Change not Charity: Essays on Oxfam America’s first 40 years
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Edited by Laura Roper
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From my very earliest days at Oxfam America, I found myself treated to many enjoyable conversations with staff, present and past, who were keen to share stories of their time with the organization. As I listened and began to collect these anecdotes, I realized that willy-nilly, I was becoming the organizational historian. The material was always rich, colorful, passionately conveyed, and, occasionally, a bit exaggerated in the telling. But what I took from these tales was the impact of working at Oxfam on the lives of each of these storytellers. Their time at Oxfam America had been an important, if not formative, moment in their lives. While the tales may be about a Cambodia or a Nicaragua or a Zimbabwe, the narrators always conveyed a sense that they were proud to be on the right side of an important fight for right and justice and privileged to be part of an organization that gave them the professional freedom to speak out, take action, live their values, and bend the arc of history even a little bit. And this made all the difference.

After many such conversations and some good deal of prodding from numerous former staff, I decided to take on the task of trying to assemble an organizational history. A first attempt in the late 1990s was aborted, but 10 years later the timing was propitious, as many of our founders were ripe for the project and still retained original documents in their garages and basements sufficient to jog their memories so they could record their reflections. In thinking about the approach, we decided against a straight chronological history written by a single author and opted instead for what might be characterized as an organizational memoir that taps many distinct voices across the 40-year history of the organization. Given the highly participatory and often disputatious internal culture of the organization, this approach seemed fitting.

This collection of essays was many years in the making, as the authors took time from their busy professional schedules to make their various contributions. I was most fortunate in this process to enlist Laura Roper in role of project manager, editor, and chief cajoler. It is her commitment to this project and her combination of persistence, charm, wit, and guile that managed to elicit such an outpouring of content from so many different informants. Without her leadership, this project simply would not have happened. I am most indebted to her for her loyalty to the task and for the quality of the final product.
It is not hyperbole to say this book would not have been possible without the generous time commitment of many others. I would especially like to thank Joel Charny, Joe Short, and Barbara Thomas-Slayter, who participated in an advisory group at the early stages of the project. The detail-oriented Kevin Ferguson provided excellent editorial services, and Jane Huber, Carl Soares, and Jeff Deutsch got me smoothly through the production process. I owe many thanks to Ellen Seidensticker for keeping this project on track so it would come out in time for Oxfam America’s 40th anniversary. I am proud and delighted that I was able to complete this project on my watch as president of Oxfam America. I hope it serves to guide and inspire many future generations of Oxfam America friends and staff.

Raymond C. Offenheiser
President
Boston, MA
June 1, 2010
Author Bios

James Arena-DeRosa started at Oxfam in 1987 as National Speakers Bureau Coordinator, and in the late 1980s and early 1990s went on to build the first formal Public Advocacy Program, serving as the Director of Public Advocacy for several years. After leaving Oxfam he became the New England Regional Director for the Peace Corps and an Adjunct Lecturer at the Heller School for Sustainable International Development, Brandeis University. Currently he is the Northeast Regional Administrator for Food and Nutritional Services at the USDA. Prior to joining Oxfam, he worked on several state-wide and presidential campaigns and served as Special Assistant to the Massachusetts Secretary of State.

Bernie Beaudreau is currently the Executive Director of Serve Rhode Island (formerly the Rhode Island State Commission for National and Community Service). Deeply involved in poverty issues his entire life, he has been VP for Development at the Global Food Banking Network, the Executive Director of the Rhode Island Community Food Bank from 1995–2007, and prior to that, Director of Resource and Constituency Development at Oxfam America, where he worked for 11 years.

L. David Brown is Associate Director for International Programs at Harvard’s Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations and Lecturer in Public Policy at the Kennedy School of Government. His research and consulting focus on strengthening civil society organizations and networks that foster sustainable development and social transformation. He worked with Oxfam America as an organization development consultant off and on in the 1980s and 1990s, and has been on its board since 2002.

Rob Buchanan is currently President of the El-Hibri Charitable Foundation. Prior to that, he was Managing Director for International Programs at the Council on Foundations. He worked at Oxfam America from 1985–1995, serving as Program Director for the Horn of Africa from 1989–1994 and subsequently as the first director of Oxfam America’s Washington Advocacy Office. He is co-author of Making a Difference in Africa: Advice from Experienced Grantmakers.

Carolina Castrillo is a practitioner and manager of international relief and development programs with substantial field and headquarters experience in a variety of US-based organizations. During the 1980s, she worked on human rights and refugee issues in the United States. She has managed programs in Central America and Asia and has worked with Lutheran World Relief, Catholic Relief Services, and twice as Oxfam America’s Regional Director for Central America, recently rejoining Oxfam in 2008.

Joel Charny is the Vice President for Policy for Refugees International. He was the Oxfam America representative on the Oxfam NGO Consortium team in Phnom Penh during the Cambodia emergency in 1980. Over his career at Oxfam America he served as Asia Regional Director, Overseas Director, Policy Director, and interim Executive Director.
Martha (Marty) Chen is a Lecturer in Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School and International Coordinator of the global research-policy network Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO). An experienced development practitioner and scholar, her areas of specialization are employment, gender, and poverty. Before joining Harvard in 1987, she had two decades of resident experience in Bangladesh working with BRAC (now the world’s largest non-governmental organization), and in India where she served as field representative of Oxfam America for India and Bangladesh. Dr. Chen received a PhD in South Asia Regional Studies from the University of Pennsylvania.

Susan Clare served on Oxfam America’s board of directors from 1995 to 2003; she was board Treasurer during much of her term. She is currently the Treasurer and Secretary of Oxfam America Advocacy Fund. She serves in similar capacity with several other organizations including TransFair USA, a certifier of fair trade products in the US, and the ICA Group, a technical assistance provider for community economic development. She has run a domestic community development financial institution that provides loans to small businesses. She has many years of experience in commercial banking and consulting for healthcare and higher education institutions.

Dan Connell, Oxfam America’s Lebanon Projects Officer from July 1982 to August 1983, teaches journalism and African politics at Simmons College, Boston. He is also an emeritus member of the Grassroots International board and the chair of the Cape Ann Forum, which he founded after 9/11. His writings focus on the themes of democracy, development, and social justice and the indispensable linkages between them. For more information or to contact him, go to [www.danconnell.net](http://www.danconnell.net).

Nancy Delaney began at Oxfam as a volunteer in 1991 and currently serves as the Community Engagement Manager. She oversees several grassroots volunteer initiatives, including Oxfam’s Music Outreach program and the Fast for a World Harvest campaign. Nancy is also responsible for two highly regarded training and advocacy programs: the Oxfam Action Corps and the CHANGE Initiative. Oxfam Action Corps is a volunteer-led effort to improve national legislation and deepen local community resources for fighting poverty and injustice. CHANGE is a campus-based leadership training program that she helped develop. Before coming to Oxfam, Nancy worked as a manager in the private sector in international transportation.

Nathan Gray has over 40 years of experience in the fields of international development and education. He was one of the Boston co-founders of Oxfam America where he launched The Fast for a World Harvest, which remains an important part of Oxfam’s outreach strategy up to the present. Nathan is a pioneer in promoting emerging community development leadership in poor countries and socially positive investment. He dedicates his energy to Earth Train, which he helped found in 1990, an international youth leadership training organization based in Panama since 2001.

Myrna Greenfield specializes in marketing and mobilizing people for innovation and social change. She was employee #1 at Equal Exchange, where she helped launch the Fair Trade movement in the United States. She also served as a product marketing manager for Dragon NaturallySpeaking speech recognition software, where she led cross-departmental global product launch teams for over 50 products in six languages. After working at Oxfam America as Director of Communications and Campaigns, she joined the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, where she is Director of Outreach and Mobilization.
John Hammock is Associate Professor of Public Policy at both the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy and at the Fletcher School at Tufts University, the North American Director of the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, and a Research fellow at the Pardee Center for the Longer-Range Future at Boston University. He has been Director of the Feinstein International Famine Center, also at Tufts, and was Executive Director of Oxfam America from 1984-1995, after serving the same position at ACCION International from 1973-1980.

Susan Holcombe is currently Professor of the Practice at the Heller School, Brandeis University. She served as Director of the Global Program Department of Oxfam America from 1996 to 2000. Prior to that, she worked with UNICEF, UNIFEM, and UNFPA in Afghanistan, Pakistan, the South Pacific, Sudan, China, and New York. She is author of Managing to Empower, which focuses on the management of Grameen Bank, and of several articles on rights and capabilities approaches to development.

Stephanie Kurzina is the Vice President for Development and Communications at Oxfam America, where she has overseen growth in contributions from $12 million in 1996 to over $70 million in 2009 through developing a comprehensive multi-channel fundraising program. She has held development positions at Joslin Diabetes Center, New England Aquarium, United Way of Massachusetts Bay and University of Pennsylvania. She is also the President of the Oxfam America Advocacy Fund.

Sandra Ng was the Program Planning and Evaluation Specialist at Oxfam America from 1999 to 2004. She provided technical advice on monitoring and evaluation issues and facilitated planning processes for Oxfam America’s programs around the world. After leaving Oxfam, Sandra worked with the International Policy Centre at the University of Michigan and the Centre on Asia and Globalisation at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. Currently, Sandra is a consultant to the Singapore International Foundation on program management and monitoring and evaluation.

Ray Offenheiser has been President of Oxfam America since December 1995. Under him the organization has grown more than fourfold in size and has positioned itself as an expert on international development and global trade. Before joining Oxfam America, he served for five years as the Ford Foundation representative in Bangladesh and, prior to that, in the Andean and Southern Cone regions of South America. He has also directed programs for the Inter-American Foundation in both Brazil and Colombia and worked for Save the Children Federation in Mexico. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, the Global Interdependence Initiative at the Aspen Institute, and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Inter-American Dialogue. Offenheiser has served as an adviser for Harvard University’s Asia Center, the Hesburgh Center for International Studies at the University of Notre Dame, the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University, and the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.
Michael Ounsted was regional director for East Asia for Oxfam America from 1998–2003. He is currently the Chair of the Wetlands and Livelihoods Working Group, and a specialist advisor on wetlands and poverty reduction to the Global Nature Fund and Living Lakes, as well as a consultant on wetland and livelihoods issues for a range of clients. Prior to joining Oxfam, he had a series of positions with Wetlands International, including Director of Programs in the Asia Pacific Region.

Laura Roper worked at Oxfam America for 15 years, working in the fundraising, policy, and global program departments, finishing her time there as Director of the Planning and Learning Department. She also served as the staff-elected representative to the Board of Directors. Since leaving Oxfam, she has been an independent consultant working on planning, evaluation, organizational development, and executive coaching with a range of clients, including Oxfam International. She has been an adjunct lecturer at the Heller School’s Sustainable International Development Program at Brandeis University and in the International Development, Community and Environment Department at Clark University.

Margaret Samuriwo joined Oxfam America’s Southern Africa office in 1996, served two stints as interim director of the office and was made Deputy Director of the office in 2008. While at Oxfam, she served on the Board of Directors and was a member of the World Bank’s External Gender Consultative Group. She left Oxfam America when it decided to close its Southern Africa Regional Office at the end of 2009. Prior to joining Oxfam, she was a project manager for the Southern African Research and Documentation Center, the director of the Zimbabwe Women’s Bureau, and a founder of the Zimbabwe Women’s Finance Trust.

Michael Farrell Scott served as Oxfam America’s first Overseas Program Director, from 1977 to 1986, when the organization grew dramatically in budget, staff, and program. Prior to Oxfam America, he was a study abroad student in Mexico, a Peace Corps Volunteer in Ecuador, a United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization consultant in Mexico and earned a PhD in anthropology. After Oxfam America he continued to work for international non-government organizations and United Nations agencies, all told in more than 30 countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. His publications include works on international aid, food security, and the environment; his most recent work is Opening the Mountain (2006). He teaches at San Francisco State University and the Hutchins School of Liberal Studies at Sonoma State University.

Martin Scurrah served as the Regional Director of Oxfam America for South America from 1997 to 2006, based in Lima, Peru. Prior to that he had been a professor of management in ESAN, a graduate school of business administration in Lima, a consultant to the Ford Foundation, co-founder of a Peruvian NGO, GREDES, which had a close association with the Inter-American Foundation and head of the Spanish Department and Coordinator of the Latin American Studies Program at Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia. He is now an independent consultant and Research Associate in the Centro Peruano de Estudios Sociales (CEPES) where he has recently completed a research project on social movements and poverty in Peru in collaboration with Tony Bebbington and Diana Mitlin at Manchester University. In 2009 Palgrave published a book he wrote with Jeff Atkinson of Oxfam Australia on transnational NGO advocacy.
Joe Short was executive director of Oxfam America from 1978-1984. He has had a long and distinguished career in both the international sector and in higher education. He became president of Bradford College after leaving Oxfam and over the years has consulted with a wide variety of organizations including UN agencies, InterAction, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, and universities in the US, Croatia, and Russia, among others. He is widely published and currently teaches at the Heller School’s Sustainable International Development Program.

Larry Simon led Oxfam America’s work in Central America and the Caribbean, and, as director of policy analysis, developed participatory evaluation programs for Oxfam’s development strategies in Africa. After leaving Oxfam, he founded and served as president of the American Jewish World Service. He has done work with a wide range of development organizations, including the Soros Foundation and the World Bank. He has taught at the University of New York and at Fordham University and currently is the Director of the Sustainable International Development Program at the Heller School at Brandeis University.

Sylvia Sukop is a writer and photographer based in Los Angeles. A former press officer and publications director for Oxfam America, she has also held senior communications positions at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and the J. Paul Getty Trust. She has a joint master’s degree from New York University and the International Center of Photography and is the recipient of a Fulbright Fellowship to Germany and a Rosenthal Fellowship from PEN USA. A contributing writer to Flaunt magazine, she founded the L.A. community-based teen photography project Boulevard Without Borders in 2007. Her professional and artistic commitments continue to be informed by values learned at “the school of Oxfam.”

Robert C. Terry has had an abiding interest in both international policy and organizational issues. He led the first Peace Corps group to East Pakistan, was an advance man for Senators Hubert Humphrey and Eugene McCarthy, and a legislative assistant to Rep. Henry Reuss. He was a management consultant for Arthur D. Little and its Management Education Institute for 27 years and has been a trustee to Oxfam America, the Experiment in International Living, and the National Peace Corps Association.

John W. Thomas is Lecturer in Public Policy, Faculty Chair of the Singapore Program, and co-chair of the Leaders in Development Program at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. He has counseled Asian, African, and Latin American universities on the development of public policy programs. As advisor to the governments of Kenya, the Philippines, and Bangladesh, he worked on land reform and poverty alleviation, organizational capacity, and policy change strategies. He was a founding member of Oxfam America Board of Directors. With Merilee Grindle he co-authored the award-winning book Public Choices and Policy Change. He received his MPA and PhD from Harvard University.
Barbara P. Thomas-Slayter is currently a Research Professor in Clark University’s Department of International Development, Community, and Environment with which she has been associated for over 20 years. Her most recent book is Southern Exposure, International Development and the Global South in the Twenty-First Century (2003). She is also author or editor of several books on gender, ecology, and development, including Gender, Environment, and Development in Kenya, and Feminist Political Ecology: Global Issues and Local Experiences, as well as manuals, books, and articles on participatory approaches to development. Thomas-Slayter served on the Board of Directors of Oxfam America from 1979–1985 and again from 1994–2001. She received her PhD from Brandeis University, and has lived and worked in a number of countries in both Asia and Africa. Her interests include local institution-building, community-based resource management, and the dynamics of class, ethnicity, and gender in development processes.

Deborah Toler was Oxfam America’s Southern Africa Program Officer from 1984–1988. From 1984–1986 she also covered Oxfam’s Eritrea and Tigray famine relief program. After leaving Oxfam, Deborah completed course work for a Masters degree in anthropology at the New School for Social Research in New York City. From 1994–1999 she was Senior Research Analyst at the Institute for Food and Development Policy (Food First) were she focused on Africa and Haiti and travelled in Cuba. Today she lives and works on Maryland’s Eastern Shore where she is conducting independent research on local African-American history. She remains active in African and Caribbean affairs.

Judith van Raalten graduated with an MA degree in Coexistence and Conflict from Brandeis University specialized in ethnic identity and the Arab-Israeli conflict. She received the Karpf-Hahn Peace Endowment for her photography work in Bosnia. She is currently a Fulbright Fellow in Jordan researching the UNRWA registration and non-registration among Palestinian refugees. She runs a non-profit organization called “Leaders of Tomorrow” in Jordan focusing on youth development and empowerment.

Gabrielle Watson has over fifteen years of international and domestic experience in strategic planning, poverty program evaluation and human rights in the private, public, non-profit, and international donor sectors. Gabrielle holds a Masters in City Planning from MIT. She co-authored Advocacy for Social Justice (Kumarian Press, 2001 and Abya Yala, 2003). She is currently Senior Advisor on Campaign Evaluation at Oxfam America.
By Laura Roper, Editor

For many years, Oxfam America’s slogan was “Change, not charity.” It was a slogan that was meant to distinguish Oxfam America from more mainstream development organizations, and it pithily captured the notion that Oxfam America was focused on changing the structures that perpetuated poverty, not simply giving handouts. Change was Oxfam America’s mission and, as an organization with a political analysis about the causes of poverty, it was also highly attuned to the changing political context, both domestically and geopolitically. This volume takes us from Oxfam America’s founding, in 1970, to Oxfam America’s 40th anniversary and documents an organization that was constantly evolving, often ahead of trends—such as with its very early emphasis on partnership and its current pathbreaking work on and with the private sector—while sometimes scrambling to adapt to new realities. Yet, as these essays demonstrate, through all the changes the organization has experienced, there are some characteristics—which I like to call Oxfam America’s DNA—that have remained constant: its desire to address root causes of poverty, its commitment to community mobilization and partnership, its fierce independence, and its recognition of the basic dignity, rights, and potential of all human beings. These characteristics are what have made Oxfam America such a special organization to partners, supporters, and staff. Despite its strong core, however, it is an organization that is not easily defined or described. In a focus group where donors were asked to identify an animal that described Oxfam America, the answers ranged from ant (it works really hard to improve the world in small ways) to elephant (it is a big organization that stamps around so that people have to pay attention to it).

In discussing how best to capture the flavor of Oxfam America’s evolution, Ray Offenheiser, Oxfam America’s president, decided he wanted a product that reflected Oxfam America’s many facets and many voices. He also wanted contributions that might be of interest not only to Oxfam America supporters, but also to the broader community of practitioners, activists, and students thinking of a career in the international development sector. Rather than commission a straight narrative history, Oxfam America decided to broadly solicit contributions from past and present staff, board members, and friends of Oxfam America, simply asking them to share their reflections and analysis of key events or key aspects of Oxfam America’s development that they thought should be documented. This is an honest, if somewhat eclectic, set of essays that we hope has some lessons to impart. In the contributions you can hear pride in the principles and successful work of Oxfam America, thoughtful reflection on periods of difficulty, and a certain ruefulness from those reflecting on their passionate (and sometimes impatient and intolerant) youth. This is a collection about Oxfam America as people experienced it and does not pretend to be a definitive or objective history. Anyone familiar with Oxfam America will notice some gaps; at the same time, there are stories and perspectives here that one wouldn’t find in a standard institutional history.
These essays can be approached chronologically or by theme. This brief introduction groups essays thematically to help readers find contributions that may be of particular interest to them.

**OXFAM AMERICA’S FOUNDING PRINCIPLES AND THEMES**

Oxfam America did not emerge organically from the US context. Rather, it was founded by Oxfam Great Britain in 1970, essentially as a fundraising arm in the United States. After a roaring start out of its office in Washington, DC, Oxfam America was unable to deliver the expected level of funding and closed. When committed board members reestablished Oxfam America in Massachusetts in 1973, where it incorporated the following year, it had virtually no resources, but the new board of directors, all with extensive development experience, intentionally set out to establish an international agency different from others in the United States. In his contribution, John Thomas, an early board chair, describes the set of decisions that made Oxfam America distinctive from the well-established international agencies at the time. Oxfam America would make a unique contribution by educating donors in the United States, not just take their money; it would promote the dignity and capacities of the poor, and not portray them as helpless victims; it would focus on long-term development and not raise funds for emergencies, the bread and butter of the aid sector. Time would prove that one of its most significant early decisions—one that has been revisited periodically but has always been validated—was the decision that Oxfam America would not accept money from the US government or other large donors who might limit its independence. All these early principles would prove to be crucial strands of the Oxfam America DNA.

Despite these noble ideas, in its earliest years Oxfam America lived a hand-to-mouth existence. The winter of 1973 saw staff and board members selling a stash of Christmas cards (a donation from Oxfam Great Britain retrieved from the Washington, DC office) in front of the Filene’s department store in Downtown Crossing, a shopping area off Boston Common, hoping to raise some funds toward making payroll for the three staff members, who operated out of a church basement in Newton, a Boston suburb. Today, Oxfam America has an annual budget of $75 million; a staff of 330, spread among seven regional programs; a bustling Washington, DC office; and a Boston headquarters perched above Interstate Highway 93, facing the Boston Garden (home to the Bruins hockey team and the Celtics basketball team), on the edge of Boston’s revitalized North End.

More important than how much Oxfam America has grown is what it has accomplished over the last 40 years. Through each stage of its growth, Oxfam America has been willing to take chances—supporting brand new, untested community organizations and incipient movements, many of which evolved into key development actors; pioneering the Fast for a World Harvest, a participatory educational and fundraising effort that, despite the skepticism of the board, became Oxfam America’s signature event; vocally taking on US government policy in Central America and Southeast Asia in the 1970s and 1980s; struggling to find the best way to respond to emergencies that was consistent with its prioritization of development activities; incorporating advocacy as a central part of its strategy, starting in the early 1990s; and reinventing itself in the new millennium as an explicitly rights-based development and global campaigning organization willing to tackle issues as big as international trade, climate change, and corporate practice. Through all of this, Oxfam America has always exercised its voice—educating, exhorting, criticizing, and proposing.
A VIEW FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS’ OFFICE

Oxfam America had several short-term leaders in the early years, but since 1977 the organization has had only three executive directors (with one brief interregnum): Joe Short (1977–1984), John Hammock (1984–1995), and Ray Offenheiser (1995–present). Each contributed to this volume with chapters that reflect their eras and their personalities. Joe Short focuses on his efforts to make Oxfam America more professional and strategic and describes how the events surrounding the overthrow of Pol Pot in Kampuchea (present-day Cambodia) presented both opportunities and challenges for Oxfam America. John Hammock offers one of the most personal (and at times funniest) reflections on being an executive director facing an organization filled with strong-minded activists on the one hand, while on the other facing down a US government that was unhappy with Oxfam America’s critiques of US foreign policy in Central America, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere. From his arrival, Ray Offenheiser, who came to Oxfam America from the Ford Foundation, wanted to see Oxfam America play a larger role in the development and policy communities in the United States. With the formal incorporation of Oxfam International in 1995, he faced a very different operational reality, and his piece focuses on how he has positioned Oxfam America to live up to its potential as a key player within the Oxfam federation, in the United States and globally. His paper is complemented by David Brown’s analysis of trends in the sector in the last decade and how Oxfam America fits into those trends.

OXFAM AMERICA AND HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

Given Oxfam America’s early decision not to fund raise around emergencies, it is interesting to note what a central role emergencies have played in its evolution and growth—from Guatemala in 1976, to Cambodia in 1979, to Ethiopia in 1984, to Somalia and Rwanda in the mid-1990s, to Hurricane Mitch in 1998, followed by the Indian Ocean tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, and the cataclysmic Haitian earthquake in the new millennium. Oxfam America learned that it was often imperative to respond to emergencies, but it has always taken a developmental stance on natural and man-made disasters: What are the root causes? Is its response addressing those causes? How can this effort be translated to one that builds on and builds up communities’ resources and capacities? Are there policy dimensions Oxfam America should be addressing? Laura Roper and Judith van Raalten provide an overview of Oxfam America’s evolution as a humanitarian organization, from early ambivalence to limited acceptance, to pull-back in the wake of the international failings in the mid-1990s in Rwanda and Somalia, to a full embrace of its humanitarian role in the new millennium. Larry Simon and Michael Scott each write about Oxfam America’s critique of mainstream emergency response in the wake of the 1976 Guatemala earthquake, criticisms that are still valid today. In their essays, Joe Short, Joel Charny, and Larry Simon reflect on Cambodia, a drawn-out crisis that grew acute when Pol Pot was overthrown in 1979 and then continued as Cambodia and Vietnam suffered under a US-imposed embargo. Oxfam America’s Cambodia response really established it as a respected humanitarian organization, as comments by former journalist Elizabeth Becker illustrate. Bernie Beaudreau discusses the 1984 Ethiopia famine and how it reshaped Oxfam America and people who witnessed the devastation. Working in the Horn of Africa meant working in conflict situations, and Rob Buchanan assesses Oxfam America’s strategy of working with the relief arm of armed movements in Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Sudan. Carolina Castrillo explains how Hurricane Mitch reignited Oxfam America’s strategic commitment to humanitarian response.
OXFAM AMERICA’S REGIONAL WORK

Oxfam America’s fundamental interest in development, particularly self-help development, profoundly shaped its approach and relationships in the Global South. Michael Scott, Robert Terry, and Joe Short each recognize Oxfam America’s debt to Oxfam Great Britain, on which Oxfam America initially relied for identifying partners. By the mid-1970s, Oxfam America was just beginning to directly fund partners, including the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, which has since grown to be not only the largest development organization in Bangladesh, but also a funder of development programs in other countries. Michael Scott, Oxfam America’s first overseas program director, explains how Oxfam America gradually developed its own capacity and autonomy in grant making, supported by a first generation of excellent staff. Barbara Thomas-Slayter writes about Oxfam America’s partnership model, a model it adopted long before it became de rigueur in the sector. Martha Chen, who undertook the delicate task of injecting Oxfam America into Oxfam Great Britain terrain in South Asia, writes about Oxfam America’s early work with women’s organizations in India and Bangladesh, putting that work in the context of a broader discussion of the understanding of the interplay between gender and development. Deborah Toler writes a very personal essay about her work as a program officer in southern Africa and how questioning assumptions is essential for good development work. Margaret Samuriwo presents a more detailed example of regional work, comparing efforts to promote legal reform of family law in Mozambique and Zimbabwe, illustrating how different contexts, even within one region, shape programming.

Both Martin Scurrah and Michael Ounsted, former regional directors for South America and East Asia, respectively, write about how regional programs evolved to be more strategic by focusing on a limited number of themes. Both also discuss the ways in which advocacy became a much more important aspect of their work, bringing the opportunity for greater impact as well as the potential for greater risk, particularly with the focus on extractive industries in South America. By the late 1990s, and certainly by the beginning of the 2000s, Oxfam America was much more conscious of being a proactive presence, rather than a more passive supporter of partners’ initiatives. Ideally, Oxfam America aimed at being co-strategists with partners working toward common goals, and Gabrielle Watson discusses such an evolution through the activities of the Advocacy Learning Initiative in South America. For Ounsted and Scurrah, being part of Oxfam International had significant strategic implications, and they describe both the benefits and the challenges of aligning the work of different affiliates in their regions.

OXFAM AMERICA’S EDUCATION AND ADVOCACY ROLE

For Oxfam America, information has always been a development currency. Educating the public about the causes of hunger was a core part of the mission from the beginning. How Oxfam America should go about that was less clear, until Nathan Gray made the case for mounting a national event called the Fast for a World Harvest, an event that has attracted many loyal donors and staff to Oxfam America over the years. Nancy Delaney writes about the factors that have contributed to the success of the nationally recognized CHANGE Initiative, a program that trains student activists on development issues and supports their efforts to mobilize student interest and action on their campuses. Sylvia Sukop, the publications director in the 1980s, talks about how Oxfam America’s values shaped its publications and how her experience at Oxfam America shaped her subsequent career. Myrna Greenfield
updates the conversation, talking about the communications challenges for Oxfam America as it became a global campaigning organization, tackling an array of highly complex issues.

Education was not an end in itself, but rather a means to support Oxfam America’s policy advocacy efforts. Larry Simon describes how early publications in the Impact Audit series, research reports that detailed the impacts of US government policies in Central America and Southeast Asia, enhanced Oxfam America’s advocacy influence. John Hammock discusses the degree to which he was willing to assume institutional and even personal risk to address injustice, including taking stands against the Nicaraguan trade embargo and in support for democracy in Haiti. James Arena-DeRosa writes about the sometimes difficult transition as Oxfam America moved away from country-specific advocacy (where regional programs set the agenda) to take on broader issues, such as structural adjustment, aid reform, and indigenous rights (where agenda setting was shared between headquarters and regions). Ray Offenheiser describes the decisive shift of Oxfam America to a global campaigning organization and how Oxfam America has emerged as a significant and respected voice on key policy issues in the United States, working with a broad array of decision makers in both government and the private sector.

ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Development is about change, and change is often not easy. We have selected some papers that highlight the real challenges that development organizations face when taking on new initiatives or responding to changing circumstances. Robert Terry writes about introducing serious planning discipline to an adolescent organization in the late 1970s, setting it on the path of institutional maturity. Dan Connell writes about the internal debates the crisis in Lebanon in 1982 generated, which eventually led some staff to leave Oxfam America and found Grassroots International. Bernie Beaudreau looks at the Ethiopia famine from an organizational perspective—how the mobilizing of human and financial resources masked and the exacerbated organizational tensions as Oxfam America tried to address the implications of an enormous growth spurt. John Hammock remembers the challenges of “walking the talk” of participatory approaches when dealing with internal issues of power and privilege at Oxfam America. Susan Holcombe reflects on the many operational implications Partnerships for Impact, the first strategic plan developed under Ray Offenheiser’s leadership, had for the global program department. Susan Clare discusses the challenges regional offices in particular and Oxfam America as a whole faced in incorporating development finance into their program strategies, a cautionary tale (with an eventual happy ending) for nonfinancial organizations contemplating embracing lending programs. Sandra Ng writes about the painstaking process required to overcome the habits and perspectives that made it difficult to institute strong and consistent agency-wide monitoring and evaluation practice, a problem many nonprofits have encountered and with which they continue to struggle. Stephanie Kurzina offers an instructive article on the process of mounting a $50 million fundraising effort, an effort that was ten years in the making, in part because she and the agency were dealing with change on so many fronts. (In the end, due to the excellent preparation, the campaign eventually raised $63 million.) Various authors discuss the challenges that becoming part of Oxfam International presented, as Oxfam America had to give up some measure of its fiercely guarded freedom of action to become a good “citizen” of the larger organization. This relationship has been complicated because US policy is so central to so many development and humanitarian issues.
and other Oxfam affiliates do not always appreciate the complexity and sensitivities of the US political context. Through all of this, Oxfam America has always sought to learn from its experiences, through both formal processes, such as the Advocacy Learning Initiative, and the informal discussions and debates you can hear in the office any day of the week.

CONCLUSION

Throughout Oxfam America’s 40 years—through changes in political administration in the United States, in personnel at Oxfam America, in priorities, fads, and approaches in the development sector—there have been a number of strands that have been consistent, as this volume richly illustrates. One is the belief in the fundamental human dignity and capacity of those suffering from economic and political exclusion. Another is a structural analysis of the causes of poverty and injustice that has led to Oxfam America’s focus not only on resource transfer to organizations in the Global South, but also on advocacy, a role that has only expanded with time. Third has been a commitment to creating and sharing knowledge—through research, through learning from program experience, through fostering linkages and exchanges among partners and allies, and through educating policy-makers and the broader public. Oxfam America’s independence—particularly from dependency that could be created by reliance on government funding—has been a touchstone of its identity.

Oxfam America’s ability to attract committed, creative, and independent-minded people has allowed it to achieve some remarkable successes. It has not always been smooth sailing, particularly during periods of major growth or strategic realignment, yet Oxfam America has constantly striven to be a more effective development actor. We see the full fruits of that over the last 15 years, during which Oxfam America—with the full embrace of both its advocacy and humanitarian roles, a more strategic approach to its regional work, and a highly successful fundraising strategy, all supported by the communications revolution—has extended its reach to more communities, amplified its voice, and leveraged its influence many times over.

Regardless of which epoch staff, board, and supports have been most deeply involved, Oxfam America has always been a place where talented and motivated people, guided by a core set of values, have felt that they could make a real difference in development outcomes. For many of the authors represented here, their association with Oxfam America has been one of the key formative events in their lives. In sharing these essays we hope to share some of that richness of experience.

Laura Roper
May 15, 2010

Founding and Early Fruition
Beginnings are important and after a false start in Washington, DC, Oxfam America got a second life in the basement of a church in Newton, MA, under the watchful eye of a committed board. It was a contrarian enterprise, intentionally designed to be different from other development organizations, emphasizing the dignity and capacity of poor people. The board wanted to apply their years of experience in development not to ameliorate poverty, but to address its root causes.

As an oak grows from an acorn, Oxfam America evolved in the way it has because of early strategic decisions about its mission and its ways of working, demonstrating the importance of a deeply engaged board of directors. In reading these papers, it is clear that almost all of its early decisions on founding principles and strategic action had long-lasting implications for Oxfam America. Two important themes that cross four decades of history are Oxfam America’s commitment to a partnership model of development and its approach to humanitarian response. Likewise, early decisions about outreach to the public through the Fast for a World Harvest lay the foundation for subsequent public education and advocacy work.
John Thomas writes about the re-establishment of Oxfam America in Massachusetts in 1973 and the thinking behind the founding principles that have shaped Oxfam America’s evolution over the last forty years.

In the late 1960s Lesley Kirkley, the executive director of the original OXFAM (in England), began to conceive of Oxfam as a global organization rather than just a leading British non-governmental organization (NGO). To realize this vision, he supported the establishment of Oxfams in a number of potential donor countries, primarily Canada, the Netherlands, Australia, and the United States. The US office was opened in Washington, DC, in 1970.

For a relief and development organization those were the best of years and the worst of years. In 1970 the Biafra (Nigeria) civil war was going on with regular high profile news of starvation, migration, and human suffering. In early 1971 the civil war for independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan began bringing further reports of rape, killing, and human need. The result was that money flowed into the new Oxfam America office in large quantities in response to these well publicized human disasters. The Oxfam office quickly responded by expanding its facilities and staffing.

By 1972, with the defeat of the Biafra independence movement and the establishment of an independent Bangladesh, these two conflicts were no longer regularly in the news. Consequently, the outpouring of financial contributions dwindled rapidly and the newly expanded Oxfam America, which had very limited name recognition as compared to a CARE or Red Cross, found itself in a financial trap with its overhead costs rapidly engulfing too large a portion of its income.

In response to Oxfam America’s growing financial problems, Kirkley decided that the best course of action was to close the US office. He asked John Shields, one of his trusted senior staff members, to go to Washington and close Oxfam America gracefully. Kirkley gave Shields a modest budget of $10,000 for the purpose.

In Washington, Shields released staff and closed the office. In the process he had several meetings with the board of directors which led him to conversations with one member, Jon Rohde, a Boston-based physician who had lived in East Pakistan in the late 1960s while working at a cholera research laboratory there. Jon was friends with a number of people living in the
Boston area who had lived in East Pakistan at the same time. The Boston group had started a small, temporary organization called Friends of Bangladesh to raise money for refugees and to make the case as to why the US government should stop giving arms aid to Pakistan; Rohde persuaded Shields to visit Boston and meet with this group before returning to Oxford.

At that meeting, Rohde and Shields asked the group if they thought it desirable—and possible—to re-start Oxfam America in Boston, with the Bangladesh group providing the leadership. The meeting lasted well into the night with Shields describing Oxfam’s work and making the case as to why it was a special organization and why it should operate in the US.

When the meeting disbanded there was sufficient interest in the idea of a new Oxfam America that the group agreed to meet again and asked Shields to join that meeting. After the second meeting two core questions were unresolved: First, was there any justification for another development-focused NGO? Second, if there was justification for an Oxfam America could it succeed in an already well populated non-profit niche? However, there was sufficient interest to ask Shields to try to persuade Kirkley to leave the issue open a little longer and delay formal closing of Oxfam America until the Boston group could make a decision. We used the additional time to hold a series of meetings to resolve our concerns about justification and feasibility.

**IS THERE A JUSTIFICATION FOR ANOTHER NON-PROFIT DEVELOPMENT AID ORGANIZATION?**

An essential input to that discussion was knowledge of the approach and operations of other such development organizations. Participants in the discussion had experience in developing countries, particularly Bangladesh, and a number continued to work in international public health. I had previously served as an overseas representative of an international NGO, and since 1968, had been at Harvard teaching, researching, and writing on topics concerning international development. I was also engaged in a consultancy for the US Agency for International Development (USAID) on strengthening the management systems of US private voluntary organizations (PVOs) registered with the US State Department to work overseas. Together, we had quite a broad perspective on the NGO/PVO community.

Through discussion over several weeks, the group came to the conclusion that although many international NGOs were doing fairly similar work and were competing in the same arena, their focus tended to be quite narrow, with an emphasis on meeting needs rather than genuine development. Key dimensions were being ignored that needed attention if sustainable community development was the goal. The group decided that if Oxfam America were to adhere to the following principles, it could play an important role that was not being played by other seemingly similar organizations. Thus, it was decided to launch Oxfam America, based on the following principles:

1. **The importance of educating the donor community.** The group felt strongly that the problem of “development” had roots as much in the affluent world as it did in the so-called Third World. Addressing poverty was not simply a matter of (charitable) resource transfer, but had roots in political and economic structures and policies that perpetuated poverty. We were impressed by the importance that Oxfam placed on education as exemplified by Oxfam position papers on employment and on education in the developing world. Therefore, it was decided that an Oxfam America would spend a significant part of its funds on educating the donor community.
2. **Promote the concept of the ability and dignity of beneficiaries.** Many of the early group felt that publicity by many NGOs that portrayed potential beneficiaries as needy, malnourished, and unable to take care of themselves created attitudes that ranged from paternalistic to condescending. It was agreed that all Oxfam America’s information and publicity would portray beneficiaries as capable people living in a difficult environment. The notion of each individual’s human dignity was a foundational concept in Oxfam America’s approach to poverty alleviation. Oxfam’s material was to portray partnership and not pity. The comment that was repeated for several years (and I understand was still being used in the 1990s) was “no starving children,” to signify that Oxfam America would not use exploitative pictures of misery for fundraising or constituency building purposes.

