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# PROGRAM STANDARDS AT OXFAM: WORKING TOWARDS AN AGREED SET OF STANDARDS ACROSS OXFAM

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Over the past decade, the Oxfam confederation has produced a wealth of policy, guidelines and both formal and informal working agreements meant to help us implement rights-based approaches. The *OI Strategic Plan for 2007–12 'Demanding Justice'* is built from this commitment to rights-based approaches and articulates five aims and four change goals in this regard. We have agreed a set of Working Principles (See Annex 1) meant to apply in all our work. We have developed campaigning guidelines and built out an extensive humanitarian dossier to help us deliver on rights-based approaches in those areas. We have also agreed on an Oxfam Program Definition (see Annex 2) which articulates what we consider to be good, rights-based practice in the countries in which we work. With all of this work, affiliates currently work much better together than they did in the 1990s. We have come a long way.

In May 2008 EDs agreed that each country should move towards a joint analysis and strategy over the next 2 to 3 years. This work highlighted that different affiliates interpret things like Working Principles and the Oxfam Program Definition in quite different ways. This diversity is a strength, but it also creates tension and disagreement between affiliates, making joint strategy development and true collaborative programming difficult. We have come to see that while flexibility and pragmatism regarding what constitutes good programming is necessary, too much flexibility can impede us from meeting our aspiration of rights-based approaches and impacts on root causes of poverty and injustice. We also know that we need better and more reliable mechanisms for agreeing on ways of working, when we are all living up to our organizational vision and principles, and for holding each other accountable.

In Nov 2008, EDs agreed that we should move towards a Single Management Structure (SMS) where Oxfam operates. Annex 4 contains the SMS Vision Statement, approved by the EDs in May. Fundamental to the vision is the idea that we need to find ways to work more collaboratively, to pull in the same direction more consistently, and to join forces in long-term programs, programs that bring together our humanitarian, development, and campaigning capabilities. This raised the urgency of overcoming existing tensions and disagreements between affiliates regarding how we can consistently live up to our Working Principles and operationalize the Program Definition. It led to an agreement by EDs that SMS requires more specific guidance about how to consistently implement rights-based programs in the field and the demand that a minimum set of program standards be established prior to rolling out new structures in the countries and regions in which we work.

### **Achieving Greater Coherence and Impact in our Programs: The Full Picture**

This document articulates a set of minimum standards for our rights based work, moving forward. It is based on existing work in the confederation. It is a starting point, and will be improved in the coming years, as SMS takes root. The standards represent a mandatory benchmark for all affiliates and they actually express what affiliates already believe in, even though their application may be inconsistent.

Any set of standards require four things to make them useful, to make them part of the DNA of an organization. First, the standards themselves need to be described in clear and simple language. Second, some basic minimum agreements are needed regarding how to implement the standards. Third, organizations need to agree on simple but still robust accountability mechanisms and processes. Finally — and perhaps most importantly — the organization needs to commit to a long-term learning process that has as its target the continuous improvement of our performance, standards, their manner of operationalization, and accountabilities. We will need to work on all four of these inter-related issues in the coming years. *Program Standards should reinforce other Oxfam Standards including CONSOL, Financial Standards, Brand and marketing standards etc.*

By March 2010, the Integrated Program Task Force of the SMS initiative will make some progress on all the above. Working with staff from around the confederation, it will produce a set of program *management* standards that will articulate in more concrete detail how important program management decisions should be made, including donor relations/reporting, fundraising, brand risk, human resources, communications (external and internal), joint country analysis and strategy development and implementation, accountability to external stakeholders, and learning. It will also produce partnership guidelines that will help us deal with the ongoing tensions we have in the confederation. All of these products will deal with practical aspects of how we implement the standards articulated in this document and how we will hold ourselves ac-

countable to them. Finally, we will propose to the EDs in March an explicit SMS monitoring and evaluation plan that will help us engage in systematic and rigorous evidence-based learning.

