 12–30 per cent or more – unlike men, who benefited from cash or material grants or interest-free loans. Oxfam's interventions tended to leave men free of debt, while women were predominantly expected to use debt as an instrument to improve their circumstances.

The biggest challenges to the logic of Oxfam's intervention, as seen internally within the organisation, included the following:

- What is the evidence that community livelihoods are best restored or enhanced through women?
- More women than men were killed by the tsunami, and in many cases single men became the sole livelihood providers and home carers for their families. What then is the rationale for targeting more women than men, if the reality is that more households are run by single men? Is there a danger that women are being over-targeted?
- How realistic is the ambition of radically changing gender relations within three years?
- Particularly in Islamic countries, does Oxfam's ambition of radically changing gender relations conflict with principle five of the Code of Conduct, concerning culture and custom?

10. Sustainability

Short, and frequently shifting, timelines were not conducive to promoting sustainable project benefits in Oxfam's livelihood programme. Change-inducing interventions (Types 2 and 3; see table) were more vulnerable to premature exits than change-neutral interventions (Type 1).

Impact of Premature Exit

Type of intervention	Sustainability prospects
Type 1: Change-neutral e.g. reinstating lost livelihoods, cash/food for work	High
Type 2: Change-inducing e.g. upgrading or expanding lost livelihoods, encouraging entrepreneurship, diversifying livelihoods	Low
Type 3: Change-inducing e.g. structural change such as gender equality, eco-restoration	Very Low

For example, the reinstatement of pre-existing livelihoods was largely unaffected by Oxfam's exit strategies: such business or trading activities were non-training- or project-dependent and skills for managing them already existed within the communities.

CFW activities such as soil and water conservation fell into a category where the sustainability prospects of benefits may be high in the short term, but less so over the medium term. Their medium- to long-term sustainability outlook depended on whether farmers, local CBOs/NGOs, or local government took responsibility for continued maintenance of the structures created. Whether or not this happened was dependent upon large-scale, and often time-consuming, capacity-building inputs.

A majority of workshop participants felt that it was not easy to institute systems or leadership in any newly created institution. In fact, when Oxfam first identified partners, it realised that many

partners themselves required massive capacity-building efforts, to the extent that this became one of the core responsibilities of the programme. Only when partners have adequately built capacity can communities do likewise.

During the response there were cases of affiliate-to-affiliate handovers of programmes. Affiliates that took over programmes considered them a 'legacy'. However, partners involved in the programmes sometimes considered relationships with the new affiliates to be 'enforced partnerships' and were not able to adjust fully to the change. This caused tension and uncertainty on both sides.

The more partners' tsunami programmes were aligned with their core programmes, the better the prospects for sustainability. For Indian partner the Dhan Foundation, the incremental costs of absorbing Oxfam's livelihood programme (Enabling Livelihood Rehabilitation Programme, or ELRP) into its own core programme were insignificant, and it was easily able to replace Oxfam's funding with funding from another donor, once Oxfam's support came to an end (see table).

The flip-side was that this sometimes came at a cost to Oxfam programmes. Midway through the tsunami response, most MFIs working with Oxfam aligned their livelihood programmes with those of the Asian Development Bank (ADB). While ADB funding may have given their programmes greater sustainability, such realignments resulted in major strategic deviations with respect to their livelihood programmes with Oxfam.

While MFIs claim that their programmes are 'sustainable', this could in some cases prove to be inaccurate. What they refer to as 'sustainability' can be more accurately described as financial self-reliance i.e. the capacity to self-finance their programmes.

While this is an important dimension of sustainability, some MFIs portray it as the whole and, in so doing, downplay the needs of their client businesses – their whole *raison d'être*. At the level of the client, 'sustainability' becomes 'the use of one's endowments to generate adequate resources to meet the requirements of the household in a sustainable manner'¹³.