3. **Do not raise money for disaster relief.** It may seem ironic that an organization, initially established in the US for the purpose of tapping into the donor market to respond to large scale emergencies such as Bangladesh, would then decide to make a principled decision not to tap into this market. While there was no questioning of the fact that relief was needed in the case of some natural and man-made disasters, the group felt that fundraising for disaster relief could be a seductive distraction from the focus on development. First, because raising money for relief is easy and the amounts are relatively large compared to support for other kinds of programs. One person who had served on the board of another NGO recalled a meeting in which the organization’s projected budget was down from the previous year and a board member commented, “If we are lucky there will be a disaster somewhere that will bring that figure up.” Second, because fundraising for disaster relief almost always leads to pictures of people in extreme distress it would be tempting to violate the “no starving children” injunction. It was agreed that voluntarily donations for relief should either be returned or redirected to another organization with the consent of the donor. Instead, programmatically we wanted to focus on community-based development efforts, which we believed would have longer-term impacts.

4. **Do not accept funds from governments or large donors.** Governments and large donors have their own agendas and often wish to use the NGOs as an agent either overtly or implicitly. Members of the group had seen how some NGOs had lost their independent voice and become agents of their donors. The group held the view that all governments pursue policies of self-interest even when they are charitable. For that reason governments give to pursue their own policy ends rather than the goals of the receiving organization. This was brought in stark relief for at least some of us by the conduct of the Vietnam War and how “aid” to South Vietnam was either military or meant to advance US military aims. To adhere to its principles, Oxfam America would have to maintain its independence by refusing money from governments and large donors.

There was a fifth principle that was adopted slightly later and is described below.

**A STRATEGY FOR ESTABLISHING OXFAM IN THE US**

Operating principles that would set Oxfam America apart from other international NGOs were a first step, but unless Oxfam could be differentiated in the marketplace and a donor base developed, principles were of little value. It was agreed that in trying to develop a constituency the new Oxfam would use the existing donor lists from the earlier Oxfam America
as a starting point. It was also clear that there was very little recognition in the US of the Oxfam name; what existed was in the Northeast, and so, the region became the geographical focus of the initial efforts. Given the focus on development education, a second distinction was made: Oxfam would target the educated of the region. In shorthand that audience became known as the readers of the New York Times.

No one was particularly confident this would succeed and Oxfam America was seen more as an interesting test of ideas, rather than a strong new competitor in the field. As a result, we agreed to give Oxfam a year to see if it could take root. We established some now forgotten ratio of program funds to administrative costs as the criteria for making the judgment a year hence. We hired an executive director, Rev. Richard Dodds, for a small salary, found space in a church basement in the Boston suburb of Newton, Massachusetts, and Oxfam America was re-launched.

**SUPPORTING PARTNERSHIPS, PROJECTS**

A fifth principle was established shortly after Oxfam America was started. In its first year of operation the organization was receiving enough contributions that it could support some overseas projects. The British Oxfam, taking into account our project guidelines, submitted projects to us for consideration. Oxfam America had a projects committee composed of board and staff members that met regularly to review and decide on supporting projects. Fairly early in the project committee’s deliberations, things hit a snag: Project budgets submitted to us by Oxfam explicitly or implicitly barred the use of funds for administrative support of the in-country organization responsible for implementing the project. The committee shared the view that it made no sense to support projects but not the organizations designing and assisting them. This led quickly to a discomfort with the whole procedure by which we in Boston were passing judgment and raising questions about activities on other continents about which we had relatively little knowledge. This led to a decision, soon ratified by the entire board, to directly seek partnerships with in-country organizations that shared Oxfam America’s goals.

We spent a long time working out the first partnership agreement with a Bangladeshi organization, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee. It proved satisfactory and we soon began to enter into others, and partnerships progressively replaced projects. This had two effects: First, we gradually were developing our own identity and decreasing our dependence on the British Oxfam. Second, we introduced a partnership model of engagement, which, although widely used now, was virtually unheard of in the US NGO sector at the time.

**THE FAST FOR A WORLD HARVEST**

In our first year of operation a staff member, Nathan Gray, came up with the idea of asking people to fast the day before Thanksgiving and then to donate the savings to Oxfam to promote food production abroad. It had the perfect symbolism for the new Oxfam. It engaged donors in the process of better understanding what it means to be hungry and it required some action and commitment beyond writing a check. The idea itself was excellent but how to make it known? We had a part-time staff member who was responsible for communications and she made contact with Anthony Lewis, then a regular columnist for the New York Times,
and persuaded him to write a column on the Fast. He wrote a very positive piece on the
Fast as an active way to promote a better world through Oxfam America as an innovative
organization, and urged everyone to participate. The column appeared the Thursday or
Friday before Thanksgiving. The Anthony Lewis column and the Fast established Oxfam
and by the end of the first year, in 1974, we could say Oxfam was a viable organization.

RANDOM NOTES

One person who is generally overlooked and deserves mention is Marion Clawson, who was
the Executive Director of Resources for the Future in Washington. Marion was the chair of
the board of the original Washington-based Oxfam. While not part of the group involved in
designing the Boston-based organization, we asked him to remain in the role of chair for con-
tinuity, and then increasingly to draw on his wisdom and judgment. He was a board member
from the DC organization who remained affiliated with the Boston-based group. About 1974
he stepped down as chair but only after playing a valuable role in facilitating the transition
and helping establish the Boston-based organization.

In sharing these notes, I have been reminded of Paul Douglas, who was also involved in the
DC-based Oxfam. His contributions were numerous: (1) He was our institutional memory
about those DC years; (2) He was a Quaker, and served as a kind of link to Oxfam UK, which
had Quaker origins; (3) He was a small businessman with valuable common sense about
the practicalities of starting a shoestring enterprise; (4) During many difficult discussions,
Paul remained a wellspring of gentle good humor and sensible suggestions to keep making
progress.

There are, of course, many others who supported the early Oxfam America in large and small
ways, who are far too numerous to mention.

We started out with modest expectations, but our founding principles turned out to be a solid
foundation for a start-up that has now turned into a well-known and highly reputed develop-
ment organization. The many and long debates, the intense discussions at the board level and
with staff, and the willingness to look for the best solutions rather than the expedient ones
all helped establish the character of Oxfam. Many of us look back at that period with
great satisfaction.
CHAPTER 2

From Church Basement to the Board Room: Early Governance and Organizational Development

Robert C. Terry

Like many NGO start-ups, Oxfam America was long on enthusiasm and commitment and weak on a lot of organizational basics. I was a board member (1974 to 1980) at the time and this paper describes in some detail an early process in strategic planning which addressed important organizational issues. Much focus was placed on collectively articulating a clear mission and long-term vision and establishing a common frame for thinking about Oxfam’s work. That provided a foundation for moving on to address operational and governance issues. By the late 1970s, these efforts were clearly bearing fruit.

RIDING OUR ROLLER COASTER, 1973 TO 1975

At first, I refused. Yes, John and Barbara Thomas were old friends, and their invitation appealing. But I had just returned home to a new job, and had to find my footing. Troubles helping another start-up social agency left me cautious. But the Thomases persisted. A decade earlier, when John had headed CARE’s program in then-East Pakistan, they had helped me mightily in launching the Peace Corps. So when in 1974, over supper in their kitchen, they again asked me to join Oxfam America’s board, of which John had become chairman, I agreed.

Our few young staffers worked from a borrowed room in a church basement. They brimmed with energy and ideas, but little strategy. A likable church minister tried to focus their efforts; but he lacked management experience, knew little about Third World development, and soon resigned. Donations in our fiscal year 1973 to 1974 totaled merely $139,129.

Our volunteer trustees numbered 24. For so small an operation, with working capital of only $84,000, a board of 24 was top-heavy. An equivalent business enterprise would burden itself with a legal-minimum board of one. Indeed, non-profit agencies typically recruit many trustees in hopes that they will add prestige, money, and free in-house consulting skills.
But we were 24-strong only on paper. One left for India. Dr. Jon Rohde moved to Haiti. Although local trustees met often to help our staff, distant trustees might attend only quarterly. We tried to engage an Asian World Bank staffer and the African-American head of an exciting non-profit agency, but each came only once. A renowned Harvard Business School professor came twice, but resigned “to pursue other endeavors” — put off, I assumed, by our amateur style. So, 25 to 30% of our trustees were no-shows. Many of us were, indeed, amateurs—young, certainly lacking prestige and money, and mostly lacking board experience. Evening meetings were long, driven by crises. Everyone weighed in on every topic.

Our finances were muddled. In desperation, I telephoned an old friend, a CPA, Harvard Business grad, and head of his own accounting firm. I asked only for advice. Amazingly, John Holdsworth promptly volunteered himself. Not only did he patientely teach us NGO accounting esoterica; John stayed for six years as trustee and treasurer, building us a sturdy financial framework. He still deserves our gratitude.

With our minister gone, we sought a seasoned leader. Acting ably, meanwhile, was Cole Dodge, who had served in India as the youngest Peace Corps volunteer and in Nigeria with the Quakers. Our tiny organization offered hope and enthusiasm, but lacked a record and strategy; moreover, we trustees lacked enough skill and patience to mount a formal search.

My thoughts turned to another friend. Roger Flather and I shared years of experience as classmates, Navy officers, and early Peace Corps leaders in Asia—he, for seven years in the Philippines, Sabah, and Micronesia as country director. Roger also held an MBA degree, and worked with the innovative Educational Development Center. His brother, Newell, was a board colleague. Not least, enthusiastic Roger was willing to take risks and try us. Our board welcomed him in August with high hopes.

At first, Roger fulfilled our hopes, and more. Our year 1974 to 1975 was heady. Nathan Gray and his staff colleagues conceived the Fast for a World Harvest. We would ask Americans, on Thursday before Thanksgiving, to give up food for a day, spend foodless mealtimes studying poverty, and then give their uneaten-food money for us to send overseas to fight hunger.

The timing was tragically right. Terrible drought in Sahelian Africa and the World Food Conference in Rome made famine headline news. Some public figures and major newspapers, notably Anthony Lewis in the New York Times, endorsed our Fast. Our inventive staff organized a food run led by comedian Dick Gregory, a “Plant a Seed for Change” project in April, a Boston Sunday Globe special Easter insert, “Breaking New Ground,” and our first scheme to enroll donors as continuing “members” of Oxfam America’s community.

Thousands responded. Groups fasted in hundreds of churches, schools, and colleges. Many donors gave less than $50. But the flood of mail also brought large gifts, notably one for $10,000 from “anonymous.” We were riding a roller coaster whooshing skyward, as had happened in 1971 to 1972 in Washington during the Bangladesh liberation war crisis.

Our first published Annual Report (Exhibit 1) showed the changes. Gifts for the 1973 to 1974 fiscal year were only $139,129, jumping almost sixfold in 1974 to 1975 to $813,227. Grants jumped tenfold, funding projects in Bangladesh (functional literacy), Vietnam (relief), Ghana (agricultural extension), Bolivia (land resettlement), and Oxfam Great Britain’s International Disasters Unit. A large reserve remained for future grants. Two films launched our domestic education program. Roger moved his growing staff from the suburban church to our own
building on Columbus Ave. in Boston’s South End, bought with a low-interest loan from Oxfam Great Britain. John noted in his chairman’s report: “Oxfam does not run its own projects, but assists others . . . to enhance their own capacities. . . . Oxfam America is not just a conduit for sending private funds abroad; it is a new approach to international cooperation.”

But the next year, our story was much different—perhaps more normal. We repeated the Fast, but without helpful headlines. Our growing pains hurt. To communicate with donors, we needed clear messages. How to write them? To make grants responsibly, we needed good projects. How to find them? We needed better plans and budgets. How to design them? Staff members lacked goals and standards. How to decide them? Our board was not structured; out-of-town trustees resented decision-making by local “insiders,” who in turn resented staff throwing issues at us last-minute. How to govern ourselves?

We were facing big issues without resolving them. Some of us worried about lack of planning; others, about ownership and governance; others, about nurturing volunteers; and others, about lack of strategy. Above all, we worried that funds were so unpredictable; indeed, financial manager Alison Smith forecast that our 1975–1976 income might barely top $400,000!

As our roller coaster whooshed earthwards, as in 1972 after the Bangladesh war, we felt our hearts sinking.

**Exhibit 1. Statement of income, expenditures, and changes in fund balance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year Ended April 30</th>
<th>1975</th>
<th>1974</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Income:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributions</td>
<td>$813,227</td>
<td>$139,129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investment income</td>
<td>15,969</td>
<td>1,953</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness of loan</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>35,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other income</td>
<td>3,198</td>
<td>610</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total income</strong></td>
<td><strong>832,394</strong></td>
<td><strong>176,692</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Operating expenses:</strong></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fundraising costs</td>
<td>28,582</td>
<td>7,798</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General and administrative</td>
<td>53,457</td>
<td>16,628</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salaries and related benefits</td>
<td>67,419</td>
<td>45,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total operating expenses</strong></td>
<td><strong>149,458</strong></td>
<td><strong>69,526</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Income before project grants</strong></th>
<th>682,936</th>
<th>107,166</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grants to develop and relief projects (Note 5)</td>
<td>243,970</td>
<td>23,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic education</td>
<td>4,439</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total income before project grants</strong></td>
<td><strong>248,409</strong></td>
<td><strong>23,700</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Excess of income over expenditures — Available for future project grants and education** | 434,527 | 83,466 |
| Development and relief fund (deficit), beginning of year | (9,119) | (92,585) |
| **Development and relief fund (deficit), end of year** | **424,408** | **($ 9,119)** |
UNDERSTANDING OUR STRATEGIC CONTEXTS

Before continuing this story, I invite glances at topics which, although perhaps abstract, shaped how we designed our start-up enterprise.

External factors influencing Oxfam America

Internal issues seemed to hog most of our discussions; but, of course, we worked in a web of external pressures. Although Exhibit 2 did not exist on paper then (I drew it later for a teaching case), it was alive in our thinking. In general, our enterprise sought to attract resources (funds and volunteers), steward them efficiently (costs) and properly (regulations), and dispense them responsibly (overseas grants and domestic education). In detail, our political economy was complex; each factor deserved attention from specialists. Our jobs as trustees and executive director were to fit all factors and specialists together—ideally satisfying all participants. This chapter focuses on how we tried to do this, looking at early governance, strategy, and how we granted funds overseas.

Regulatory frameworks, government & industry

Legally, Oxfam America, Inc., fits in the class of non-profit corporations, including churches, libraries, and hospitals, known as private, voluntary associations (PVOs, termed today non-governmental organizations or NGOs). In Massachusetts, it is registered and overseen by the state attorney general. Its federal status, under Section 501(c)(3) of the US Tax Code, reflects public policy exempting qualified charities from taxes on both corporate resources, such as buildings, and donations. Its board is generally responsible for proper conduct as a licensed charity.

In practice, we also tried to follow the more specific standards of our industry’s watchdog, the National Information Bureau. Its power was not legal, for it was also a self-appointed and non-profit association, but flowed from its independent reports, often studied by large donors. It defined eight standards for such features as board effectiveness and ethical promotion; for
example, it required a “detailed annual budget, consistent with the Uniform Accounting Standard…translating program plans into financial terms.” These standards also highlighted best current practices in NGO governance and management.1

**US development aid “industry”**

To label development NGOs as an “industry” may surprise those who associate the term exclusively with the private sector. But even if we thought more about cooperating rather than competing with other NGOs, our work would certainly be compared with that of others, especially by careful large donors, foundations, and corporations. Moreover, we could learn much from others.2

Of about 4,000 US charities in 1975, only a few focused on alleviating poverty, disease, and suffering in developing nations. But the development aid industry was growing. USAID’s Advisory Committee on Voluntary Foreign Aid listed 87 agencies on its register. A few big players, such as Catholic Relief Services and CARE, had budgets approaching $200 million; some small players had budgets well under $500,000. Despite our modest budget, under $1 million, our eight-person staff in 1976 ranked us as average, because many agencies had staffs of only one or two. But we were the new kid on the block!

An important fact was that some agencies received major support from the US government, in such forms as grants, donations of excess property, and freight costs. Over half of CARE’s income came as donated American food grains, which it distributed abroad under the Public Law 480 program. Some smaller agencies, such as Volunteers in Technical Assistance and Oxfam America, received none.3

**International confederation of Oxfams**

Oxfam Great Britain’s support was invaluable. It put up the initial capital to launch us in America. It gave us a working model of ideals, ideas, and practices; my visits to Oxford were inspiring. Its network of Field Directors, posted in many countries, gave us a system for identifying projects and dispensing grants. Moreover, collegial help came from sister Oxfams in

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1 The National Information Bureau was founded in 1918 to advise Americans giving millions to agencies about which they knew little. In 2001, it merged with the Council of Better Business Bureaus’ Foundation to form the BBB Wise Giving Alliance (www.bbbwise givingalliance.org). Other resources appeared in recent years. GuideStar (www.guidestar.org) enables donors to access Federal tax returns (Form 990) of charities, as well as GuideStar reports. Charity Navigator (www.charitynavigator.org) ranks using a star system, with four stars for exceptional. “Exceeds industry standards and outperforms most charities in its cause.” The American Institute of Philanthropy (www.charitywatch.org) also rates agencies on a scale of A+ to F. Oxfam America informs these agencies of its finances and performance, has always worked to comply with standards, and is rated highly. For example, in the Wise Giving Alliance’s latest report, Oxfam America met all 20 “Standards for Charity Accountability.”

2 The number, financial size, and effectiveness of development NGOs have grown in recent years, and also dramatically in developing countries. Government aid agencies and The World Bank increasingly use NGOs to deliver services. Today, 165 NGOs working in international development form the American Council for Voluntary International Action (www.interaction.org). Created in 1984, InterAction produces “PVO Standards” periodically (in 1998, 28 pages of nine detailed standards, plus guidelines), some of which exceed those of the Better Business Bureau. They offer a useful checklist of best current practices of governance and management. InterAction asks members to review the Standards yearly and to re-certify their compliance.

Australia, Belgium, Canada, and Quebec. Oxfam Canada’s first director, Henry Fletcher (1966 to 1971), became an early trustee of Oxfam America.

REFINING OUR GOALS, ORGANIZATION, AND POLICIES

The board created in 1975 an Organizational Development Task Force. Chairman John Thomas asked me to lead it in discovering how to change our lemons into lemonade. I had no experience designing NGOs, but my consulting firm, Arthur D. Little, Inc., advised companies and public agencies on such tasks. So I quizzed my patient seniors, rifled their toolkits, scoured the literature, and found some techniques we could adapt to our dinky enterprise. One offered a simple way to start organizing our goals.

Adapting the “Hierarchy of Objectives”

Using the metaphor of a pyramid-shaped layer cake helped to fit together various goals: short- and long-term, those for various organizational levels, and those for different units or functions. The hierarchy also suggested how different kinds of objectives deserved different degrees of precision; while details matter for short-term and lower-level objectives, they clutter long-term thinking about policies. The hierarchy created a common framework and language by which persons with different tasks in different units could better talk and coordinate efforts. It also fostered consistency between timeless values and annual budgets. Organizations with different needs should choose their own labels and time frames; what’s important

Exhibit 3.

Increased details

Values and Beliefs (timeless)
Grand Design (25 years)
Program Missions (10 years)
Program Goals (5 years)
Annual Goals and Budgets

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is not the details, which are arbitrary, but the principle of one framework useful to all participants. We fiddled with it several times before getting it right for us.

Organization-wide themes occupied the top two levels: timeless “Values” and 25-year “Grand Design.” Below them, dotted lines divided the lower three levels into our four main functions—fundraising, overseas grant making, domestic education, and administration.

**A participatory and interactive process**

We invited everyone—board, staff, and some key volunteers—to fit their desired goals into this hierarchy, several times. But iterating did not mean repeating; instead, it was a series of increasingly honed statements, each earning wider approval. Iterating helped resolve conflicts, replace weak words, and craft language to satisfy all participants in their various roles.

Broad participation may be less important in strict hierarchies, such as the military, centralized churches, and manufacturing firms, where goals must be imposed from above. But it is essential in more modern and flat organizations, such as universities, professional partnerships, and voluntary agencies. Participation is especially important when an organization depends upon talents of volunteers; their psychological contracts include sharing its style and goals. Finally, participation not only strengthens feelings of ownership, but also satisfies critics demanding “a piece of the action.”

We worked our way down the hierarchy from its top, timeless Values and Beliefs, to its bottom, Annual Goals and Budgets, in the following eight steps.

**Codifying major themes**

First, we all proposed values and goals at whichever levels we wished. I then assembled them—banging away nights on my old typewriter—and mailed them back verbatim. We had to use photocopies and snail mail, slow by today’s standards. Second, everyone commented—filling gaps, changing words, dissenting, etc. Third, I codified our top two levels—timeless Values and 25-year Grand Design—for discussion. As we spotted conflicts, gaps, and fuzzy words, we changed substance and style. Fourth, I refined these changes. In time, these became guiding statements, for ourselves and for others.

**Timeless values and beliefs**

Oxfam America’s website (oxfamamerica.org/whoweare/welcome_to_oxfam/oxfam_beliefs) lists statements of vision, mission, beliefs, values, and stewardship. They include, not surprisingly to me, the values we identified in 1976: all peoples’ right to shape their own lives, respect for diversity, the case that poverty results from systemic exclusion, a model of partnerships defined by mutual respect, a commitment to steward donors’ resources effectively, a belief that democratic practices enable people, and that citizens must respond to human suffering. They add a point we omitted, but would have endorsed to reflect what we’ve all since learned about our fragile environment: “…committed to building a more environmentally sustainable world.” Moreover, compared to our statements then, today’s versions are much more succinct!

Three values we defined in 1976 became signature features of Oxfam America. The first flowered soon into vigorous advocacy: “We recognize our responsibility as citizens to influ-
ence, when and as appropriate, those leaders and institutions, including Congress, guiding the wider aspects of United States relationships with Third World countries.” As other papers show (especially those by Simon and Short), this set Oxfam on a unique path as a development organization which looked beyond grants to advocacy as a key means of helping the poor.

The second value reflected our early concern with the dignity and independence of partners and recognized that we were just one actor among many: “Too often, development programs create dependency and charity, including the techniques used to raise funds and create resentment among those being helped. We seek ways to improve the corrosive aspects of the donor-recipient relationship, and to express more adequately our interdependence with all people.”

The third value recognized that we worked in a dynamic environment in which we had to learn and adjust constantly: “We live in a changing world. Our own organization and its policies must, therefore, respond to new needs and insights as they appear. We must remain sensitive to the need to learn and adapt ourselves.”

25-year grand design

Having codified timeless Values, our second level started to translate beliefs into action. Our iterative process of discussion, drafting, and redrafting resulted in our grand design statement that is worth quoting in full:

New ways of voluntary self-help and participation in international development are needed in response to new circumstances in the last quarter of the 20th century. Overseas, voluntary self-help projects are increasingly accepted as pioneers or complements of government-sponsored programs; local leaders, often inexperienced but improving, need support and encouragement in long-term development efforts, as well as in immediate relief crises. In the USA, Oxfam America appeals mainly to persons of goodwill who seek new ways for participation and effective action; they understand that development is long and arduous.

Oxfam America’s special role is to link the growing number of local self-help leaders in poor nations with the growing number of conscientious Americans seeking to make a difference in progress toward international development and peace. Specifically, we offer ways for Americans to consolidate their contributions and thus to magnify their assistance. We offer not only immediate material relief aid during disasters, but also long-term material, technical, and action-oriented aid to enable local leaders to contribute economically to their societies.

This requires that Oxfam America evolve, and periodically refine, a realistic strategy for implementing this broadly-conceived design. This strategy must reflect the Values and Beliefs of our donors, staff, volunteers, and overseas partners. Further, our stewardship on behalf of donors and volunteers requires us to conduct our programs so that Oxfam America’s limited resources will produce the greatest possible benefits for all participants.

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Clear here was our strategy of partnering with NGO leaders in developing countries. The next three decades of growth in indigenous NGOs would prove that “voluntary self-help projects are increasingly accepted,” and show that local leaders are no longer so inexperienced; moreover, Oxfam America achieved this Grand Design, and today continues to practice its principles.

**Designing internal organization**

Now that we had a strategy, we needed intensive effort to make it work in daily operations. We retained one of my Arthur D. Little colleagues, Dr. Charles C. Halbower. Chuck brought two new ingredients—external objectivity and long experience assisting non-profit agencies, especially in higher education. He led us through our fifth step, which was to structure board and staff into four teams—fundraising, overseas grants, domestic education, and internal administration (Exhibit 4). A paid staffer managed each. Trustees started working in committees, parallel to staff functions, with a staff officer supporting each. Valuable resources were volunteer advisors, such as Dr. John B. Wyon, from Harvard’s School of Public Health, who assisted our Grants Committee, and Betty Wetzel, a skilled writer who edited our newsletters, educational materials, and project reports.

Treasurer John Holdsworth refined our chart of accounts to match these four units. He guided the staff in assembling our financial history into formats useful for goal-setting and budgeting; our “history” was skimpy, but better than none.

**Deciding 10-year program missions and key policies**

In our sixth step, each of the four board-staff teams, using financial history data and our agreed Values and Grand Design drafted its own 10-year Program Mission, five-year Program Goals, and two-to-three-year Program Intentions. (We invented the last category on discovering that some goals fitted neither five-year nor annual time frames.)

**Diversifying donations**

Painfully aware of our roller-coaster revenues, we sought ways to grow them more evenly—direct mail? events? a capital campaign? deferred gifts? The public signature in Great Britain was a prominent, well-stocked Oxfam Shop on almost every city and town’s Main Street. But we lacked any skills in retail enterprises; moreover, Roger Flather and his team decided this strategy would not suit US conditions.

Some PVOs received large US government subsidies. We re-debated the lures and risks of chasing US government contracts, but soon reaffirmed our fears of becoming dependent on one or a few large sources. Moreover, many of us, opposed to US policies in Vietnam, felt that we needed clear financial independence to advocate strongly on public policy issues. We decided to diversify our sources and risks by appealing to groups open to our message—individuals, churches, students, foundations, and corporations—and set fundraising targets for each.
Educating donors

We defined three domestic objectives: first, inform Americans of new ways for effective actions; second, explain why development is long, complex, and arduous; and third, tap their latent impulse to help, not just during holidays, but year-round. Nathan Gray and the education team scoped target groups, projects, budgets, and milestones.

One policy decision, reaffirmed, was to avoid messages and photos suggesting condescending attitudes toward the poor and dispossessed. Our messages should not be emotional, but thought-provoking and based on practical experience. Another was that appealing to would-be donors would not be enough; we should advocate our views on public policies via the media and communications to Congress and development institutions.

Making responsible grants

One guiding principle was to avoid running our own projects, hence avoiding costly overseas offices and dependency relationships; instead, we decided to partner with the best local leaders, hence strengthening their capacities. But we needed ways of finding reliable partners, both US and overseas, reviewing requests, and allocating funds among regions and types of projects. We could continue working through the British Oxfam’s international network of field directors, and perhaps also cooperate with other like-minded US NGOs.
Gerry Goodrich and his team reconfirmed that our meager resources should focus on small projects run by small local NGOs. But we needed to define our criteria clearly, and then communicate them clearly to field directors and potential partners.

**Curbing costs**

Critical to running a tight ship are administrative tasks—accounts, audits, personnel, publications, and mailings. Donors constantly asked how much of their gifts paid for overhead costs, and how much reached poor people. A major metric for donors and rating agencies is the ratio of expenses to services delivered. Alison Smith and her team confirmed our policies to attract and retain talented people. We aimed to reward our staff well, with respectable but not lush salaries. We also relied heavily on volunteers, for both office tasks and leading events in communities.

**Finalizing the plan**

Our seventh step assembled these draft goals from the four teams into their boxes in our hierarchy. We reviewed all during a special meeting at a Cape Cod motel at Craigville Beach on July 24–25, 1976. All board and staff participated; John Thomas had by then moved to Nairobi, but had joined early rounds before departing and later ones by mail.

We also invited the executive director of Oxfam Great Britain. Brian Walker joined us in polishing these statements, especially Values and Grand Design to encourage consistency with the mother Oxfam’s strategies and policies.

Chuck Halbower challenged us with hard analyses of our numbers and aspirations. Debates were vigorous, but we resolved major issues. By the end, we felt bold enough to set a five-year goal of increasing income at the rate of 20% per year!

Eighth, we polished language into our final 15-page *Goals for Oxfam America, 1976–2000*. This document helped, at last, to improve our governance. To our surprise, we finished those tasks, which had seemed rife with problems, with relative ease. It brought other benefits. Programs with precise goals became models for those where fuzziness persisted. Planning the next year’s budget was much smoother. It helped attract new trustees and staff for key roles. Clearer goals helped us appeal more successfully to foundations and large donors.

By the end, the efforts of trustees, staff, and volunteers had been considerable. Good ideas flowed top down and bottom up. The process created shared goals, boosted our self-confidence, and helped us to weather the leadership change from Roger Flather to Joe Short.

Thirty years ago, our process took two years. Experienced leaders could mock us for giving so much effort to so small an enterprise; but we felt it important to think big and professionally. A few years later, we felt justified by the results when Oxfam managed a period of rapid growth smoothly. (Recently, I watched an NGO with hundreds of staff worldwide use electronic mail, chat rooms, and bulletin boards to complete much more complex strategic conversations—with only six months!)

Now, I leave it to later Oxfam leaders to judge how well our efforts served their purposes.
LEARNING TO GOVERN OURSELVES

Having agreed on goals, policies, and organization, the task force’s final duty was to propose how to govern ourselves better. A charity’s board is a self-perpetuating body; apart from filing tax returns and regulatory forms and holding an annual meeting, no legal requirements specify how it should organize and conduct itself.

Board in 1974 and 1975

Our 24-person board when I joined in 1974 included many talents. Half had worked overseas: John Thomas and Marshall Bear, like several of us, in Bangladesh; Felix Knauth, in Somalia with the Peace Corps. Several brought continuity from the Washington years: Paul Douglas was not only a founder, but also a Quaker and business owner, in the tradition of Oxfam Great Britain’s founders and leaders; I valued his practicality and optimism.

Others brought skills in business, management, and education. Newell Flather, one of the first Peace Corps volunteers, in Ghana, had become a bank trust officer. Judith Wood Spock and Elizabeth Wyon were teachers. Helene Martin was a social service program manager.

Four were chief executive officers of non-profit agencies. Marion Clawson headed Resources for the Future. William Gaines led the educational exchange Institute of European Studies; an early mentor of Newell and Joe Short at the African-American Institute, he offered seasoned judgments on many issues.

Although willing, our Boston group was new, not yet organized well, not using our talents to full advantage, and not yet a team. We had problems of three kinds:

Lacking structure and procedures

First, our meetings were too many, too large, too long, and with too little notice or staff work. Those present tended to pitch in on every topic, but without resolving each carefully. Some sub-groups met on special tasks, such as screening grant requests, but we lacked standing committees. Terms and duties were not defined. Visitors drifted in and out. Distant trustees felt left out of discussions by us Boston-area trustees. We lacked ways to vet suggestions for new trustees, elect officers, and evaluate performance. We lacked a code of conduct governing such matters as absences and relating to staff without interfering with our executive director’s authority.

Confused roles and behavior

Second, and not surprisingly, some did not know or share understandings about roles. In theory, trustees should keep noses in, fingers out—oversee performance, but not interfere in details. In practice, during the start-up years, we oscillated between roles as trustees and as consultants helping staff, but found it difficult to switch between behaviors appropriate to each. Some behaviors were less than productive: when one trustee stormed out in a huff, we accepted the departure as final; when another became too disruptive, we asked him to resign. If young boards survive, as experienced observers know, they often evolve through four stages: forming, storming, norming, and performing. Our task was clearly to agree on norms.
Lacking enough diversity

Third, we needed critical skills: law, accounting, business, economics, public health, and specialists in Africa, Latin America, and women in development. We had only four women, or 20% of total trustees. We had no participating trustees of color. We needed more geographic outreach, beyond the northeast USA, and ideally also overseas.

Governance guidelines

For help, we looked inside and out. Chuck Hallback queried board and staff for ideas. We studied the governance of other NGOs. I scoured literature and industry associations for best practices. I combined it all into *Recommended Guidelines on Governance.*⁶ We made a series of decisions, many still in practice today, that established the basic infrastructure for governance. These included:

- Establishing 3-year terms, limiting trustees to two terms, and staggering those terms to balance continuity with fresh energy;

- Specifying ten duties, such as setting strategy and reviewing CEO performance; and establishing three full meetings a year;

- Creating an Executive Committee consisting of officers and committee chairs and four standing committees that would oversee the four main functions;

- Adding a fifth standing committee, for board recruitment and development, to identify needed skills, set criteria, screen and nominate candidates, orient new members, lead board self-evaluations, and compile a Director’s Handbook. This Handbook and our Strategic Plan became useful tools for recruiting and orienting new trustees, all of whom served on a voluntary basis;

- Establishing nominating procedures and a special nominating committee, elected anew each year by the board, that did not include current officers; and,

- Creating categories of Advisors and Honorary Directors. The advisor category was needed to attract and recognize experts in fields such as agriculture, relief, and women in development—people like Bisrat Aklilu, an Ethiopian economist teaching at Boston University and Dr. John Wyon, who had worked over 30 years in India, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Haiti, both of whom contributed to our Overseas Grants Committee. We established “Honorary Director” to honor those who had rendered extraordinary service, such as former chair, Marion Clawson.

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In mid-1976, when John Thomas moved to Kenya, I became chairman. After serving over two years, I stepped aside, but remained a trustee until my term’s end in 1980. The chair role had demanded much time. Other fine talents were at hand. And I wanted to show that, in merit-based organizations, professionals can play different roles at different times.

**Board in 1980–81**

By 1981, our 21-person board, chaired by Newell Flather, had grown more diverse and better organized. Seven of its members were women, and four, of color. It had more skills: CPA John Holdsworth; lawyer Catherine E.C. Henn from a major Boston firm (who later chaired the board); lawyer Stephen Land from a major NY firm (and who remains active today on the leadership council); seven businesspersons, including Wall Street broker and Asia expert Ernest M. Howell, Lawrence Phillips from Phillips-Van Heusen Corp., public relations expert Martha Stuart, and Dr. James Thornblade, a First National Bank of Boston specialist in Latin American economics; MIT Episcopal Chaplain Scott Paradise and Rocky Mountain United Church of Christ minister Clyde Miller; Professors Walton R. Johnson from Rutgers and Pearl Robinson from Tufts, who strengthened our expertise in Africa; Princeton Professor Richard H. Ullman, an academic star who had also been Director of Studies of the Council on Foreign Relations; and, public health expertise came with Dr. Hamilton B. Brown from the University of New Mexico and J. Larry Brown from Harvard’s School of Public Health (who later became board chair). Barbara Thomas had returned from Kenya, bringing both continuity and fresh ideas (she would later become vice chair). It also included the Executive Director ex officio and a staff representative elected yearly.

Committees worked well. Everyone participated. It had become a team.

**GRANTING FUNDS TO OVERSEAS PARTNERS**

Given our conscious decision to avoid costly overseas offices and scouting trips, we relied mainly on the British Oxfam’s field staff to recommend projects suitable for funding, although some requests also came from other NGOs.\(^7\) Requests went to the grants committee, consisting of trustees and non-trustee specialist advisors, which met every six weeks and generally reviewed between four and seven proposals. We used nine criteria, summarized in an annual report, which included:

> “The potential impact . . . on the economy, the environmental and existing social and cultural patterns; its potential to improve the lives of lower status groups and benefit rural, low-income people; the degree to which development and management of the project would encourage innovative and repeatable activity by local people; and whether the project is part of an integrated effort towards lasting economic and social development.” \(^8\)

Another guide was our intention to allocate 30% of our available grant funds each to Africa and to Asia, 20% to Latin America, with 20% in reserve. Our decisions were then communi-

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\(^7\) Oxfam’s Field Officer for Bangladesh was Cole Dodge, who had been Oxfam’s Acting Director. He regularly submitted projects to OA, and we trusted his judgment.

cated to Michael Harris, the field secretary, in Oxford, who asked us to share both our criteria and our reasons so these could be channeled back to his field staff.

Although we had a system in place, our prospects in early 1976 were sobering. Fiscal Year 1975–76 revenues would likely total $450,000, only about half of 1974–75. But while we sought more gifts, lingering ironically from last year was too much money—not granted, sitting idle. Of the $632,250 available to grant, and with only two months remaining in 1975–76, we still had $330,000 or 52% on hand. Why? We lacked enough reliable partners: at an earlier meeting, we had disapproved all six requests, because each lacked a key quality, such as good local leadership!

Our March 4, 1976, meeting proved more productive, and symbolic, although we did not fully realize it then. We met in Newton around the dining table of John and Barbara Thomas. We were four trustees—John, Marshall Bear, Dr. Hanna Papanek, a sociologist focusing on women-in-development, and I; one Advisor—Dr. Wyon; three staff—Roger Flather, Gerry Goodrich, and Alison Smith; and two guests—F. H. Abed and his wife, Ayesha, of the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC).

