Introduction

The Indian Ocean Tsunami struck the coast of Sri Lanka on December 26, 2004. It inflicted enormous damage and loss, displacing over 443,000 people and destroying over 500,000 livelihoods. With a long-standing program in Sri Lanka, Oxfam International was able to respond immediately to the disaster with urgent humanitarian relief and ongoing support of long term community rehabilitation.

The independent evaluation assessed the first 11 months of the Oxfam International (OI) Tsunami Response Program in Sri Lanka. It forms part of a suite of evaluations of the first year of OI tsunami programming in India, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. The following provides an edited summary of the Sri Lanka evaluation’s main findings and OI’s response to the recommendations.

The Evaluation

The independent evaluation of the OI Tsunami Response Program was undertaken in November 2005 to fulfill accountability responsibilities to donors and communities, and to improve future performance through learning from experiences. The evaluation reviewed the program implemented by six Oxfam affiliates (Oxfam Great Britain, Oxfam Australia, Oxfam Novib (The Netherlands), Oxfam Hong Kong, Oxfam America and Oxfam Belgium) and over 55 non-government and community-based partner organizations in collaboration with various government departments. The evaluation reviewed activities over a range of sectors in which OI was responding: water, sanitation, shelter and livelihoods in the affected coastal districts in the north, east, south and west of Sri Lanka.

The evaluation found impressive achievements in OI’s tsunami response program. The successes were said to derive from Oxfam’s long term presence in Sri Lanka, an understanding of local and national contexts, long-established partner relations and an extensive partner network. The evaluation concluded however, that the program’s impact should be optimized through greater cohesion between Oxfam International affiliates, more investment in local capacities and stronger emphasis on accountability; between Oxfam affiliates and to beneficiaries.

The evaluation noted that the OI tsunami response program is implemented in a highly complex and deteriorating socio-political, economic, cultural and religious context. National and local government structures’ effectiveness varies in policy determination, coordination and guidance of tsunami program implementation. Serious racial and religious tensions and violence are escalating in many of the affected areas. During the past 30 years Sri Lanka has frequently confronted civil conflict and environmental
disasters. After the tsunami, once again communities had to cope with enormous loss of life and assets. The country’s history and the large numbers of war-affected and internally displaced persons it produced made Sri Lanka’s tsunami recovery especially challenging.

The immediate post-tsunami response by citizens and local and national organizations was impressive. There were few post-disaster deaths and an absence of epidemics. The massive influx of international aid organizations led to competition among humanitarian agencies, lack of coordination, unplanned supply of assistance and unrealistic national and international expectations. While investments in local markets, civil society, community groups, authorities and services were observed, there were also occasions of weakened or unrecognized local capacities by national and international actors.

OI and its partners had to navigate and cope with these elements. Despite such challenges, the evaluation team assessed that OI’s achievements in the first 11 months were impressive; the establishment of a central Tsunami Fund Management structure, a local management structure, an OI media, advocacy, research and Monitoring and Evaluation capacity, recruitment of large numbers of new permanent and temporary teams, the design and implementation of a multitude of programs with a large coverage, and the support of programs of over 55 national and local partners. Joint national level advocacy on issues such as land and shelter, and joint media and research were other laudable examples.

The magnitude of these tasks mounted enormous pressure on OI. Within such a context, the evaluation team considered that the tensions between affiliates were understandable on issues such as type of partnerships, participatory processes and cost-effectiveness.

The evaluation noted that Oxfam affiliates shared a common vision to save lives, reduce suffering and build disaster preparedness. They also possessed common direction towards linking relief and rehabilitation with pro-poor development. However the evaluation highlighted that common strategies to achieve these were absent. Between affiliates there was a lack of real sharing and coordination, and mutual accountability was still evolving. In the view of the consultants the added value of OI to in-country programming was minimal with few synergies evident. The evaluation team encouraged OI to harness the value of the diverse approaches by OI affiliates as a resource to optimize program impact.

All OI tsunami program evaluations have used the Red Cross and NGO Code of Conduct as the main domain of assessment. In the Sri Lanka tsunami program, OI achieved success in terms of coverage and output. To varying degrees, OI addressed the principles of the Code of Conduct and this is summarized below.

- Though most of OI’s tsunami programs include war-affected communities, full proportionality of aid for tsunami and war-affected communities was not achieved. One example was that districts affected only by war and not by the tsunami did not qualify for new housing. Squatters among the tsunami victims were also often underserved. This was mainly due to reasons beyond Oxfam’s control but under-recognition of this had potential to increase tensions between communities.
OI's support in food, water, sanitation, health, cash for work and transitional shelter is acknowledged, however a fair distribution was hardly possible within the chaotic conditions produced by the tsunami. OI’s support of the elderly and the disabled, who required specially tailored support, was not always adequate.