Evaluation studies of MFIs indicate that their so-called 'sustainability' often comes at a very high price. Pressures to break even operationally tend to tempt them to move away from servicing the vulnerable to the moderate poor. 'In some of the newly opened branches it was observed that POs [project officers] tend to select beneficiaries that are above the poverty line in an attempt to assure loan repayment and minimise the risk of default,' noted one study¹⁴.

Dhan Foundation Impact of absorbing tsunami operations into core programme			
Particulars	Core at present	ELRP	Growth
Members (number)	500,000	61,500	12%
Community staff (number)	3,000	414	14%
DHAN staff (number)	700	119	17%

An even more serious question is the quality of micro-enterprises supported by MFIs. 'Whether micro-enterprises that have been (and are being) supported constitute long-term sources of livelihoods is an aspect that goes beyond the reach of the programme both in terms of scope and time span. It has to be taken into account that, for the most part, the businesses of the beneficiaries are not necessarily productive units but subsistence enterprises.'¹⁵

In the case of farming interventions, where these were based on low-input organic practices and built largely on local traditional knowledge and experience – as was the case in India and Sri Lanka – their eco-sustainability prospects were high. Oxfam's interventions in Aceh, however, did not follow these principles and in this case prospects for sustainability were low.

The sustainability prospects for community management were high in cases such as the rice credit line, where the model was kept at a scale and complexity that did not lead to project

dependence. As the scale and operational complexity of projects increased, however, as in the case of C Camp, sustainability prospects diminished, while project dependency rose.

The over-response in the distribution of boats prompted many evaluation studies to warn that indiscriminate over-supply of this sort threatened the sustainability of all fishery sector livelihoods, as it was leading to fishery resources becoming increasingly depleted.

Oxfam's livelihood response contained only a minor strategic emphasis on increasing fish resources. Green Coast partners in Thailand, Aceh, India, and Sri Lanka attempted to restore mangroves and coral reefs as interventions aimed at increasing fishery resources. These programmes appear to have met with greater success in Aceh than elsewhere. This was because programmes here were not only strongly aligned with the policy outlook of the Aceh government, but played a key role in shaping that policy.

There was very little strategic focus on interventions such as fish aggregating devices (FADS) and artificial reefs. Research has proved that FADS, contrary to popular understanding, are a resource-depleting technology, unlike artificial reefs, which are resource-regenerating.

Both these interventions potentially run the risk of causing conflict within fishing communities, as they were introduced mainly by technologically-driven Oxfam partners, whose community organisation capabilities were relatively weak. However, most interventions of this kind were simply experimental, rather than being implemented as tried and tested solutions.

11. Conclusions

It is impossible for individual nations or relief players to effectively tackle a disaster of the magnitude of the tsunami on their own.

As one of the few international players with extensive experience and with staff on the ground in most of the countries affected,

Oxfam chose to be operational in seven different countries. This entailed an enormous and abrupt scaling-up of its activities, with implications for all parts of the organisation.

Realising that an institutionalised, central mechanism was needed to co-ordinate such a response, the OITF was established as the co-ordinating architecture for the responses of seven operational affiliates, under the common brand of Oxfam International.

This unique situation warranted intensive strategic co-ordination for recovery efforts to be effective, as well as considerable pressure to deliver tangible results. However, the OITF remained more a support organisation, with affiliates retaining their decentralised line powers. The Oxfam response was therefore characterised by wide diversity and weakened co-ordination due to the inherent limitations of the confederation structure. 'The amount of management support required was under-estimated. Moreover, the mechanism was not designed in collaboration with Oxfam [GB]'s funding experts who would have advised on improved systems and accountability,' said one evaluation study¹⁶.

'Under the best of circumstances, changing the behaviours of huge organizations is difficult,' observed another¹⁷. Shortcomings in Oxfam's coping capacity were reflected in reduced administrative and programming capacity to implement livelihood programmes. In the process, Oxfam also experienced its share of false steps and setbacks.

However, all things considered, the outputs were truly astounding. Up to September 2008, Oxfam spent €200m overall. While it is notoriously difficult to count the number of people benefiting from a humanitarian response, it is estimated that, cumulatively, Oxfam's tsunami response reached some 2.5 million people¹⁸. The livelihood programme components of the response spent €65m, accounting for 33 per cent of all funds used. Oxfam's livelihood programme reached 962,000 people, or 38 per cent of all beneficiaries of its tsunami response.

