Summary of the Independent Evaluation of Accountability to Beneficiaries of Oxfam and its Partners in the Tsunami Response Program in South India

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This report was commissioned by Oxfam to understand and assess the extent to which Oxfam and its partners are accountable to beneficiaries in the Tsunami Response Program in South India. The report is based on a field survey in two States (Tamil Nadu, Kerala) and the Union Territory of Pondicherry. The survey covered the work of partners in nine districts, 55 settlements. The survey team spoke to 997 beneficiaries and 35 Panchayat (local government) members.

A framework was developed for the study drawing on various humanitarian standards and principles including the Red Cross Code, Sphere Charter, Humanitarian Accountability Partnership-International (HAP-I) and People in Aid. This included measures of:

- **Participation** – Involvement of beneficiary groups at various stages of the program; roles, perceptions and satisfaction levels
- **Transparency** – Providing information to both those who seek to assist and those who are assisted, on the local partner, their programs, budgets, process of beneficiary selection and accountability principles
- **Staff Capacities and Attitudes** – Capacities of staff (knowledge and attitudes) to effectively respond to beneficiaries needs
- **Complaints and Response** – Mechanisms for receiving complaints and responding to beneficiaries in fair and efficient manner
- **Learning and use in Decision Making** – Involvement of beneficiary groups in assessing needs, monitoring and evaluating program components and using them in decision making
- **Disaster Response on Local Capacities** (implementation through local partners); staff profiles (local/ community level staff)

A. Top-line Findings:
The results of the assessment show that all NGO staff exhibit an awareness of the term ‘accountability’ although they do not necessarily know about the accountability “principles”. Nevertheless they adhere to some accountability principles in their work due to their inherent approach of working through communities. However NGOs have not put any specific mechanisms in place to ensure ‘accountability’ and Oxfams have not supported them to do this.

All the NGOs seem to organize and work through community-based organizations and involve both the Traditional Panchayat and Gram Panchayat members\(^1\). This ensures a reasonable degree of community participation in the tsunami response program and, in the view of the partners, has ensured that most accountability principles and processes are incorporated into their programs. The partners with the longest experience in community development have been most successful at this.

Participation rates vary across sectoral interventions and the different stages of these interventions (beneficiary selection, planning, implementation and monitoring). Participation has been limited by community interest and also by the partner’s ability to “create space” for participation.

Implementing accountability standards will require Oxfam and its partners to address structural and systemic issues at the design and planning stage of a program (for example partner staff emphasized the need for them to be familiar with accountability standards at the start of interventions).

The risk of marginalizing vulnerable groups in disaster situations remains very high as NGOs are subjected to pressure to show performance and program spending and have difficulty in prioritizing equitable distribution.

All assessments (at community, NGO and stakeholder level) suggest that program staff are committed to sharing information. However the content, quality, type (physical and financial) and regularity of information shared could be improved. NGOs find financial information particularly difficult to share. NGOs need to develop systems to ensure regular and transparent updates on the progress of activities and expenditure with respect to agreed budgets and program goals. Furthermore community awareness levels about accountability principles and the right to information will go a long way in improving the implementation of these standards.

\(^1\) The “Traditional Panchayat” derives from pre-colonial local governance structures. This still works in parallel with the “Gram Panchayat” – a local government system introduced by the British and given increasing powers and relevance by successive constitutional amendments.
Complaints and response mechanisms have received lowest ranking in NGOs’ self-assessment. NGOs have stated that working through community-based organizations (CBO) and self-help groups has assisted in the process of reporting grievances. However even in these cases documentation of complaints, written policy and dedicated staff for handling complaints remain areas of concern.

On learning and adaptation, good performance is reported by NGOs on their taking beneficiary suggestions into account and acting on them, particularly in relation to needs assessments and target setting. There needs to be improvement in identification of vulnerable groups and building staff capacities to deal with local powerful interest groups. Documentation of most policies and processes followed by NGOs (including complaints, feedback, etc. that happen at CBO level) through their existing monitoring and reporting system is rather weak.

B. Implications for Future Programs

The findings of the evaluation provide some useful pointers for ensuring accountability principles in future humanitarian aid programs.

- **Accountability principles must be effectively embedded in the work culture of NGOs.** To ensure this, support organizations need to help NGOs build their understanding of accountability and of methods to ensure and monitor accountability, and train staff and community members on these principles.

- **Organizations that have a strong community base and long experience in community development are most accountable.** Accountability is more likely if partners are selected that have a strong community base and years of experience in community development approaches. However, these approaches and processes need to be effectively documented as part of being accountable.

- **Communities need to be empowered to hold NGOs accountable.** Program design must incorporate capacity building of communities and programs should assist communities to establish a monitoring mechanism at community level.

- **Accountability to beneficiaries needs to be prioritized by NGOs.** It is understandable that in emergency situations the priority of NGOs is relief and rehabilitation and there is little attention to accountability especially when it comes to participation in decision making. The situation and environments in which humanitarian NGOs operate pose additional problems for downward accountability. Addressing the life-threatening problems of vulnerable
populations in complex, often unpredictable environments and often under considerable time pressure makes implementing the necessary mechanisms, such as transparency and consultation, difficult. This must not be regarded as a reason for non-engagement, rather as a challenge that needs to be overcome. It is therefore important to have these assessed during appraisals, and prepare systems and provide capacity building to organizations before disaster strikes.