The programs focused on gender and there were excellent examples of support to women and women's organizations. Many programs aimed to rebuild the economic position of women. In many cases these programs could go further to provide women with more opportunity to overcome poverty.

OI does not discriminate with regard to religion and politics, does not pursue political agendas, and respects local culture and customs. OI involves beneficiaries in project activities and builds on local capacities. However, the involvement of beneficiaries in OI program design and administration was noted as a weak point. The future program should place greater emphasis on involving and strengthening (especially the smaller) local NGOs and their platforms.

OI’s efforts have contributed to the reduction of vulnerability and more attention is needed to make these efforts sustainable and institutionalized. Issues of disaster risk reduction, risk transfer, and preparedness are still to be articulated by and with the communities so that they can be included in upcoming recovery activities.

Accountability to donors and to a lesser extent to communities was observed, but mutual accountability of Oxfam International affiliates is far too limited.

From assessing the first 11 months of the OI tsunami response program, the evaluation concluded that Oxfam International has under-utilized its potential to support affected communities. Many of the lessons learned highlight the need for a more coordinated approach by the affiliates to make individual affiliate activities Oxfam International activities. The lessons OI has learned in Sri Lanka provide a good basis for improving future disaster responses within OI and also improving the responses of the broader humanitarian sector.

Key Recommendations and OI’s Response

The DEC (Disasters Emergency Committee) and other evaluations are seriously reviewed within OI and their analysis and recommendations are used in the present planning process to improve ongoing programs.

Oxfam Great Britain (OGB) has completed an evaluation of its own tsunami program in Sri Lanka. The recommendations of that evaluation are in the process of being implemented. Oxfam Novib’s evaluation of its partner programs is currently being undertaken and will be reviewed when complete. The remaining OI affiliates are yet to commission their own program evaluations.

Make better use of the Oxfam International potential through a common strategic focus. It is recommended to start with joint strategy development for two core
areas: increased protection and sustainable livelihood systems, while leaving space for diversity in the other areas.

Oxfam International supports the recommendation of joint strategy development in protection and sustainable livelihoods. The current program and future plan reflect this commitment.

In the area of protection, Oxfam affiliates are jointly developing the OI Contingency Plan for Sri Lanka with leadership from Oxfam Great Britain (OGB). Through this process, OGB has initiated community-based disaster preparedness in some villages and has been investing in the disaster management capacity of partners. This will also be pursued by other affiliates in 2007. Civil society disaster management work complements advocacy to encourage an increase in the Sri Lanka government’s disaster management mandate through the Sri Lanka Disaster Management Centre. A supporting study by OGB on the government’s disaster management policy and practice is underway.

Other initiatives progressing or completed are a micro insurance project through Oxfam Novib to give insurance to people who traditionally have not been able to access it, engagement in networks and initiatives to develop security monitoring measures, and a regional disaster preparedness workshop held with affiliate and partner staff across the region. To build communities’ awareness of rights and entitlements in the recovery process, we have established information centers to disseminate government and NGO policies, receive complaints and pursue redress. These have led to local government solutions to communities’ issues.

Since the external evaluation was conducted, Oxfam affiliates have directed considerable attention to the sustainability of their own livelihood projects. This has included feasibility studies, increased support to small to medium enterprises in viable sectors, and linking savings and credit groups with long-term Oxfam partners that can provide ongoing financial and support services and stability. Joint work by Oxfam affiliates has built on individual strengths, for example; Oxfam Great Britain on coir rope development, Oxfam America on research, Oxfam Australia on engagement with small partners, and Oxfam Novib on engagement with large partners.

Oxfam International forms an independent Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) chair, increases lateral accountability, conducts learning with OI Board representation, and conducts similar evaluations in other affected countries.

Oxfam accepts this recommendation, but feels that an independent chair is not necessary. Independent tsunami program evaluations have also been completed in India and Indonesia. So far there have been two joint affiliate field visits to program sites to enhance lateral accountability. This will continue into the future program. Regular sharing of affiliate monitoring and evaluation reports and documents has been implemented through the OI Dashboard.

Various measures have been implemented to stimulate and support internal staff development including joint program planning, collaboration on the Contingency Plan and disaster preparedness training.
The Humanitarian Country Team has agreed to jointly monitor the six objectives of the OI country plan for Sri Lanka biannually. This will be reported to the Tsunami Fund Management Team and will strengthen accountability processes.