Gerry, who was responsible for the overseas program, came from Yankee farming roots; he had first learned about development during a Quaker work camp in Ghana, and then immersed himself in it as a Peace Corps Volunteer and headmaster of a secondary school in Kenya. He reported first on his recent visit to Oxford, noting Oxfam Great Britain’s difficulties finding enough projects of good quality in India. Gerry brought a proposed “Agreement among Members of the International Oxfam Group on Overseas Procedures and Liaison,” which we reviewed and agreed to send to the board for approval.

**Funding decisions—Business as usual; and a key early direct partnership**

We then approved two disaster-related grants. One was to Oxfam’s International Disaster Unit, and the other to the American NGO, World Neighbors, for Guatemala after an earthquake. It was not for rebuilding houses directly; instead, it would help masons and extension workers of El Quetzal, an agricultural cooperative we had been helping in the Indian highlands, to teach simple, safe building techniques using adobe, salvaged wood, and cane.

Next, we considered two requests from BRAC, presented by Mr. Abed, the organization’s founder. F. H. Abed, and his relatively new organization had a significant history (see box). We had already made small grants to BRAC, which it had handled well. He was now requesting two new grants. The first was for $10,400 for a functional education program, presented in a six page proposal with the title, *A Program Designed by, Directed Towards, and to be Implemented by Women*, which showed BRAC’s trademark style. We approved.

Next, Abed requested $134,000 over three years to build and launch a pilot training and resource center (TARC). Several years of experience had shown that villagers were enthusiastic, but a major need was skilled field workers. BRAC had designed modules to teach needs assessment, program planning, group dynamics, and leadership. It now needed a rural center to help college-educated workers learn to communicate with villagers effectively.

This request raised several issues. Much larger than our usual grant, it would use 29% of our year’s planned allocation for Asia. Could so young an NGO handle such a complex program? Would it compete with the government’s rural development program, with which I had
F. H. Abed had spent fifteen years in the UK and Canada studying accounting and computer science, and had returned home in 1969 to become Treasurer, and later a Board Member, of Pakistan Shell Oil Co. His secure life was changed first by the devastating 1970 cyclone which left 500,000 dead and thousands more homeless, when he enlisted friends to organize Help, and then by the 1971 liberation war, when he resigned from Shell and went to London to form Help Bangladesh. The greatest responses came from young British idealists and Bangladeshis studying in Britain. After independence, Abed realized that merely repairing old facilities would be insufficient. To launch a more complete approach, he used money left from Help Bangladesh to found BRAC. In his meeting with us, he spoke precisely, softly, with self-deprecating humor, but without wasting words. He described BRAC’s fumbling start-up efforts in 1972. Recruiting mostly university graduates, he chose to work in a difficult area. Sulla’s 120,000 people were poor, 65% Hindu, severely damaged by war, 90% flooded during monsoons, and remote—hence, unlikely to be helped by government or aid agencies. Aiming to eliminate adult illiteracy within three years, BRAC idealists set up 255 centers. But many villagers soon dropped out. Within a year, more than half of the centers were closed by floods and the villagers’ inability to repair them. Failure taught BRAC the shortcomings of a purely academic approach; it set out to design more functional methods.

Several Oxfams had helped Bangladesh since liberation. With $61,800 from Oxfam America in 1973, BRAC had launched a pilot program. Dr. Leon Clark of World Education helped design it, stressing consciousness-raising and basic skills more than literacy. Lecturing was replaced by group discussions; the Bengali title Shikok, teacher, was replaced by Shebika, helper. BRAC’s staff and local teachers created materials distilled from living in villages: charts, pictures, and games made learning more fun.

In May 1974, BRAC re-opened 59 centers, each with a local teacher. Enrollment in the first cycle was 1,175, with 734 men and 441 women. Attendance improved markedly: most drop-outs resulted from external causes—planting, harvesting, or migration—rather than loss of interest. 41% completed the full course, and a large number, more than half, achieved some literacy. In the second cycle, half the lessons were revised, some were dropped, and pictures were improved; 54% of the 1,087 graduated. BRAC continued to experiment and improve.

worked in the 1960s? How well would it be managed? Results would not be clear for some time; how would we account to our donors? Should and could we send Gerry to monitor progress?

However, we saw the opportunity to evolve a long-term-relationship: BRAC was the type of partner we were seeking. A major asset was Abed’s managerial skills. John and Marshall had worked there recently and seen BRAC’s performance; Cole Dodge had also endorsed its management abilities. Abed impressed us with his precision and balance, by admitting mistakes while evolving effective techniques, and by showing how BRAC improved its programs through continuous research. In the end, we approved.

Our meeting adjourned at 10:30 PM. We had approved grants totaling $219,550, two-thirds of our funds available (one problem neatly solved).

Other countries, partners, and projects

Using the same procedures, we also approved in 1975–76 grants to Chile—$15,000 to help displaced campesinos return to productive farming; Ethiopia—$10,500 to help build 20 wind-
mills for a “Food from Wind” program; Peru—$16,800 to set up an agricultural center to train
“farmer promoters”; Tanzania—$8,000 for an experimental mechanized vessel to extend fishing beyond depleted shore areas; and Upper Volta—$71,000 to help establish six agricultural
demonstration centers. Experience with BRAC helped us to identify and nurture relationships
with partners elsewhere, such as Sarvodaya Shramadana (meaning “awakening through shar-
ing”) in Sri Lanka.

In time, as we applied our criteria consistently and learned how to work with overseas part-
ners, the number and quality of their project requests improved.

**ATTRACTING DYNAMIC CHIEF EXECUTIVES**

During Oxfam’s first six years in America, three Executive Directors came and left, with Cole
Dodge and Alison Smith acting during gaps. During its next 31 years, Joe Short served nine,
John Hammock served eleven, and Ray Offenheiser in 2008 is serving his thirteenth.

Roger Flather was willing in 1974 to accept our request, despite its modest salary, to lead us
out of our roller coaster pattern. His early months were exhilarating. But Roger’s enthusiasm
and skills lay more in front-line tasks of encouraging volunteers and raising funds, and less in
directing others. Unfortunately, we trustees were not yet organized enough to give him and
his staff the policy framework and practical help they deserved. At that challenging stage in
our evolution, we needed someone with skills and style better matched to our unique needs.

To me, then as chair, fell the sad duty of presiding over his departure. Roger had helped
greatly, as Joe Short’s chapter describes, to lay foundations for fundraising. His optimism and
dedication to grassroots work inspired everyone. Roger resigned gracefully, and we remained
good friends until his untimely death 28 years later. Newell did not storm out, but remained
on our board, became chair, and helped lead Oxfam America through phenomenal growth.

Our 1974 search had relied on old-boy networks. In contrast, in 1976 it was professional,
though, and competitive. Dr. Joseph Short was an Africanist, with academic credentials and
high-level administrative experience as assistant to New York University’s president. Joe was
attracted by Bill Gaines and Newell Flather, and also by our strategic plan and governance
guidelines, which suggested that we were serious and organized. After joining in February
1977, Joe hired able directors, such as Michael Scott for Overseas Programs, Robert Hohler

Joe then led the staff not only in executing our strategy, but also in exceeding our goals and
timetable!

I encouraged periodic performance evaluations—by the board of the executive director, and
by the Board of our own performance. We accepted help funded by USAID, because it was
small, one-time, and aimed to improve our governance capacities: Denise E. Cavanaugh, an
organization consultant, visited several times in 1978 to observe and propose changes.

I was long gone before the eras of Presidents John Hammock and Ray Offenheiser. But I know
both and admire their fine accomplishments.

Oxfam America is indeed fortunate to have attracted a series of able staff leaders!!
LATER PERSPECTIVES AND CONCLUSIONS

Responsible performance and growth, 1979–81

Newell Flather, in Oxfam America’s Annual Report for 1979–80, described it as the year of Kampuchea: the Khmer Rouge had slaughtered 1.3–2 million people on Cambodia’s “killing fields.” More than 500 groups and 450,000 individuals donated to Oxfam America, and public support and revenues jumped from $1 million in 1978–79 to $5.6 million in 1979 and 1980. Grants jumped 634%, funding 30 projects totaling $3.8 million. Staff expanded to 22 dedicated professionals. The board welcomed eight new trustees. Oxfam ran fundraising and educational events, such as the Congressional Fast of 1,000, including Senators, Representatives, and their staffs.

In his following year’s report, Newell summarized: “Prior to 1981, Oxfam America existed in part as an alternative to government-sponsored aid programs . . . By being unconventional and at times unorthodox, Oxfam America has [now] established itself.” It not only surpassed its income target by raising $4.1 million, but received an additional $2.3 million, its largest single gift ever, from the Burroughs Corporation. Grants assisted 50 projects in 14 countries. Its work was featured by the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, and other media. Oxfam had clearly graduated to its next phase of development.

Glimpses backward from 2007

While we were one amongst several donor organizations to have the insight (and luck) to be early supporters of BRAC, our 1976 grant decision was an important one for Oxfam, and I like to think for BRAC also. Over 35 years, BRAC scaled up enormously. Its full-time staff of over 47,000, making it today the second largest employer after Bangladesh’s government, is aided by another 53,000 teachers and volunteers; 72% are women! Its 1980 budget of $780,000 was funded by foreign donors 100%; but 25 years later, they contributed to its 2006 budget of $330 million only 30%! The other 70% was supported by BRAC’s profitable enterprises such as nurseries, hatcheries, cold storage plants, and craft shops. Thousands of primary schools, health, and service centers offer micro-finance, education, health, and social programs serving 110 million people. Other institutions include BRAC Bank, BRAC Industries, and BRAC University. The Magsaysay Foundation, Gates Foundation, and UN Development Program have honored F. H. Abed and BRAC for innovative leadership. The Government of Bangladesh awarded BRAC in 2007 with its highest honor. The World Bank acknowledges BRAC as one of the world’s largest and best-run development NGOs. BRAC, which adjusted its name to Building Resources Across Communities, has worked in Afghanistan since 2002, Sri Lanka since 2005, and east Africa since 2006.9

BRAC flourished partly due to supportive government policies, talented staff, and improving social and economic conditions. A recent World Bank review recalls how Bangladesh in 1971 was desperately poor, overpopulated, shattered by war, and famously dismissed by US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger as “an international basket case;” today, child mortality has dropped 70%, life expectancy at birth has risen from 45 to 64 years, population growth has

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been halved, literacy has more than doubled, unemployment has dropped from 25–30% to 4%, and the poverty rate from an estimated 70% in 1971 to 40% in 2005. Much of the “Bangladesh paradox” started in the 1970s and 1980s with “innovative social programs pioneered by world-famous NGOs such as Grameen Bank (winner with its founder, Professor Mohammad Yunus, of the 2006 Nobel Prize for Peace) and BRAC, partnered with government agencies and international donors.”

In April 2007, I revisited BRAC. We dropped in one day, unannounced, at one of now-19 Training and Resource Centers nationwide. It was clean, well-equipped, professionally staffed, and vibrant with activities. Forty-five years ago, I had visited this district often for meetings, mostly with only Bengali men, short and black-haired. Now, students did not crowd around to gawk at my 6’3” frame and my wife’s blond hair and radiant smile; instead they went about their tasks briskly. Most exciting was how the many women behaved: instead of turning away or hiding silently behind saris, they looked and spoke to us confidently, explained their lives and work clearly . . . and laughed.

REvOluTION!!

Oxfam America today is much larger and in some ways unrecognizable. In 2007, it raised $64 million; it now has well over 300 staff; and, yes, it does have seven regional field offices worldwide. But it still remains true to the core values that early staff and board would feel comfortable with; it still partners with a broad array of organizations; it still does not accept government money; and it actively advocates for a range of development policy issues.

Careers of some alumni

It is striking how so many Oxfam “alumni” made lifelong commitments to development and other philanthropic work. Aside from the contributors in this book:

Cole P. Dodge served Oxfam Great Britain as Field Director in Ethiopia, India, and Sri Lanka. Fifteen years with UNICEF returned him to Bangladesh as Country Representative. Living now in Kenya, he advises institutions of higher education, including BRAC University.

Gerry E. Goodrich and his wife set up the American Friends Service Committee’s office for West Africa in Dakar, and then directed a rural health services project in Mali. For 27 years, he has combined his legal and public health skills in public, private, and non-profit leadership roles in New York and New Jersey. He teaches health policy and management at New York University, Beijing University, and Harvard School of Public Health.

Roger Flather became a star fundraiser for a development NGO and Harvard, and a dedicated teacher to special needs children in New York City, where he died in 2004 at age 71.


Dr. Jon E. Rohde has lived 35 years in developing countries—researching diarrheal disease in Bangladesh, UNICEF’s Representative in India for 12 years, Rockefeller Foundation’s Health Representative in Indonesia, directing Haiti’s Rural Health Delivery System, and Senior Advisor for the South African EQUITY Project. A pediatrician, his books are used in Schools of Public Health worldwide. In 2002, he and John Wyon edited Community-Based Health Care: Lessons from Bangladesh to Boston. One chapter, “particularly instructive...helps the reader understand why Bangladesh...has made so much more progress than Pakistan...Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee shows how a local group was able to provide a comprehensive development package to more than a million people.” He helped to found and direct BRAC University’s School of Public Health.

My Oxfam America work helped return me to Bangladesh, where I commuted for 20 years while advising many government and non-government agencies, including BRAC.

Why did it work?

Others with longer experience can answer better. But my biased view suggests three reasons. First, Oxfam America’s founders thought big and strategically. They defined compelling ideas—yes, relieve short-term suffering in crises, but seek always to invest in long-term development; educate donors; advocate to improve public policies; partner with the best local NGOs; stay independent, by avoiding US government funds; and, evaluate, learn, and adapt.

The 2007 donations, totaling over $64 million, mostly came from individuals and foundations, but none from the US government! The board periodically re-debates whether to accept US funds, but still concludes no. Our early choice, in addition to expressing values, produced long-term benefits: we’ve always had to hustle for donations from individuals, churches, universities, corporations, and foundations, and thus stay in touch with our community; diversity of funding spread the risks of sources running dry; independence assured an objective platform for advocating changes in US policies!

Second, we adopted professional management and standards. We learned from best practices and experience. Harvard’s Kennedy and Business Schools, Clark University, Tufts’ Fletcher School, and Brandeis’s Heller School use Oxfam America’s story in teaching.

Third, these ideas and practices attracted CEOs, staff, and volunteers with imagination and dedication—the key to turning ideals into effective action.

I’m still grateful that, after my first refusal, John and Barbara Thomas persisted.
CHAPTER 3

Launching Oxfam’s Educational Mission

Nathan Gray

Nathan Gray, one of Oxfam America’s earliest employees, relates the early struggles to raise funds and his role in establishing “The Fast for a World Harvest,” Oxfam America’s signature awareness raising effort.

As one coming from the generation of Baby Boomers known for not trusting anybody over the age of 30, I can only laugh at the prospect of accurately recalling Oxfam America’s beginnings in Boston, events that took place almost 35 years ago. However, while I may mangle a few facts, I am confident that my recollection of the spirit of the organization in those years is dead on. It was one of zealous entrepreneurship—years before the word and its pop icons gained their grip on our national consciousness.

It was December 1973 when I joined Cole Dodge, who had come back from a field position in India to manage the start-up of a newly re-organized Oxfam America. Working out of a tiny church basement office in a suburb of Boston, Cole subsequently hired Alison Smith, recently graduated from college, bringing the team to three twenty-somethings and Betty Wetzel, a retired English teacher from Missoula, Montana.

To fully appreciate the corporate culture and policies that took form in those years, consider the forces swirling about our bunker. The presidency of Richard Nixon, wracked by the resignation of Spiro Agnew and the Watergate revelations, was entering its fifth and fatal year. Young people were growing increasingly cynical, drifting away from activism and teach-ins toward just dropping out. It was hard to remain idealistic watching Henry Kissinger bask in the glory of a Nobel Peace Prize and our nation’s economy, hit by the Arab oil embargo, sputter to a halt, stuck in gas lines.

However, those of us coming from assignments in poor countries were of a different mind. We were mortified by the yawning gap that was so evident between the rich and the poor of the world. Cole and his wife, Marilyn, had just returned to the States from work among the desperately poor of India with a little girl they had adopted from Mother Teresa’s orphanage in Calcutta. Several members of Oxfam America’s board in Boston had years of experi-
ence abroad, including in the semi-arid countries of the African Sahel, then caught in the grip of a drought that would eventually kill more than a million people and afflict 50 times that number over the years. Board member and future chairman, Dr. John Thomas of Harvard’s Institute for International Development, was appalled at our government’s tepid response to the crisis, the apathy of the American public, and the tendency of the large aid organizations to promote big relief efforts while saying nothing about community development and social change. The icon of their appeals for donations was the starving child with the distended belly and the empty bowl.

Coming from work in Central America, I was simply angry. I had worked in Managua, Nicaragua, in the immediate aftermath of the “Christmas Eve earthquake” of 1972 and witnessed the US-supported dictator, “Tachito” Samoza use the disaster as cover for the mass elimination of political prisoners and then divert relief aid toward enormous personal gain. I watched students and campesino organizers being shot at by riot control troops in Guatemala City using equipment supplied by the US military. I saw, firsthand, that the idealistic rhetoric of the Kennedy years—with its glowing Alliance for Progress—only cloaked the darker truth of anti-Castro paranoia, leading ultimately to Latin America’s entry into a Dark Age of military dictatorships. Although I loved working in Latin America, I accepted Cole’s invitation to join him in the re-starting of Oxfam America. It struck me that the time had come to head back to the belly of the beast and see what one little organization might do to wake up Americans to the underlying causes of poverty in the world and the truth about our crazy foreign policies.

I have a vivid recollection of the first staff meeting of the newly re-organized Oxfam America. It was in December 1973. Our headquarters were located in a church basement in West Newton: 354 square feet of dark and damp space. The table and chairs that we used were on loan to us from the adjacent daycare center. I sat down on one of those pink kiddy chairs and my chin collided with my knee caps. The table before us was only a foot and a half off the ground.

Three of us attending were the full-time staff, one was part-time and the other was a volunteer. I don’t recall seeing the volunteer after that staff meeting. Perhaps it was the shrill voices of the children next door singing Christmas carols that scared him off. After glancing over a budget sheet filled with numbers that were both tiny and tenuous, I remember thinking to myself, “Good grief, I left a field position in Latin America for this?”

Our most serious handicap starting out was not a shortage of cash—we were willing to work for almost nothing. Far more challenging were the negative impressions and ill will that we inherited from the first effort to start Oxfam America in the United States. To put it bluntly, the Washington, DC-based group that made the first attempt really botched the job. Oxfam had organized popular fundraising events without having the mechanisms in place for adequate accountability. Individual and foundation donors to international assistance projects, whom I met through my previous work, were not interested in speaking with me about Oxfam America. They had already formed a negative impression of the organization from its brief, high profile, rise and fall in DC.

Cole and I came up with what we thought was a very sensible idea. Let’s take the time to meet the heads of our peer organizations. Hey, once they know what we’re doing and hear about our new board of directors and about our plans to re-incorporate the organization in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, surely they’ll help us restore our image and even collaborate with us on projects.
How naïve we were. Cole, being more sensible than I was, gave up when no one seemed to be returning our calls. I persisted until, finally, I got a call back from the office of the president of one of the largest of the US-based international aid organizations. As the secretary put, “Mr. So and So would like to meet with you at your earliest convenience.” At last, an opening! I was on the train to New York the next day.

I was kept waiting in the reception area of this renowned organization for at least an hour. Finally the secretary led me into the president’s corner office—one of those spaces, like the Cathedral at Chartes, that was designed to intimidate ordinary worshipers. She gestured me toward a small chair positioned directly in front of an enormous hardwood desk. Mementos of power and accomplishment were everywhere. My eye caught an autographed photo of my tardy host with Richard Nixon at the White House and another of him with a famous actress in an African village surrounded by gleeful children.

I was beginning to chuckle to myself at the idea of lighting a votive candle when suddenly the president entered the room. He walked right past me and dropped into his plush executive chair without bothering to shake my hand, offer an excuse for his tardiness or to extend any other simple courtesy. “Let me get right to the point, Mr. Gray,” he said, tersely. “I’ve spoken with my colleagues in many of the other international aid organizations and we’re of one mind. If you persist in trying to start up Oxfam in the United States, we’ll make things difficult for you.” If there were any more words from him, or any reply from me, I don’t remember them. If I said anything, it wasn’t much: I was too shocked and too flustered.

By the time I hit the cold air of the street, I was flushed with another emotion. Rage. Not since the worst of my experiences in Nicaragua had I felt such anger. It took most of the five-hour train ride back to Boston for me to regain my composure. Approaching Boston’s South Station, two aphorisms came to me: “Don’t get mad. Get even,” and “The best revenge is success.” Finally, my feelings of anger took focus on one simple question: What can we do to give Oxfam America a fast liftoff?

That was the question that had me reconsider a fundraising idea for our little organization that I had originally deemed a bad idea. The owner of a garment company in Providence, Rhode Island, Jagdish Sachdev, came to us with a proposal that we collaborate with him on the conduct of a campaign to raise money in response to the drought in the Sahel. Borrowing from a kit of community fundraising ideas prepared by Oxfam in England, Jagdish proposed that we call the project “A Fast To Save A People.” He offered to buy up to three full-page ads in the New York Times to drive the campaign. He further proposed that the proceeds be split evenly between Oxfam America and a non-profit organization he founded and managed out of his offices in Providence.

Cole had mixed feelings about the idea. He felt that it was worth doing, provided we were given complete control over the content of the ads and the management and allocation of the funds. However, I felt that the name and the tone of the event were completely wrong for us. The Boston-based members of the board were even more negatively disposed toward the proposal.

My experience in New York had me weighing this Fast idea with fresh and steely eyes. I suggested to Cole that we renegotiate the deal: We set a 10 percent cap on all fundraising and administrative expenses. If Jagdish wants to pay for ads, fine, but he should not expect to
be fully reimbursed unless the event is extremely successful. Moreover, we would receive 70 percent of the net proceeds and be guaranteed that all proceeds be allocated only to long-term development projects and not to short-term relief efforts. Jagdish agreed and the board gave its consent, albeit reluctantly.

By May 1974, we had raised a net of $150,000 and something else that we had not obtained from earlier efforts to start Oxfam in the United States—a mailing list of contributors. Although the Fast To Save A People was supposed to be participatory and educational, it was really just an ad campaign by another name. However, we were intrigued to see that the Fast was well received by a few grade schools and churches. I was especially gratified by those modest indicators of potential. I had been voraciously reading everything I could get my hands on about the history of Mahatma Gandhi. Now convinced that we could organize a powerful grassroots campaign, I coined the name “Fast for a World Harvest” and proposed that we schedule it on the Thursday before Thanksgiving.

The board rejected the Harvest Fast out of hand. They were strongly of the view that Oxfam America should be positioned as a “thinking person’s organization” and that we should eschew any approach to fundraising that was less than dignified. They defined our market as “college educated individuals with international experience.” Cole and Alison were disappointed with their decision. I felt crushed, even trapped. It seemed I had given up stimulating work in Central America to now be condemned to do time in a moldy basement in stuffy old Bean Town.

Being hopelessly of a kinetic sort, I worked out my depression through exercise. I found a child’s balloon-tired bicycle in the church storeroom and spent several days pedaling aimlessly around the area. That’s when I chanced upon a US Committee for UNICEF storefront in Newton Corner. While gazing forlornly through the window upon an odd assortment of greeting cards and handicrafts, I was struck by an idea. We had inherited from Oxfam in England a warehouse full of handicrafts, like these funky umbrellas from Bangladesh made out of bamboo and grass, baskets from somewhere in India, and what not. We didn’t know what to do with the stuff, especially since some of it was moldy and most of it appeared to be rather passé.

Amazingly, we managed to sell our total inventory of handicrafts to the Boston chapter of the US Committee for UNICEF for an even $10,000. Cole, Alison, and I decided that, contrary to the board’s wishes, we were going to use this money to at least start to organize the first Fast for a World Harvest. Perhaps if we prove our ability to develop “thoughtful materials,” we reasoned, and an organizational plan emphasizing education and reflection, just maybe the board would relent and give us permission to proceed.

This time we were not going to have the advantage of full page ads in the New York Times. So how, I wondered, were we going to get the word out? Through some route I no longer recall, I managed to get a meeting with the director of the National Association of Campus Ministries, which happened to be based in the Boston area. I brazenly asked the dignified gray-haired reverend if we could buy their mailing list. Nope, not a chance. Fortunately, I realized that I was acting insensitively and corrected course.

I spoke about our struggle to get Oxfam started in the US and how we had been put down by people who should be our friends. What really impressed the kind gentleman before me,
however, were my words about the spirit of the Fast we were organizing. I spoke about the seasons of harvest, sharing, and celebration that I had experienced in very poor Mayan communities in Guatemala. I spoke about how we wanted to bring that spirit of sharing to people in this rich country—and during the week of Thanksgiving, no less. The image that emerged as we talked was of neighbors—although divided by distance and, in the extreme by circumstance—breaking bread together.

While I’m sad to say that I can’t remember the good reverend director’s name, I vividly recall sitting there for several moments in silence with him. When, finally, he spoke it was to suggest a compromise. He was willing to include our Fast for a World Harvest materials in their next national mailing, provided that our materials were ready in about three months time and that we cover half the cost of the mailing. What he was offering was far better than a mailing list: He was offering the national association’s blessing. If one were to single out the most important breakthrough toward the liftoff of Oxfam America, that was it. Hundreds of campus ministries around the country would later prove to be the sustained engine of support for the delivery of Oxfam America’s educational and, dare I say it, spiritual message.

Soon, Cole, Alison, and I requested a special session of the board’s executive committee. Our materials were drafted, our plan was carefully thought through and mostly funded. We were convinced that the committee members would give us the green light. We were wrong. Once again, we met a wall of opposition. The fall is prime time for large donor fundraising; that’s definitely not a time to risk another populist venture.

Seeing how hard we had worked on the Fast and how disappointed we were, John Thomas intervened with a Solomonic proposal. He suggested that they pick the board member among them who was most opposed to the Fast and ask him or her to meet with us, study our plan and materials and then make the final go/no go decision. No question who that would be: Newell Flather. He was dead set against the Fast and, moreover, I had managed to offend him every which way with my impetuous and immature outbursts. Seeing the thin smile on his face when the committee adopted John’s proposal, I knew that the Fast had fallen into the executioner’s black velvet glove. It was doomed.

If only to bolster our spirits, we set to work in preparation for our meeting with Newell. We compiled statistics on the Fast To Save A People, prepared a plan of action complete with PERT charts, and, with the benefit of Betty’s sharp editor’s eye, we honed our promotional and educational materials. We expected to be meeting with Newell at his foundation offices in downtown Boston. However, to our amazement he called first thing one morning to let us know that he was dropping by our basement offices to meet with us that afternoon.

Judging by Newell’s expression when he entered our offices, it was clear that this was his first visit to the place. His expression seemed to soften when he looked around and saw how tiny and dingy the place was; he looked as if he had chanced into a place imagined by Charles Dickens. But Newell stuck to his guns. He was mildly impressed with our quantitative report on the preceding event but completely uninterested in our event plan and materials. He gave them only a cursory glance. It looked hopeless.

I don’t know what possessed me, but I chose that moment to apologize to Newell for having spoken to him so disrespectfully during past board meetings. “If you’ll give me a few minutes more of your time” I said noting gratefully that I had his attention, “I’d like to show you why
I have such strong feelings about this Fast and why we’ve worked so hard to try to make it happen.” I proceeded to lay out on the table a half a dozen letters that we had received from groups of people who had participated in the Fast To Save A People.

One of the letters was from a teacher in a grade school in Hartford, Connecticut. In lovely and clear cursive, she wrote that her fifth-grade class was composed of children from poor black and Hispanic families. On a whim, she decided to bring the Fast into the classroom and to devote a whole week to the drought in Africa. The stories, the picture books, the urgency of the moment all piqued the children’s interest. They organized to raise money—not just among themselves and their families, but among all of the children and teachers in the school. Attached to the teacher’s missive was a check for over a hundred dollars and 35 letters all written by the children in her class, many illustrated with drawings and all with something original to say about the Fast, about the future of children their age in the Sahel and much more. Newell was clearly touched.

There were more letters like the one from the teacher, but I picked one of a completely different sort to read to Newell. It came from a prisoner in a penitentiary in upstate New York. He explained that he happened to read about the Fast when one of the guards let them have a dated copy of the *New York Times*.

During one of our exercise breaks I started talking about the Fast with a number of my friends. I even spoke about it with a few of the guys I don’t like. We got to talking about how there really are a lot of people out there who are worse off than we are. They’re imprisoned by hunger. Many of us, as fathers, could also imagine feeling imprisoned by the fear that we’d have to watch our children die slowly in front of us from starvation. Serving time behind bars can’t be worse than that! Talking it over among the guys, we decided that since the food here is bad, going without it would be too easy. We chose, instead, to go without cigarettes for one whole week. Now that’s really hard. The guard who gave me the newspaper is enclosing a check with this letter. We know that $65 isn’t much but it sure means a lot to us.

I noticed that Newell’s eyes had moistened. I took care to look away; I didn’t want to put him on the spot. “Okay, okay,” he said, “get on with it. We’ll give it one more try, but that’s it.” Being a Westerner, I had to work hard to overcome my cultural tendency to give hugs. However, I’d been in Boston long enough to know that one just doesn’t go off and embrace a dyed-in-the-wool New England Brahmin. Newell and I would continue to clash over the years, but I never stop feeling a great deal of affection for the guy. Although grateful for the green light from the board, we were sobered by how short we were on the green needed to fund the organization of a national event. We barely had enough money to finance the crucially important mailing to the campus ministries and to our house list. An ad in the *New York Times*? Out of the question. As Cole Dodge put it, as he was preparing to leave for a UN position in Uganda, “You need a miracle.”

Cole’s humorous aside got us thinking along the lines of manifesting loaves of bread and fishes in biblical proportions. Perhaps we should recruit a dozen disciples, that is, individuals from around the country on whom we could count to produce miraculous results on college campuses and beyond? If we managed to get any media attention, they could play a key role in creating the impression of plenty. After combing through the correspondence from the Fast To Save A People and making numerous phone calls, Alison Smith and I managed to enroll 12
people for a “four day intensive” in Boston on the work of Oxfam America and on the planning of Fast events. They were of diverse backgrounds, including a couple of student body presidents, several college campus chaplains, and a few community organizers who had led the fight against the aggressive marketing of infant formula in Third World countries.

To our delight, the twelve individuals we picked warmed to the idea of being included in the planning of a national event. They especially enjoyed meeting members of our Project Selection Committee, such as John Wyon of the Harvard School of Public Health describing the pioneering microcredit program for women that we were funding through the newly formed Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and John Thomas reviewing international aid projects gone wrong, such as the negative consequences of tube wells in the African Sahel. I remember joking at the end of the workshop that we needed some kind of knighting ceremony. We had clearly expanded our circle of zealots, now what might we do to have the press take notice?

Our first big break came with syndicated columnist Anthony Lewis of the New York Times. Betty had sent to him our Fast materials and a copy of an essay I wrote about harvest traditions in the countries where I had studied and worked. The quixotic and offbeat nature of our campaign struck a chord with him and the result was an uncharacteristically lyrical endorsement. This was the baton we needed and we ran with it. Betty prepared our press kit—emphasizing a “sampling” of Fast events planned by our vanguard disciples, of course—and I got ready for a New York press blitz.

Although my parents had come from California to Boston in November for a short visit, I wasn’t about to postpone my trip to New York. It occurred to me that having my 74-year-old father accompany me on the trip just might make my spiel to the press a little more credible. His gray hairs and distinguished demeanor proved to be the ideal complement to my wide-eyed enthusiasm: We were clearly an odd but entirely credible duo since every media outlet we visited—such as UPI, AP, the New York Times—took us seriously and, in a few cases, published several pieces on the inaugural Fast for a World Harvest. The New York Times even ran an editorial endorsement that appeared on the day of the Fast.

For my father, the highlight of our media tour was visiting CBS Evening News, then anchored by Walter Cronkite, and meeting with the producer, who graciously accepted our materials but was entirely noncommittal. As he was leading us back to the lobby, I happened to notice Mr. Cronkite standing next to an open office door. “Mr. Cronkite,” I blurted, my voice sounding squeaky, “I’m here with my father to tell you about Oxfam America’s Fast for a World Harvest.” I don’t remember what he said in reply, but I do remember being struck by his warm informality and by his willingness to take a few minutes to hear my spiel.

On the morning of November 19, two days before the Fast, we received a call from the manager of a CBS News crew: “We’re on our way to the University of Georgia in Macon to cover the Fast. Whom should we contact there?”

“Just a second,” I replied, reaching over to the list of university chaplains that I happened to have on my desk. “Just call this number and ask for the events coordinator.”

I hung up the phone and broke out in a cold sweat. None of our “disciples” were from the State of Georgia and I had no idea if any Fast events were planned on the campus. Hands shaking, I immediately called the number I had nonchalantly given to CBS News. I’m sure
I would have fainted if I had encountered a busy signal since I would have assumed, of course, that CBS had beat me to the punch. Someone did answer the phone, however. Equally fortuitously, she didn’t assume that I was a crackpot when I breathlessly asked to speak to the head chaplain while adding, “And, please, if anyone calls asking to speak with your events coordinator, kindly put them on hold until after I’ve spoken to the chaplain.”

The chaplain was actually glad to hear from me since they did have a few educational activities planned for the day of the Fast, but not much. He was interested in knowing if we had any suggestions on how to increase participation, or better still, a prominent individual to address their planned teach-in on “world hunger.” It took a flurry of phone calls but, by the end of the day, we had managed to recruit Dick Gregory, the black comedian turned activist, to fly in for a speaking engagement that would be hosted by the University’s Black Student Union. I immediately called the chaplain to confirm Gregory’s participation. “Oh, thank God,” he sighed, “because I’ve already told CBS News that he was coming and we’ve got posters up everywhere!”

The eve and day of the inaugural Fast were among the most exhausting and exhilarating days of my life—all the more so since I stupidly decided to go without food that day. I’m sure I had the glazed look of a dervish as we ran about responding to a crush of last-minute requests for press kits; educational materials; stock photos for stories on Oxfam-supported projects; we even helped to produce a Holly Near concert at Amherst College benefiting Oxfam America. Among the calls we received on the day of the Fast were words of congratulation and encouragement from several celebrities, including Paul Newman and Robert Redford. We even got a call from Julia Child who in mock scold let us know that she had been miserable all day. “You can ask me to cook you a meal, but never ask me to go without food again!”

The media coverage that the Fast received was overwhelming and included numerous editorial endorsements, topical feature pieces about the experience of fasting for the first time, the history of fasting, and coverage of the myriad educational events that had taken place around the country. And, of course, there were the four and a half minutes of coverage on the CBS Evening News introduced by Walter Cronkite. Dick Gregory and the rainbow of good people on the Macon campus of the University of Georgia managed to convey exactly what we most wanted the nation to hear: Rather than another admonition to “feed the hungry,” the Fast is really a call to sustained action, to share in the work of creating a healthier world and, ultimately, to share the harvest.

An estimated 250,000 people participated in the inaugural Fast, generating close to $1 million in donations to Oxfam America and, in the aggregate, many times that amount to peer organizations, including appropriately the US Committee for UNICEF which had unwittingly seed-funded the event.

The Fast for a World Harvest went on to be Oxfam America’s signature event. The program has evolved over the years, and is now complemented by the CHANGE initiative (see Nancy Delaney’s piece in this volume). Like so much development work, its success was due to the many hands applied to the work and the crucial interventions of key individuals. In the summer of 2000, during a ceremony at Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts, honoring local heroes organized by the Stone Soup Foundation, I was thrilled to finally acknowledge Mr. Cronkite. Among other things, I said:
To Mr. Walter Cronkite’s everlasting credit, he recognized the Fast for a World Harvest as much more than another fundraising gimmick, another call to alms. He saw it as a much needed shift in popular worldview… the Fast for a World Harvest was and has been every year an inspiring celebration of community, people joining together out of concern and hope while taking action to raise money and awareness at the local level. It’s a world community in action raising the money and the spirit that grassroots heroes need to rebuild community.

And how fitting that it was you, Mr. Walter Cronkite, who played such a crucial role in launching the Fast…Your unique window on the world stimulated many of us to dedicate our lives to social engagement. And, much like FDR with his fireside chats, you forged community. In that way many of us recognize you as the first newsman of the global village.

After waiting 26 years for the right opportunity to say thank you, I’m thrilled to be here on behalf of Oxfam America to present you with a plaque. It’s very simple, just a beautiful picture of school-children in Massachusetts creating a calendar for the Fast for a World Harvest. No gold plating—just the sterling smiles of children who care.
Humanitarian Response in Oxfam America’s Development: From Ambivalence to Full Commitment

Judith van Raalten and Laura Roper

Oxfam America’s evolution has been shaped by emergencies. Since its founding in 1970 in response to the crisis generated by Bangladesh’s struggle for independence, these crises have included: the Cambodian crisis in 1979; the Ethiopian famine in 1984-85; Rwanda and Somalia in 1992 and 1994, respectively; Hurricane Mitch; the East Asia Earthquake and tsunami in 2004; and the Haitian earthquake of 2010. It may be surprising, therefore, that Oxfam America has always had a certain ambivalence about its humanitarian role and positioned itself, first and foremost, as a development organization that only addressed humanitarian crises under a limited circumstance, that included bringing a developmental perspective to its interventions. This paper discusses how emergencies have played a central role in OA’s evolution and driven both organizational and strategic change, particularly after the late 1990s when Oxfam America fully embraced its humanitarian role, a role that has evolved within the context of the Oxfam International Confederation.