While there was a trend within the overall response to concentrate on interventions that were easier to implement, more

visible, and more quantifiable – which led to over-response in some areas – Oxfam limited its exposure to coastal fisheries and sought out gaps left by others. It soon emerged as one of the leading voices in highlighting the plights of saltpan workers, shell-gatherers, inland fishers, tailors, craftspeople, barbers, sex workers, etc., all of whom had lost their incomes, while the humanitarian and media focus remained largely centred on fisheries.

In the process, Oxfam punctured the media myth that the tsunami was a great leveller. Marginalised communities were found to be more affected by its destructive force since they were more vulnerable to begin with.

The strategic emphasis on the farm sector was very successful, with Oxfam chalking up significant achievements. Although it was not easy within the short timelines, Oxfam's livelihoods advocacy efforts were able to significantly influence government policy in Aceh and Thailand. In India, SRI was found potentially to have the greatest impact of all Oxfam's livelihood interventions. In Sri Lanka home gardens were restored using sustainable agricultural practices, and this could lend itself as a replicable model.

Growth in the agricultural sector is often considered to be up to four times more effective in reducing poverty compared with growth in other sectors; it thus acts as an engine of growth across the board. This is something that is only now being fully appreciated, after evaluation and impact studies of tsunami responses by other agencies have underlined the farm sector's economic significance. Oxfam concentrated on agriculture as the pivotal sector from the start, a decision that was questioned at the time but which has since been widely vindicated.

Oxfam's performance in the fisheries sector is also to be commended, as household incomes have increased to a greater extent than in all other sectors. BioRights was an innovative micro-credit model piloted during the tsunami which proved effective in eco-restoration activities.

Areas where results did not measure up to expectations of Oxfam's 'reconstruction plus' ambition were CNFE and gender.

The reasons for this overlapped, as women were almost exclusively the target of Oxfam's livelihood interventions within CNFE. Oxfam's strategies focused mainly on restoring income-generating activities that were low-skilled and distress-driven, and for which wage rates and returns on investment were low.

Otherwise, Oxfam's performance was impressive: it succeeded in restoring the livelihoods of at least 70 per cent of all people targeted who had lost their livelihoods within the CNFE sector. At least 40–60 per cent of the 962,000 people reached by its livelihood programme were from this sector.

Where women were concerned, Oxfam's livelihood interventions may have fallen short of achieving real economic breakthroughs, but they did give women greater social empowerment in many significant ways, across countries.

Where OI fell short on strategies, it made up for it in targeting. Interventions provided alternative livelihoods and life options for women, enabling them to avoid forms of exploitation and oppression such as prostitution and domestic violence, while offering survival strategies to female-headed households and single women.

Nevertheless, if the tsunami experience is any indicator, Oxfam's problem was not so much one of policy or intent as one of translating and mainstreaming gender goals in such a way that its ambitions could be more practically realised in the field.

The tsunami response also gave Oxfam an opportunity to scale up interventions such as cash programming and micro-finance. Excesses and shortfalls were experienced in both types of intervention, but both were critical in significantly improving livelihoods. All these lessons should help to mould more effective strategies for use in future responses.

A clear lesson learned was that short and frequently changing timelines did not allow Oxfam to translate its humanitarian successes into sustainable legacies, particularly where long-term structural change was involved.

When an operation of such unprecedented scope and scale draws to a close, it throws up many useful lessons of what worked and what did not – to which hopefully this study in whatever small measure has contributed. 'It's not enough to pick up the pieces. We must draw on every lesson we can to avoid such catastrophes in the future.'¹⁹

In general, whenever Oxfam applied principles of good development programming to its tsunami livelihood response, it met with higher chances of success in its emergency response programming. Many of the successes and failures during the tsunami response were not new or unique to Oxfam, or indeed to the relief sector as a whole.