This document, however, focuses only on articulating the standards themselves.

## **Structure of this document**

The proposed set of standards is divided in two. The first part describes standards that are process focused, in other words focused on the 'how' of rights-based programs. They focus strongly, therefore, on aspects of design, on relationships between parts of Oxfam that need to be consistent if we are to implement good rights-based approaches, and on learning processes within programs. The second part of this document is quite different: it focuses on the Oxfam change goals and sets out standards related to outcomes, not processes. All of the standards from the first part of the document apply to change goal work, of course. Equally important is that a considerable chunk of this work (conceptualize, implement, evaluate, learn) is done in co-operation with the organizations that we engage with.

## **A Note on Terminology**

Different people and organizations use terms like 'principle', 'standard', 'goal', 'aspiration', 'objective', 'indicator', etc differently. We do not have formal agreement in Oxfam on how we should use these terms. Annex 3 contains an explicit statement of how these terms are understood and used in and for this document. Note that the contents of this document are meant as 'standards', which is to say that moving forward we will assess whether or not programs meet them, and develop joint and consensus agreements in single management structures about how to meet them more consistently.

# **PROGRAM STANDARDS**

## **STANDARD 1: Collaborative, iterative, analysis of root causes of poverty and injustice forms the basis of all programs**

'Collaborative' means that we do such analysis with partners and allies and with those whose rights are being denied or abridged. 'Root causes' means that this collaborative analysis includes gender analysis, power analysis, vulnerability, trends, natural factors (e.g. climate change) and political economic analysis. The analysis looks at the systemic and structural causes of poverty and inequality. 'Iterative' means that we revisit and revise this analysis at regular intervals. 'Forms the basis of all programs' means that the analysis leads to being explicit about who is most vulnerable (gender, ethnicity, age, HIV prevalence), where causes need to be addressed (globally, regionally, nationally, sub-nationally, communities, within households), how public, private, and civil society sectors are

implicated, and which specific rights are at issue (political, economic, social, cultural, group, children, women, indigenous people, etc.).

## **STANDARD 2: Program strategies are created in a participatory and collaborative manner and contain eight elements.**

Oxfam does not work alone. Long-term program strategies are developed jointly with others. In addition, in all our work, we need to pay close attention to gender dynamics and be explicit about the changes in gender relations that programs will foster. Those jointly developed strategies all include the following elements, at a minimum:

- An articulation of the scale and nature of changes that will make the most impact on poverty and injustice,
- An indicative time frame,
- A theory of change,
- Identification of key risks/challenges,
- The key relationships and partnerships we need to develop to deliver the changes, be they with civil society, state, or private sector actors,
- Oxfam's distinctive contribution and role,
- The linkage between long-term goals, objectives, inputs and indicators of success and how we will measure and assess progress, and
- Resources, an indicative budget, and capacities and skills needed. This includes identification of donors and Oxfam affiliates that will collaborate on the program, and what they will do.

## **STANDARD 3: The program has clear ties to the OI strategic plan**

Programs are an important investment. They represent long term commitments, implying joint work on fundraising, reporting, public relations, research, campaigning, and humanitarian and disaster risk reduction efforts (see standard below regarding the "one program approach"). Programs represent an important unit of strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation, calculations of efficiency and cost-effectiveness, and reporting about results. Every program, therefore, needs to connect to OI strategic plan priorities, report on results to OI change goals and record funding allocations according to CONSOL classification

## **STANDARD 4: Programs are flexible and adaptive within the parameters of the OI Strategic Plan**

Program strategies are not set in stone. Programs and program teams need to be open to innovative ideas, to changes in external context, to new insights about local context, to new partners or donor/government priorities. Innovative pilots may become the seeds of new programs, keeping Oxfam's global program portfolio relevant, and appropriately adapting to new realities. Program strategies should be subject to consistent and regular review, program teams need to have explicit mechanisms and transparent processes for assessing the value of innovative ideas to the program, and programs should change over time.