INTRODUCTION

Oxfam America’s evolution has been shaped by emergencies. The British Oxfam, hoping to tap into the generous charitable market in the US, founded Oxfam America at the time of the Bhola cyclone that killed an estimated 500,000 people in East Pakistan (soon to be Bangladesh). As is evident from other chapters in this volume, the Guatemala earthquake of 1976, the Cambodian crisis of 1979, the Ethiopian famine of the mid-1980s, and the complex emergencies in Somalia and Rwanda all were key events for the agency. The generous outpouring by
donors in response to emergencies has fueled Oxfam’s growth and expanded its donor base. Each emergency has presented Oxfam with institutional challenges and opportunities that have resulted in evolutionary change. That said, until the late 1990s, Oxfam America had a certain ambivalence about its humanitarian role, that dated from the time of its re-establishment in New England in 1973.¹ Even in those early days, Oxfam believed that disasters were exacerbated by poverty and consequently strong development programs were a much more effective humanitarian response than riding in at the aftermath of a disaster with relief supplies. Oxfam very consciously developed an approach to disaster response that was distinctive from mainstream agencies, in fact, it was a vocal critic of the dominant model of large-scale material support (food aid, donations of clothing and medicines, etc.) as early as the late 1970s.² One implication of its developmental approach was that for more than three decades it avoided having a specialized emergency staff or a separate disaster response unit, necessarily limiting its engagement in emergencies. Yet this model proved to be largely functional across a range of circumstances up until it effectively reached its limits in the mid-1990s in the aftermath of the complex and massive Somalia and Rwanda crises. There was a period of internal critique and reflection which eventually led to a transformation in Oxfam America’s approach, in part spurred by the impact of Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and in part because of Oxfam America’s close engagement with Oxfam International. Now, Oxfam America has fully embraced its humanitarian response role, while at the same time continuing with its innovative positioning on emergencies.

WHERE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE FITS IN THE OXFAM AMERICA DEVELOPMENT MODEL

Two of Oxfam America’s five founding principles—promote the dignity and capacities of poor people and refrain from raising money for disaster relief—argued pretty strongly against a humanitarian relief role for Oxfam.³ The first principle, often referred to in shorthand as “no starving children,” was a reaction to what founding members of Oxfam’s Boston incarnation saw as the dehumanizing exposure of victims in fundraising appeals to evoke pity and therefore donations. The second principle was bred of concern that the agency’s energies might get diverted from its development mission and strategy by the relatively easy money that came from emergency appeals. This second principle proved to be untenable to maintain for several reasons. First, the British Oxfam was widely known as a humanitarian agency; second, Oxfam America could not ignore emergencies in countries in which it worked; and third, the exigencies of organizational survival made it impossible to refuse emergency funds. However, Oxfam America developed an approach that, in the first instance, was informed by a critique of the dominant aid model and built upon its partner-based, grass-roots development approach. Based on its observations of the impact of food aid in the aftermath of the 1976 Guatemala earthquake, which were documented in Fred Cuny’s book, Disasters and

¹ Oxfam America was originally established in Washington, DC in 1970. After the significant influx of funds for the Bangladesh floods and humanitarian crisis during its independence process, the office ran into fundraising difficulties and closed, relocating to the Boston area in 1973.
² See Larry Simon’s chapter, for the fullest discussion of this critique.
³ See John Thomas’s chapter for a complete discussion of the principles.
Development, Oxfam America developed a critique of material support (especially PL480) and argued, instead, for getting funds circulating back in local communities. Rather than getting inundated with large quantities of foodstuffs that often depressed local prices, thereby secondarily harming local markets that may have been unaffected by the disaster, people with cash in hand could buy what they needed locally, which in turn would help jump-start economic revitalization. A second component of Oxfam’s developmental approach was to try and limit its emergency response to areas where they already had experience implementing development programs and work through existing partners. This meant that Oxfam had an understanding of the local context and also had trusted collaborators with roots in the community.

That said, Oxfam America was not rigid in its approach, and made an important exception at the time of the Cambodian crisis (1979) when it entered into work in Cambodia for the first time through a consortium pulled together by Oxfam Great Britain. That experience led to an extended debate and the development of a disaster response policy in 1981. The policy took up “…the difficult task of resolving the tensions between long-term [development] work and disaster relief.”5 The policy defined disaster response broadly to include grants, fundraising, education, and advocacy, confirming that Oxfam’s main goals are “promoting understanding of and support for equitable, self-reliant development among the world’s poorest people, providing grants to meet development and emergency needs,” including self-help recovery from disasters by the very poor.6 The policy further explained that “any disaster project should enhance the capacities of people to help themselves and restore their own productive capacities.”7

The shorthand Oxfam America eventually began to use with its public was the idea of moving from “disaster to development” as quickly as possible, while internally it made every effort to look at disasters through a developmental lens. What this meant in practice was that it spread its emergency investments over a period extending up to a year, or even beyond, to insure that partners continued to receive essential funding once the media’s and public’s attention turned to other matters. Oxfam would look for relatively simple interventions that could leverage a lot of change, such as investing in local building materials and training so that affected communities could build homes that were more earthquake-resistant. Finally, Oxfam’s emergency responses generally had an educational and advocacy component, in which Oxfam would identify the human factors (poverty, foreign policy, armed conflict) that exacerbated or even caused acute human suffering on a wide scale and seek to influence policy-makers to address those causes.

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4 See the contributions by Joe Short and Joel Charny in this publication.
6 ibid
7 Charny (1993), p. 151
Because of the developmental perspective on disasters, disaster response was the responsibility of all Oxfam America staff, rather than a specialized disaster unit. One of the exciting things about working at Oxfam America through the mid-1990s was the way the whole organization mobilized to address emergencies (manning the phones, fielding media inquiries, hopping on a plane within the first 24 hours). Without a disaster division, a lot of responsibility for response fell on representatives based in regional offices and on program coordinators based in Boston. The regional representative had to recommend how Oxfam America should respond, identify partners and collaborating agencies (such as Oxfam UK), and make specific funding recommendations, while the Boston-based regional coordinator was the focal point for communicating with the rest of the agency, donors, and the media.

With larger emergencies, the agency would go on emergency footing, with daily briefings on the situation in the affected country. These briefings would cover the current situation in country, the fundraising numbers, and updates on contacts with policy-makers and how Oxfam America advocacy positions were being received. Oxfam would also monitor the response of organizations such as the Red Cross, CARE, and other large humanitarian players that were at the forefront for addressing immediate needs, so that Oxfam America could determine where there were gaps in the response.

Another aspect of Oxfam America’s humanitarian work was advocacy around US foreign policy that, in Oxfam’s analysis, contributed to humanitarian distress. Oxfam America was a vocal critic of US policy in Central America, while at the same time funding refugee and displaced communities in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, as well as specifically taking on the US trade embargo against Nicaragua with its Tools for Peace and Justice Program. In East Asia, Oxfam was vocal on the humanitarian impacts of the trade embargo against Vietnam and prioritized Cambodia for years of intensive policy work. In trying to address the multiple emergencies in the Horn of Africa, Oxfam America did extensive advocacy on Capitol Hill and with the White House. Often, as was the case with Operation Lifeline Sudan, this involved the collaboration of other humanitarian organizations. Again this
advocacy was complemented by funding directed at affected communities, such as Chukudum in Southern Sudan.8

The Horn of Africa always presented a challenge for Oxfam America, not because of Oxfam’s policies and approach, but rather because of the scale, the political complexity, and the structural nature of recurring food emergencies. While on balance Oxfam America assessed its handling of emergencies in the Horn and elsewhere as sound (although not error-free), by the mid-1990s concerns about working with the relief arm of armed movements in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea, as well as the humanitarian and political crisis in Haiti, presaged the growing complexity the humanitarian sector faced in a post-Cold War world.9 As a small organization, Oxfam America had neither the capability nor the funds to address protracted emergencies in a well-coordinated and professional way on a scale that could reasonably make a difference. Without a professional humanitarian department that regional offices could tap into for expertise, regional representatives and their staff had to rely on their own experience to handle crises. Without more deeply developed relations with Oxfam UK and other OI affiliates, Oxfam America, in turn, could not tap into the broader capacity that existed in the family. In the mid-1990s, this was changing, as the affiliates discussed the possibility of incorporating as a unified Oxfam International that would align the image, messages, and efforts of the widely dispersed and fully independent organizations that bore the Oxfam name.

THE MID-1990S—FACING UP TO LIMITATIONS WHEN CONFRONTED BY COMPLEX EMERGENCIES

Like much of the humanitarian sector, Rwanda was a watershed event for Oxfam America. In 1994, at the height of the genocide there, the Oxfam name was seen on every television around the world. Although Oxfam International would not incorporate until the following year or develop a shared logo until 1999, the visibility of Oxfam UK in Rwanda raised expectations of Oxfam America’s US-based supporters: Oxfam America had to act. Although Oxfam America did not have a program in Rwanda (or anywhere else in Central Africa), after initially redirecting donor inquiries to peer organizations such as CARE and the Red Cross, Oxfam America soon accepted and then actively solicited funds for Rwanda, raised awareness of the Rwandan genocide issue, and struggled to develop a set of advocacy positions directed at the US government.

As Rwanda played out, the ramifications came into focus. Beyond the immense scope of suffering and killings to consider, it was soon clear that a broad array of institutional actors were complicit in the killings—political parties, military forces, and even the church. In addition, the vulnerability of aid personnel and the challenge of addressing the aftermath of the violence presented grim complications for Oxfam America. It chose to disburse its funds through Oxfam UK and Oxfam Quebec and did its best to monitor developments. However, Rwanda crystallized the realization that suddenly the world of humanitarian response had become much more complex. The challenges of addressing the political crisis in Haiti, the deteriorat-

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8 See contributions by Hammock, Arena-DeRosa, and Simon for more detailed discussion on OA humanitarian advocacy.
9 See Charny (1993) for a review of Oxfam America’s humanitarian response up through the early 1990s, see Buchanan in this volume for a discussion about working with the relief wing of armed movements, and see Hammock and Arena-DeRosa for brief discussions of Haiti.
ing situation in Southern Sudan, with Rwanda, coming on the heels of Somalia, where Oxfam America’s response had previously been complicated by its lack of experience in the country, led to an assessment that Oxfam America was not equipped to effectively respond to complex emergencies. Oxfam, going back to its earliest years, reconfirmed that its main focus and expertise would be on development programs and not humanitarian action.

Starting in 1995 Oxfam America stopped actively raising funds when an emergency occurred. When a potential donor called in to donate for an emergency or even arrived at the office with a check in hand, as sometimes happened, the staff at the front desk had an up-to-date list with humanitarian assistance agencies that were active in the afflicted areas. Most funds that came in unsolicited were passed onto another affiliate. The strategic plan, *Partnerships for Impact, 1998-2002*, completed in 1997 under the auspices of Oxfam’s new Executive Director, Ray Offenheiser, seemed to confirm the earlier decision, but also signaled a subtle shift in OA’s strategy. It stated:

> Tragically, humanitarian emergencies will always be a part of the context in which we work. Although humanitarian response will never be a major program focus for Oxfam America, we do believe we have a moral obligation to respond and will continue to do so through the vehicle of Oxfam International.

*Partnerships for Impact* went on to reaffirm OA’s longstanding perspective on disasters and also positioned itself in relation to Oxfam International:

> Our approach to humanitarian assistance is unique within Oxfam International, in that it reflects our commitment to moving communities from disaster situations toward long-term development, to high reliance on local capacities, and to building bridges among parties in conflict. We will position Oxfam America to share this unique perspective with the International by strengthening our capacity to quickly mobilize as emergencies arise. This would involve developing the stand-by capacity of Oxfam America staff and Board, appointing a staff member to serve on the Oxfam International Emergencies Working Group, creating an interdepartmental emergency response team for coordination, creating a budget set-aside for emergency fundraising and public information costs, and bringing in outside expertise to help us refine our approach and enable us to make real contributions to the humanitarian assistance debate.

Now, as Oxfam informed donors, it would accept money for emergencies, directing those funds to other affiliates. Beyond this, it also wanted to influence Oxfam International’s approach to emergencies by carefully seeding funding and staff in Oxfam International bodies.

Donors, many of whom first came to Oxfam because of a large scale emergency, were surprised by Oxfam’s decision not to accept funding for emergencies for its own work, did not understand the argument about Oxfam America having a more effective role to play during the later recovery and rehabilitation stage, and began to drift to other organizations. Another factor pushing Oxfam back into the emergency business was Oxfam International’s expectation that Oxfam America had to engage in emergencies, if not directly, at least as the Oxfam voice directed at the US government. The reality was that, simply by dint of being part of Oxfam International, Oxfam America had to deal with humanitarian issues, particularly emergencies that grabbed the headlines, such as the continuing crisis in eastern Zaire (1996) in the aftermath of Rwanda.
UNIFIED BUT DIVIDED: OXFAM INTERNATIONAL’S EARLY EXPERIENCE IN ADDRESSING A COMPLEX EMERGENCY

As early as 1992, the Oxfam family started the conversation to join efforts and collaborate with one another when an emergency arose. Previously, the different Oxfams came across each other in the field, in particular during emergencies, but rarely attempted to collaborate with one another, although there are some notable exceptions, such as in Central America during the 1980s and early 1990s. In 1995, the actual cooperative agreement was signed by all 10 Oxfams to unite as one family under the name Oxfam International and begin a formal process of closer collaboration. Despite the shared name, each affiliate was governed by its own board and operated under its own strategic plan, and the common name masked many differences among the affiliates in terms of approach and priorities. Consequently, the process of aligning the affiliates under an Oxfam International strategic plan turned out to be arduous, with progress stalling around certain core areas of difference. One of these areas was the extent to which an affiliate was operational, that is, that they had staff on the ground who designed and implemented projects as Oxfam. In the area of humanitarian relief, Oxfam UK, which is internationally known for the scale and quality of its response, particularly in the area of water and sanitation, was the most operational of the affiliates. Other affiliates, particularly Oxfam America and Novib (now Oxfam-Novib) worked almost exclusively through partners.

Aside from differences in approach, at times ideological and philosophical differences came into play. For example, in the 1996 crisis the population of the border regions of eastern Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), in the Great Lakes region, swelled with more than 1 million Rwandan and Burundian refugees. Women and children were among the most vulnerable, without sufficient shelter, food, water, or security. Violent clashes occurred in and around the camps, while the influx of displaced people stretched facilities beyond capacity. Neither local communities nor relevant government bodies were capable of handling the continuous influx of refugees and internally displaced persons. It was clear to Oxfam, particularly the affiliates directly engaged in the region (UK, Belgium, and Quebec), that the situation of the displaced in Eastern Zaire called for immediate humanitarian aid and long-term assistance to reduce their vulnerability and find durable solutions to their refugee question.

However, within Oxfam International, the situation was intensely debated. The essence of the debate was disagreement on the question of whether the federation, collectively, should endorse international military intervention or not. One of the decision rules of Oxfam International was that if two out of 10 Oxfam representatives objected to a proposal, they could, in effect, veto it. Oxfam Belgium voted against military intervention. Oxfam America seconded this decision, with strong board backing, based on one of its strongly held beliefs against the use of military forces for the support of a humanitarian outcome. This debate was the first crisis to occur within the new federation and many hours were spent developing a common position on the crisis.

Initial experiences around collaboration, particularly on humanitarian issues, were sobering for the Oxfam affiliates. Unfortunately, circumstances required that Oxfam International tackle the extremely complex, large-scale, and politically sensitive emergency in Zaire from the outset. On the one hand, it was obvious to everyone that if Oxfam International could get

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10 The 10 affiliates were Oxfam America, Canada, Quebec, UK, Belgium (known as Oxfam Solidarity), Hong Kong, New Zealand, Intermón (Spain), Novib (Dutch), and Community Aid Abroad.
it right, it would amplify severalfold the impact of humanitarian efforts of any individual affiliate. On the other hand, the experience in Central Africa was frustrating for everyone and brought the affiliates face to face with the fact that being part of a confederation could reduce their individual autonomy in significant ways. The growing pains within Oxfam International forced all the affiliates to reflect on their own humanitarian practice but the dispute over Zaire greatly complicated the process of shaping common policies, positions, and procedures on humanitarian response until Hurricane Mitch struck.

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR HURRICANE MITCH FOR OXFAM AMERICA

For several days in 1998, Hurricane Mitch, a Category 5 storm, raged over Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Material damages would be in the many billions of dollars, more than 11,000 people died, and hundreds of thousands were displaced. Even before the storm was over, Oxfam America’s regional office in Central America (San Salvador) felt compelled to act, knowing its partners on the ground needed their assistance. 11

Other Oxfams were also present in the affected area, and initially many projects were set up independently of one another. There was considerable pressure on regional staff from the various headquarters to collaborate with each other, and considerable time was invested in doing so. However, it was challenging and often difficult to share and communicate across agencies. While some progress was made in terms of channeling money, developing protocol, and trying to develop a coordinated response, it was a strenuous process, which was generally regarded by participants as being inefficient. Better coordination was established during the recovery phase, in the aftermath of the immediate crisis. A joint program was eventually developed in Honduras, the country hardest hit by the hurricane, under the able leadership of Sonia Cano. In addition, Oxfam International developed an advocacy strategy that linked ongoing work on debt relief with discussions on the financing of recovery from Hurricane Mitch.

Hurricane Mitch fully brought home to Oxfam America program staff and management that it was impossible to operate exclusively as a development agency. That regional emergency illustrated to Oxfam America, as well as the other affiliates, the need for preparedness plans, improved coordination, and harmonization of policies and approaches, especially in disaster-prone and conflict-stricken areas. For Oxfam America, the events that unfolded during Hurricane Mitch highlighted the need to institutionalize humanitarian response capacity, with an eye to creating synergies through collaboration through Oxfam International structures.

The board, some of its members still remembering the debates concerning Haiti, Rwanda, Somalia, and Sudan, still needed convincing. Bill Thompson, former executive of a major high tech company in Boston and a highly engaged board member, initiated the conversation with his colleagues. He raised concerns that Oxfam America’s donor attrition was due to OA’s limited direct involvement in emergencies, and he argued that OA was not taking advantage of the relationships with the other Oxfams who often were present in time of humanitarian crises. His passionate argument led to the board’s request that Oxfam management design a proposal to reintroduce Oxfam America’s humanitarian values, accept its humanitarian responsibilities, and professionalize the humanitarian work.

11 See Carolina Castrillo’s paper on the Oxfam America response to Hurricane Mitch.
A part-time Special Projects position was created, funded out of Oxfam America’s core bud-
get, to lay the foundations of responding to emergencies. Mike Delaney, as director of Special
Projects, started off alone to coordinate internally Oxfam America’s humanitarian work and
sustain the link with Oxfam International. He became a member of the OI Humanitarian
Action Working Group (HAWG) to participate in the Oxfam International processes.

On Jan. 13, 2001 a major earthquake struck El Salvador. Under an Oxfam International
practice, begun during Mitch, of assigning one affiliate as the country lead during emergencies,
Oxfam America was the lead in El Salvador. While all the affiliates had accepted this idea in
principle, not much thought had been given to what it meant operationally. In the midst of
the crisis, the staff of the regional office spent seven consecutive days in the office developing
a strategy, not only for OA, but for OI as well. This involved conducting needs assessments,
identifying what other affiliates were doing, proposing resource allocation, and coordinating
the operations with partners and headquarters. This plan had to be signed off on by OI and
the plan went through many iterations and extended negotiations, with Mike Delaney and
Ray Offenheiser traveling to El Salvador to support the office. Undeniably, these seven days
were necessary and well used at the time, but what they indicated was a lack of forward
planning necessary for a coordinated rapid response capacity.

It was at this point that Oxfam America fully embraced the implications of being a humanitar-
ian organization. In 2001, Oxfam America added two staff positions, and in 2002, breaking
with decades of practice, established a fully funded Humanitarian Response Department
(HRD) with Delaney as the full-time director. HRD set up an internal Emergency Manage-
ment Team (EMT), which pulled people from different functional areas of the agency, and was
charged with establishing principles, protocols, and procedures, including criteria for when
an emergency should become an OA priority and draw upon agencywide resources. When
such an emergency arose, the EMT mobilized and coordinated internal resources to respond
to particular emergencies.

**AN EVOLVING OXFAM INTERNATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE**

At the level of the executive directors of the extended Oxfam family there was an ongoing
discussion as to what Oxfam International’s model of humanitarian response should be. These
general discussions were punctuated by various emergencies such as Kosovo, Afghanistan,
and Iraq. It was then that some of the underlying tensions and frustrations—over operational-
ity and the role of partners, over particular policy positions directed toward northern gov-
ernments and the United Nations, and over the capacity of individual affiliates to deliver on
promises—would rise to the surface.

Oxfam America, like other affiliates, found the infrastructure that was evolving around
emergencies to be cumbersome and not consistently effective. Any affiliate who wanted to be
on HAWG could be, even if it had minimal involvement in emergency response. There were
multiple sites and layers of decision making, so even if something was agreed to at the level of
HAWG, those decisions had to be revisited, clarified, or pushed within each affiliate. Commu
nications were also a problem. Decisions might be taken at the field level that turned out to be
inconsistent with agreements at the OI level. HAWG also found itself negotiating with other
OI entities, such as the Advocacy Coordinating Committee, around policy positions related to
particular emergencies. However, during this period there was an important shift in mind set:
The affiliates agreed that any emergency response, regardless of how many or which affiliates were actively engaged, was an OI response and had to be governed by agreed-upon, shared standards.

In 2002, the Oxfam executive directors worked closely with HAWG to develop a new, more streamlined model. It was instituted in 2003 with the establishment of the Humanitarian Consortium (HC). Every Oxfam affiliate was invited to submit a proposal to become a member of the HC, but not every Oxfam member passed the selection criteria. Only those that had the ability to invest sufficient funds, could allocate large numbers of skilled staff, and commit to these investments for the duration of a state of emergency (including the recovery phase) were eligible. Those selected were Oxfam Novib, Oxfam Great Britain, Oxfam Australia, Intermón Oxfam and Oxfam America. These affiliates each provided a senior representative who made up the HC Management Group (HCMG) which was expected to:

- effectively coordinate humanitarian responses by Oxfam;
- be Oxfam International’s voice in humanitarian emergencies;
- shape the knowledge agenda within the organization, e.g. best practices;
- address the complex ethical issues that the organization had to deal with; and

Building on past work, the HC has invested heavily in developing a common set of principles and procedures, and hammering out common policy positions on key issues. The consortium also sought to improve Oxfam International’s learning and accountability practices during emergencies, including the joint management of resources. Since then, mechanisms and practices have been put in place to improve field-level coordination and decision making. HAWG had established the practice of identifying a lead affiliate for emergencies in each of the countries where Oxfam has programs and had begun the process of contingency planning. To strengthen country-level response the HC fostered the creation of Humanitarian Country Teams (HCT) that consist of country directors, or their designates, and can include any affiliate that is contributing to an emergency response in the country.

The HCT is the vital link and actor in emergency response. It collects preliminary information on needs, executes the assessments on the ground, analyzes and interprets the incoming data, and remains in close coordination with partner organizations to ensure a well-fitted response to the emergency. Within 48 hours of an emergency, the HCT also develops a comprehensive Action Plan, detailing immediate relief, longer-term plans, and advocacy and communication strategies.

A major test for Oxfam International was the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami of 2004, which demonstrated how far the HC had come in a very short time. The affiliates were not only able to mobilize quickly, but also able to plan for the long-term virtually simultaneously, while at the same time dealing with the massive influx of funds the media coverage of the disaster triggered. According to an evaluation by Peter Walker, within days after the tsunami, the HC management group (HCMG) had a teleconference and agreed, among other things, to the principle of establishing a joint Oxfam International fund for the emergency. During the

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following weeks, while individual affiliates operating in the region engaged in immediate response, information tracking investments was collected and mapped, and the HCMG worked on formalizing a common strategy. This was forwarded to the executive directors on January 27 and approved February 1. The Tsunami Trust Fund was formally endorsed on March 1, and on March 3 the Trust Fund Management Team, consisting of the HCMG and the two regional managers leading on the response, met to review allocations made to date and plan future allocations. By mid-March both the Trust Fund and a global operational framework had been signed off on by the executive directors. In this process, Oxfam America, which did not have programs or staff in any of the affected countries, identified its niche as conducting practical research to provide vital information to the OI program, and subsequently hired several researchers. Ultimately, the Trust Fund would disburse over $280 million.

HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES

One of the achievements of Oxfam International has been the establishment and endorsement of a series of humanitarian principles that all Oxfams subscribe to and aspire to put into practice in the field. Oxfam International is a signatory of the Sphere Standards, the Code of Conduct of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief, and the Principles of Accountability of the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership. Oxfam America and Oxfam International takes these principles very seriously and incorporates the ethos of these humanitarian principles within their structures. For example, in echoes of its earliest days, Oxfam does not use images that are demeaning to individuals, and therefore no pictures are used that portray people as helpless victims. Rather, Oxfam uses images that convey the empowerment of individuals. Oxfam is also one of the international agencies that most consistently raises issue of gender sensitive response and the protection of civilians, including an emphasis on the protection of women against gender-based violence and sexual exploitation.

Under the Oxfam International Strategic Plan (2001-2006), Toward Global Equity, all affiliates worked toward the goals of achieving “…a significant reduction in the number of people who die, fall sick or suffer deprivation as a direct result of armed conflict or natural disasters,” and “…a significant reduction in the number of people who suffer personal or communal violence, forced displacement, or armed conflict.” In the strategic plan, these goals were framed in terms of the right of people to life and security, consistent with the underlying foundation of the plan, which was a rights-based approach to development. This was an easy fit for Oxfam America, given its historical orientation toward addressing not only the immediate suffering, but also the underlying causes of humanitarian crises. It continues to work on the principle that to create a true impact in the lives of those who are affected by disaster and conflict, well-rounded strategies to both prevent and respond to emergencies have to be institutionalized.

14 Humanitarian Dossier (2007)
OXFAM AMERICA EMBRACES ITS HUMANITARIAN ROLE

Oxfam America’s humanitarian response department came of age in a decade characterized by an increased number of complex emergencies of broader scope and longer duration. As climate change gains speed, already vulnerable areas are afflicted with more frequent and more severe weather events. The rules of the game have changed, as respect for the Geneva Conventions and for the standing of humanitarian agencies has declined, both among state and non-state actors. Military engagement in humanitarian response has called into question principles of impartiality and neutrality in aid delivery. All these issues have created a range of dilemmas for humanitarian agencies and afflicted communities.

Oxfam America has had the benefit of building up a program during this period, allowing it to readily adapt its approach to the new realities. It has also benefited from its affiliation with Oxfam International and has been intentional in creating a niche for itself within the Oxfam International context that brings added value to the whole enterprise. While concerned with responding to high priority emergencies, it also works with its partners in key locales, either to address acute crises or to reduce the vulnerability of communities to natural and man-made risks. As of 2010 the main elements of Oxfam’s approach are: an operational role when necessary; partner-based responses focusing on livelihoods; preparedness and prevention; communications and advocacy; research; and an emerging public health initiative, focused on water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH).

An operational role when necessary

The other elements of Oxfam strategy, discussed below, are keeping with a long history of partner-based responses; highlighting the role of poverty, while working to address related vulnerabilities to prevent or mitigate the impact of emergencies; and the desire to transition to recovery and longer-term development as quickly as possible. The move to a more operational role is a departure for Oxfam America, but has been driven by two main factors. One is that after careful evaluation of experiences in Ethiopia, Peru, and the US, Oxfam America had to acknowledge that depending on partners who do not have sufficient expertise in humanitarian response places unrealistic demands on them and can leave critical gaps in an emergency response. The second was the potential disastrous impact Oxfam GB’s expulsion from Sudan would have on those victimized by the conflict in Darfur, had Oxfam America not stepped in to take on an operational role. As a result Oxfam America drastically built up its response capacity in Sudan, and will soon have 70 humanitarian staff positions there.

In Boston, Oxfam America has built up its responsive capacity by hiring a logistician and developed a registry of humanitarian personnel, who can be assigned to emergencies as they occur. In the current case of the Haiti earthquake, Oxfam America has embedded several humanitarian staff in the offices of Oxfam Quebec in Port au Prince, an affiliate suddenly plunged into a large scale emergency situation with little in-house capacity, and has facilitated the shipment of essential supplies to Haiti from the US. Oxfam America is very clear, however, that it is only interested in building up capacities that complement the role other affiliates play; nor does it want to displace partner efforts, but rather find collaborative solutions, such

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The Sudanese government suspended the licenses to operate of 16 international agencies working in Sudan in retaliation for the warrant issued by International Criminal Court against President Omar Al-Bashir in March 2009, for war crimes.
as the co-management of a relief supply warehouse in a high risk area with a partner organization in El Salvador.

**Partner-based responses with a focus on restoring livelihoods**

This is a time-tested element of Oxfam America’s approach to humanitarian response. Local partners, who have knowledge of the social, economic, and political context, are Oxfam America’s key asset in shaping effective response and recovery efforts. In an emergency, through its funding and technical support, Oxfam America focuses on trying to restore a sense of agency and a capacity to revitalize livelihoods as soon as possible. As in its earlier history, Oxfam America tries to provide as much emergency relief through purchases in local markets to stimulate the local economy. For example, in the case of Hurricane Katrina recovery, Oxfam provided gift cards from construction and home improvement retail stores so that those affected by the hurricane could buy emergency supplies such as plastic sheeting, tools, coolers, and generators locally.

Oxfam America also focuses on getting cash in the hands of community members, through various mechanisms, including cash-for-work programs. This is particularly important in conflict zones as it avoids creating tempting targets for armed combatants with massive supply drops, yet gets funds into individuals’ hands so they can buy the supplies they need. Oxfam America tries to identify cash-for-work schemes with multiplier effects. During a severe drought in Ethiopia’s southern Yabello region, individuals were invited to work as employees of an NGO that dug boreholes for the efficient capture and use of spring water. The community increased its access to water, generated employment so young men didn’t drift into violence, and got modest amounts of cash circulating in the economy.

In the longer term, funding for recovery is combined with risk-reduction strategies. This involves a range of measures, such as hurricane-resistant housing, reforestation projects, relocation of community activities and assets to lower-risk areas, and the purchase of community boats strategically located in areas where floodwaters rise rapidly. It also involves working with capable partners, such as REDES in El Salvador and Centro Humboldt in Honduras, that help communities set up community-level emergency response committees concerned with prevention, mitigation, and response. It includes strategies to reduce economic vulnerability, such as introducing improved seed and food storage, and more diversified livelihood strategies. In an innovative investment, recommended by Ethiopian partner, Action for Development, Oxfam funded the purchase of camels, which were used at the time of a drought and continue to be used to transport water from distant, but reliable, water sources.

**Risk reduction through preparation and preparedness**

One of the formative moments for the Oxfam America program came from the experience of Hurricane Mitch in the community of San Vicente in El Salvador. The community was highly organized before the hurricane hit. As the waters in the Rio Lempa began to rise from the upstream release of dams, community members organized committees for evacuation, shelter, health, and security, and were able to evacuate and care for people from low-lying areas. Although the community did not formally have a preparedness program, it deeply influenced

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16 With the Indian Ocean tsunami, much of the damage was concentrated in a kilometer-wide band along the coast, with communities slightly inland being physically unaffected by the disaster.
Michael Delaney’s thinking as he began to develop priorities for his program and think about staffing. The early focus was on assigning program officers to develop working relations with key partners, such as the Centro Humboldt in Nicaragua, to develop local contingency plans.

The contingency-planning process is the linchpin of Oxfam International’s humanitarian response strategy. A contingency plan outlines emergency strategies and procedures to be followed by the regional offices, local partner organizations, and people involved from the local communities. These plans include the division of labor and the mapping of resources under different emergency scenarios. The Oxfam affiliate that is the country lead has the responsibility to develop the contingency plans with other Oxfam affiliates. For its part, Oxfam America has led the process of developing contingency plans in Peru, El Salvador, Ethiopia, the Gambia, and Guinea Bissau, while being actively involved in contingency planning in all the countries where it has partners. To date, Oxfam has developed contingency plans for virtually all of the countries in which it has a presence.

A theme that has emerged from Oxfam America’s experience in both livelihoods work and prevention and preparedness is the importance of peace building and conflict resolution. Vulnerabilities increase in the case of resource scarcity; they increase even more dramatically if resource scarcity leads to conflict over that resource. These conflicts can be further exacerbated if ethnic or national differences come into play. While Oxfam America does not have a large peace-building program, per se, it is often drawn into conflict resolution work in Africa, particularly around resource-related conflict. For example, in Moyale, Ethiopia, the indigenous Boren, Gebre, Guji, and other Somali pastoral ethnic groups have been involved in continuous violence against one another for many years, fueled by conflicts over access to land and water, and exacerbated by the availability of small arms. Oxfam America sponsored peace practitioners, working for the Research Center for Civic and Human Rights Education, to facilitate community dialogue and problem solving. The conflicting groups reached a series of agreements. More generally, the Oxfam America program has been influenced by the work of the Collaborative for Development Action that developed manuals out of two innovative learning initiatives, Do No Harm and Local Capacities for Peace.

Communications and advocacy

As in its early history, communication and advocacy continue to be a central aspect of Oxfam America’s strategy. Oxfam has done high-visibility advocacy on issues such as debt relief for Central America in the wake of Hurricane Mitch, the control of small arms, the humanitarian situation in both Afghanistan and Iraq in the early stages of their respective wars, and the humanitarian crisis in Darfur. It has directed its advocacy efforts principally at the US government and has supported OI advocacy at international bodies, such as the UN. Oxfam also supports advocacy efforts at the local level, such as that of a network of Salvadoran partners (the Mesa Permanente de la Gestion de Riesgos/The Permanent Roundtable for Risk Management), that succeeded in getting the Civil Protection Law passed in 2005 after eight years of lobbying, to insure that government employees, particularly at the local level, are better trained and resourced to respond to emergencies. Domestically, partner advocacy at the state and federal level was an integral part of the post-Katrina strategy, with partner organizations advocating on issues such as housing and workers’ rights as reconstruction slowly advanced.

As part of the process of strengthening collaboration across affiliates on humanitarian response, Oxfam International has adopted a “Rights in Crisis” campaign framework (2008-11)
that will focus on two broad areas: protection of the rights of individuals who find themselves in emergency and conflict situations as mandated by existing laws, covenants, and agreed-upon standards; and increasing the quantity and quality of assistance. This work is being carried out in northern advocacy arenas (e.g., the US and the UN) and at the regional level. This work has increasingly dovetailed with another Oxfam campaigning priority, climate change, where “adaptation” (better disaster preparedness and mitigation) is an important theme.

**Strengthening humanitarian response through research collaboration**

Research has been an important part of Oxfam America’s advocacy work since the 1980s when it assessed the impact of US government policy on vulnerable populations in Central America and Cambodia. Following in this tradition, Solon Barraclough and Daniel Moss conducted research in the post-Hurricane Mitch period, documenting the impact of the hurricane on the agrarian sector and making recommendations for the sector’s recovery — not only from the hurricane but from years of policy neglect. Oxfam America facilitated the participation of Oxfam Quebec in the Collaborative for Development Action’s action research effort, the Local Capacities for Peace Project, around the same time.

Building on this experience, the humanitarian response department has decided that targeted, policy- and action-oriented research is one of the distinctive contributions it can make to the Oxfam family and the broader humanitarian field. One impetus for this shift is the desire to take better advantage of Oxfam’s location in Boston where it has easy access to academic centers of excellence, including the Harvard School of Public Health, the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, the Feinstein Center at Tufts University, the MIT Migration Program, Brandeis University, Clark University’s Livelihoods Program, and the Collaborative for Development Action. The other impetus is simply to capitalize on knowledge gained from Oxfam’s work in settings at high risk for disaster. One such effort was an analysis of Cuba’s emergency preparedness system by Martha Thompson, *Weathering the Storm: Lessons on Risk Reduction from Cuba*, which came out in 2004. With an explicit learning agenda, Oxfam’s humanitarian work adds additional value to the design of projects, investments in local partners, capacity-building strategies, and policy positions.

After the 2004 tsunami, Oxfam America, like many international NGOs, was nearly overwhelmed with donations. It increased its humanitarian staffing to help cope with the scope of the emergency, but after looking at the staffing and activities of the rest of the affiliates, decided to add researchers to conduct in-depth analysis of the needs, opportunities, and obstacles to reconstruction in the region. For example, concerned about the revitalization of women’s employment, Oxfam America conducted research on the coconut fiber (coir) industry in Sri Lanka, including an in-depth analysis of the supply chain. Prior to the tsunami, women made pennies on the sale of skeins of coconut fiber they harvested and spun for sale. Based on this research, Oxfam program staff developed a five-year plan to help fiber workers yield greater market power, including the introduction of a simple, motorized spinning machine that self-help groups can purchase. These interventions have had the effect of organizing workers and also improving incomes beyond what they were earning prior to the tsunami.

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The public health initiative

The public health initiative within the humanitarian response department is an effort to mainstream public health practices within the long-lasting solutions during and after an emergency. While most emergencies have public health dimensions—including malnutrition, infectious disease, and psychological trauma—international agency responses are often reactive and fail to use strong epidemiological studies that would maximize effective response. For example, resources are often deployed after a disease outbreak has begun to trend down on its own. To improve this, Oxfam America has established a collaboration with the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, which has medical personnel who can be deployed to conduct either quick assessments or in-depth research on public health issues.

Data collection is an important aspect of prevention strategies. In Ethiopia, Oxfam supported collaboration between government and local partners to collect data on morbidity rates, level of food reserves, and the price of staples and livestock. The monitoring was based on key indicators identified as early warning signals of drought in pastoral communities, such as the amount of food that adults eat as measured against the amount that children have, since adults tend to reduce their consumption in times of scarcity so that their children can maintain their level of nutrition. This allows Oxfam to flag an emergency before it is a full blown crisis and not only respond itself, but also use the data to muster other resources from other agencies. It has managed to do so in southern Ethiopia, in Moyale, since 2006. Ongoing data collection by government and communities will allow Oxfam to monitor trends over time, building a body of evidence on things such as the impact on health of climate-related crises or incipient crises and better understanding of family and community coping strategies.