Some failings had been highlighted in previous international responses, prompting one study to suggest that these were perhaps not so much an outcome of inadequate learning but of mental blocks to learning itself²⁰.

So will Oxfam do better the next time a tsunami or similar disaster strikes? It all depends on how it learns to multiply successes and overcome shortfalls by applying the lessons learned to future responses.

12. Key Recommendations

12.1 The potential for replication is higher if the lessons learned are embedded within a low-cost framework.

The challenges of the tsunami response flowed from 'problems of plenty', whereas more often challenges flow from resource scarcity. Learning from the tsunami should be suitably reviewed to take account of this distinction. The current global economic crisis serves as a harsh reminder that, whatever the lessons for replication, they need to be embedded within a low-cost framework.

'Luckily, the most important lessons we have learned are not necessarily those that depend on the availability of large amounts of funding.'²¹

12.2. The convergence effect of operating within a common framework creates a greater potential impact, as exemplified by the SRI experience in India.

OI can only emerge as a corporate brand if its strategies are synchronised. At the same time, the diversity of affiliates can be preserved by maintaining a high degree of freedom in the use of tactics. For this, co-ordination structures such as the OITF need to have more line authority. To ensure that their decisions are appropriate, they need to extend their structures closer to the action to facilitate better contextual understanding.

12.3. Oxfam should have a more realistic perception of its built-in systemic shortcomings.

The assumption that any organisational system has the elasticity to scale up capacity overnight proved a fallacy when Oxfam's organisational structures were severely tested and weaknesses exposed. The way that the relief industry is currently structured means that it is probably impossible to eliminate all of these systemic weaknesses when there is an abrupt demand for rapid scale-up by organisations.

Oxfam, like most other relief players, ended up being trapped by 'the Peter Principle'²², the degree and symptoms of which varied widely across countries and affiliates. The coping capacity of affiliates depended on their ability (or inability) to adapt rapidly to challenges posed to their existing systems.

12.4 Continue to adhere to high accountability standards and set an example to the relief sector by complying more closely with the principles of Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD).

The consequences of Oxfam exceeding its coping capacity were most clearly documented in Aceh, where a few instances of low-scale corruption occurred within its cash programming operations.

'With large amounts of cash and goods in motion, corruption is always a threat during a crisis. But despite the influx of billions

of dollars in tsunami-affected countries, corruption levels across the board were kept remarkably low. Key to this success was a commitment to view corruption, not as a nuisance or unfortunate side effect of the recovery, but as a core threat to the reconstruction effort as a whole.²³

Oxfam stood out as one of the few international NGOs willing to make voluntary disclosures of fraud, thus enhancing its own public accountability standing.

12.5 Oxfam should avoid subscribing to the myth that equates recovery to a mere logistical challenge in jumpstarting the economy.

This tendency was most visible in the fisheries sector, where Oxfam contributed to the over-supply of boats designed to improve fishing capacity. Replacement of assets such as fishing boats should be always be tempered with an understanding of the effects on resources over the medium to longer terms.

In most of the affected countries, fish resources are already exploited close to the level of maximum potential yield. Efforts to achieve short-term increases in fish catches can put pressure on scarce stocks and be unsustainable over the medium to long term. Sustainable strategies should first increase the availability of fish stocks and then in a calibrated manner increase fishing capacity.

12.6. Micro-credit and micro-finance interventions need to be applied in a more strategic fashion.

If the strategic intent is to reach the most vulnerable people, then NGO micro-credit models are appropriate as an intervention tool.

However, if the intent is to prevent middle- and higher-income households slipping into poverty, the tsunami experience suggests that micro-finance is a better choice. Nevertheless, micro-finance should not be seen as a panacea for all community livelihood problems, nor should it be seen as pro-poor.

12.7. Strengthen non-financial support services provided by micro-finance institutions to enhance their impact.

In the context of markets with extremely limited potential demand, the indiscriminate and excessive supply of credit to businesses such as grocery shops can lead to intensive competition and a subsequent decline in profits.