**STANDARD 5: Programs link development, humanitarian, and advocacy and campaigning work (a 'One Program Approach') in pursuit of a common objective**

Oxfam's programming strength, distinctive competence, and capacity to achieve greatest impact lies in our ability to link long-term development programs, campaigning and advocacy at local, national and/or international levels, and humanitarian assistance and protection in rapid onset and chronic emergencies, as well as effective disaster risk reduction and preparedness work in order to support and preserve development and policy gains. Program strategies explain what the links are, and what needs to be done. Strategies are also explicit about which elements of the one program approach are not included due to contextual factors. Strategies also identify which affiliates will take on which work.

**STANDARD 6: Programs rely upon partnership and alliances with autonomous, independent, accountable organizations to achieve positive changes in people's lives as well as policy changes. These relationships should be mutually empowering, cognizant of power imbalances between partners, and focused on impact, mutual growth, organizational development and institutional strengthening.**

Our Working Principles (Annex 1) speak directly to the principles, beliefs, and values that Oxfam holds regarding partnership. Key values for Oxfam International are respect for the diversity of people and partner organizations, respect for their autonomy, transparency and accountability of their own organizational policy and processes, and a consultative style that ensures that the voices of partners and allies can effectively influence Oxfam thinking and practice. Programs do not instrumentalize partners. Effective partnering is a fundamental strategy through which Oxfam seeks to become redundant.

We are transparent in how we select partners and allies through our country and regional joint analysis and strategic planning. We make long-term commitments to partners, set agreed mutual expectations, and are clear about when and why partnerships end. Programs establish explicit mechanisms for partner feedback and mutual influence. We talk openly and consistently about power imbalances between partners, imbalances created by funding discrepancies, size, North/South dynamics. The quality and productivity of partnerships and alliances is subject to regular and formal evaluation.

**STANDARD 7: Programs will have the capacity to deliver effective national campaigning across relevant elements of the OI Global Campaigning Force model (media, lobby, research, popmob, celebrities etc.) under the parameters set by the OI Southern Campaigning Guidelines as appropriate in a given country context, and to link this work to Oxfam International global campaigns.**

Oxfam believes that much change happens at national level and the importance of linking national realities with, and influencing positive outcomes through, regional and/or international processes. This requires contributing to lasting changes in policies, practices, ideas and beliefs at a national level through context specific investments in campaigning for change.

In order to achieve this, programs will be based on power analysis and the use of alliances and partnerships with a wide range of civil society organizations and social movements to stimulate active citizenship and deliver lasting change; linking our work from the national to global level as appropriate to achieve maximum impact.

**STANDARD 8: When programs engage in humanitarian work, they adhere to existing humanitarian agreements, standards, norms, policy, and guidelines..**

All humanitarian responses by Oxfam affiliates are Oxfam International responses. That is, whichever affiliates respond, they do it on behalf of all. This means that all the Oxfams acting in a particular emergency will do it under the principles of OI and will do their best to coordinate their work according to the current Oxfam International's mechanisms.

The Humanitarian Dossier applies to all programs. Program strategy identifies the preparedness, prevention, and disaster risk reduction activities needed, as well as important policy advocacy and campaigning issues related to humanitarian action. All humanitarian work conforms to the OI Working Principles (Annex 1). Oxfam humanitarian work must meet the Red Cross Code of Conduct, the Code of Conduct against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, and strive to meet SPHERE standards, HAP principles, and the People in Aid Code of Good Practice. Above and beyond this, humanitarian work is conducted in line with agreed humanitarian principles (Annex 5).

**STANDARD 9: Programs integrate OI's agreed cross-cutting objectives of Gender Equity and Active Citizenship<sup>1</sup>, and have strategies in place where appropriate for HIV and AIDS Response and engagement with the private sector**

Oxfam analysis, policies and campaign work, program design and implementation, and resource allocation should be premised on gender equality concerns and perspectives. Strengthening of partner capacities

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<sup>1</sup> OISP 2007–2012 "Demanding Justice"

for gender work is also needed. We must also build Oxfam capacity to 'engender' all our work and to shift the internal culture and practice of affiliates. In the context of our rights-based approach, programs must be designed to empower poor women and men as agents of change and as active citizens.