Oxfam America’s public health experts are currently developing toolkits to distribute among the regional offices and local partners to strengthen their focus on public health. The toolkit is designed to provide staff with user-friendly material on such basics as how to conduct a survey during a humanitarian emergency and how to analyze and interpret the collected data. The research practices are the next step in the growing of the humanitarian world. The extensive research projects add invaluable knowledge on how to improve and shape Oxfam America’s humanitarian responses.

Humanitarian response and gender

Protecting the most vulnerable, women and children, is a priority of the humanitarian enterprise, but also continues to be a challenge. Gender dynamics in emergency situations are complex. For example, an emergency may create openings where women may take on non-traditional economic and leadership roles, but the same situation may also increase women’s vulnerability to individual and collective gender-based violence. Oxfam America attempts to assure that women are given a voice responding to situations of crisis and vulnerability, such as the dialogues in Moyale, Ethiopia, contingency planning in Central America, and response priorities in Haiti. It seeks to ensure that interventions address the needs of women—by getting cash into their hands, by reducing the burden of such tasks as water retrieval, and guaranteeing their physical security in emergency settlements. Oxfam expects that the public health project will further strengthen its gender-based humanitarian work.
CONCLUSION

After years of responding on an ad-hoc basis to emergencies, Oxfam America has within the last decade developed a permanent humanitarian response capacity. Up through the mid-1990s, without a specialized unit or well-trained staff devoted to emergency response, Oxfam America generally had to respond reactively when an emergency surfaced. The expertise that developed was acquired by regional staff in those countries (e.g. Cambodia) or regions (the Horn of Africa, Central America) facing sustained humanitarian crises. Since re-committing to humanitarian response at the end of the 1990s and establishing a humanitarian response department in 2002, in addition to the 70-person staff in Sudan, there are now nearly 30 full-time staff members divided between the Boston headquarters, the DC office, and the rest of the regional offices. The program is proactive in developing strategy around the priority areas of partner-based responses; disaster risk reduction, communication, and advocacy; research collaborations; and public health; and well positioned to take on an operational role when needed. The humanitarian response department has made strides in institutionalizing reflective practice and uses program-based learning and research, such as establishing the early-warning system in Ethiopia or documentation of its conflict-resolution efforts. Research and evaluation is used to fine-tune contingency plans, improve preparedness strategies, monitor vulnerable communities, and increase the effectiveness of its humanitarian interventions.

The joint efforts of the Oxfam affiliates continue to improve, as was demonstrated with the tsunami response and, more recently, the response to the Haiti earthquake. Oxfam America is increasingly well-positioned to add value to the joint OI enterprise and has been strategic in defining a clear niche for itself. While the humanitarian consortium continues to be a work in progress, on balance Oxfam America is enriched by its closer association with other Oxfam affiliates.

Development thinking still underpins Oxfam America’s approach to emergencies in its own work and within Oxfam International, and relationships continue evolving in interesting ways. Currently, with Oxfam International’s emphasis on the impacts of climate change on poor communities, a closer link is being established between Oxfam’s livelihoods programs and its humanitarian work. Having shrugged off the ambivalence of its early years, and doubts that emerged in the 1990s, Oxfam America has embraced its humanitarian role.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


CHAPTER 5

Perspectives on Oxfam America’s Partnership Model¹

Barbara P. Thomas-Slayter

This paper examines the evolution of Oxfam America’s approach to working with partners over a 30-year period. Despite some difficulties in execution—which will be identified in this essay—Oxfam America has always attempted to work with partners within a context of shared values, trust, and transparency. Around the start of the millennium, Oxfam America modified its customary partnered approach to development in order to introduce a new, strategic model of partnership. In its paradigm shift, Oxfam America re-conceptualized its relations with partners. It redefined partnerships as key elements of a broad vision that included not only grants to partners but also policy advocacy and educational campaigning. These three elements of Oxfam America’s programs were to be co-equals in tackling the structural causes of poverty and injustice. This essay first reviews Oxfam America’s partner-led approach of its early years, provides glimpses of the new model’s impacts in three regions, and finally suggests some new directions as well as challenges and tensions for Oxfam America to contemplate as it continues to modify and strengthen its partnerships and its strategies for social change.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A PARTNER?

Partnerships are alliances formed to accomplish common goals. They exist in many arenas of life, including the world of non-governmental organizations, bridging development efforts among organizations of the global North and South. Ideally, partnerships are based on trust with candid communication, financial transparency and an open spirit. There is a sense of

¹ I am grateful to Laura Roper and to Susan Holcombe for their invaluable insights and observations in regard to this manuscript. Both Laura and Susan have been long-term members of Oxfam America’s professional staff as well as esteemed colleagues. They are true “experts” on the organization itself and on the issues and challenges it has addressed over many years.
community and of learning together, supporting the collective partners in meeting their objectives. In all cases—not just the best of circumstances—there is an emphasis on accountability, honoring commitments, and shared responsibility. A partnership that is working well can lead to better decisions because it has access to more perspectives and ideas. It requires open communication and a willingness to address difficult issues candidly and promptly. It respects autonomy in the context of broad agreement on values and goals. Most of all, there is a shared vision as to how collaborative action can address specific problems and there is a commitment to that vision.

This description, of course, identifies the ideal in a partnership. The reality is that partnerships, like the people who are making them, are imperfect. Despite the best of intentions, partner organizations are embedded in their own cultures and reflect the strengths and weaknesses of that culture. There may be, for example, gender-bias in a partner organization operating in a culture permeated by gender discrimination, or profoundly hierarchical relationships in one where equality in transactions is rare. As Oxfam America’s Global Programs Director noted in 1997:

We need to grapple with the contradictions between our ideals and the realities of our own agendas. On the one side we all have an intense loyalty to our partners with whom we seek long-term relationships. On the other side we and our partners bring our own values, agendas, strategic plans, thematic areas, etc. to the relationship building.²

This essay has two purposes. First, it explores some of the strengths and challenges in Oxfam America’s approach to working with partner organizations, particularly in its early years. Second, it examines Oxfam America’s changing vision of partnerships and the ways in which Oxfam America and its partners are endeavoring to build these relationships strategically and practically to meet their common goals.

OXFAM AMERICA’S EARLY PERSPECTIVES ON PARTNERSHIPS

I first became involved with Oxfam America in the early 1970s when its office was moved from Washington, DC, to Boston. There were a group of us, several who had lived and worked in East Pakistan (by then Bangladesh) or in other countries largely as Peace Corps volunteers, who were eager to assist in the establishment of a viable American Oxfam. At that time, the typical mainstream development organization operated with a traditional notion of a donor-recipient relationship. That is, the arrangements were likely to be characterized by inequality or possibly an attitude of noblesse oblige with the beneficiary linked to the donor through arrangements to assure accountability, but with little involvement in decision making and with virtually no collaborative style. Even among “partners” arrangements were generally hierarchical. A typical development organization viewed organizations in developing countries as “welfare recipients” and regarded itself as a “service” agency.

Oxfam America was different. From its inception, Oxfam America had a distinctive view of what it means to be a partner and to have genuine partners in finding lasting solutions to poverty, hunger, and social injustice. The organization has articulated precepts, at the heart of its identity, for the formation of partnerships. These include an egalitarian spirit, confidence

in the capacities of partners, respect for the diversity among partners and for each partner’s integrity. It has periodically examined the elements of partnerships, the ways they are structured including the terms of association, the articulation of commitments and values, the legal instruments of partnership, the supervisory procedures and reporting requirements. It has focused on opportunities for partner workshops, searched for imaginative ways to collaborate on developing proposals, worked on joint fundraising efforts and staff exchanges. The process of partnership has been characterized by a willingness to learn and openness in addressing challenges and exploring new opportunities. Such ideals and efforts notwithstanding, the reality for Oxfam America partnerships “on the ground” has been characterized by strengths, challenges, flaws, problems, and gaps.

An example of a highly valued, but more traditional Oxfam America partner might be the Philippine Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas (PhilDHRRA) with which Oxfam America worked for many years, closing its program with PhilDHRRA only in 1998. PhilDHRRA is a national network of NGOs involved in rural development throughout the Philippines. It focuses on agrarian reform and rural development in the three major ecological zones: the uplands, the lowlands and the coastal zone. Oxfam America’s collaboration with PhilDHRRA involved community-based coastal resource management (CBCRM) programs in two coastal municipalities in Leyte. The program had three strategic goals: 1) building and strengthening the social infrastructure of the community by building the capabilities of the people’s organizations, NGOs, and local government agencies; 2) securing and ensuring the territorial use rights and management control of small fisherfolk; and 3) increasing the productivity of fisheries and aquatic resources and ensuring improved incomes as well as ecologically sound management. Community-based coastal resource management involves the organization and transformation of local fisher communities into resource user-managers.

Oxfam provided funds to hire community organizers, strengthen fisherfolk organizations, clarify and ensure territorial use rights, form a tripartite partnership with local fishery resource management councils, document the progress of the project, and provide training programs on CBCRM. The program with PhilDHRRA clearly linked community-based resource management with community organization, democratic participation, and equity, Oxfam America’s central themes. Despite the clear compatibility with Oxfam America’s approach and objectives, PhilDHRRA and Oxfam America had to work through problems of accountability, transparency, political bias, and careful use of resources. Such issues did not simply disappear with the wave of a wand of good will but had to be dealt with carefully and systematically. Today PhilDHRRA continues to be an influential and thriving organization, and OA is proud of its past association with it.

**Strengths of the Oxfam America approach with partners**

There are many strengths in Oxfam America partnerships that evolved over the early years. Let me identify five of them:

First, Oxfam America has endeavored to sort out different kinds of partners and partnerships and reasons for choosing them. A strategic partner is different from an “incubator partnership,” from a partnership for scaling-up a program, or even from a grantee that may or may not become a long-term partner. In addition, Oxfam America has worked with partner groups
or partner councils and welcomed opportunities for such collective collaboration. It has maintained an open and self-critical attitude toward learning from all kinds of partnerships, carefully weighing different mixes and types of partners appropriate for a particular setting.

Second, Oxfam America has been quick to work with partners to identify key issues or concerns and then to focus resources on addressing those that have been identified. It often continues working with these organizations as the partnerships and their objectives evolve. In one illustration, Oxfam America has assisted federations of indigenous peoples in South America for nearly thirty years. However, the program has evolved from meeting basic livelihood needs (in the late 1970s and early 1980s) to building the capacities of organizations and communities to organize themselves to gain title to their territories (mid-1980s to the present), to supporting the continuing struggle to claim their rights in the face of territorial pressures by oil, gas, and mining corporations and compliant central governments (late 1990s to the present). Another example comes from Central America where Oxfam America’s early focus was on basic livelihoods and then increasingly working with refugees and the internally displaced during the prolonged period of political repression and armed conflict of the 1970s into the early 1990s. The early 1990s saw work on building civil society and support for democratic accountability and equitable economic programs, which remains an ongoing concern. After Hurricane Mitch in 1998, there has been increased emphasis in actively building partnerships around disaster preparedness and risk management with at-risk groups in communities highly vulnerable to hurricanes and earthquakes.

Third, long before it was more common, Oxfam made a point of staffing its regional offices with people from the region, including regional directors, to the full extent possible. In contrast to many INGOs with field offices, in Oxfam America’s regional offices in San Salvador, Dakar, Addis Ababa, Pretoria, and Phnom Penh, there may be a sprinkling of expatriates, but the vast majority are professionals from the host country, as well as from countries throughout the region who know the local realities and are fully aware of the nuances of working with local partners. Moreover, again in contrast to the more operational model of many international NGOs well into the 1990s, Oxfam has always worked with local organizations, an approach central to capacity building and to empowering not only host country organizations but, more broadly, civil society.

Fourth, Oxfam America made a practice of encouraging all sorts of exchanges among partners and between partners and Oxfam America home and field offices. Beyond facilitating travel by partners to the United States for meetings with Oxfam America home office staff, it also has arranged opportunities for partners to meet with donors, DC-based NGOs, and decision-makers and their staff on the Hill and in the Executive Office. One such visit occurred early in the Clinton administration when partners, accompanied by Central American academics, met with USAID to present their views on aid reform. Oxfam has also facilitated many opportunities for partners to meet other partners for exchange of ideas, networking, and program learning and innovation.

Fifth, Oxfam America fostered an enormous degree of regional programmatic autonomy through the mid-1990s (some might argue too much). Whether a gender focus in India, fisheries in Southeast Asia, or human rights and legal issues in Southern Africa, all have been
part of the Oxfam America portfolio. These varied emphases emerged from deep and collaborative discussion and decision making with host country partners. In many ways these carefully selected activities within a regional theme have represented the very best among Oxfam America’s partner-driven projects and programs. In sum, Oxfam America historically welcomed and encouraged the open and transformative approach and allowed its programs to be defined according to regional priorities, not the other way around.3

**Difficulties and challenges of the Oxfam America partnership approach**

Challenges are numerous and vary somewhat across regions, but others are common across program areas. One challenge, identified earlier, is the need to recognize that partner organizations are embedded in their own cultures. Some of the constraints under which they operate may be inimical to the broad values and goals of Oxfam America. For example, many if not most of the regional offices have long recognized the difficulties of moving forward in meeting objectives pertaining to gender equity. They must search to find ways to strengthen gender equity within their programming and within the values shared by their partner organizations. In some instances, Oxfam America staff members have recognized that their sense of solidarity with a partner organization may have encouraged them to suspend judgment, perhaps becoming insufficiently discerning and even staying with a particular partner longer than is ideal. For example, in South America at times there were concerns about the internal democracy of indigenous federations. This had many causes. One was the tendency of the leadership of some of the indigenous federations to lose touch with their base as they got drawn into the international development circuit as members of global civil society. Another was simply the fact that they were embedded in a dominant culture and polity characterized by severe authoritarianism in the 1980s and only limited democracy in the 1990s.

A second challenge that certainly knows no regional bias is the difficulty of selecting and supporting partners in zones of conflict. How does an organization like Oxfam America continue effective development work without becoming a participant in the conflict? It can also become extremely difficult to avoid situations in which the aid or assistance becomes part of the problem, and a coveted asset sought by all parties to the conflict. In fact, external aid can make conflicts worse and have a negative impact on conflict resolution. According to the Local Capacities for Peace Project of the Collaborative for Development Action, international and local aid agencies must ask themselves two questions:

1. How can they provide assistance to people in areas of violent conflict in ways that help those people disengage from the conflict and develop alternative systems for overcoming the problems they face?

2. How can aid agencies and aid workers encourage local capacities for peace?4

These questions can be rendered more difficult because the conflicts can spill over into the regional and home office. In the early 1980s, Oxfam America was acutely divided in its efforts to “assist” development efforts in Ethiopia and in the region that is now the independent state of Eritrea. Some felt that providing either relief or development assistance to organizations that

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3 In the last decade, due to a desire for greater coherence and impact, Oxfam has been much more explicit about setting strategies at the center, a tendency that has accelerated with Oxfam America’s deeper involvement in Oxfam International. For more discussion on this see the contributions by Susan Holcombe and Ray Offenheiser.

were promoting Eritrean independence was tantamount to undermining the Ethiopian Government; others felt it was important to help an oppressed people in difficult circumstances no matter the political orientation. Tensions within the home office ran high, and, eventually, Oxfam America arranged for an expert mediator to facilitate a workshop on the complexities of the Horn of Africa and ways in which Oxfam America could most effectively carry out its work in that region. In sum, in highly politicized or conflictual settings, NGOs and community-based organizations are likely to be politicized as well, and the complexities of this situation can flow over into Oxfam America-partner relationships. (See the contribution by Rob Buchanan for a discussion of Oxfam America’s work in Ethiopia and Eritrea in the late 1980s and early 1990s.)

Third, specifics around funding often complicate partnership relationships. One aspect of this relates to the timing and size of grants. Initially, Oxfam was so small that it had no choice but to make small grants. A small grant may leverage a lot of change, but there are times when such a grant is too small to make much of a difference, yet it is administratively as demanding as a much larger grant. Because of the grant approval process, which required that grants over $25,000 come to headquarters for management approval and over $50,000 had to go to the Board, we created a cumbersome process that created disincentives for submitting larger grants. Another aspect is how changing donor priorities impacts Oxfam’s grantmaking capacity. In the 1980s, Oxfam made some of the largest grants in its history to Ethiopia, given the massive public response the 1984 famine generated, which carried over for many years. Later (1997), after a number of years of stagnant revenues, the Oxfam America Board made a decision to withdraw from development efforts in Ethiopia because it determined that the aid it could provide was insufficiently focused to be meaningful in the context of great need and because the program was small relative to the administrative costs of implementing it. That decision was revisited when the revenue situation improved, reflecting the concern of some Board members that Oxfam was losing too much in terms of its history and relationships given Ethiopia’s importance in Oxfam America’s evolution. Currently Oxfam America has a strong program in Ethiopia linked to the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative around disaster preparedness, drought monitoring, and improved community water sources. One can imagine the impact on partner perspectives regarding Oxfam America given what they may well have viewed as indecisiveness on Oxfam’s part.

Fourth, there was a significant learning curve associated with setting up and staffing regional offices appropriately. This process required a certain amount of trial and error, and it took time and patience to sort out the details. This was not easy on partners and partnerships. Oxfam America’s first foray in establishing a regional presence was in Zimbabwe in 1981, to help manage a large grant dedicated exclusively to that country. At the time, there was already an Oxfam Great Britain office in Harare and the presence of two Oxfams caused untold confusion among partners, as they were not sure which one they should be dealing with. Then, too, Oxfam America and Oxfam-GB had not sorted out their regional relationship there, or, for that matter, other places. In addition, the Boston office and the regional office in Harare found relations getting tense as they tried to learn not to step on each other’s toes. (Today some of the issues might more easily be sorted out through rapid email exchanges!)

When Oxfam America finally decided to commit to establishing regional offices for all its key regions in the late 1980s, Board concern about the additional expense meant that for a long time it was a struggle for those offices to secure the level of staffing and infrastructure needed
for fostering the type of ongoing collaborative partnership that both organizations want. Having a field presence has been a great boon for Oxfam’s regional work, delivering huge payoffs in terms of the number and quality of partners identified, and the rich relationships that have been established. However, headquarters learned from experience that finding the right people for the post required high levels of due diligence, particularly if the situation in the country was highly politicized. Looking back on it, the offices were ridiculously lean (they had only a regional representative and administrator originally, begrudgingly adding one program officer after several years) and underfunded for establishing the types of ongoing collaborative partnerships we aspired to with our grantees. It was owing to some of the amazing staff we identified that Oxfam could achieve as much as it did in the first decade of having regional offices.

Perhaps Oxfam America’s early efforts to define partnership were summed up most succinctly by a West African regional representative, who stated:

> It is the local organization, not Oxfam America, which is ultimately responsible for the vision, design, and implementation of initiatives at the community level. Oxfam America provides information, funding, contacts, training opportunities, and advice based on our experiences in other parts of the region and the world. Our partners help us gain deeper insights and understanding into local social and cultural realities, enrich our analysis of political and economic contexts, provide us with good local contacts inside and outside of the non-governmental organization (NGO) community, and share with us the knowledge and experience they have gained by working directly, and often for many years, with grassroots communities.⁵

Indeed, at the time of that statement, Oxfam had collaborated with local organizations in many countries to help people identify the root causes of poverty. It had recognized in nearly 30 years of partnerships that communities and their organizations are often the most knowledgeable about their problems and when empowered are able to find solutions. The preferred mode of operation from its early years had been to promote sustainable development through the relationships with partners.

The context for rethinking Oxfam America partnerships

Thus, it may come as a surprise that by the end of the 1990s Oxfam America was in the process of rethinking its mission and its relationship with its partners. What happened? Increasingly evidence across many countries and cultures reflected the stubborn deepening of poverty and deprivation. Oxfam America’s efforts and those of many other organizations—to provide seeds or tools, a new health clinic, agricultural training or literacy programs, and many other forms of development assistance—did indeed help the people directly involved. They did not necessarily, however, address the broad structural impediments to livelihood security, to health, and to social justice. Oxfam America began serious reflection on the ways in which it was addressing development problems. It examined two critical questions:

1. Is it adequate to work through selected partners and encourage local organizations in poor countries to determine their needs and to set the development agenda?

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2. Should Oxfam America focus not only on its partners but also on the structural conditions and policy frameworks that create the conditions keeping people impoverished and depriving them of their rights?

The first step in rethinking Oxfam America strategies around the concept of “partnership” was in the course of developing Oxfam America’s strategic plan for 1997–2001 that was called Partnerships for Impact. The intent here was to begin a process whereby the regions moved beyond the task of finding good partners to funding good strategies for addressing deep-seated and structural constraints pertaining to poverty. These discussions at Oxfam America were taking place within a global political and social context that had become quite strained. Power inequities between Northern and Southern nations and organizations resulted from huge disparities in resources. There was growing concern about the fairness of the global economy in which the industrialized countries controlled international financial institutions and forced the developing countries to open their markets to products from the industrialized nations while tightly controlling the entry of products, such as textiles and agricultural commodities, from developing countries. Many poor countries were deeply in debt and servicing that debt consumed a large part of the value of their exports. The outflow of debt repayment deepened the crisis with debt simply reinforcing the cycles of economic stagnation and broadening poverty. Throughout the 1990s Oxfam America had worked on options for achieving debt relief and had started advocacy and campaigning efforts to meet that objective. Some critics described the global economy as “a race to the bottom promoting a destructive competition, not just between developing and industrialized countries but also among the countries of the Third World.”6 Joseph Stiglitz, university Professor, former World Bank economist and 2001 economics Nobel Prize winner, emphasized that it does not matter if the market is working, one must also ask working for whom? “The West” said Stiglitz, “has driven the globalization agenda, ensuring that it garners a disproportionate share of the benefits, at the expense of the developing world.”7

Meanwhile, there was a growing and deep-seated suspicion of Northern intentions on the part of Southern residents. Many viewed aid, both governmental and non-governmental, with increasing skepticism and regarded it as self-serving. A pervasive lack of trust on both sides had emerged, and it seemed difficult to avoid the paternalism that sometimes accompanies “helping” people. It was widely felt that the traditional, Northern-dominated, “top down” assistance was not providing sustainable improvement in the lives of the poor. Many practitioners and scholars working in the development field were beginning to question the adequacy of aid results. Jeffrey Sachs, Director of Columbia University’s Earth Institute and former head of the UN Millennium Development Goals, challenged this generation to make a commitment to end poverty.8 It was apparent that the continuing vulnerability of the Global South to reliance on primary commodities; the increased vulnerability of low-wage, labor-intensive ghettoes; the new vulnerabilities to international financial capital flows; and the deepening vulnerabilities to the power of Northern governments and institutions to shape their economies and polities were cause for concern for people of the global South. They were also cause for concern for people of the North who were beginning to recognize the links

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8 Jeffrey Sachs, 2005:364.
between acute poverty, social upheaval, anger, and hostility toward Northern nations and institutions, and the urgent need for social and economic justice. There was clearly a need to examine the Northern NGOs’ characteristic roles. Oxfam America was positioned to initiate and fully engage in this debate. It did so with a wide range of timely reports on controversial topics such as resource access, extractive industries, global finance, debt issues, North-South trade and aid relationships, and the impact of arms sales on sustainable development.9

REDEFINING PARTNERSHIPS

Thus it was at the turn of this century that Oxfam America began to redefine its mission and its partnerships. The philosophy behind Partnerships for Impact had begun the shift away from a sometimes deferential “what the partners say is what we should do” mode to Oxfam being more explicit about developing a clear development agenda. Along with this approach was emerging the concept of Oxfam America as a campaigning organization. The redefinition was, in fact, a paradigm shift in which partnership and regional grant making would share center stage with policy advocacy and campaigning in order to address the “policies, practices, and structures that exclude people from rights, resources, and opportunities.10 It was also an effort shaped by the emergence of Oxfam International and the intent of the constituent Oxfams from around the world to align their strategic goals with campaigning and education in coordination with Oxfam International.

Oxfam America no longer saw itself primarily as an agency making grants to partners. Instead it envisioned “three programmatic legs” central to its mission: global programs, policy work, and education/outreach all aligned toward common objectives. In this way, Oxfam America redefined its notion of partnership in order to be able to include broad agendas forged collectively with partners to address structural and systemic barriers to change on a global level. Oxfam America planned to join with other agencies to develop partnerships within the framework of jointly identified and pursued social change goals.11

Was this transformation easy and smooth? No. Whereas global programs had previously defined the nature and scope of Oxfam America activities, now priorities were a negotiated process within the agency and all resources—grants, policy, media, and research—were to be mobilized on behalf of these objectives. Local program work, regional efforts and international campaigns needed to align with Oxfam America’s overall policy/development agenda. The criteria for selecting partners now included their capacities to contribute to the broader policy concerns and not only their effective involvement with a local constituency. Moreover, some regional directors found it difficult to adapt to the new strategy and ultimately there were personnel changes to ease the transition to the more unified “three-legged” approach.

Practically speaking, what does this transformation mean? Let us briefly consider three regional programs—South America, East Asia, and West Africa—to understand how this transformation in strategic approach shaped regional policies.

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9 See, for example, Oxfam America reports including “Extractive Sectors and the Poor,” 2001; “Global Finance Hurts the Poor,” 2001; or “Mugged, Poverty in Your Coffee Cup,” 2002.
10 Strategic Plan, 1997:11.
The South America Program

How, for example, does the South America Program reflect this paradigm shift? The South America program had a long history of supporting indigenous organizations, including the supra-national Coordinating Body of Amazonian Indigenous Organizations (COICA) which was founded in 1984. As mentioned above, the Oxfam program evolved to include both livelihoods and more political organizing and mobilizing around territorial rights. Its support for COICA anticipated the paradigm shift, in the sense that COICA was linked to activists in the North through the Amazon Coalition that, among other things, was directing advocacy at the World Bank around the social and environmental impacts of its lending. However, Partnerships for Impact both embraced this strategy on an institutional level and encouraged stronger coordination and strategizing among the Policy and Communication & Education Departments, while at the same time challenging the regional program to be more explicit about what concrete outcomes it wanted from these alliances. Over several years the extractive industries strategy emerged.

The paradigm shift of Oxfam America’s Partnerships for Impact and redefinition of Oxfam America to include work as a campaigning and policy advocacy organization has not diminished the organization’s concerns about the issues that matter to national and regional indigenous organizations. Rather, the redefinition has strengthened Oxfam America’s endeavors in new ways. Oxfam America now links in-country work with partners on community-based resource management and other economic and political strategies with the efforts of the Oxfam America Policy Department and the Communication and Education Departments. Oxfam America has used research and advocacy to identify the ways in which international financial institutions and international corporations ignore the devastating impacts of mining and drilling for oil on health and child mortality in regions where these extractive industries are located. In Peru, Oxfam America has helped organizations of indigenous peoples pressure the companies building the Camisea Gas Pipeline, along with the InterAmerican Development Bank supporting them, to monitor critical environmental impacts, such as water pollution, soil erosion, deforestation, and damage to wildlife habitats. In this way, Oxfam America believes it is actually strengthening its work with indigenous peoples, by moving beyond general support to the national and supra-national federations to doing more concentrated policy work at the national level. (For a fuller discussion of the South America Program and extractive industries see the paper by Martin Scurrah.)

The East Asia Regional Program

As part of the OA paradigm shift, the East Asia Regional Program (EARO) consolidated its work to better support a range of partners in the greater Mekong River Basin. This led in 2001 to a new departure in regional cooperation among the international Oxfams: The seven Oxfams working in the countries of the Mekong region developed the Oxfam Mekong Initiative under the leadership of Oxfam America. This plan focused initially on protecting and promoting local communities’ control over natural and other resources in order to provide equitable benefits to poor men and women and improve their livelihoods. Its intention was also to ensure greater accountability and transparency at all levels of decision-making including the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, the Mekong River Commission, private corporations, and governments in Mekong Development Projects.12 EARO has worked extensively on land

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titling, access to water and to fisheries, watershed management trainings for the region, and on post-flooding rehabilitation. (For a fuller discussion of this, see Mike Ounsted’s paper.)

We can consider the East Asia Regional Office and its programs in the Mekong River Delta as illustrative of the ways in which the new paradigm is working. According to the EARO strategic plan for 2004–2006, the overarching goal of Oxfam America’s strategy in East Asia is to strengthen the livelihoods of small-scale fishers and farmers in the Mekong region by improving food and income security and enhancing access to and control over natural resources and their sustainable utilization. Issues include such matters as managing fish stocks, protection from commercial poachers, and preventing over-fishing or introducing new rice farming techniques. The focus is on resource access and food security across the six countries with a great variety of partners contributing to that endeavor. They include partner organizations such as the Cambodian Center for Agriculture and Development Studies (CEDAC), which has enabled more than 60,000 Cambodian farmers in 14 provinces of Cambodia to modify their farming techniques to correspond with the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) that promises poor households more productive agriculture.13

Important crosscutting themes include enhancing the status of women, improving gender equity and reducing the marginalization of ethnic minorities. These objectives are linked with campaigning and advocacy with national governments in the Oxfam home countries and with supranational institutions and transnational corporations. So, for example, OA research and advocacy on damming the Mekong and its upstream tributaries, trade issues, agricultural subsidies or on property rights carried out at a supra-national scale has been integrated into EARO programmatic concerns. A synergy between internal activities with partners and external efforts in advocacy, education, and campaigns has emerged.

The West Africa Program

West Africa provides some examples of the evolution of Oxfam America’s partnering model over the last 25 years. Established in the 1980s, the West Africa Regional Program was strengthened and revitalized in 1991 and now focuses on six countries: Burkina Faso, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Mali, and Senegal. OA has established a portfolio of more than 40 partnerships in West Africa with a diverse group of organizations at various stages of development and with different capacities for effecting change.14 Some were established, well-functioning organizations with strong reputations; others were newer, emerging organizations growing in their capacities and experience. Grant making in the early phase focused mostly on individual projects and only later did it evolve towards a more programmatic approach following the introduction of agencywide themes.

Today, the emphasis on food security, livelihoods, democracy, and human rights lends itself to policy concerns around food subsidies and trade issues outside West Africa that the OA Policy Department has been eager to address. Trade barriers and agricultural subsidies in the United States constitute significant structural impediments to development in poor countries such as those in West Africa. Recently Oxfam America commissioned a study of the impacts of US cotton subsidies in the 2007 US Farm Bill on small farmers around the world. The study revealed that reforming these subsidies could have a beneficial impact on the well-being of more than one million West African households (10 million people) by increasing their incomes from

cotton by 8 to 20 percent according to a University of California professor who indicated that “even a modest increase in the world price of cotton would greatly improve their daily lives.” Thus, specific projects on-the-ground are being linked with policy and educational initiatives outside West Africa. Oxfam’s campaigns have been critical in identifying the “rigged rules and double standards” in trade, globalization, and the fight against poverty.

The Program Strategy for 2001–2006 for West Africa made grassroots peacebuilding and conflict management a centerpiece with the goal of building capacity to enable people to deal with the reoccurring episodes of insecurity and strife found at different levels throughout the region. Recognizing that all the countries in the West Africa Program have had to deal with some form of conflict over the past decade, Oxfam America has funded a variety of organizations working specifically on crisis management and conflict negotiation such as the Council of Non-Governmental Organizations for Development (CONGAD) in Senegal or The Association of Non-Governmental Organizations (TANGO) in Gambia. In such ways Oxfam America is linking its work with partners with its broad goals regarding emergencies, humanitarian relief, security, livelihoods, social justice, and human rights.

GENDER AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES TO UTILIZE OXFAM AMERICA’S STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP MODEL

How does the new Oxfam America strategic partnership model address questions of gender equity and justice? Are there opportunities for action yet to be discovered? Gender has long been identified as a crosscutting theme, important in all Oxfam America program and project work. In the 1980s Oxfam America was widely recognized for its work in South Asia on women and livelihood security in the informal sector through organizations such as the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) or the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC). In the mid-1990s, Oxfam America played a prominent leadership role in a critique of the World Bank and Gender Equity, with its publication entitled Gender Equity and the World Bank Group: A Post-Beijing Assessment. Oxfam America formed an advocacy coalition with two networks, “Women’s Eyes on the World Bank—Latin America,” and “50 Years is Enough: US Network for Global Economic Justice.” That extraordinary effort took place in 1997 in the wake of energies generated by the United Nations 5th Conference on Women held in Beijing. From this peak of high profile advocacy around gender issues, gender mainstreaming into Oxfam America programs and initiatives has come to depend more on the commitment of individuals or sets of individuals in a department or region. On the positive side, in Southern Africa, there have been strong efforts around gender legal reform in both Mozambique and Zimbabwe. (For a fuller discussion of this topic, see Margaret Samuriwo’s contribution.) In the case of El Salvador, Oxfam America has fostered the development of a coalition of local NGOs combating violence against women, including intensive work with judges and police to insure that domestic and sexual violence is treated as a crime. On the negative side, failing to address this consistently detracts from overall effectiveness since gender inequality must be viewed as both a root cause of poverty and an expression of social injustice. The Oxfam federation, in its strategic review Promises to Keep, concluded in 2006, acknowledges that its performance on gender has been uneven and recommits to gender justice in its current strategic plan for 2007–12.

15 Laura Rusu, June 2007.
This is encouraging and, as a longtime supporter and admirer of Oxfam America, if I could give Oxfam one piece of advice, it would be that it could really strengthen both its new partnership paradigm and strategic impact by more vigorous organization-wide acknowledgment of the relationships among women’s rights, inequitable gender relations, human rights, and poverty. I see it as imperative to link campaigns, policy advocacy, and partnership commitments to addressing inequitable gender relations according to Oxfam America’s three programmatic legs: global programs, policy advocacy, and popular campaigning.

I feel strongly about this because, while it is possible to point to advances in women’s rights and conditions, numerous examples illustrate that the vulnerabilities of many women and girls is shaped not only by poverty, but also—and perhaps primarily—by vastly unequal gender power relations. The facts speak for themselves. For example, HIV/AIDS affects more women and girls than men and boys in Southern Africa. It is predicted that the next epicenter will be Asia with fastest growth in rates of infection in Cambodia. Trafficking in women for sexual bondage and slavery has been escalating to new heights throughout the world since 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Women, but not men, risk being stoned for adultery in Nigeria; young girls in Nepal are at risk of kidnapping and transport to Bombay for prostitution; daughters are traded (sold) to pay off debts of impoverished male elders in Zambia; dowry deaths occur among women in India; and girls in Bangladesh continue to be victims of vicious acid-throwing assaults. This is an arena in which Oxfam America’s new partnership model could amply demonstrate the organization’s core values. These values are reflected not only in actions addressing class-based poverty issues, but also in those addressing other forms of injustice, including those deriving from the unequal social relations of gender.

In sum, adding to its long-established capabilities in grantmaking, Oxfam America has emerged as a global campaigning force with carefully honed skills and expertise in advocacy, and in building issue-based coalitions and networks on topics designed to transform oppressive global structures. It has carried out widespread and influential campaigns on fair trade, debt issues, global patent rules related to medicines, the impact of small arms sales, and a number of other issues. It would be timely to add gender relations to this list.

**CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS: OXFAM AMERICA PARTNERSHIPS INTO THE 21ST CENTURY**

This essay has explored the ways in which Oxfam America’s conceptualization of partnerships has evolved from an essentially partner-driven development agenda to a broad strategic vision in which there is a close alignment of partners and partnerships with policy, campaigning, and educational objectives. Collaboration through partnerships brings together stakeholders affected by a problem and enlarges the capacities for influencing outcomes that will enable all the partners to pursue their respective missions in a more sustained manner. No longer, however, are partnerships simply for problem-solving according to a narrow definition. Rather, partnerships must be strategic, increasing the capacities of each organization or component and the partnership itself to meet a broad vision of livelihood security and social justice on which all parts of the organization focus.

Through its grantmaking, Oxfam America’s partnerships ground the organization in the realities of poverty and give a legitimacy to its policy work and campaigns that is widely recognized. There is a clear synergy between what is happening in the field with Oxfam
America-supported projects, and the policy and education strategies that the organization undertakes. Findings in the field reinforce policy relevance. Local realities are linked to global policy debates through Oxfam America’s advocacy and campaigning efforts. In effect, the agency has “ground-truthed” its emerging efforts to transform US and international policies with information and perspectives from its partners. So, for example, when focusing its advocacy efforts on the World Bank and the IMF and the international debt borne by the peoples in poor countries, Oxfam America can present evidence from its partner organizations; or, in working on fair exchange in coffee prices, it can draw on information and experience from partner coffee cooperatives in El Salvador or Ethiopia. Such linkages with Southern NGOs and community-based organizations have provided credibility for Oxfam America that many other organizations simply do not have. These relationships are essential to ensuring transparency and accountability.

This essay has also revealed that—despite the best of intentions, as well as trust, good faith, and some excellent outcomes—there are inevitably tensions and conflicts. They may revolve around financial transactions and the need to achieve accountability and clarity within a context of trust. They may involve differences of opinion about how to maintain equity and fairness in decision making. They may involve the difficulties of balancing accountability to civil society organizations on the ground with accountability to donors eager to see measurable outcomes. There can be differences over strategy or a gradual evolution in Oxfam and/or a partner that ultimately ends the partnership. Tolerance, openness, vigilance in nurturing and strengthening these valued relationships are essential. Seizing opportunities to explore new types of partnerships to fit changing contexts is also vital.

In sum, Oxfam America endeavors to develop “strategic” partnerships based on compatible objectives, complementary strengths and weaknesses, and a shared willingness to address not only the needs of specific project holders, but, more broadly, the structural barriers to reducing poverty and injustice. With this vision, Oxfam America partners are critical not only to specific community-based struggles for justice and well-being, but also to regional and international policy and advocacy initiatives to shape a more just world. These organizations, in partnership with Oxfam America, are challenging the structural impediments to achieving secure livelihoods and social justice across the globe.