In several cases, the only response that MFIs could manage was to provide further loans to their clients in an attempt to prevent greater deterioration of their businesses, rather than more broadly-based interventions aimed at bringing about a wider stabilisation of markets. The evaluation found that support was given for the expansion of businesses without any consideration of the possible destabilisation of existing markets through excessive supply. This came about through over-dependence on expansion and under-dependence on diversification at a strategic level.

Failure to adequately complement MFI services with non-financial micro-support assistance also considerably weakened outcomes in transitioning subsistence businesses into fully-fledged micro-enterprises.

One of the reasons why MFIs are reluctant to develop non-financial services is that these are basically cost-centred, thus adding to their sustainability challenges. One solution is for MFIs to create a non-profit subsidiary to deliver such non-financial services.

12.8. When intervening in coastal disasters, the pivotal strategic thrust on agriculture should be maintained to maximise potential impact.

A strategic emphasis on agriculture builds on Oxfam's strengths in this sector. In addition, such a strategy can leverage the sector's potential as an engine of growth and potentially drive up demand in other sectors, such as CNFE and fisheries.

12.9. The logic of gender interventions needs to be reviewed to improve the prospects of realising gender objectives within livelihood strategies.

Oxfam's gender objectives were more successfully realised in non-Islamic countries than in Islamic ones. This is a lesson that should inform the review of existing gender frameworks within the organisation, particularly given its professed principle of respecting local cultures.

Wider acceptance of mainstreaming gender within livelihood strategies will depend on the degree to which Oxfam's gender framework convinces practitioners that the almost exclusive targeting of women is the best way to restore community livelihoods lost during disasters and to build vibrant economies.

12.10. Avoid changes to timelines and align these with strategic ambitions.

Set timelines provide greater clarity in the field on implementation. However, strategic ambitions cannot be formulated in isolation from realistic timelines. Most structural change objectives cannot be realised within a three-year period: sustainable outcomes for eco-restoration activities, for instance, need at least a 15-year time horizon. If these are the strategic objectives of a response, there should be a clear sustainability plan that factors in premature exits by Oxfam.

Short and shifting timelines may be influenced by Oxfam's own donors. Even so, Oxfam could have learned from the approach of the Canadian Red Cross Society (CRCS). During its Tsunami Appeal, CRCS released an overview assistance plan that stated, 'Canadian Red Cross will fund programs overseas for at least 10 years. It will take a generation to rebuild. The generosity of our donors puts the Red Cross in an excellent position to adapt to the changing needs in the tsunami-affected countries and direct funds as needs evolve.'²⁴

12.11 Livelihood strategies, to be truly sustainable, need to be conditioned by eco-restoration and disaster risk reduction (DRR) philosophies.

Oxfam's strategic thrust was weak on approaches to sustainable livelihoods that aimed to reduce vulnerability and provide better coping mechanisms in the event of future disasters. Furthermore,

such approaches were incorporated piecemeal and did not permeate Oxfam's overall livelihood strategy as a fundamental philosophy.

12.12. At the country level Oxfam needs to demonstrate more evidence of being a strategically functional organisation.

Across affiliates and countries, Oxfam provided only a few glimpses of acting as a strategically functional organisation. While its global livelihood strategy was relatively clear, country-specific strategies, however, were often confusing. There were deficiencies in programme design and implementation processes due to lack of clarity in objectives, exacerbated by frequent and costly strategic shifts and reversals.

Even worse, according to one evaluation, 'Planning in some cases has been based on what Oxfam would like to do, not on a clear assessment of need and on what can be done in terms of context and internal capacity'²⁵.

It may be good practice at the country level to design at least one large-scale intervention to generate visible impact.

12.13. Close alignment with in-country policy environments enhances potential impacts.

The impact of SRI in India was largely facilitated by a favourable in-country policy environment. Oxfam acted as a force multiplier to spread a technology that was closely aligned with the priorities of the government, at both state and central levels.