We must ensure active participation, grassroots leadership, and voice of the voiceless in all our programs and work to become a valued ally, especially of women's organizations. A clear analysis of the HIV and AIDS context in programs must be undertaken and context specific actions should be integrated into programs wherever appropriate. The role of the private sector is an important part of our contextual and power analysis and strategy development should be guided by the OI private sector strategy.

### **STANDARD 10: Programs engage in participatory, evidence-based learning and are results based**

Programs require participatory monitoring, evaluation, and learning systems that allow Oxfam, partners, and vulnerable and marginalized people to use empirical data to improve our work and to demonstrate results. Participation of the people and partners in learning processes is an important element of empowerment, and they need to have ways to shape and influence what success is and how it will be measured and judged. Programs also organize periodic external evaluations to provide credible, unbiased public evaluation of our work to donors, governments, partners, and people. At least one percent of affiliate program budgets should be allocated to MEL activities with a proportional amount available for MEL in joint programs. Data and findings from the program's monitoring, evaluation, and learning system are used regularly to adjust program strategy and plans.

### **STANDARD 11: Programs are accountable to stakeholders**

Programs have explicit mechanisms and processes in place in order to demonstrate accountability for inputs, rights-based approaches, and for outputs, outcomes, and impacts. These mechanisms empower stakeholders to hold Oxfam to account. Accountability mechanisms and processes engage donors, partners, collaborating affiliates, and most importantly the vulnerable and marginalized themselves in transparent dialogues about Oxfam's results and its ways of working with and for others.

## **CHANGE GOAL OUTCOMES**

In the *OI Strategic Plan for 2007–12 'Demanding Justice'* we have set out joint commitments to the achievement of significant and sustainable change in four major areas: Economic Justice, Essential Services, Rights in Crisis, and Gender Justice. In this section, we summarize the outcomes that we've committed ourselves to achieve. These are not process standards — like many of those contained in the first section of this document — but outcome standards. All ten standards from section one apply, of course, to programs pursuing these outcomes.

## **1. In *Economic Justice* we commit to the following outcomes:**

- Make agriculture work to the benefit of poor farmers and laborers. We will work at local, national and international levels with communities, governments and the private sector to increase the levels of food security and sustainable income for smallholders and farm workers.
- Increase the power of poor producers, especially women and build capacities of institutions that can engage in and regulate markets.
- Enable poor countries and people to get a fair share of the wealth and opportunities generated by world trade, with a strong focus in IFIs, governments and agribusiness with an increased focus on national level including labor rights and women's role in the national economy.
- Reduce inequality through more equitable distribution of assets, jobs, income, opportunities and power.
- Reduce the vulnerability of communities including women and migrants to hazards and climate change and increase their ability to adapt. Work together with partners and allies on energy equity, mitigation strategies and support the role of government to deliver appropriate social protection.

## **2. In *Essential Services* we commit to the following outcomes:**

- Support the State in ensuring delivery and equitable provision of good quality essential services especially in relation to women and excluded groups. For example through lobbying antagonistic governments, IFIs and building the capacity of weak governments.
- Strengthen the capacities of communities and civil society organizations to achieve their rights of access to good quality essential services. This includes budget monitoring support.
- Services that are inclusive, affordable and of high quality where communities are involved in defining what quality services mean to them and satisfaction with services. For example using education completion data rather than enrolment data.
- Oxfam's role will be less involved in delivering services and more in strengthening of governance, advocacy and campaigning in both North and South.