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THE SHORT YEARS

Establishing an Institutional Identity and Ways of Working
Over the course of its first 15 years, Oxfam America established an institutional identity distinct from the English Oxfam, while recognizing its debt to the original. It moved from an upstart organization working on a shoestring budget to an increasingly well-known and structured institution under the leadership of Joe Short. It was an organization willing to take on the big issues—whether it was mainstream humanitarian aid practices, US policy in Central America, or the humanitarian implications of US involvement in Southeast Asia—and through a combination of intellectual rigor and passion, got a hearing in the elite media and in the highest reaches of government.

Oxfam America also established its practice of empowering its overseas staff to go out and find promising community-based and non-governmental organizations to fund. Guided by regional strategies, overseen by the board, and supported by vigorous exchange and debate amongst peers, overseas staff found these years at Oxfam to be particularly enriching. Oxfam America wanted to put its stamp on the world; it also put an indelible stamp on the people involved in its launching as an increasingly independent development organization.
CHAPTER 6


Joe Short

This chapter traces the organizational evolution of Oxfam America from 1977 to 1984, centering on its humanitarian and development interventions in Cambodia and Nicaragua—two engagements which significantly defined and ignited our efforts as an aspiring development NGO. I try to convey how Oxfam America transformed itself from a little-known and marginal development actor in US and world contexts, to one that received a significant measure of respect for its development strategies and programs, and, to my great personal satisfaction, to one that enjoyed an increasingly secure financial base. This is the story, I believe, of the energizing effects of an organization that feels that its vision, values, strategies, and programs truly align with one another.

INTRODUCTION

In 1984, at the end of my tenure as Oxfam America’s executive director, Robert White, the respected former US ambassador to El Salvador, gave Oxfam America (OA) the highest compliment I could imagine. “It has become,” he told me, “one of the most important and independent voices in America on US relationships with the Third World.” If that were only partly true, it was a gratifying tribute to a small NGO, then only 14 years old. Now, as I write about my years as executive director, 1977 to 1984, I recognize that whatever accomplishments may have merited that tribute evolved from contributions made from the beginning by many OA board members, volunteers, and staff members, and four executive directors. And those accomplishments could be credited, in significant part, to OA’s increasing capacity and readiness—in the parlance of NGO management studies today—to think, act, plan, and manage strategically. By 1984, Oxfam was financially and organizationally strong, and had a clear vision and mission for “equitable development” for the poorest communities of the world. It had a well-honed strategy and programs for combining humanitarian and community aid in Africa, Asia, and Latin America with education, communications, and advocacy. In both the
United States and at the global level, it advocated for action and international policies favorable to grassroots development.

In my time, our strategy was to build directly on the village grants and US development education programs which were well defined by our predecessors by the mid-1970s; but also to significantly expand and better integrate aid, education, advocacy strategies, and programs. Our Cambodia campaign “to save a nation” and the “Tools for Peace” campaign for Nicaragua, had antecedents in the “Campaign for a People” for Bangladesh that led to the founding of OA as an NGO in 1970. We restored the relief and humanitarian elements of that first OA campaign and recombined them with established community development strategies to drive the Cambodia campaign. In FY 1980, the fundraising campaign for Cambodia, which assured OA’s future financial viability and gave it the critical organizational mass to implement its strategic aspirations, was built upon Oxfam’s established fundraising infrastructure, but we dramatically increased fundraising capacities and results. Oxfam America’s first direct mail efforts were initiated in 1973 and helped OA, in 1979 and 1980, to seize the opportunities to raise large sums for assistance to Cambodia and all of its programs, and to build the invaluable donor list of more than 80,000 contributors.

In its Nicaraguan and other Central American ventures, OA defined and honed concepts of advocacy for development that had their origins in OA’s advocacy of appropriate aid responses to natural disasters such as the Guatemala earthquake in 1976. Of course, so much of what the young Oxfam America accomplished in its first 14 years was made possible by the technical assistance, field representatives, and high reputation of the founding British Oxfam. Yet, during my tenure, OA also established, in its own right, a high degree of independence and international recognition for its development expertise and programs. In certain programmatic areas, such as “women in development,” Oxfam UK actually began to look to Oxfam America for leadership. Programmatically, OA developed a diverse and thematic grants portfolio (e.g., aid to village food security) and a fully articulated education and advocacy-for-development program. We developed a stronger institutional infrastructure, a larger and more professional staff, and embraced the habits of an innovative, learning organization—particularly the habit of thinking strategically.

WHAT I FOUND IN 1977 AND EARLY STEPS AS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

When I became executive director of OA and made acceptance remarks at the January 1977 board meeting, I applauded the recent strategic planning done by the board and staff to clarify OA values, beliefs, and mission, and to lay out a grand design for action (OA, Goals for Oxfam America, 1976–2000). The logic behind OA planning and action was made clear in their statements of values and beliefs:

Oxfam believes in the essential dignity of people in their capacity, given appropriate assistance, to overcome problems and pressures which can crush or exploit them. These may be rooted in climate and geography, or in the more complex areas of economics, politics, and social conditions.
Further, speaking to the nature of OA interventions for development, the OA plan declared that

Oxfam’s contributions, restrained by limited resources … can be enhanced in our role as a
catalyst, helping small groups to become self-reliant and to combat oppressive factors in their
environment.

Robert Terry, then board chairperson, was also the prime-mover for strategic thinking and
planning by Oxfam America, within an organizational culture not yet fully ready for that way
of thinking (see his contribution to this volume for his thoughts on this period). I strongly
shared his orientation and I sought to have strategic thinking flourish at Oxfam America.

When I arrived, Oxfam America was only in its seventh year. Headquartered on three crowd-
ed floors in a row house in Boston’s South End, it had a declared mission of assisting self-help
development in poor villages and “grassroots” communities of Africa, Latin America, and
Asia; and of raising Americans’ consciousness about, and action against, hunger and poverty
in those communities. The latter part of the mission was already being called “development
education” and one of its signature education tools was an annual Fast for a World Harvest
in US schools and colleges (See Nathan Gray’s contribution on the origins of the Fast). OA
wished to combat world hunger and foster food-security, and to serve as a “development”
NGO by “helping the poor to help themselves” and to “take control of their own lives.”
Further, OA staff and board wanted to work for equitable development, empowerment of the
poor, and social and political change among grassroots communities of the world. We were
advocates for sustainable development before that became the shibboleth of leading NGOs.

One thing that strongly appealed to me about OA was its readiness to question the relief and
food-aid paradigms that we saw dominating the aid strategies of the largest international
NGOs, like CARE and Catholic Relief Services, and many bilateral and multilateral agencies.
True, we sometimes could be self-righteous about our dedication to development and “their”
(other NGOs’) preoccupation with relief and food aid, belying our founding as a humanitar-
ian organization. (In Washington, DC, OA mounted the “Campaign for a People,” which
initially sought relief and emergency aid for the Bengali people of East Pakistan, who were
breaking away to become Bangladesh.) When in the Cambodia, Lebanon, Ethiopia, and other
campaigns OA began again to use humanitarian and relief strategies and aid, we were always
careful to say that those were complements of our primary mission to promote and support
equitable development. In the foreword to Fred Cuny’s Disasters and Development, I observed,

Encouraging local self-help works at the relief stage, at the same time that it is a bridge to the re-
habilitation and development stages for a completely shattered society…Both relief and develop-
ment assistance should be predicated upon respect for the recuperative and self-help inclinations
of people affected by disaster. ¹

In 1977, Oxfam America was still very small. We had an annual budget of about $500,000.
One of the expectations placed on me by the board was to foster significant financial growth
and stability. This made my first two years as executive director professionally satisfying,
but also partly hellish because of the difficulty of achieving a quantum leap in contributions
and operating revenue for an NGO like Oxfam, with (as we were constantly reminded) low

national name recognition and program visibility. Our small program of community development grants and projects, which were the basis of our efforts to attract donors, required labor-intensive efforts, practically on a case-by-case basis.

The challenge was even more pronounced because Oxfam America, from its beginnings in 1970, had decided to neither seek nor accept US or other government funds, in order to protect its independence to conduct development and education programs in a manner of its own choosing. That laudable, and as time would prove, exceedingly wise strategic policy necessitated that it establish an independent base of private funding. There would be no lucrative government contracts to truly launch the young Oxfam America, such as the well-known CARE had. Imagine the temptation I felt when USAID tried unsuccessfully to persuade us to accept $5 million for aid programming in Zimbabwe.

With the new strategic plan and a concerted focus on growth, by 1979 OA had made progress towards financial viability and doubled its revenues to nearly $1 million. Yet, we still felt that we were living hand-to-mouth, or more pointedly, project-to-project. We now had 15 staff members, but were still heavily dependent on the British network of overseas representatives to identify, select, and support projects. We also had to depend on the high name-recognition and international reputation of Oxfam UK to gain what little recognition we could get from international development specialists, the multilateral agencies like the UN and the World Bank, and certainly the American public on whose contributions and support OA was dependent for its work. OA had some 6,000 individual donors and occasional foundation gifts, and the highest individual annual gift was only $20,000—enough perhaps for a substantial local NGO program, but not enough for OA’s international ambitions to have a significant impact on development processes and discourse among many communities on three continents. In the vernacular of the time, we just couldn’t seem to take off.

Our grant making was also quite modest. In FY 1979 (which ended April 30), Oxfam America made 17 small grants for community development in 12 different countries—e.g., to the Abala Cattle Loan Program in Niger, the Anaradhapura Center for Rural Development in Sri Lanka, and the Potato Growers Cooperative of Peru. On the US side, with only a few educational and consciousness-raising projects, such as its Fast for a World Harvest, OA was nonetheless a recognized leader and exponent of development education among NGOs in the United States.

**OPPORTUNITIES AND WATERSHED EVENTS**

Then came the watershed years in 1979 and 1980, triggered by regime changes in Cambodia and Nicaragua, that enabled OA to begin to fully realize its strategic vision and shape as an NGO. This, now, is how I remember that time and its implications for the evolution of Oxfam America as a strategy-minded, development NGO.

It was unusual that Brian Walker, director general of the British Oxfam, would call from Oxford to our offices at 302 Columbus Avenue in Boston. That was September 1979, and I was in my third year as executive director of Oxfam America. Walker urgently wanted to know if Oxfam America would join the British Oxfam and other international NGOs in a worldwide aid campaign to “save the Cambodian people.” Millions of Cambodians faced starvation after years of repression by the Pol Pot tyranny, recent occupation by Vietnamese forces, and disastrous prospects for the fall rice harvest of 1979. Brian said that he intended to negotiate

directly with the Vietnamese-installed Cambodian government of Heng Samrin to gain approval for a massive program of NGO relief and development aid through Phnom Penh by an Oxfam-led consortium of international NGOs. He now was calling to invite Oxfam America to participate in the consortium—as at first the only American NGO among mostly European members—and to spearhead an effort to reach the American people and policymakers for support. The consortium would eventually include 27 agencies, which together would provide about $42 million in assistance by air and sea through Kompong Som and Phnom Penh between October 1979 and December 1980. I replied quickly, “Absolutely, we’ll join—if I can bring along our board.” I was confident that I could, although there were various issues the board justifiably might raise. One was Oxfam America’s stated goal of focusing on development, leaving relief work to others. Another was concern about OA getting involved in that Cold War hotspot. A few might be timid about so brash an undertaking by the small, fledgling Oxfam America.

After Brian Walker and I hung up, I paced my office floor—excitedly thinking that this could be Oxfam America’s moment for bold action that would position OA to have a much larger and more strategic impact on development in poor countries, to achieve a broader, more influential design of its organization, and to become, at last, financially solvent. Chief fund raiser Bob Hohler would reinforce my enthusiasm within minutes. These were issues I had to bring to OA’s September board meeting just weeks away.

In that fall of 1979, at the onset of the humanitarian crisis in Cambodia, another momentous regime change was simultaneously occurring in Nicaragua, as the Sandinistas consolidated their power after seizing Managua in July from the forces of the exiled dictator, Anastasio Somoza. For some months, we had been monitoring the evolving political situation in Nicaragua through one of the British Oxfam’s most capable regional representatives, Reggie Norton, as so-called “moderate” and “revolutionary” Sandinista forces vied to succeed Somoza who had fled the country. We had been looking for opportunities to expand community aid work in Central America, since Oxfam America had first become involved in the region by aiding El Quetzal, an agricultural cooperative in the Indian highlands of Guatemala. That aid had included funds for grain storage and adult literacy. After the devastating earthquake in Guatemala in 1976, it also included $76,000 for a unique rebuilding program, combined with development education and advocacy about effective “development assistance” in a “disaster-relief situation.” As dramatic political changes occurred throughout the region and now in Nicaragua, Reggie Norton anticipated that there would be openings for genuine social and economic development and opportunities for the several Oxfam organizations to be of help.

For Oxfam America, Nicaragua and Cambodia seemed to present exceptional strategic opportunities. First, Oxfam could be of major service in two struggling countries. Second, it could do so in two settings in which OA ideas of human development might be given full play. And third, the circumstances might help OA gain substantial financial and other support in the United States for its interlocking triad of programs: aid to grassroots communities, education about development for Americans, and advocacy of U.S. policies favorable to equitable, grassroots development. So in late summer 1979, we began to strategize about how we might propose to the OA board of directors a two-country campaign—for Cambodia and Nicaragua. But, to be ready with a clear course of action for board consideration, we felt we needed a closer look at the turbulent situation in Nicaragua and quickly accepted Reggie Norton’s invitation to visit Managua just weeks before the board meeting.
On the day of that September board meeting, Michael Scott, our director of overseas programs, and I flew from Managua (jostled by a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico) to Miami. We had hopes of connecting to Boston in time to meet with the directors to make an impassioned plea for the two aid-and-advocacy undertakings. Our plans for Nicaragua, focused on grassroots communities now freed from Somoza’s dictatorship, were now slightly modified by our trip to also include other work in Central America. As we literally raced across the Miami air terminal to catch our northbound flight to Boston, I worried that we could miss the moment for possibly momentous decisions by our directors.

In Managua, where Somocistas were still occasionally firing guns from friendly embassies where they had taken refuge from the Sandinistas, Reggie Norton, who was from Gibraltar and fluent in Spanish, had helped us size up the fluid political situation in Nicaragua where the young, leftist Sandinista government was consolidating its power and setting such priorities as a literacy campaign and food production by cooperatives. Mike Scott and I came away from meetings with Nicaraguan officials, such as Foreign Minister Miguel D’Escoto, and with NGO and community leaders, believing that Oxfam America could indeed mobilize development assistance for villages and community groups. The Sandinista government would encourage OA to work directly in its own people-to-people style and according to its own project selection criteria, such as that a project should benefit community members equitably, men and women alike. As we contemplated a plan of action to be proposed to our board, of course, we would need to be realistic about the probable aggressive response of the US government to the rise of the Sandinistas. To Cold Warriors in Washington, they looked too much like Castro redux. This “revolution” was occurring under the anxious eyes of the Carter administration and one year before the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan. If anything, we underestimated the havoc which would later be wreaked upon Nicaragua by the Reagan administration and US-sponsored Contras.

In both Cambodia and Nicaragua, we would be operating in zones of Cold War conflict. Oxfam would need political, as well as technical skills, to serve our mission of getting aid and support for grassroots empowerment and development. All of our division directors, several of our board members, and I all had such skills and considerable experience of highly charged political settings in the United States and in many developing countries of the world.

Mike Scott and I arrived in Boston within hours of the start of the board meeting. I can’t recall most of what happened then, and the board minutes of that meeting have been lost, but I remember making a strong appeal to our board for Oxfam America to undertake aid and advocacy programs for both Cambodia and Nicaragua. Bill Gaines, a trustee from Chicago, and earlier one of my first professional mentors at the African-American Institute in New York City, later recalled that he had never seen me so “impassioned” about anything. Why, he said half-jestingly, I had even resolved his doubts. In fact, no strong objections were lodged against the two initiatives. Most of the members sensed a tipping point for Oxfam America—an exceptional but fleeting opportunity. Looking back, years later, we can see that it was a watershed moment when Oxfam America could truly begin to realize its potential.

THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF THE OXFAM AMERICA BOARD

While the board approved the two initiatives unanimously or nearly so, they asked a series of sober and cautionary questions. The board had three major concerns. First, could OA keep
its development priorities, if, as would be the case in the Cambodian campaign, emergency and relief aid would necessarily be a major part of Oxfam assistance and campaigning? Board members and I understood full well that by this decision OA would, like the British Oxfam, embrace relief as well as a development strategy. Yet, everyone ardently believed that OA must keep its fundamental development outlook and posture. For the next years we would be working constantly to find the right balance—and really, symbiosis—between development and emergency relief strategies and programming, and specifically, between aid for small-scale, grassroots development action and, in the case of Cambodia, mega-aid-and-advocacy programs with both relief and development assistance components.

Second, was OA being too opportunistic and would it get caught up with “chasing fire trucks,” as board member Richard Ford, a professor of African studies at Clark University, memorably put it? What he meant, and what we all understood, is that while high-visibility emergencies like Cambodia would make OA fundraising and public communications vastly easier, would that detract from fundraising efforts for OA’s primary development mission targeted at the most out-of-the-way, and least visible poor of the world? Perhaps we also were feeling a bit guilty for believing that the Cambodia campaign would surely help Oxfam America come of age as an organization—with tremendous potential to gain national recognition and raise large sums of money—and for being less sure how much we could actually help the Cambodians. Could we be rationalizing organizational self-interest and our desires for personal adventure as “saving a nation?”

Finally, the board also questioned the wisdom of a small Oxfam America entering the Cold War maelstroms of Nicaragua and Cambodia. In some respects, Nicaragua seemed more foreboding because the radical Sandinista regime in Managua would be seen as a threat to rock-ribbed US dominance in its geographic backyard, Central America. President Carter and his National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski were already maneuvering to neutralize the Sandinistas. In 1981, as we could not anticipate in 1979, the newly elected Reagan administration, treating the Sandinistas as surrogates for the Soviet Union, would quickly bankroll and train a rebel force, the Contras, to overthrow the new Sandinista government.

In response to board concerns about the political risks we might be taking, I answered in two ways. First, I said that the new situation in Nicaragua, certainly by contrast with that during the Somoza dictatorship, was now considerably more conducive and open to OA-style direct assistance to campesino and village groups. Fortunately, I was able to give a firsthand account of our very recent visit to Managua and of our on-the-ground discussions with Reggie Norton, the Nicaraguan government, local NGOs, and peer organizations. So long as the government permitted and even encouraged OA involvement, according to our own values and standards of practice, then OA could work acceptably well within the political setting of Nicaragua. Secondly, I argued that I was fairly sure we could work around anticipated US hostility towards the Sandinistas. Because we did not accept US foreign assistance funds from the Agency for International Development or other government agencies, we could not as easily be proscribed from, or pressured into, not working in Nicaragua by denial of US funds.

Further, the board and I reassured ourselves with the half-serious thought that OA was still too small and inconsequential to be perceived as a political threat by the US government; so, yes, why couldn’t we negotiate the political shoals of Nicaragua, Cambodia, and Cold War politics by, as they say, flying under the radar? After OA was well into the Cambodia aid
campaign, however, I was startled to hear from a prominent American journalist that he had heard a senior State Department official, at a press-only Bangkok briefing, disparage Oxfam America and other NGOs working inside the country. In that same briefing he divulged that US policy was “to bleed the Vietnamese out of Cambodia.” The journalist warned that “Oxfam America should watch its back,” because it was, with the Oxfam consortium, providing aid through Phnom Penh and, therefore, running at cross-purposes with US policy of opposing the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. (For a further discussion of Cambodia, see Joel Charny’s contribution.)

Our board raised another important question about whether our proposed intentions of taking advocacy positions on development issues in Nicaragua and Central America could violate our 501c3 status under IRS tax law—that is, our rights as a tax-exempt NGO which could receive tax-deductible contributions. By 1979, and certainly after the Reagan administration came to power, I had become keenly interested in this question, as we began to expand OA’s advocacy role for Cambodia, Nicaragua, Central America, the Horn of Africa and other parts of the world. I was able to assure the board that with the close counsel of our pro bono lawyers at Bingham, Dana and Gould, in Boston, that we could confidently both expand our advocacy role and minimize risks to OA’s tax-exempt status. In the 1970s, the IRS and US courts had begun to define the boundaries of permissible “political activity” by tax-exempt NGOs, including general advocacy and direct lobbying, and of how NGOs should appropriately account for financial expenditures for such activities. General advocacy such as we proposed to undertake—for example, TV appearances and publications to propose and support certain development-related policies for Central America—was not and has not been considered “political activity” under IRS laws.

To my mind, the board’s approval of the Cambodia and Nicaragua initiatives marked its coming of age as a board that would encourage OA to take calculated risks to promote development and to serve poor communities, while soberly challenging me and the senior staff to be prudent about organizational, fundraising, and political issues. It was not very long after, for instance, before the board asked me to develop guidelines for deciding when and how Oxfam America might again undertake a Cambodia-type aid campaign which would combine emergency relief, grassroots community aid, and development education and policy advocacy. We needed to be ready for that next decision, sooner rather than later. Those board-approved guidelines, “Disaster Response: Principles, Guidelines, and Procedures” (April 25, 1981), helped us decide very shortly on disaster response campaigns for such countries as Lebanon and Ethiopia. Among the goals to be served by OA disaster responses, the board-approved guidelines stated, was “educating and advocating for equitable, self-reliant development and self-help recovery from disasters by the very poor.” Any disaster response or project, it continued, “should enhance the capacities of people to help themselves and restore their productive capacities.”

THE MAIN ELEMENTS OF THE CAMBODIA AND NICARAGUA CAMPAIGNS

The fundraising and communications launch for Cambodia began slowly with several small newspaper ads but soon took off when OA placed a half-page ad in section four of the Sunday
New York Times, at a cost of $12,500. That, our director of resource development Bob Hohler and I agreed, would announce a human survival crisis in Cambodia deserving of worldwide attention; reach a large, national cross-section of policy-makers, internationalists, and donors to humanitarian causes; announce Oxfam America’s capacity and commitment to enable concerned Americans to respond through an experienced and highly competent Oxfam-led international consortium of aid-providers; and in the course of events, make a small and enterprising NGO named Oxfam America better known to media and policymakers and to potential donors. We hoped that the ad would at least pay for itself, and ideally do much more for Cambodia. As it turned out, it truly ignited every aspect of the OA Cambodia campaign.

The phones rang. The press called. The dollars flowed. And that lasted for months. Within weeks, we literally walked duffle bags of checks from our South End headquarters to our bank branch in the nearby John Hancock building.

Our New York Times ad was probably the first alarm within the United States about the human survival crisis in Cambodia, though media and Oxfam had already made it well known in the United Kingdom and Europe. That is why it had such a galvanizing effect for the campaign in the US and for Oxfam America. Coming not long after the destructive US engagements with Vietnam and Cambodia – board chair Newell Flather and I would later see the ribbon of water-filled bomb craters left by Nixon’s secret bombing of Cambodia, as we flew from Bangkok via Ho Chi Minh City to Phnom Penh – American policymakers, journalists, and an attentive public were highly attuned to the geopolitics of Southeast Asia. Many felt justifiable guilt over America’s part in the shattering of Cambodian society. As OA called national attention to the humanitarian and food crises in Cambodia, we felt confident to assert in the Times ad that a nation was at risk of starving. Indeed millions could die while the US government was preoccupied with the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia and the retreat of Pol Pot forces to the Thai border. Our purpose, as Oxfam America, was to appeal to the American people and to advocate to the US government and others that the Cambodian people should not be starved and sacrificed to realpolitik.

Oxfam America, given its membership in the Oxfam UK-organized consortium, was uniquely positioned among American NGOs to provide information about and advocacy for the Cambodian people and campaign. We were represented in the consortium team of seven staff in Phnom Penh by Joel Charny, a talented, young former Peace Corps volunteer, who was seconded to Cambodia from our Boston office to be an executive assistant to the chief representative. In 1980 I participated in several consortium council meetings (in Bonn, Brussels, Amsterdam, and other cities) and visited, with Newell Flather, Thai refugee camps for Cambodians and the Phnom Penh and the Mekong River supply lines for consortium aid. Throughout, there was constant intra-Oxfam communication about the relief and rehabilitation efforts in Cambodia.

The Joint Mission, composed of UNICEF and the ICRC and which coordinated overall international aid to Cambodia, along with affiliated United Nations (WFP and FAO), ultimately spent an estimated $600 million on aid to Cambodians within the country and to refugees in Thailand. More than half of that was spent inside the country. Total NGO expenditures were
significant but of smaller magnitude: $100 million, of which $42 million was provided by the Oxfam-NGO consortium. Oxfam America accounted for over $5 million of the consortium aid. Voluntary aid was directed to supplement Joint Mission inputs in certain sectors, especially agriculture, and to key and timely interventions where the Oxfam consortium stressed the restoration of food production and food security that had been shattered in the years of repression and war. “The voluntary agencies,” wrote Joel Charny and I in 1986, “...actually contributed as much rice seed and more fertilizer, irrigation pumps, insecticide sprayers, hoe heads, and plow tips than FAO.”3 Due to international aid, which allowed for the doubling of the rice harvest between December 1979 and December 1980, “it was clear that the people of Kampuchea would survive.”4

While the ideas for the Nicaragua and Cambodia campaigns were conceived at the same time, the Nicaragua work took a little longer to incubate. Since the Sandinistas had come to power, Oxfam America had increased its own level of funding for Nicaragua and had advocated that Americans should aid grassroots development and criticize the US government for backing the Contras. We intensified our efforts through the national Tools for Peace campaign for Nicaragua, which Jacqueline Jackson and I announced in a 1984 rally at Dolores Park in San Francisco. According to a memo I prepared for staff on December 27, 1983, our multi-pronged strategy was:

- to raise gifts-in-kind for agriculture, health, and education, such as rakes, hoes, irrigation pumps, and garden seeds;
- to give aid and encouragement to three outstanding Nicaraguan organizations;
- to bolster the impressive development process;
- to promote knowledge and understanding of [that] process among Americans; and
- to provide a peace-making alternative for the American people.

Tools for Peace partners in agriculture already had been Oxfam America allies and grant recipients for several years. These included the National Union of Small Farmers (UNAG); the Women’s Association of Nicaragua (AMNLAE); and the Association of Rural Workers (ATC)—all organizations that remain active members of Nicaraguan civil society to this day. For those groups, the Campaign would establish a tool bank for small farmers; aid family and community gardening; and stimulate the creation of gardens on private estates and state farms. Tools for Peace also shipped supplies and equipment for hospitals and rural clinics, and for schools.

Through the development education and advocacy components of Tools for Peace, OA wanted American policymakers, opinion leaders and the general public to understand what was being accomplished for grassroots development in Nicaragua, whatever their views of Sandinista governance and ideology might be. We wanted them to understand the human and development costs of American tax dollars being used to fund Contra attacks in the Nicaraguan countryside. After four years of OA work at and with the grassroots of development—

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4 Ibid, p.260
including much grant-making and numerous staff and board member visits—I felt confident to announce the beginning of the Tools for Peace in Nicaragua campaign in this way:

We have seen the people [of Nicaragua] make great strides toward a better life for themselves and their children...reduce the infant mortality rate by 33 percent...double the number of children attending primary school...and provide land for 40,000 landless rural families.

Nor did I pull punches, when I described the impact of US policies:

The CIA has funneled tens of millions of dollars to the Contras...this undeclared war has already killed 700 Nicaraguans and destroyed more than $600 million of crops, farm equipment, homes, and buildings.

The Contras, and an “economic squeeze” by the United States, I declared, had had “…disastrous effects on the country’s ability to grow enough food.”

ORGANIZATIONAL ASSETS FOR THE CAMBODIAN AND NICARAGUAN CAMPAIGNS

There were compelling reasons why Oxfam America was organizationally and strategically ready to seize the moment to simultaneously aid Cambodia and mount a large aid and advocacy effort, including the Tools for Peace campaign, for Nicaragua. We could build quickly on the innovative work of our OA predecessors. We had a highly talented core staff and a cadre of experienced leaders, and many senior volunteers with professional qualifications. We could amplify OA’s strong beginnings in development education and advocacy and apply those skills to the situations in Cambodia and Nicaragua. The OA board grew in wisdom and stature and was well prepared to take calculated risks by authorizing strategic actions for Cambodia and Nicaragua; some members were able to provide professional expertise in staff-like roles. Again, Oxfam UK was a catalyst for Oxfam America’s leap forward in capacity and performance by inviting us to join the Oxfam-led consortium for Cambodia and by providing essential field staff services in Nicaragua through its Central America representative, Reggie Norton.

Farsighted predecessors

The three executive directors who preceded me, and Alison Smith, the acting director for the year before I started, deserve great credit for building OA’s readiness to grasp the challenges of Cambodia. My immediate predecessor, Roger Flather, began to develop a computer-based capacity for storing the names and addresses of OA donors and to further enhance capacity for direct mail fundraising. Roger and Alison began to methodically cultivate each and every precious major donor—then described as giving or being able to give $10,000 or more. Roger moved Oxfam America from its basement quarters at the Eliot Church in Newton, Massachusetts, to its first real office, in Boston’s South End. I was able to immediately build on their critical efforts.

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5 Oxfam America poster publicizing the Tools for Peace Campaign, which included a reproduction of letter by Joe Short announcing the campaign, 1984.
The right staff

What first prepared OA for the decisive Cambodia and Nicaragua responses, and for the growth and evolution of OA in my tenure, were several good staff appointments of talented and experienced senior program directors—at very small salaries given their qualifications and responsibilities. Together, we improved the professional and management capacities of the organization—notably for translating inspired ideas, past and prospective, into action and workable organizational arrangements. They included Michael Scott as director of overseas programs, Robert Hohler as director of resource development, and Laurence Simon as director of development education (later, we added advocacy to Larry’s portfolio and title). Trin Yarborough, an experienced journalist and former officer in that role with the Institute for Policy Studies, would become public relations and communications officer and bring professional innovations in OA media communications. Brad Merritt, our first chief administrative and financial officer with an MBA, would bring order to OA finances and administration during a period of explosive financial growth, organizational diversification, and a major office move from Columbus Avenue in the South End to Bay Village.

Mike Scott, a UC-Santa Barbara Ph.D. in anthropology and former Peace Corps volunteer in Ecuador, quickly built on the creative work of his predecessor, Gerry Goodrich, to expand, diversify, and better organize OA’s grants program for communities in Africa, Latin America, and Africa. Importantly, Mike’s contributions included further developing strategies, principles, and criteria for grant-making, and drawing on the vast array of international development expertise in the Boston area and around the world to give OA substantial intellectual and technical competence much beyond its material means. Very critical to our quick uptake in the Cambodia and Nicaragua campaigns, Mike gained the confidence and cooperation of his counterparts in Oxfam UK.

Robert Hohler, already a highly experienced professional in fundraising, organizational communications, and political campaigns in Vermont, rapidly created a diverse resource development capacity that was ready to capitalize on the fundraising opportunities of the Cambodian campaign that presented themselves at the end of 1979. Bob quickly recognized the full potential of a Cambodia campaign to truly revolutionize OA’s fundraising capacities. But he had to convince me—and fortunately he did—that direct marketing would be an essential part of OA’s diverse fundraising capacities, which also included major donor, events, foundation, and other techniques.

Direct mail was highly suited to the Cambodia campaign and became the linchpin of OA’s financial transformation which enabled expansion and diversification of programming and aid to community projects far beyond Cambodia. Over 18 months of the Cambodia campaign, OA’s donor list grew from 6,000 to 86,000 individuals, giving it the foundation for attracting many more donors in future years. Those donors accounted for most of the millions raised for Cambodia, and then for moving OA’s total revenue from $446,000 in FY 1977 to nearly $5.5 million in FY 1980, to $6.7 million in FY 1985, and to $16.9 million in FY 1986. As time passed, OA became quite innovative in using direct mail to raise significant funds and to attract attention to, and understanding of, the silent suffering and poverty in the world’s remote villages.

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6 This is not to suggest that everything was smooth sailing. In my first months as executive director there was a strong protest against my leadership by staff, as I instituted changes and tried to manage OA’s precarious financial situation.
Our communications strategy evolved to the point where we could consistently link experiences of small-scale development to larger issues of international policy and practice, such as those that impacted small-scale farmers and nomads.

Larry Simon, successor to Nathan Gray as OA’s director of development education (and later, also advocacy), came with both development and Latin American experience. He developed a clear vision of what OA development education could become and had practical aptitude, skills, and determination to fund and implement educational projects. His vision firmly positioned Oxfam America to use the Cambodia and Nicaragua campaigns—indeed the full range of OA’s Third World projects—as sources for educating Americans about the conditions and needs of the world’s poor, and of alternative ways to respond to world poverty and hunger. From its beginning, OA had understood the importance of learning from grassroots experience to improve ongoing and new projects.

During this period, we extended that concept to drive our fundraising and to inform our educational programs and media communications. Ultimately, the concept also drove our advocacy for international policies that were favorable to food security (e.g., delivering aid inside Cambodia, rather than on the Thai border), to appropriate uses of assistance in disasters, and to land-use policies and human rights in Central America. Development education came to include educational and press tours to learn about development conditions and processes in the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Jamaica, Cuba, and Zimbabwe; educational conferences for students, academicians, and others, which typically would feature Third World partner NGOs as presenters; and several authoritative publications on land tenure in Central America, human rights in Guatemala, and Fred Cuny’s 1983 work, *Disasters and Development*. (For a detailed discussion of the development and impact of these publications, see Larry Simon’s contribution.)

**Oxfam America’s track record with development education**

By 1980, Oxfam America was an acknowledged leader among NGOs in undertaking and advocating development education as an appropriate and vital role for NGOs. OA’s educational philosophy was well defined; development education was a line item within the organizational budget; and Oxfam was an advocate for development education among peer NGOs in the national NGO associations Private Agencies in International Development and InterAction (the latter of which I helped found, name, and imbue with an interest to promote development education by NGOs)⁷. So, at the launch of the Cambodia and Nicaragua campaigns, OA was committed and well prepared to seize educational opportunities for helping Americans to understand the development contexts and the development assistance options for the two countries and their regions. That was important in itself, but we also understood that an educational posture might bring OA more credibility in the eyes of press, policymakers, legislators, academicians, and students. I liked to say then, with tongue partly planted in cheek, that OA wanted to be the “thinking person’s development NGO.” I won’t say who we thought the non-thinking NGOs were.

⁷ As late as 1985, when I conducted a national survey of American NGO development assistance to Africa for the American NGO association InterAction, few NGO leaders believed that development education was a priority role for their organizations, like providing food aid and community development aid were.
During my tenure, we intensified longstanding OA efforts to expand constituency support in US colleges and universities, and to gain credibility and support among intellectuals, leading TV and radio commentators, and journalists. Imagine our satisfaction to hear that when Market Facts of Chicago conducted a pro bono marketing survey of OA’s donors it discovered that those donors were highly educated and responsive to OA’s intelligent, thoughtful, sensible, and informed approach to development (as I remember the characterizations of OA chosen by the respondents). That survey, in fact, led to a communications campaign conceived by Trin Yarborough, under the theme “Aid that Works.”

**A strong and engaged board**

A central reason that Oxfam America was so ready and able to grasp the Cambodia and Nicaragua opportunities in 1979 was the longstanding leadership of its board of directors. When I became executive director in 1977, the OA board was eager to support strong and professional leadership from a CEO and ready to work cooperatively with me, provided that I also would be collegial. That suited my style, and we began what I consider to have been a very productive collaboration of nearly eight years. I was the first of four executive directors to serve more than three years. Earlier in my career, I had closely observed board operations at the African-American Institute and New York University, and had learned that an effective working relationship between board and CEO is a *sine qua non* of NGO success. As an adjunct professor of NGO management and development studies in the Sustainable International Development Master’s Program (SID) of The Heller School at Brandeis University, many years later, I sounded that theme even more strongly among my students.

OA’s board did not become a fundraising juggernaut during my tenure, but it did set the table for its successors. Rather, board members brought an abundance of professional expertise, and most had had extensive experience in international and development affairs. Several had had Peace Corps experience. Some had management and significant board experience. All were passionate about the OA mission of assisting social and economic development among the world’s poorest communities. More than half had excellent deliberative skills.

Typical of NGOs at an early stage of organizational development, some board members still played staff-like roles. Board member Jim Thornblade, an economist at First National Bank of Boston, for instance, was an active member of the staff-driven projects committee, which recommended what grants should be made. Perhaps most fortunate for me and OA, I would serve successively with three able, dedicated board chairs—Robert Terry, Newell Flather, and Catherine Henn—with whom I would work to build our board membership and capacities.

Bob Terry, a former Peace Corps executive, lifelong advocate of voluntary service, and management consultant for Arthur D. Little Inc., should be remembered for his constant and successful efforts to get OA to think and act strategically, and for somewhat less success at getting us to do the formal strategic planning that we should have done. Bob was relentless about urging good board and management practices, and was an ideal board member for that stage of organizational growth and diversification within Oxfam America.

Newell Flather, a volunteer in the first Peace Corps group, in Ghana, a leader in Boston-area philanthropy, and founder and president of Grants Management Associates, was a key member for helping OA get established in Boston’s social, educational, and philanthropic networks. He, like Bob Terry, had good organizational savvy, a commitment to strengthening
board capacities, and a lively interest in developing countries, especially in Africa. Newell and I traveled to Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Phnom Penh in 1980, at the beginning of the Oxfam consortium’s aid efforts inside Cambodia.