The government imposed no cap on market prices for rice products. It also had a policy of reducing subsidies for inorganic agricultural inputs, which made them more expensive. These favourable policy conditions helped boost the expansion of organic SRI.

By contrast in Sri Lanka, although SRI demonstrated significant promise, there was not the same momentum for its spread, as the policy environment was less conducive. Here the spread of SRI was constrained by cost/price squeezes that eroded much of its competitive advantage.

12.14. There is a greater chance of success when strategies are built on existing traditions.

The need to create demand for an intervention only arises when activities are not traditional within communities. In India, attempts to promote home gardens failed. Home gardens are not traditional in Tamil Nadu's coastal areas and, besides, plots were either not readily available or were not large enough to ensure profitability.

In Sri Lanka, however, the programme met with resounding success. Here home gardens are a tradition: they are maintained by farmers, villagers, and fishermen and supply a significant proportion of households' nutritional needs. Participation rates were high, and there was no need to create demand as there was in India.

12.15. Strong links between recovery and long-term rehabilitation are needed to ensure impact.

In Aceh, weak linkages between CFW activities and cash grant beneficiaries led to rehabilitated land being left idle. Oxfam, like other agencies, initially put no special focus on reclaiming paddy fields affected by salinisation. Consequently, there were wide-scale changes in land use patterns as at least half the rice farmers opted to cultivate alternative crops such as watermelon and groundnuts. However, farmers' coping skills were found wanting, as they had no previous experience of cultivating these new crops.

By contrast, in India there were strong linkages between CFW activities and cash grant/loan beneficiaries. These programmes aimed to increase the water retention capacity of the soil and to enhance irrigation potential. Systems of this kind often also make it easier to flush salinity out of the soil. As a result, agricultural recovery was fastest in India, as land restoration activities were mostly in place in time to take advantage of the first monsoons and subsequent floods.

12.16. The use of cash programming needs greater calibration.

At times cash programming was used by Oxfam in a reckless, supply-driven manner, instead of being calibrated to suit the context.

There is a need for greater appreciation that an intervention cannot exist in a vacuum. It is bound to be affected by the conditions of the broader response. Just as it paid to avoid 'following the herd' by limiting its exposure to the fishery sector, Oxfam needs to adopt differential strategies whenever the relief environment is over-reliant on a single intervention to produce results, which leads to excesses and abuse.

This may imply the wider use of cash vouchers as an intervention while operating in an inflationary environment, driven by the indiscriminate supply of cash programming by the relief community.

Better still – and a strategy which proved to be an effective remedy during the tsunami – savings interventions can be used to suck excessive liquidity out of the economy. One way to ensure sufficient demand for savings could be to use matching grants but to lock in savings until inflation starts to subside.

12.17. Completely stop agricultural interventions based on high-input, inorganic chemicals.

These go against Oxfam's sustainable livelihood framework; moreover, failure rates are high, as was seen in Oxfam's experience in Aceh.

References

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² Dhaincha (*Sesbania acculeata*) is a green manure crop which fixes nitrogen in the soil and is able to grow under a variety of extreme conditions, including in highly saline soil.

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¹⁰ Final Report, ECDF Tsunami Program Partner Assessment.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² The Gender Parity Index, or GPI, is calculated as the ratio of the value for women (e.g. number of girls enrolled at a school) divided by the value for men (e.g. number of boys enrolled). A value of less than one indicates a discrimination against women and vice versa.

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²² The principle that every employee tends to rise to his/her own 'level of incompetence'.

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Oxfam International is a confederation of fourteen organizations working together in more than 100 countries to find lasting solutions to poverty and injustice: Oxfam America, Oxfam Australia, Oxfam-in-Belgium, Oxfam Canada, Oxfam France - Agir ici, Oxfam Germany, Oxfam GB, Oxfam Hong Kong, Intermón Oxfam (Spain), Oxfam Ireland, Oxfam Mexico, Oxfam New Zealand, Oxfam Novib (Netherlands), and Oxfam Québec. Please call or write to any of the agencies for further information, or visit www.oxfam.org

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