## **3. In *Rights in Crisis* we commit to the following outcomes:**

- Improve the performance of the international system (including UN and national governments) to provide greater assistance and better protection: increasing humanitarian aid, improving co-ordination, speed and accountability, reducing gender based violence and increasing national government's disaster preparedness planning.
- Ensure all our work is conflict sensitive, supports conflict prevention and peace building.
- Improve our OI performance to deliver greater assistance and protection through:
  - Timely response to assist and protect (within x days for rapid onset emergencies);

- Appropriate scale of response given the number of people affected, capacity of government and other partners;
  - Where those affected, especially women, are involved in determining the type and quality of response they receive;
  - Recognizing our distinctive competency in public health responses and secondary alternatives to food aid;
  - Professionally competent response in line with SPHERE standards, HAP principles and other guidelines;
  - Provide an integrated response including campaigning advocacy and media as part of a humanitarian response;
  - Context specific leadership and management behaviors and competencies e.g. shortened management lines following OI Humanitarian dossier agreements.
- Adhere to Humanitarian Principles and principles of impartiality
  - In *rapid onset disasters* we must meet the above Humanitarian Response standards and commitments.
  - In *chronic humanitarian crises* we must respond with both an immediate and long term perspective to reduce vulnerability and promote social protection. Delivery will be through partnerships with civil society and others wherever possible.

#### **4. In *Gender Justice* we commit to the following outcomes:**

- Increase women's ability to exercise critical leadership in the transformation of households, communities and organizations and to secure institutional, public policy and resources in defense of women's rights proportionate to their experience of poverty, exclusion and injustice.
- Increasingly acknowledge and tackle violence against women as a violation of women's rights, a fundamental constraint to poverty alleviation, and barrier to active citizenship through reducing its social acceptance and securing improved institutional and policy environments related to violence against women.
- Strengthen partnerships with women's organizations, networks and movements, especially through building their capacities so that Oxfam is positioned as a key ally on Gender Justice issues.
- Work with a wide range of actors, including men and boys, recognizing that the responsibility for and benefits of creating gender equity rests with all members of society.
- Ensure that Oxfam has greater institutional depth and reach on issues of gender justice, and is a more effective agent of gender-focused change through improving theory and practice of GJ in policy, advocacy and programs, transforming and strengthening our own systems to support this.
- Respond to emerging issues (such as gender and climate change) with creativity and innovation.

## ANNEX 1: OXFAM INTERNATIONAL WORKING PRINCIPLES

### **Oxfam International Working Principles (Article 52 of Oxfam International Rules of Procedure)**

These working principles set common standards which all Oxfam programs should aim to achieve.

1. The Oxfams at all times work through local and accountable organizations and/or towards strengthening or facilitating the establishment of such organizations or structures.

2. Exceptionally, where and when local capacity is insufficient, the Oxfams will help people directly, through consultants (often from the South), field staff, emergency workers and /or co-operants or other support people recruited for their professional capacity. These staff or support people will be brought in (only when local capacity is insufficient or inappropriate) preferably from Southern countries, but also from the North and can where necessary be involved in operational tasks. They will work simultaneously on strengthening local capacity, which means they will be accountable, facilitate local ownership, and work with a short or long term withdrawal strategy.

3. The categories of volunteers who are brought in for their own learning experience are accountable to the local organization who has agreed to 'adopt' them for specific tasks during a specific time-span.

4. Oxfam and organizations/structures supported by Oxfam will organize planning, management, implementation and evaluation of projects in such a way that people from participating groups or communities can (optimally) run or (minimally) significantly influence that project at different levels. Oxfam will base its partnership on a relationship where they support partners to achieve their aims; where partners themselves propose, conceive, plan, manage implement and co-evaluate the projects in a direct way. Explicit procedures should be in place to ensure that women and, where relevant, other marginalized people can significantly influence the projects. This includes systems to encourage diversity and to allow for and resolve disagreements, complaints or conflicts.

5. Gender and diversity issues (such as issues around class, ethnicity, ability, language, age, etc.) are explicit parts of any level of strategic planning, management, implementation, evaluation or withdrawal strategies, whether this be done by local organizations/structures, or by the Oxfams themselves.