There were surreal aspects to that visit: We were the only two passengers in an Italian-piloted relief flight from Bangkok to Phnom Penh. When we arrived, the Phnom Penh airport was virtually empty and manned only by two men; the city itself was only then being repopulated after Pol Pot’s brutal removal of its population to the countryside. We stayed at the Samaki Hotel, an old French colonial-style edifice and then the only residence for international aid groups from Europe, Russia, Bulgaria, and multilateral agencies. On our first night there, we were the only Americans invited to a wedding party of Cambodians on the grounds of the former US embassy. We were almost bodily passed from table to table to be personally welcomed by all the celebrants. Newell should be remembered for his wise judgment and counsel within the board of directors and as its chairman for several years.

Catherine Henn, corporate counsel of the Boston Globe when she became OA’s chairperson, had been one of our pro bono lawyers from the Boston law firm Bingham, Dana and Gould. When the OA board and I decided to broaden its membership to include more women, persons of color and Americans of influence—that seemed urgent for an OA professing to help empower women, black Americans, Third World villagers and others—Catherine was an early and wise pick. She already knew our legal, organizational, and personnel issues intimately, and had a good head for organizational design and processes. She quickly became the first woman to serve as OA board chair.

Professor Richard Ullman was one of several board members who brought much needed, timely professional expertise and external recognition to Oxfam America, just as it was developing its policy advocacy capacities for developing countries, and especially for Cambodia and Nicaragua. Recognizing Dick’s name among OA donors, I called upon him at the New York Times in Manhattan where he then was an editorial writer on foreign affairs under Max Frankel. A bit to my surprise, for one so respected by the US foreign policy establishment, he was very enthusiastic about the OA mission and programs. Very soon, Dick accepted our invitation to join the OA board. A professor of international relations at Princeton University, his mere presence lent our still small and little-known OA a larger measure of credibility among Washington and international policymakers, as we began to speak out on development needs and actions in Cold War hotspots. In 1983, for example, when I led a group of board members to Nicaragua to learn directly about the development and political situation there, and about what Oxfam was doing to aid the villages of that country, Dick was able to arrange for us to see the US ambassador and to make our group of greater interest to the Sandinista leaders whom we met. At the same time, OA staff members—like Latin America program officer Rusty Davenport, who guided that board visit to Nicaragua and to Honduras to visit Salvadoran refugee camps—helped Dick and other board members see development needs and situations through the eyes of villagers, Sandinistas, government officers, NGOs, business people and other Nicaraguans. In the villages of the north, we became aware that US-financed Contras were in the vicinity. We board members were all the more proud to be ambassadors of good will at a time when our tax money was being used by the Contras to try to overthrow the Sandinistas. Board member Larry Brown and I later tried to capture the paradox of that situation in an op-ed for the Christian Science Monitor (Sept. 7, 1983) by quoting an incredulous village leader whom we met: “Why does your Mr. Reagan want to take away our revolution?”
The “revolution,” as he saw it, was for literacy, education, more food through cooperatives, and the development of small-scale agriculture and enterprise.

John Holdsworth, partner in a Boston accounting firm, exemplified another kind of board member talent that enabled Oxfam America to leverage opportunities to plan for the future. John was skilled and committed to build the organizational capacities of OA, specifically its financial management capacities. John should be remembered as the board member who, using his accounting expertise, virtually as a volunteer staff member, refined the budgeting, financial management, and financial reporting systems of the organization. He helped me as an inexperienced financial manager, and Kathy Dowd, our competent bookkeeper, to strengthen the OA accounting system so that it would be capable of handling the crush of contributions that would come in the Cambodia campaign. With an annual budget that leapt from $600,000 to over $5 million in three years, we needed the capacity to distinguish program expenses from those incurred from fundraising and IRS-defined “political activities.” We also needed timely financial reports for our managers, donors, and the general public. During my tenure, Oxfam America succeeded in becoming transparent and accountable to its various stakeholders, long before those terms were in vogue in the national discourse about NGO responsibilities to the public.

I also believe that John’s spadework in budgeting and accounting prepared the way for Brad Merritt, as OA director for administration and finance after 1980, and his able deputy Ro Clarke, to further batten down the accounting hatches when the Reagan administration began to come down on the Sandinista government of Nicaragua. The OA accounting system was by then sophisticated enough to carefully allocate all OA “political activities” appropriately, to avoid jeopardizing our tax-exempt status in the event of an audit which would examine if we were within the court-tested guidelines for how much any tax-exempt US NGO could spend on political action. Thus, after I called on Oxfam America’s Congressman, the late Speaker of the House Thomas “Tip” O’Neill, to talk about development conditions in Nicaragua and the depredations of the Contras there, I asked Brad Merritt to ensure that all my expenses for that trip to Washington were carefully booked as OA “political activities.” I recall that Mr. O’Neill mentioned to me that he was being well briefed about the situation in Nicaragua by Maryknoll Sister Peggy Healey, who he later acknowledged in the press as having a significant influence on his decision to oppose US support of the Contras. Sister Peggy and the Maryknolls were great friends and allies of Oxfam in Central America, with our shared concept of development based on social and economic justice—akin to what many years later would be called “rights-based development.” Later, I was all the more glad to help bring Sister Peggy to the OA board.

If I seem to be rhapsodizing about the role of the OA board members in shaping our mission and organization during my period as executive director, it is partly because they really were indispensable and so effective in preparing Oxfam America for the Cambodia and Nicaragua campaigns. And they were, of course, volunteers.

The role of Oxfam UK

As I recall the factors that enabled decisive and quick OA action for Cambodia and Nicaragua in 1979 and 1980, none was more essential than the leadership and assistance of the mother Oxfam. Just after the Campaign for a People in Washington in 1970, the British Oxfam had
shared its invaluable name with the new American NGO as it incorporated as Oxfam America. Disadvantages in taking the Oxfam name—among international development professionals OA would have difficulty in getting its own independent expertise recognized—were far outweighed by the advantage of being able to earn the immediate respect for competence and integrity established by the British Oxfam since 1943.

From its beginning, and into the first years of my tenure, OA relied heavily upon Oxfam’s professional expertise and extensive field network of representatives to identify development projects for funding, to forge relationships with individuals and NGOs in the developing countries, and to secure ad hoc assessments of emergency and development situations such as those of Cambodia and Nicaragua.

In 1977, I remember, we began to consider project proposals of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement (SSM) of Sri Lanka, as passed to us from the Oxford headquarters of Oxfam. By the next year, we hosted A.T. “Ari” Ariyaratne, the founder-president of SSM at our Boston headquarters, and within 18 months of that I visited Oxfam House in Oxford en route to visit Ari and SSM in Sri Lanka. Often, Oxfam House would introduce us to indigenous NGOs and their leaders, and thereafter, we would forge closer, direct relationships with them. Ari and SSM became close friends and allies for development. Over several years, OA funded major SSM projects, such as a development training center at Anuradapura. As the relationship evolved, Ari and his staff visited the US to participate in our development programs and fundraising efforts, and we in turn introduced them to other development groups and funding sources in the United States, like the Ford Foundation and the World Bank. That was one of the international relationships in which I learned what a true partnership between First and Third World NGOs could be. Too often, nominal partnerships have been defined only by Northern NGOs being the senior partners because they have had the money to disburse. I will always treasure the personal and professional relationships that OA continually had with NGO leaders like Ari.

Oxfam America, during my tenure, continued to be indebted to Oxfam for the expertise of its many professional staff and field representatives, and for the access it could provide to grassroots and NGO leaders worldwide. Oxfam representatives Rolando Lopez in Guatemala and Reggie Norton in Nicaragua, for example, provided OA with the wise qualitative development and political analysis that would constantly inform its grant making, policy advocacy, and development education for Central America. In the early 1980s, Oxfam convened a meeting in Mexico City of affiliated Oxfam organizations with their representatives, the leaders of NGOs, university people, and a few political analysts. That was not a planning conference so much as an opportunity for us to compare our analyses and align development actions for Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, and to meet national and community leaders from Central America. Oxfam America, by itself, would have had nothing like that access to development knowledge and experience of Latin America without Oxfam.

In launching its Cambodia efforts, OA first drew on the expertise of Jim Howard, an engineer and one of Oxfam’s disaster specialists, who had visited Cambodia in August 1979 and returned to Oxfam House and the United Kingdom to sound the alarm about the peril of the Cambodian people. Howard was a veteran of numerous Oxfam disaster responses and all the more credible for being able to detail the threats faced and to point the way to practical responses. According to Howard: “Unless we act now we will see the possible extinction of Kampuchea [Cambodia] before Christmas.” That alarm would become the basis for the
Oxfam consortium to target much of its aid to reviving the food production capacity of the country. That meant not only food aid but repair of irrigation systems, handles for traditional hoes, fish nets, and rice seeds. We were also fortunate in being able to use Jim as a spokesperson in the US to raise awareness of the public and policymakers about the dimensions and urgency of the Cambodia crisis.

ESTABLISHING A ROBUST MODEL FOR DEVELOPMENT ACTION

For me as executive director, one of the greatest satisfactions of the Cambodian and Nicaraguan undertakings was the opportunity to bring into full play the overarching strategy of OA grant making, development education, media communications, informed fundraising, and advocacy of international policies favorable to development in those two countries. By dramatically expanding media communications and advocacy, we began to achieve the full programmatic and organizational gestalt that we had long desired. The Oxfam consortium delivered timely emergency aid to Cambodia, and very quickly and nimbly introduced types of assistance favorable to recovery and self-reliant development. In sum, we increased our access to, and influence with, policy shapers and policymakers, and we fully tested our programming model (what strategists now refer to as the theory of change), seeing it result not only in necessary aid getting into the hands of those who most needed it, but also in forcing debate on key foreign policy issues.

Access and influence with the media

The Cambodia campaign gave OA the unprecedented opportunity to access national and local media at minimal cost. Several of us had media experience and skills to quickly seize this chance, and to fashion a media strategy for rapidly expanding OA recognition, resources, and reach, and perhaps some modest influence on the course of events and policies. I was invited to appear on many radio and television programs: three times on the Studs Terkel radio forum in Chicago (subjects were Cambodia, Nicaragua, and with board chair Newell Flather, Zimbabwe); the MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour, with Charlayne Hunter Gault as my interviewer about Cambodia; and the Phil Donahue TV show (which, for all its huge audience of millions, and despite the fact that Donahue posted the OA appeal and address on-screen, yielded few inquiries or contributions for Cambodia). My colleagues and I appeared on scores of regional and local media programs, and wrote numerous articles for leading newspapers and other periodicals. When we traveled for any purpose, we would try to book as many public affairs appearances on local TV and radio as schedules would permit. Once, over two days in San Francisco, I had eight interviews with TV, radio, and print journalists.

At one point, OA’s access to Cambodia was so unique that the New York Times asked us to help get their Bangkok-based correspondent into the country. Newell Flather and I bore a letter of introduction for him on our trip to Cambodia, and I unsuccessfully tried to persuade Vietnam’s chief political officer in Cambodia to admit either the Times correspondent or Anthony Lewis, the Boston-based Times columnist who had been the first to write in that newspaper of OA’s important role in Cambodia. Our OA motive for doing that was to foster international press attention to the plight of Cambodians inside the country. My meeting with Vietnam’s chief political officer, probably the real power behind the newly-installed Cambodian government, came at the introduction of Ha Van Lau, Vietnam’s ambassador to the United
Nations, whom I had met in New York to seek his help for the Cambodians. No doubt, their motive for meeting me was to explore informal, nongovernmental channels of communication with Americans, and to persuade us of the benign character of the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. I apparently made little or no progress in my private diplomacy for getting a New York Times correspondent into Cambodia, but the mere chance to be an interlocutor indicated the unique access that OA had attained.

I knew that the Cambodia campaign was truly opening doors to the national press when the Washington Post’s respected reporter and columnist Mary McGrory called me for information about Cambodia. Later, she interviewed me briefly at the White House when I was among NGO and religious leaders who met with President and Mrs. Carter in separate meetings in the cabinet room and over dinner. When OA board members and I returned from Nicaragua, she quickly responded to my request to sit down with her at the Post for a report on what we had learned about OA work with campesino groups, about Sandinista politics and policies, and about the toll being exacted by the Contras on villages and food production. Studs Terkel, doyen of national radio broadcasters in Chicago, told me that Oxfam America interviews about Third World issues were among his best, most informative, and objective interviews. Coming from one of the best of radio interviewers, even allowing for Studs’ ebullient hyperbole, that, too, was an indication of OA’s growing success and further potential for development education and advocacy through mass media.

Increased access to celebrities through the Cambodia campaign was another measure of OA’s greater recognition and probably enhanced its popular appeal, though it had relatively small fundraising benefits. At the introduction of columnist Anthony Lewis and author Frances Fitzgerald, film director William Friedkin (The French Connection) invited me to Hollywood to meet producers and actors; that only netted $25,000, including $5,000 from actor Al Pacino. Arlo Guthrie gave a benefit performance at the Trinity Church at Copley Square in Boston, but perhaps due to our ill-prepared methods for passing the hat, that drew few contributions from a large audience of youth.

Oxfam America’s biggest opportunity for raising awareness and dollars for Cambodia collapsed when Bill Friedkin could not put together a national network TV benefit for OA and Cambodia.

Joseph Papp, founder of New York City’s Shakespeare in the Park, included me on a major forum on Cambodia in New York, with Times columnist Anthony Lewis and Richard Holbrooke, then the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs and later to be an American ambassador and advisor to presidential candidates on foreign affairs. In another opportunity for Oxfam America to speak to issues of development and through the good offices of the Dunfey family of Boston, I took part in a conference on human rights and development for Central America, at the Martin Luther King Center in Atlanta. I basked in the celebrity and expertise of my co-panelists—Michael Manley, Prime Minister of Jamaica, and singer Harry Belafonte—but I also felt confident in the credibility of my own contribution, based on the first-hand knowledge and information that OA had gathered on repression of campesino cooperatives in Guatemala, Salvadoran refugees in Honduras, land reform possibilities in El Salvador, and alternatives for assisting grassroots development in Nicaragua.
Access to and influence with policymakers

For Oxfam America, advocating for equitable and sustainable development, and getting direct access to key decision makers was one of the objectives, and ultimately, one of the best outcomes of the Cambodia and Nicaragua campaigns. Peter Galbraith, a key staff person to Sen. Claiborne Pell, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, invited me to testify on Cambodia before the committee. In a similar testimony before the Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, which Senator Edward Kennedy later entered into the Congressional Record-Senate (October 11, 1979, S14367-68), I tried to make both the humanitarian and political cases for US government and private aid to spare the “3 to 4 million Cambodians [who] face starvation.” “Their best hope,” I said, “is that we in America will come to rapid and operational agreement on what we can do to place the survival of a huge number of human beings above geopolitical calculations of the moment.” By “calculations,” I was referring to the unfortunate prospect that US policymakers would prioritize the defeat of the Vietnamese occupation over making the “survival of the Cambodian people… the highest priority.” We would rejoice, I added, if Oxfam’s recent operational experience of starting aid to Cambodia should encourage a “massive humanitarian response by our [US] government,” but nonetheless, “we and others will help rally and channel directly US private support to starving Cambodians.”

I will always wonder, but will probably never know, if OA lobbying of the State Department and President Carter, with other NGOs and religious groups, deterred the US government from closing down Oxfam America’s participation in the Oxfam-led NGO consortium that was providing all its aid through Phnom Penh. That was a real possibility and could be easily done by using the little-known Trading with the Enemy Act, adopted as a war measure during World War I and subsequently used against small Communist countries like Vietnam, Laos, Cuba, and North Korea. We believed that the US government had the motive to halt our program by denying us export licenses for financial and material aid, if it concluded that our humanitarian role in Cambodia was detrimental to US policies preventing Vietnam from consolidating its position in the country. That would have to be done by denying OA the right to pass funds through Oxfam UK to the NGO consortium programs in Cambodia. While we had our own immediate concerns, this was also an issue for other US-based agencies, such as Catholic Relief Service and Church World Service.

Consequently, OA became active in advocating and lobbying for the view that the United States should permit American NGOs to use the Phnom Penh channel, even though that required cooperation with the Vietnamese. We contended that there were urgent and gigantic needs within the country that could only be rapidly and effectively addressed within the country. Further, humanitarian aid at the Thai-Cambodian border was becoming a magnet for Cambodians to go to the border and become refugees. At the level of the State Department, we tried unsuccessfully to ascertain if the US government would permit Oxfam America to give active support to the NGO consortium through Phnom Penh. Kit Sawitsky, our pro bono attorney from the firm Bingham, Dana and Gould in Boston, and I traveled to Washington to put our case to the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs, Paul Wolfowitz. Later, Wolfowitz would have a large role, as deputy secretary of defense, in launching the US invasion of Iraq, and then briefly as president of the World Bank. To us and on the subject
of Cambodia, he was polite, enigmatic, and noncommittal. He couldn’t or wouldn’t respond to our appeals for US government measures to rescue the Cambodian people. On the other hand, he may not have opposed our getting export licenses for OA aid.

When I called Father Theodore Hesburgh, president of Notre Dame, hoping to enlist him, as a respected leader of American public opinion and policy, in the “Save Cambodia” cause, I received an immediate and enthusiastic response. Later, he would visit Cambodia, with our assistance, and exclaim to me about the many household gardens he had seen and which were made possible by Oxfam seed imports. President Hesburgh, I knew, was the board chairman of the Overseas Development Council (ODC), a private think-tank on international development, in Washington, DC. As I hoped, he called the ODC president James Grant and encouraged him and ODC to become involved with the Cambodian situation. Shortly thereafter, Jim became the head of UNICEF and immediately took a positive role for aid to Cambodia. It is probably Jim Grant who arranged for national NGO and religious leaders to meet President Carter, reportedly through the good offices of Mrs. Carter whom he knew quite well. Some thirty of us met President Carter in the Cabinet Room, and later, President and Mrs. Carter hosted a White House dinner for the participants to give recognition to the plight of the Cambodian people and to the humanitarian responses of the American people and NGOs. The dinner event was well covered by the press, and I had the chance to talk with Washington Post columnist Mary McGrory and other press people.

At the Cabinet Room meeting, leaders of the three main American religious groups were our primary spokespersons. The broad appeal was for massive humanitarian assistance to save the Cambodian people, and for both Thai and Phnom channels to be fully utilized for aid. I positioned myself next to the National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and tried to reinforce that appeal with him and perhaps to strengthen the argument that an NGO humanitarian response through Phnom Penh could just as well serve American national interests as to harm them. Our sense was that the most important person in the room, President Carter, was morally and politically responsive to our appeal, and that his and Mrs. Carter’s invitation to dinner was intended to signal his encouragement of an outpouring of American humanitarian aid to Cambodians. I suspect, too, that Mrs. Carter had made saving the Cambodian people one of her personal causes. Against that backdrop, it seemed unlikely that any US government measures, like the Trading with the Enemy Act, would be taken to bar OA and other NGOs from providing aid to the Cambodian people through Phnom Penh. As I recall, we were never called upon to apply for export licenses.

Later, in OA’s home city, Boston, Kitty Dukakis, the First Lady of Massachusetts and wife of Governor Michael Dukakis, made refugees from Cambodia and other Southeast Asian countries one of her causes. At a dinner for Prince Sihanouk that she gave at the State House, I had the incredible good fortune to be seated next to him for an hour. After describing the Oxfam NGO consortium’s aid program in Cambodia, and knowing that there were worries that Cambodia’s historic adversary Vietnam might occupy Cambodia indefinitely, I gingerly asked if the NGO consortium was doing the right thing by providing aid through Phnom Penh and necessarily in a degree of cooperation with the occupying Vietnamese force. “Yes,” he replied quickly, “you must help my people now.” And then words to this effect: “And the rest will sort itself out later.”
Validating the Oxfam model of education, advocacy, and responsive grassroots assistance

The Cambodia campaign enabled OA to advocate for desirable development policies and to better formulate and structure what its general role in “advocacy” should be for other issues. At the macro political and policy levels, Oxfam searched for the right voice and approach in advocacy. We adopted the primary advocacy positions that the Cambodian people should not continue to suffer and die for lack of aid and certainly not due to Cold War maneuverings; further, that international aid be provided within Cambodia through the Phnom channel, as well as to Cambodian refugees in Thailand; and thirdly, that the American people, through NGOs like OA, should act to literally save the Cambodian nation, while our government, though not unsympathetic, was preoccupied with ways of ending Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia. In practical terms, we encouraged other aid providers to offer relief and development assistance that would be sensitive and responsive to indigenous circumstances and indigenous capacities for recovery. We promoted practical, self-help aid – the kind the NGO Consortium was providing – that would revitalize the Cambodian economy: assistance to rice production; animal husbandry, especially for oxen; restoring irrigation systems; and supporting livelihoods from fishing and from using oxen for plowing and transport.

As in Cambodia, the OA strategy for Nicaragua was to provide grant and material aid to grassroots partners, and then to use our learning from that experience to inform our development education programs and policy advocacy, and to motivate Americans to take action for development and peace. For example, for Nicaragua, we advocated and undertook direct external aid to village groups and to development programs, like the Zelaya Rural Health Program and the Village Leadership Training and Agriculture Program. We contended that people-to-people development action should be permitted and encouraged by the US government and Americans, especially so long as the Sandinista government remained hospitable to, and facilitative of, such relationships. We became openly critical of US efforts to deter and even quash Oxfam-style aid to development in Nicaragua, and then of US support of Contra attacks inside Nicaragua, too often with adverse effects for the poor communities that OA sought to aid. While started under my tenure, the Tools for Peace Campaign, as well as policy work Oxfam America did on El Salvador and Guatemala, would strongly shape the agency John Hammock would inherit in 1984. In particular, the Tools for Peace Campaign became a rallying point for fundraising, education, and advocacy for Nicaragua up until the early 1990s.

CONCLUSION

By 1984, Oxfam America had become what I then called a “clipper ship” for development action – aspiring to be nimble and increasingly entrepreneurial, as well as effective and efficient. Perhaps the most important achievement for OA as an organization, in that time, was to attain financial viability and a level of annual revenues reasonably adequate and sustainable for its desired strategic design and programs. By that year, OA could raise at least $5 million annually, wholly from diverse, private sources, and had prepared the way for annual revenues of $10 million or more, by initiating a high-visibility campaign for famine-stricken Ethiopia. Financial empowerment, due mainly to the dramatic funding and donor list growth of the Cambodia campaign, enabled OA to expand its campaigns and community aid projects worldwide, to allocate increasing sums to development education and policy advocacy, and to
consolidate its position as an independent voice on Third World relationships—indepen
dent of the US government and even of the fraternal Oxfam UK.

Second, the Cambodia and Nicaragua campaigns enabled OA to extend and further define its advocacy role. In both campaigns, we sought to define the nature and means of OA policy advocacy, for example, concerning desirable modes of humanitarian and development assistance. Such advocacy needed to be tied to our learning from project and other experiences at the grassroots and to different national and international contexts. Our arguments were strengthened, I believe, by the fact that we could use our funding of partner groups in Cambodia and Nicaragua to model the types of development assistance we sought elsewhere in the world.

Finally, in my point of view, by 1984 Oxfam America began to realize an ideal strategic organizational design, made fully possible by adequate resources and 14 years of testing and refining key strategic elements. There were now clear synergies between our fundraising, overseas programming, education, and policy work. OA could raise millions of dollars annually from a diverse funding base to protect its independence of action. Most of our millions would be granted directly to village self-help development projects or through peer and partner NGOs and associations, to insure that funds arrived at the community level. Oxfam America would seek to learn about development issues and problems from its project, program, and partner relationships and to share that learning with Americans and others through development education and policy advocacy. We would seek to link individual project learning to larger themes, actions, and policies, such as for women in development, and food security for all. All communications—fundraising, programmatic, and public relations—would contribute to global understanding of and concern for the capacities of the poor and powerless to undertake their own development. We would selectively and periodically engage in large-scale humanitarian and development campaigns, like those for Cambodia and Nicaragua, but only in those cases where OA might make a significant, unique contribution within its means. Within the United States, OA would prioritize constituencies drawn by development values such as empowerment, participation, self-reliance, and continual learning. We believed that there must be at least 2 million to 3 million Americans who could be motivated to financially support OA’s work and values; by 1984, we had enlisted some 89,000 of those potential supporters and participants. Fundraising would be driven by challenging donors to support empowerment and change at the village level, but also at the level of international policy favorable to grassroots development. Abroad, we would seek true partnerships of equality with village groups and indigenous NGOs. Indeed, Ambassador Robert White’s compliment for OA, cited at the beginning of this chapter, captures the aspirations of Oxfam America in that time: to be an important and independent voice on relations with the Third World.
CHAPTER 7

The Origins of Advocacy at Oxfam America

Laurence R. Simon

Given its commitment to addressing the root causes of poverty, Oxfam America was inevitably drawn into policy analysis and advocacy. From an early concern about food aid, triggered by our experience with the Guatemalan earthquake of 1976, we went on to use the mechanism of impact audits to draw attention to other problematic US policies. Topics covered were the impacts of US-designed land reform policy in El Salvador; the potential impacts of the provision of US military aid to the Guatemalan government, a government that was already violently repressing its rural population; and the humanitarian impacts of US policies that obstructed humanitarian and development assistance to Kampuchea (Cambodia) and Vietnam. Our first impact audit on El Salvador exceeded our wildest expectations in terms of drawing attention to US policy and established Oxfam America as a respected policy voice, a voice it would hone in subsequent decades.

INTRODUCTION

From its earliest days, Oxfam America included in its strategic vision the notion that truly successful overseas work was dependent on the American public’s and policymakers’ understanding of the causes of underdevelopment. We saw our role as giving voice to those who were disenfranchised and exploited, from El Salvadoran hacienda workers who were pushed from their traditional lands by the rise of export farming, to rural development workers in Guatemala who were being assassinated by those who feared that rural development was the leading edge of revolution, to nomadic herders in Niger whose escape routes from drought were cut off by fences, to the widows of India who climbed the funeral pyres to burn with their dead husbands.

Oxfam was not the only US NGO to create a development education unit in the 1970s, but unlike most others, we saw the role for development education as going far beyond, and separate from, project information that prepares the reader for a fund-raising appeal. Ours was
not to tell the story of Oxfam America, but to tell some of the myriad stories of the people and communities we served. Our aim was not to elicit sympathy or guilt that is still so common in NGO public appeals, but we aimed to define problems of underdevelopment, to point to their causes and to present practical solutions.

The evolution from development education to policy analysis and advocacy occurred as we realized that practical solutions were often blocked by policy decisions of the powerful. The organization’s annual Fast for a World Harvest became the major focus for development education that went beyond fund-raising literature. The Fast reached into hundreds of schools and religious communities throughout the country where people studied the causes of world hunger while contributing the cost of a meal to Oxfam. Because of the success of The Fast, we saw the opportunity to move beyond constituency education into policy analysis and advocacy. We wanted to build a greater transparency into our project information and sought to educate the reader about the roots of the problems we encountered overseas and the considerable obstacles to development. Thus grew a more professional approach to development education and a wider separation from the kind of project information disseminated by our fundraising department.

We saw policy analysis as an effort to research problems of underdevelopment as we encountered them and to understand the policy context in which these problems emerged and were sustained. Advocacy was defined as the effort to communicate the findings of our research and policy recommendations to Oxfam groups around the US, the general public, the press, Congress, and bilateral and multilateral organizations. We did not seek to advocate directly with policymakers in developing nations as we did not wish to presume to speak for our project partners.

**EARLY CONCERNS**

Four major issues became apparent early in our advocacy work and will be described more fully later:

1. **NGOs generally seek to do no harm.** But we had to confront the possibility that Oxfam America’s advocacy could endanger the lives of the very people we sought to help.

2. **While autonomous, we shared a name with the other Oxfams.** Advocacy brought home the need for close consultation and coordination on positions that might compromise the work of the other Oxfams.

3. **Development NGOs are not solidarity groups.** We became sensitive to the need to protect our credibility with the US government, with intergovernmental organizations, and with the world’s news media. Our policy analysis and advocacy positions needed to be firmly rooted in our own experience on the ground. We needed to be seen by policymakers and press as a humanitarian organization documenting the impacts of policies and programs on the poor and seeking more informed and humane solutions.

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1 A “solidarity group” is considered an activist network of people or organizations devoted to the support of an oppressed or beleaguered people or collective. While we may have had some common analysis with solidarity groups, the latter were perceived as partisan and lacking the credibility of a non-political actor.
4. Early efforts might alienate our own constituency. We worried that Oxfam America’s critiques, especially of US government policies, would result in fundraising losses.

Other organizations also worried that advocacy positions might alienate the US government. But Oxfam America, from its origins, had an unwavering policy not to accept US government money or commodities. This policy was intended to protect the independence of the organization. It was, indeed, an important strategic decision for it guarded the organization against the dependency on US government funds common among American INGOs as well as the inhibition that comes with such dependency.²

OA ADVOCACY PRIORITIES

The limits of US government approach to alleviating world hunger

The earliest policy advocacy dates to January 1979 when, as Director of Development Education and Advocacy, I testified before the Presidential Commission on World Hunger. In my remarks, I wove together the Oxfam critique of the *modus operandi* of official aid programs with the Oxfam emphasis on grassroots development:

Though there are no easy solutions for the major distortions that divide our world between societies which are overdeveloping and those which are underdeveloping, effective programs can alleviate the suffering and permit the world’s poor a greater measure of participation.

Before the Commission recommends new aid programs we must, however, closely examine the motivations for and impact of the current ones, as well as analyze the underlying causes for world hunger. For it may be that the rescinding of some current aid programs would be of greater benefit than would be their expansion.³

I also referenced major concerns of the still nascent civil society movement:

The ideas of an economic ‘take-off point’ and a ‘trickle down’ approach to development have led in many Third World nations to increased food-dependency, a staggering debt burden, IMF-imposed austerity programs, and an increasing loss of Third World autonomy over the commanding heights of their own economies—the banks, industry, minerals, and land.

After pointing out that hunger continued after two UN Decades of Development and US investment in the Alliance for Progress, I asked the commissioners to consider that “[s]trategies which inadvertently or consciously ignored the structural inequalities inherent in many Third World nations, have … reinforced the problems and increased hunger and poverty.” Because of our recent experience in the aftermath of the Guatemalan earthquake, I felt compelled to talk about “…the victims of the increasing incidence of so-called ‘natural’ disasters as more

² It might be noted that the other Oxfams did not have a prohibition against accepting grants from their own governments. The reasons OA held this view also had to do with the unique role of the US in world affairs, especially during the Cold War. Only once did I hear the Oxfam America board seriously question this prohibition. This occurred when Oxfam GB was spearheading the international relief effort in Cambodia (Kampuchea) and asked OA to consider channeling USAID Food for Peace (PL 480). OA had gone so far as to check with USAID and was told that registration as an NGO would take many months. The lesson for us was twofold: that USAID really did not want to cooperate; and that OA, as a principled organization, knew when to bend its own rules.

and more people are made vulnerable to [natural] forces.” And I decried the rise of oligarchic governments that reinforce an order without justice.

Few multilateral and bilateral development programs have effectively reached into the village to reverse the deepening poverty. A rigorous examination is overdue of the assumptions and strategies behind the development programs of both the government and the PVO community.4

CRITIQUE OF US FOOD ASSISTANCE

To the apparent surprise of the commissioners, I offered a critique of PL 480, the Food for Peace Program that most other American INGOs strongly supported. The concerns I raised reflected the investigations of an Oxfam GB worker, Tony Jackson, who was seconded to Oxfam America and whose publications on food aid were to shake up the food aid establishment.5 “No independent studies,” I testified, “have been carried out to test the impact on the local development process of food aid distributed under Title II for humanitarian purposes.”6 I continued:

Studies have looked at the potential disincentive effects of food aid on local agricultural production, but concentrated almost exclusively on Title I concessional sales. It had, until recently, been assumed that the voluntary agency/World Food Program part of PL 480 was fulfilling its mandate and successfully feeding the hungry while improving the long-term nutritional and community-development aspects of their lives. However, recent reports by field workers have questioned the value of Title II Food Aid. According to the most critical of these reports, food aid has harmed the very people it is designed to help.

And again, basing our testimony on the organization’s direct field experience:

The most glaring example was in Guatemala in 1976—the distribution after the earthquake of over 25,000 tons of Title II foods not only depressed the local market for corn by about a third, but small farmers in the worst-hit region, Chimaltenango, complained of the difficulty of hiring help to bring in the wheat harvest. Workers in the area were happy to live off the food aid they were receiving.7

The testimony was the subject of an Associated Press wire story8 that was picked up by European newspapers.

Oxfam America was not alone in the early investigation of food aid, based on observations of field programs. Roland Bunch and William Ruddell, field coordinators for World Neighbors, our partner in the Guatemala reconstruction program, shared their analysis and experience in trying to influence aid delivery efforts in extensive interviews with Jackson.9 Bunch argued that the year’s harvest, which was very good, was barely affected by the earthquake based on field monitoring that he had done. He noted:

4 Ibid. NGOs were known in the US at this time as Private Voluntary Organizations.
6 Simon (1979)
7 Ibid.
8 Written by Don Kendall, January 23, 1979.
Most of the corn—maybe 95%—was already harvested. The potatoes had been harvested several months earlier and had already been sold. But they hadn’t yet harvested the wheat. So, either the harvests were in the fields, where they were not affected by the earthquake, or they were in the houses, where they were only temporarily buried, but not really damaged.

The interview goes on to state that local shortages in the two weeks after the earthquake were being met by nearby villages that had not been affected. “Basically,” Bunch says, “by the end of the first two weeks, the problem was solved.” But by that time, he goes on, “the PL480 food was pouring in from CARE and CRS (Catholic Relief Services) and was being handed out by their own staff and by the military, school teachers, Peace Corpsmen, and so on.”

In the interview he notes an array of adverse distorting effects the PL480 inflows had on recovery: The price of grains was depressed, and to opportunistic leaders who exaggerated the plight of their villages accrued influence from their control over relief aid. Bunch found the latter development particularly troubling. Foodstuffs, some of them unfamiliar in the region, were not used, or fed to animals, or used creatively—such as mixing powdered milk with limestone to create whitewash. These distorting effects went on for many months as food aid, later in the form of food-for-work, continued to flood into the region up to seven months after the earthquake.

To counteract these effects, Ruddell describes a bizarre situation in which Oxfam had to commit funds to counter the impact of USAID:

So, the Quetzal cooperative, with financing from Oxfam, became involved in buying corn and beans from subsistence farmers in villages throughout Chimaltenango. Our idea was that when the traditional increases in the price of grains came around, we would sell off what we had bought.

We would buy up to 5,000 pounds from any farmer in the area, whether or not he was a member of the cooperative. So that small farmers were able to sell all they needed in order to reconstruct their homes.

Bunch summarizes the scheme by saying that we were doing exactly the opposite of what USAID and its US NGO contractors were doing. “We were creating demand, and they were reducing it.” The feedback from the farmers, Bunch notes, was that for the four or five months that PL480 flooded in, the Oxfam–World Neighbors scheme to buy farmers’ produce stabilized prices.

Based on this interview and other evidence gathered from the field, my testimony went further to point out that in fiscal year 1978, over 55 million people were recipients of Title II and that it was the widest reaching program for US NGOs that channel these humanitarian supplies: “Efforts to examine the effects of this food aid have not met with success. Indeed, there is evidence of cover-up of negative reports and serious omissions in public ones.”

These points were not lost on other American NGOs and research organizations. The National Academy of Sciences, in part due to Tony Jackson’s near obsession with the harm being done by Project Food Aid, launched a major study of the role of food aid in the aftermath of the 1976 earthquake. The disaster relief community began to take notice. Where the US

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10 Simon, 1979
government opened the floodgates for Title II immediately after the earthquake, Oxfam was asking the relief community to base its emergency response on direct and verifiable assessment and not on assumptions about disasters. We noted that the earthquake in Guatemala did not destroy food supplies. What then was the justification for Title II food? We questioned whether commodities and supplies are demand driven or supply driven in such disasters. Even today this question could be asked of the clogged ports and runways in almost all major disasters.

A LONG-TERM DEBATE

Jackson’s work prompted much correspondence and some heat between major food aid contractors like CARE and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and Oxfam (both Oxfam America and Oxfam Great Britain). In a letter of October 10, 1979, from Michael Harris (director of overseas aid for Oxfam GB) to OA’s executive director Joe Short, Harris recounts an exchange with the leadership of Catholic Relief Services: “I told both Jean [Chenard] and the various monsignors that we accept full responsibility for Tony Jackson but that he was investigating this whole matter of food aid as objectively as possible and that there was of course no attempt to accuse either CRS or CARE. I did not, of course, tell him that most of the ammunition that had been provided to Tony originated from members of CRS, themselves!”

Joe Short and I were invited by Phil Johnson, head of CARE, to come to their New York headquarters to open a dialogue with their senior staff responsible for food aid programs. It was a friendly enough encounter and a series of discussions were planned. The dialogue was ended, however, after the first session, and we understood that CARE staff felt too threatened by outsiders questioning their assumptions. It was not until August 15, 2007, a full 25 years after this truncated dialogue, that CARE changed its policies on food aid when it turned down $45 million in federal financing and phased out sales of heavily subsidized US food aid, which it had used to help fund its development projects. In doing so, it took a public and principled stance, both affirming the critique begun by Tony Jackson and demonstrating that CARE, itself, is an organization capable of major policy advocacy based on ground level experience.
Rethinking Disaster Response as Social Change

Famine and disasters played an important role in Oxfam America’s early overseas programs and its own institutional development. We saw our mission as abetting long-term development, but we were pulled into disasters that ranged from the earthquake in Guatemala in 1976 to the post-Pol Pot Cambodia (then called Kampuchea) in the early 1980s. Despite our intention to stay focused on development, Oxfam America needed to be responsive to its domestic constituency who wanted to help when confronted with large-scale human suffering. We also saw an opportunity to respond to disasters differently from most relief organizations and to advocate for policies and practices that would link relief to development. For Oxfam, emergency operations were just the first phase on a continuum that would take a dedicated organization through reconstruction and onto development. We saw disasters, therefore, as an opportunity to correct the causes of vulnerability in society and to help rebuild communities in ways that produced needed social and economic development.