6. The constant search for better practice is developed as part of the organizational culture of the Oxfams and is facilitated in local organizations/structures. This involves using and developing participatory processes and instruments at different levels: strategic renewal, planning, monitoring, (self) audit of organizations, programs and projects, (self-) evaluation, external evaluations and impact assessment. Linking and

learning across projects, organizations and countries should be stimulated.

## ANNEX 2: PROGRAM DEFINITION

**Agreement endorsed at:**

EDS & BOARD MEETING, 26<sup>th</sup> to 30th NOVEMBER 2007, BERLIN.

**Origin of document:**

Developed by RST Support Group and GCT Sep–Oct 2007; it was also Annex 1 [EDNov07/1.1] to progress report [to EDs] on OI Operational Plan 2007–8.

### Programming at Oxfam: Our common definition<sup>2</sup>

The Oxfam International (OI) confederation is comprised of 13 independent affiliates — each with its own variant of programming. As we forge closer links between affiliates at the national and regional level, and as we seek greater scale and impact on the ground, we build on this diversity and move toward a common program philosophy and approach.

Our programs strive for an **impact goal**: a sustained, significant, positive change in both the material condition *and* social position of specified poor and vulnerable people. Absolute poverty and equity both matter. We can broadly define a ‘Program’ as ***a set of strategically aligned, mutually reinforcing interventions — by Oxfam and others — that contributes to sustained, positive impact on poor people’s lives.*** Because of the entrenched, multiple and severe constraints they face, we pay particular attention to interventions with and on behalf of women and girls.

A program identifies a rights-based goal, key roles that different actors need to play over time, and specific roles for Oxfam. A rights-based goal may have intermediate objectives, but we recognize that many issues require long-term (10–15 year) engagement to achieve significant results. This includes acting to change policies, practices, attitudes and beliefs.

We prioritize leverage points. Successful programming usually entails multiple types of engagement, including policy and advocacy work, community-level work, and campaigning in national and international forums. It may involve supporting alliances that inform and mobilize public opinion and actions at national as well as global level. We strive to hold governments and others accountable for fulfilling their role in eradicating poverty. Our programs work toward both better policy for poor people and for better implementation of good policies.

We act directly, especially in humanitarian response and global campaigning, and indirectly by making grants to further strengthen partners. Sustained partnerships with civil society, government, research institu-

<sup>2</sup> This statement does not replace, but rather brings together, concepts from a set of existing previous agreements.

tions, and the private sector are hallmarks of some of our most mature programming. Increasingly, our work involves Oxfam playing convening or facilitating roles. We help bring together actors who might not otherwise collaborate to work together on common problems. We work to build a worldwide constituency for people's rights, and promote inclusive citizenship and participation. In all cases, ultimately, we see poor and vulnerable people as the primary agents in the social movement to better their lives.

Programs at Oxfam encompass our humanitarian work, which includes disaster risk reduction and long-term livelihoods rehabilitation. Programming, as described above, unites all of our major interventions working with and on behalf of poor and vulnerable people.

Evaluation and learning is inextricably embedded in good programs. We are accountable both externally (to poor people, our partners, stakeholders, donors, and Oxfam affiliates) and internally (to our values, strategies, and priorities). We measure the effectiveness of our approaches and the nature of our results. Our programs utilize learning mechanisms to make mid-course corrections, if needed, and to more widely disseminate experiences.

### **Implications of Oxfam's Program Approach: What's different?**

The impact of the Oxfam confederation will be more powerful if we work together more closely at national level as well as at international level, not only in our campaigning but also in our long-term development work.

We use our facilitating and convening capabilities more consciously, developing longer-term but more flexible partnerships in order to reach larger scale.

At all appropriate levels, we put into place teams of staff with competencies that span the full range of humanitarian, long-term development, advocacy, and communications skills.

We expend greater resources on evaluating, learning from, and disseminating lessons from our programs; we realize the goal of becoming an action-focused learning organization.