At the time of the earthquake in Guatemala, we met a young Texan civil engineer named Frederick C. Cuny who shared our values and perspective on disaster response and who was to be a major voice on disaster relief issues until his death in Chechnya in 1995. We held in common the belief that the impacts of many natural disasters were absorbed hardest by the most economically marginalized groups. And we observed that disaster aid did little beyond short-term sustenance and often simply reconstructed the prevailing conditions of poverty. We saw that OA had a role, through its policy analysis, to challenge the very concept of relief...
and reformulate disaster response so that it committed to long-term development with affected communities, working with them to envision social change essential to their advancement. We saw in Fred, because of his experience, charisma, and dedication, an opportunity to further our policy advocacy around disaster planning and implementation, through the publication of a definitive work on disaster response. After agreeing on a book outline and identifying a publisher, working with Fred proved difficult. He was always on a plane and I suspected he had writer’s block. With the publisher, and our executive director, getting nervous, I finally sent Fred a portable tape recorder and every time he got onto a plane, Fred dictated a chapter. The book, *Disasters and Development*, was ultimately published in 1983 by Oxford University Press and was hailed as a landmark in disaster planning. It has had a significant influence in rethinking disaster response and mitigation strategies.

**CHALLENGING US GOVERNMENT POLICY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COLD WAR—THE USE OF IMPACT AUDITS**

Oxfam America was to publish three policy research studies in a series of impact audits, looking at the impact of US government policy on the poor. Two dealt with Central America (El Salvador and Guatemala) and one with Southeast Asia (covering Kampuchea and Vietnam). All of these countries were policy hotspots and we knew from our field experience that US government policy was either intentionally or unintentionally hurting the poorest rural communities. Little did we realize when we published the first one on El Salvador that it would put us firmly on the map as an advocacy organization and garner a good deal of attention from the US government. Despite the risks associated with taking such overt political positions, uncharacteristic for the vast majority of US-based development agencies, it established Oxfam as a serious development actor, committed to holding the US government accountable for the humanitarian consequences of its foreign policy.

**Impact audit on land reform in El Salvador**

Why the focus on land reform? Land issues were of longstanding interest to Oxfam, largely because we saw it as one of the structural causes of poverty and political unrest in a variety of countries. This was certainly true in Central America. In the years OA began work in Central America, political oppression had given rise to armed opposition. The Sandinistas first came to power in Nicaragua in July 1979. The United States anticipated a similar revolution in neighboring El Salvador, which had a history of peasant revolts against their increasing political and economic marginalization. While OA saw a growing political space in Nicaragua in which to work with the poor, the opposite was true in El Salvador. Indeed, growing government repression combined with the increasing politicalization of the poor, especially the landless, was fueling sympathy for a revolutionary solution in the form of the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN.) When a reform-minded military junta came to power willing to break with their history of alliance with the landed oligarchy, the United States engineered a sweeping land reform that, in the words of one USAID official, would breed “capitalists like rabbits.”

Thus, in the case of Nicaragua, we were keen and sympathetic observers of Jaime Wheelock, the Sandinista Minister of Agrarian Reform, and OA began supporting projects in Nicara-
gua that were ancillary to the land reform. Concomitantly, we were particularly interested in monitoring the land reform in neighboring El Salvador, especially given the ostensible commitment to the development of cooperatives and the provision of land to the landless. Though the regime and its political violence made any reform risky, we watched for opportunities and impacts the reform might have for the people with whom we worked.

The land reform would unfold in three phases: the first, where haciendas of 500 hectares or more were converted into cooperatives; a second, where haciendas of 100 hectares or more were appropriated; and a third phase, known as “Land to the Tiller,” where small plots of rented or sharecropped land were to go to those that worked them. Not long after the government of El Salvador’s surprise decrees of March and April 1980, expropriating large haciendas under Phase I, OA began to see a dark side of the reform. Death squads were directed against the leadership of new cooperatives and rogue Treasury Police, in uniform, were reportedly assassinating land reform workers from the government’s own agrarian reform agency known as ISTA. Phase II ended almost before it was even started because it included many of the fertile coffee haciendas on which El Salvador was dependent for foreign exchange and galvanized fierce political opposition from the old right. Phase III was implemented amidst the chaos of thousands of claims for deedless plots of land. We saw the reform leading to the repression of agricultural laborers and the landless poor, as US dollars flooded into El Salvador in a sincere but tragically naïve, ill-timed and poorly planned reform.

After my own observations confirmed the chaos that was engulfing rural El Salvador, I decided, with the support of Joe Short, to document the reform. My goals were to clarify its still largely shrouded plans and to monitor its implementation and impact. El Salvador Land Reform, 1980–1981: Impact Audit (published February 1981), which I ultimately co-authored with James Stephens, was, I believe, the first time any aid organization had issued a development policy impact analysis based on data collected on the ground.

Research for the impact audit was not easy. Jim and I printed the following on the copyright page:

This report is the result of research by the authors in consultation with a wide range of experts including government officials, business and university leaders, field workers and peasants. Consultations were conducted in El Salvador as well as throughout Central America and the United States. Special effort was made to talk with persons or varying political perspectives. The authors wish to acknowledge the constraints under which field research was conducted. The possibility for collecting a large database, using established survey techniques, must be deferred until the end of rural violence and repression. Meetings were often held at secret locations. Several Salvadoran government representatives risked their lives to meet with us and must remain anonymous. At least four have since been killed in the ongoing tragedy that is El Salvador today.

That said, our research was well-sourced both on the ground in El Salvador and in Washington, DC. As is often seen at times of massive US involvement overseas, the Department of State and USAID were divided. Officially they had a unified message of support for administration policy, and land reform in El Salvador became a pillar of counter-insurgency strategy. But within USAID there was real dissent. The real hero of the OA policy analysis and ensuing advocacy was Mac Chapin, a USAID anthropologist responsible for social impact evaluation. Within USAID he had issued reports that sounded the alarm over and over about the
failure of an increasingly massive USAID financial commitment. Out of deep commitment to accountability, Mac starting working with us on documenting the real impacts on the poor. State Department concern about criticism grew so intense, that we started worrying about Mac’s vulnerability and met him in neutral locales. The US ambassador to El Salvador, Robert White, a person of great integrity and independence of mind, was also very helpful to us. On trips to San Salvador, White hosted conversations at his residence for us.

White found himself increasingly at odds with official US policy. He was withdrawn in February 1981 soon after the Reagan administration took office and eventually resigned from State in protest. After the rape and murder of four American churchwomen in December 1980, it seemed that the choices White saw for US policy were no longer political but moral. He permitted himself to be quoted in US papers that Salvadoran security forces were “directly involved” in this atrocity.11

By coincidence, El Salvador Land Reform, 1980-1981: Impact Audit would be released right around this time. We could not know at that time how seriously the US government would take OA’s first advocacy campaign.

THE SURPRISING POWER OF A WELL-PLACED EDITORIAL

Immediately prior to its publication, Jim and I wrote an op-ed article for the New York Times.14 By appalling coincidence, it was published the same day, January 6, 1981, that the newspaper carried a front-page report about the assassination of US land reform advisors in El Salvador.15 Even more striking was that the the New York Times’s lead editorial that day urged support for the land reform, while across the top of the op-ed page was our article condemning the reform.

The reaction inside of OA was worthy of note. The day of the op-ed, there was palpable concern, especially in the fund-raising staff, about the impact of our confrontation with US government policy. Policy analysis, no less advocacy, was new to OA, and I think the organization was nervous about how solid our analysis was and how far out on a limb we may have gone.

Support within OA strengthened when we received a letter (this is, of course, pre-email days) dated January 7, 1981 from Richard Ullman, Professor of International Affairs, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University. Ullman was both a member of the New York Times’s editorial board and the OA board of directors. Ullman, who had no prior knowledge that our op-ed article would appear, said:

11 White was, I believe, one of the great figures in the history of US foreign policy who sought to bring a higher morality and humanity to the role of the US in the world. I recall one time when a Salvadoran under threat from death squads was told by Salvadoran human rights workers to stand on a street corner where, at the appointed hour, a US embassy armored car drove up and chauffeured the party away to the border. This involved some personal risk. White told me on one visit that he feared his wealthy neighbors more than the FMLN. On trying to reach him one night late in the evening, the Marine Guard said they could not disturb him because he sleeps with a rifle next to his bed.

12 It could be argued that the murder of these four churchwomen further opened the rift on US-Salvadoran policy that was created by the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero in March 1980 and set the stage for the reception and immediate controversy surrounding the release of the OA report on land reform.


14 Sandy Close, head of Pacific News Service, encouraged us to submit it to NYT as the most influential paper in the US. Sandy had the LA Times ready to run it if the NYT had declined.

15 In a cover letter to Charlotte Curtis of the op-ed page of the NYT, I asked that the op-ed not identify my name with Oxfam “because of the increasing risk to our Central American staff.” Subsequently NYT and OA decided to use the affiliation.
I enclose a copy of a letter I have just sent to Max Frankel, the Editor of NYT editorial page, concerning the unfortunate juxtaposition between Tuesday’s misguided editorial and your own really superb op-ed article. I thought your piece was devastating, one made all the more impressive by the sober, almost understated way in which you marshaled your evidence.

Ullman’s letter to Max Frankel of January 7, 1981, we were told later, sent a tremor through the New York Times news and editorial staff. It read:

This time, a letter not for publication. I write to say that I was especially unhappy to note the juxtaposition between Tuesday’s editorial on El Salvador and the Op-Ed page piece by Lawrence Simon and his colleague. What Simon and Stephens say about land reform in El Salvador is, I think, irrefutable. I have heard the arguments they make from a number of persons. Alas, land reform in El Salvador has been almost completely a failure, and there is virtually no prospect that it can succeed under anything like an extrapolation of present conditions. For NYT so strongly to pin its hope on such a will-o-the-wisp when the case against its success is made so painfully clear on the page opposite only undermines the credibility of other Times editorials.16

A rift opened in the NYT’s editorial page staff that surprised us. It was less about the validity of facts than an interpretation of them. It was now clear there was a rift at the Times between those for whom El Salvador was merely an unfortunate proxy in a larger Cold War and those who feared they were seeing a repeat of the abuse and arrogance of power in Vietnam. The latter saw a strong need for an extra vigilant and inquiring press. In the end, the latter group won out over the former.

On January 9, Robert Kleiman, editorial writer for NYT, published a signed piece in the Editorial Notebook column that asserted that the reform was working. It was a clear attempt to counter Ullman’s influence and the impact of our op-ed. I wrote to Ullman on January 14:

You may be interested to know that I have learned through a New York Magazine reporter, Susan Churcher, that Robert Kleiman was infuriated with my piece. Churcher says that she called him to question the validity of several points he makes in his signed editorial of 9 January. Kleiman reportedly lectured her on “national security interests.” Churcher is right, in my opinion, when she questions whether there is a conflict of interest on his part in writing about the Land Council since his wife, Mary Temple, heads the organization. He told Churcher that he funds its activities. This is all very odd because the Land Council often appears at important conferences, most recently at the Socialist International, yet no one ever answers their telephone (which is itself unlisted). Yet, they are spoken about by the Times and other influential periodicals as a major actor in non-marxist land reform programs. Temple is a very close associate of Roy Prosterman, the University of Washington Law Professor who designed Land to the Tiller in both Vietnam and Salvador. 18

16 Also, Joseph Eldridge, director of the Washington Office on Latin America wrote me: “In all my years of newspaper reading, I can think of no instance where a more timely and provocative piece appeared in the major media.” Letter, January 23, 1981.

17 The Land Council was an organization based in New York that stated as its objective the support of rural progress in developing nations. It was a short-lived organization closely allied with Roy Prosterman and support for US policy on Latin America.

18 Also John McAward, Director, International Programs, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee wrote to the NYT on March 19, 1981. “In the interest of fairness the readers of the New York Times should be informed that Mary Temple, Prosterman’s associate and collaborator, is the wife of New York Times editor Robert Kleiman. I trust that Mr. Kleiman removes himself from all discussions concerning Salvadoran land reform and has not used his position to influence the editorial views on the issue.”
I noted that the Op-Ed piece “seems to have created a national debate; we have papers calling from all around the States.” Little did I realize at that moment the central role Prosterman would play in the unfolding debate.

Jim and I sent a letter to the NYT answering the Kleiman editorial and a follow-up news story on the reform that had appeared in the paper.

We agree with Mr. Robert Kleiman (Editorial Notebook 1/9/81, “Death in El Salvador”) that the best tribute to the slain American land reform advisor, Mike Hammer, would be “land reform that endures.” We might also add: land reform that benefits the poor. Unfortunately, Mr. Kleiman’s report as well as Janet Battaile’s article (1/6/81 “Salvador Farm Program is Described as Enduring”) is based on misinformation.

As noted in our Op Ed article of 1/6/81, we have just completed a six month study of the program. Contrary to the information you have reported, not one farm tenant has yet been given legal ownership of his plot. Mr. Hammer confirmed this in conversation with us weeks before his tragic death. The legal procedures for transfer of title have never been announced. Miss Battaile erroneously reported that coffee plantations have been expropriated. Almost all coffee plantations fall within the 375-1,250 acre range, and thus would be expropriated under Phase II of the program. However, Phase II has not been implemented. Atillo Vietez, the Salvadoran Minister of Planning, recently told us that the coffee estates might be expropriated by the end of 1981.

We then went on with a point-by-point rebuttal of the NYT coverage, challenging their statements regarding percentage of landless peasants who would receive land, the productivity of expropriated properties, which were suffering from lack of credit and basic agricultural supplies if not outright sabotage, and their claim of continued peasant support for the program. We concluded on this point:

Finally, the assertion that peasants remain enthusiastic about the land reform directly contradicts AID’s own assessment as presented in the Chapin Report and other AID documents. Repression against peasants increased dramatically after the land reform was announced. Even many members of the Union Comunal Salvadoreña (UCS), the union founded by the American Institute for Free Labor Development, no longer support the reform and condemn the union’s close identification of interests with the present government and the Romero regime before it. We assume that the writers have not talked to the peasants themselves, either on their farms or increasingly in the refugee camps.

Within a few days of our op-ed, the NYT assigned Raymond Bonner, one of their best investigative reporters, to cover the land reform. His reports over the next months confirmed our findings but so angered the State Department that the NYT came under great pressure to withdraw him.19

Bonner’s dispatches from San Isidro and El Peñon, El Salvador, published on January 11, sought to portray the reality and the hope of change.

The junta President, José Napoléon Duarte, asserts that the reforms, which included nationalization of banks and agricultural exports, have broken the oligarchy’s grip and produced a social revolution more significant than in Cuba or Nicaragua. The Salvadoran right has certainly acted

19 The public face of DOS criticism of Bonner came from US Ambassador Deane Hinton who was quoted in the Miami Herald of June 12, 1982: Hinton charged that “slanted and biased reporting” by Ray Bonner of the NYT...created a false impression that the new Salvadoran government has scuttled the agrarian reform program.”
as if this was so. Rightists are believed responsible for the assassination last week of the head of ISTA and two advisors from the United States.

Many supporters of the agrarian reforms judge them by political, not economic, yardsticks. Roy L. Prosterman, a land reform expert from the United States, told a hostile audience of businessmen in San Salvador last spring that ‘the left fears land reform. It deprives them of their most valuable weapon in implementing a revolution because they can no longer appeal to the landless.’

Excitedly prancing around his office, Defense Minister Col. Jose Guillermo Garcia declared last week: ‘Our agrarian reform is the most profound ever in all of Latin America. We have taken the banner from the left.’

Bonner went on to describe another side of the story.

In July, soldiers hauled the president and seven other members of the cooperative that now owns the plantation to the beach and shot them.

According to an employee of El Salvador’s Institute for Agrarian Transformation, more than 80 cooperatives are being forced to pay … protection money. More than 200 peasant cooperative leaders and five institute employees have been killed since the land reform program began in March.

‘The purpose of land reform was not to help the poorest because they were poor, but to keep them from joining the left,’ said a wealthy landowner. Referring to the American Institute for Free Labor Development, an arm of the AFLCIO that is advising the Salvadorans on land reform, the executive said, ‘that is why they were given contracts by AID’ The executive contended that the Free Labor Institute is primarily concerned with combating Communism.

‘The economic and political structures have to be changed,’ said a business executive. ‘The military still control this country. And it is serving the wealthy oligarchy as it always has.’

The world’s press began to take notice. Two weeks after our op ed, Newsweek (January 19, 1981) published a story, “Land Reform Under Fire,” and stated that the conclusion of our six-month field study of the program was that it “does not fit the needs of the country.”

Oxfam America had not even published the study yet, and we had already managed to change the terms of the debate.

**PUBLICATION AND BROAD DISSEMINATION**

Upon the release of the first edition of the report, OA’s first major advocacy effort needed the help of other organizations if our impact was to be more than short-lived. We were lining up against considerable power, as was so amply demonstrated by the reaction to our editorial. The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) proved to be a key ally. WOLA helped our staff to organize a press conference to discuss the newly released Impact Audit.

The press conference, held at The National Press Club, was well attended by representatives of, among others, Forbes, InterPress Service, Reuters, National Geographic, Religious Press Service, Pacifica, Jurnal Do Brasil, Uno Mas Uno (of Mexico), United Press Service, TASS (Russia), National Catholic News Service, and the Organization of American States. Others included Church World Service, American Baptist Churches, United Church of Christ, and Amnesty International. I can still remember the fabled Washington correspondent Mary McGrory sitting in the front row and asking wonderfully pointed questions. Leonel Gomez, ex-deputy director of ISTA, attended and gave gravity to the occasion. It was Mr. Gomez who
had declined to head ISTA, insisting that a person of peasant background be appointed. He narrowly escaped death when he missed the dinner invitation to join the head of ISTA and the American advisors at the San Salvador Sheraton that fateful night.

WOLA also distributed a copy of the OA Impact Audit to each senator and representative and held briefing sessions with their legislative staffs. WOLA’s Joe Eldridge, Heather Foote, and Cindy Arnson coordinated with us on numerous meetings with members and on the reaction of the Department of State. What was unleashed was a barrage of press coverage that fed the dissemination of the report. This, in turn, led to more publicity on the issue from sympathetic organizations and think tanks and generated pressure for a Congressional hearing.

Within the first six months there were 10,000 copies in print with over 8,000 of them sold. Within the first year, the report received over 500 citations in news media, testimony, and subsequently numerous additional citations in scholarly books.

Moreover, the attention and interest was sustained. Bread for the World, a Christian citizens’ lobby for world development with chapters in nearly all US Congressional Districts, issued Background Paper #54 in June 1981, subtitled Land & Hunger: El Salvador, that further solidified the OA position in the public’s mind. Food First/The Institute for Food and Development Policy, founded by Frances Moore Lappe and Joseph Collins, issued an Action Alert in March 1981 titled El Salvador: The hungriest people in Latin America, supporting the OA analysis and echoing the rising chorus of opposition to US aid to El Salvador. Particularly satisfying for me was the article in Christianity and Crisis (May 11, 1981) by Prof. William C. Thiesenhusen, of the Land Tenure Center at the University of Wisconsin, one of the country’s finest scholars of land reform programs. His article referred people to our Impact Audit for further reading and corroborated much of what we had raised.

While our op-ed in the NYT must have surprised the Department of State and USAID, it was the Wall Street Journal that one month later, on February 6, 1981, must have stunned them with a long and authoritative critique. Under a headline, “Flaws in Salvador’s Land Reform,” The Wall Street Journal’s Steve Fraser wrote, “Many experts think that even if the conflict is silenced, El Salvador will be left with a land reform that is a hastily implemented political and agricultural time bomb.” I was quoted at length in the article, reinforcing key points in the study—that the land reform was poorly designed and even more poorly implemented, was failing to put land in the hands of the poorest of the poor, and would exclude well over half of the rural poor even if fully implemented.

The Wall Street Journal article reinforced these points by quoting a USAID source that even in the Salvadoran ministries responsible for its implementation, the reform is regarded as “a symbolic measure which was proposed because it would look good to American politicians and not necessarily because it would be beneficial or significant in the Salvadoran context.”

Following the OA analysis closely but corroborated by the Wall Street Journal’s independent interviews, the article makes the case that as designed, the “land to the tiller” component of the program would worsen the state of Salvadoran agriculture by expropriating small plots of rental land from equally poor small holders and by breaking up traditional patterns of rotating agricul-

20 The Wall Street Journal had earlier published (January 15, 1981) a superb article “Policy Under Fire: El Salvador Puts Faith in Land Redistribution But the Killings Go On” in which correspondent Steve Fraser focused on the mounting violence in rural areas and directed against the new cooperatives. “El Salvador’s land-redistribution program is choking on the blood of the violent conflict it was designed to end,” he eloquently wrote.
ture, where plots lay fallow for several years, by locking in renters to the plots they are currently farming, land often too marginal to support a family. Furthermore, it would discourage landowners from renting plots in the future for fear of a next round of expropriations.

**PUSHBACK FROM PROONENTS OF THE PROGRAM**

The administration and its supporters were clearly nonplussed at the turn the debate had taken. Supporters of the program tried to reclaim the debate. Constantine Menges of the Hudson Institute began orchestrating a campaign to discredit the critics of the land reform. In a note to Ambassador Bowdler, James Cheek, and John Blacken (all Foreign Service officers), Menges wrote:

> Among the things that need to be done are to send credible, well informed individuals to Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom… France, and Portugal, who can meet with democratic socialist leaders and party staff concerned with international affairs. I urge that State and CIA… consider sending one or more of the following: Mr. Michael Hammer, AIFLD… has played a major role in the agrarian reform….; Ms. Mary Temple and/or Mr. Roy Prosterman, independent experts with the Land Council actively involved … in the efforts in El Salvador.

The major public pushback from the Administration started with a letter to the editor printed by the *NYT* on February 3. The author was William C. Doherty, Jr., executive director, American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD). AIFLD had a checkered history as an AFL-CIO organization but whose purpose was often critiqued as undermining foreign unions. Its

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21 From 1981 to 1983 Menges was an intelligence officer for Latin American at the CIA under Director William Casey. He then served at the National Security Council as a special assistant to the president, again on Latin America. He died in 2004.
funding came from the US government, through USAID, and in the 1980s through the National Endowment for Democracy. Rumors were often present of their operations being closely tied to the CIA.22

In the letter, Doherty tried to counter the impact of our op-ed with a darkly brilliant stroke dismissing us as pawns of the right-wing. “Reading the Jan. 6 op-ed article on land reform in El Salvador by Messrs. Simon and Stephens, one is struck by the irony of American citizens agreeing with El Salvador’s extreme rightist oligarchs that the reform should never have been undertaken.”

Then switching his attack to our being pawns of the left, he went on:

The oligarchs oppose the reform because they want to continue owning the land and exploiting the campesinos. Unfortunately, some who would even claim to be liberal want the reform to fail so that El Salvador’s peasants will have no political alternative to the dictatorial left, which too many misguided observers support.

The land reform is not a ‘cruel hoax,’ as is charged by Messrs. Simon and Stephens. It is already benefiting 212,000 peasant families who have received land. Contrary to the dire predictions of the opponents of land reform, such as the oligarchs and Messrs. Simon and Stephens, the small farms of the former tenants and sharecroppers have produced record 1980 crops of corn and grain…

The former tenants who Messrs. Simon and Stephens says are ‘locked into’ tiny plots by the reform consider themselves to have finally achieved their most ardent wish, which is to control the lands they have been tilling.

On February 8, one month after our op-ed, the NYT printed an op-ed by Roy Prosterman. This was the first of a series of articles he authored in papers and magazines around the country to salvage public opinion about the land reform. He said, “The land reform is neither a ‘cover for repression,’ as some left-wing critics say, nor ‘Communism,’ as some right-wingers suggest; nor is it simply a ‘plan.’ It is an accomplished fact.”

Prosterman obfuscated the debate by trying to force OA, the leading authority by that time on the reform, into one camp or the other. He went on to present sweeping assertions in an effort to counter a rising critique in major papers across America:

Despite continual violence involving Marxist guerrillas, and rightist ‘death squads,’ in complicity with some members of the security forces, 40 percent of all cropland has been transferred to more than 210,000 peasant families. Two-thirds of the country’s 300,000 landless farm workers and tenants have benefited. About 150,000 now operate their own family farms.

Based on our analysis, an analysis corroborated by a growing number of journalistic sources, we found advocacy in support of the land reform scheme based on an idealized vision of the “family farm” to be delusional, yet it had a strong hold. Congressman Clarence Long (D-Maryland) stated in an interview with US News and World Report (March 16, 1981):

22 This alleged tie was made first by Philip Agee, a former CIA official in his book Inside the Company, CIA Diary where he describes the Free Labor Institute as a “CIA-controlled labor center financed through AID” and cites 19 references to overseas programs involving the agency and the institute. In a Seattle Times news article, January 6, 1981, Prosterman contests these persistent rumors about AIFLD: “Prosterman dismissed as ‘ridiculous’ claims that the organization is connected to the Central Intelligence Agency. If he had any evidence of such a relationship, ‘I would not have had [a] damn thing to do with what they’re doing,’ he said.”
Let's see that the titles to small plots of land are given to individual campesinos. Once they accomplish that, there would no longer be a problem with the guerrillas. Give a man a couple of hectares of land down there, and he's going to be more capitalist than you and I are. Land divided among the campesinos is also far more productive per acre. That, to me, is the solution.

Nonetheless, we had the ear of Congress. Congress, already concerned with mounting violence in El Salvador and the deepening US role, called hearings on the land reform. Our Audit, followed by the barrage of press attention it generated, called into question the ability to achieve US and Salvadoran goals of greater economic justice and peace. Joe Short, our executive director, with several of us sitting behind him, testified with charts and all on our findings. No, Senator, the reforms will not create a middle class. No, they will not create American-style family farms. The land under Land to the Tiller is denuded; the plots, small; the hacienda workers intimidated by the National Guard and waiting for the old owners to return.

We argued that the poverty that was the end result of a hundred years of forced marginalization of the peasantry was now made permanent through the Land to the Tiller Program. Prosterman’s plan for South Vietnam 10 years before that had been transferred lock, stock, and machete to rural Latin America without input from Salvadoran experts. Ultimately, it would be clear that his effort toward pacification of the Salvadoran poor did not work any better than it did in Vietnam. That is why repression mounted along with the land reform. Prosterman was not behind the death squads or condoned violence in any way. To this day, I believe he wanted only peace and prosperity for El Salvador. He was in this instance simply a poor and misguided planner with powerful friends in Washington.

As our visibility rose, we were invited to speak about the land reform and US policy at college teach-ins on the escalating war. More than once, Roy Prosterman and I debated each other at national conferences. A UPI wire story on our debates was picked up by papers in Honduras, Guatemala, and throughout the US. The public challenges to Prosterman’s position culminated in a series of events at Harvard in mid-March, 1981, organized by the Harvard/Radcliffe Committee on El Salvador.

In preparation for the event, the committee produced a report, In Crisis, with an article “Land Reform Nightmare” reviewing the OA report. I was to debate Prosterman the day after he was to hold a talk at the Kennedy School of Government. He was heckled at his KSG talk and then confronted by 1,800 marching protesters, protests that badly unnerved him. The events of that weekend were covered in the Boston Globe of March 16 (“Land reform – or ruse?”) by Stephen Kinzer, who was to go on years later to be a distinguished NYT reporter:

The controversial law professor who helped design land-reform programs in Vietnam during the 1960s and in El Salvador last year had a stormy weekend in Boston.

Speaking to an audience of several hundred at Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government Thursday evening, Roy Prosterman had to contend with catcalls accusing him of being a ‘liar’ and a ‘fascist.’ The MIT anthropologist he was debating, Dr. Martin Diskin, won applause for charging Prosterman with ‘debasement of the academic world’ and designing a program ‘which masks and supports violence.’

A classic study of rural El Salvador describes the characteristic of peasant agriculture: “denuded hillsides of bare rock and stone continue to be scratched each year by the ‘peasant’s stick and hoe; blackened stretches of burned forest where scattered maize plants are grown between the skeletons of dead trees; emaciated cattle grazing withered clumps of grass on unwatered slopes; and valleys where riverbeds are choked by the debris of unchecked erosion.” David Browning, El Salvador: Landscape and Society (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971) pp. 256–257.
The heated reaction to his appearance led Prosterman to cancel a planned public confrontation with his most prominent critic, Laurence Simon of the private development agency Oxfam America. After delicate negotiations, Prosterman and Simon agreed to hold their debate in a radio station. It was taped Saturday and will broadcast in part on WBUR-FM today.

The article captured the details of the debate, citing Oxfam America’s Impact Audit and Prosterman’s combative defense of the land reform program and his claim that the program had been successful as a counter-insurgency strategy by reducing “groups’” ability to mobilize large-scale demonstrations against the government. It was the last time I was to debate Prosterman face to face.

It was no comfort to Oxfam that we had the weight of evidence and of time on our side. As the year wore on, Bonner’s dispatches for the NYT became bleaker. By August 3, 1981, his headline was “Salvador Land Program Aids Few.” He reported from San Cayetano that “the milking stalls are empty” in cooperatives he visited and that lack of financing from government-owned banks caused one collapse after another of haciendas which could not make a go of it as cooperatives. Bonner quotes Peter Askin, the director of the office of USAID, who said, “It has not been a total economic success,” but he added, “up to this point it has been a political success. I’m firm on that. There does seem to be a direct correlation between the agrarian reforms and the peasants not having become more radicalized.”

In August of 1981, Jim and I again wrote an opinion piece for the Pacific News Service and picked up by numerous papers. We continued to press the argument that the reform was not well planned.

In the midst of the Vietnam War, a land reform program called ‘Land to the Tiller,’ was hailed by the American press as more important than ammunition for howitzers. Virtually overnight it was agreed that the Viet Cong would be deprived of a gut issue. A massive shift of peasant allegiances toward Saigon was predicted. But though the program was politically expedient and well nourished with US tax dollars, it was also poorly designed and discredited as a cover for military repression.

And turning to El Salvador:

The problem is not that the majority of the rural population does not want land reform. There is no country in Latin America more in need of land reform than El Salvador. But the US ‘reform’ is not worthy of the $50 million already invested in by the US Agency for International Development (AID), nor the $425 million in additional US funding planned for the next five years.

And we sadly noted that the American Chamber of Commerce of El Salvador, which one year before issued a position paper that stated that “peace and democracy in the region depend on broadly based and fundamental socioeconomic and political reform,” was now saying that the “hastily and ill-planned” AID land reform might reap unknown political benefits but, “…in practical terms there is a grave possibility of disaster.”

Officials at DOS and USAID were concerned enough to request a thorough review of the Impact Audit. The analyst, on January 23, 1982, wrote to Kenneth W. Bleakley of DOS:

The following observations are presented here in reply to your request for comments on the subject report which was prepared and published by Oxfam America in February of last year. Normally, we do not reply to externally prepared reports or articles on the Salvadoran agrarian
reform. Our limited staff and the sheer volume of material being published about El Salvador in general and its agrarian reform in particular preclude that. However, Oxfam’s self-appointed audit may merit more than a passing and belated review on our part in that it was published by a well regarded development institution and it has enjoyed a wide readership. Both points are important to us since the report concludes that the agrarian reform in El Salvador is not producing a beneficial impact on poor of this country. The intent here is not to produce a page by page rebuttal of the report, but rather to demonstrate how its authors used misleading data or misinterpreted the reliable to arrive at a conclusion that can best be described as premature.

The four-page, single-spaced analysis shows seriousness of intent and, while it dismisses much of our analysis, it also praises other parts. How I wish AID and DOS would have invited us to meet and iron out these differences. But AID was caught in the same quagmire that traps them on projects of high national security interest: Professional judgment is sacrificed to the political objectives.

The US Congress was, of course, the most important venue for our policy advocacy, but not the only national body to call upon our report. Mr. Walter McLean, Member of Parliament (Waterloo), Canadian House of Commons, read a statement into the record on March 9, 1981, on El Salvador’s human rights record and detailing our report. A similar statement was read in the British House of Lords.

A second edition of the Impact Audit published in 1982 contained an update by Martin Diskin of the MIT Department of Anthropology who had challenged Prosterman at Harvard. Joe Short, executive director of OA, wrote in the preface:

The first edition of *El Salvador Land Reform* (February 1981) was published during a build-up of US military support for the government of El Salvador. Land reform emerged as a pillar of US support … That report started a national debate about the land reform and, many have said, had a major impact.

Tragically, a year and a half later, there is a continued slaughter of the Salvadoran peasantry, increased US military and economic support and right wing control of a new constituent assembly. As the bloodshed and repression continued, the US Congress conditioned continuation of US aid on the government of El Salvador's respect for human rights and progress on economic and political reforms, specifically the land reform.

If the first edition of *El Salvador Land Reform* cast serious doubts upon the prospects of genuine land reform, this supplement, based on significant new data and documentation, as well as on an analysis of the Salvadoran Constituent Assembly's recent decrees, concludes that the land reform process has been aborted—and with it, the hopes and aspirations of hundreds of thousands of the rural poor.

Diskin estimated the total cost of the reform to be roughly one billion dollars over a five year period to cover compensation to former land owners, administration, credit, and so on. “The agrarian reform started with some promise and some of its early accomplishments endure,” said Diskin. “However, the reform process has now ended.”

One of our final communications on the Salvadoran Land Reform was prompted by an interview on March 23, 1983, given to National Public Radio by Peter McPherson, administrator of USAID. Having closely tracked coverage of the land reform for two and a half years in every report from El Salvador, from USAID and DOS, news accounts and independent assessments,
we felt compelled to write to Mr. McPherson (in retrospect probably too harshly for policy advocacy):

Having heard your NPR All Things Considered interview of March 23 on the status of the land reform in El Salvador, I am moved to express my dismay at how far you are willing to make AID the handmaiden of US foreign and military policy.

Your characterization of the great success of the land reform runs counter to all accounts provided by credible sources including virtually every American and Salvadoran who designed and implemented the early program. Did I hear correctly … when you said that 500,000 persons are now beneficiaries? This is so outrageously exaggerated that it could only be proffered by someone grossly misinformed or one who would be willing to go to any lengths in fabricating an illusion in an attempt to persuade Congress of the morality and efficacy of channeling tens of millions of US dollars to shore up the repressive Salvadoran government.

It was a wise policy after all for OA to not accept US government funds. What independence of thought and action would we have had? During the worst of the attempts to discredit OA, our independence gave us greater strength than other NGOs that were concerned with the impact of US policy in El Salvador.

On April 26, 1981, UPI published an article based on a set of captured documents released by the US State Department that implied US NGO involvement with guerrilla activities in El Salvador. The documents and the administration’s white paper, Communist Interference in El Salvador, instantly became the source of debate in the media about authenticity and accuracy. The three agencies implicated, Church World Service, Catholic Relief Services and Oxfam America, sought a meeting with Secretary of State Alexander Haig. In a telegram to Haig, Paul McCleary, head of CWS stated: “The June 8 Wall Street Journal lead story suggests that your department is readying another release of documents inferring the same.” William P. Clark, deputy secretary of state, denied that a second group of documents were to be released and ignored our request for a meeting.

The three agencies considered the documents to be falsified and an attempt to discredit them for their independence and criticism of US policy. As Christian organizations, both Catholic Relief Services and Church World Service (Protestant) had been shocked by the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero and four missionary nuns and had begun to speak out about repression.

The WSJ article of June 8, however, told a different story from the deputy secretary of state:

In a speech late last month and in an interview, Jon Glassman, the State Department official who collected the documents and deciphered them, declared that some of the documents not yet generally released show that relief funds raised by several major US charities are subject to diversion to the Communist war effort in El Salvador, with or without the charities’ knowledge. The charities, including Catholic Relief Services, Oxfam America and the World Council of Churches, deny the accusation. They say they investigated the charges after learning of them in newspaper accounts several weeks ago but have never been given access to respond to them.

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24 I cannot help but compare this to the Bush administration’s documentation of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.
25 Clark subsequently became National Security Advisor, then fed up with the in-fighting at the White House, asked for and became Secretary of the Interior.
26 The words “with or without the charities’ knowledge” must have been carefully wrought to allege violation of US and Salvadoran law. The implications for our field staff were staggering.
The documents purport to be plans to merge two Salvadoran relief agencies into a single agency, known as CESAH, which would be secretly controlled by Communist revolutionaries and whose money would be used to buy arms, among other things. In fact, the charities say, the two agencies did merge into an organization, called ASESAH, which the charities continue to support.

The article went on to state that Monsignor Robert J. Coll, the assistant executive director of Catholic Relief Services, had visited El Salvador to check with church and political leaders about the charges. Monsignor Cole said that both President Napoleon Duarte and Bishop Rivera y Damas, the head of the Salvadoran Catholic Church endorsed ASESAH’s work. Regarding Oxfam’s position, the article stated:

Lawrence Simon, an official at Oxfam ... says the State Department has told him it is about to distribute the documents widely with an English translation. An article based on the documents was distributed in April by United Press International, which didn’t quote the charities’ denials. Mr. Simon says that publication of the documents could hurt fund raising but that ‘we’re more worried about the Latin American newspapers getting this information. Saying someone is connected to the Communist Party of El Salvador is tantamount to signing someone’s death warrant down there. We’re concerned about the danger this has placed our field staff in.’ 27

A few weeks later my hotel room in Cologne, Germany, where Joe Collins and I had gone to speak at a conference on El Salvador was burgled. It was superbly done. Nothing was taken but my file on El Salvador. A few weeks after that, my name appeared on a death squad hit list in El Salvador.

This complicated relationship with the US government on El Salvador would continue throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s, until the time of the 1992 Peace Accords, after an estimated 60,000 civilians had been killed, many of them in rural areas, victims of the struggle over land.

**IMPACT AUDITS: RURAL VIOLENCE IN GUATEMALA**

The experience of the El Salvador Impact Audit demonstrated to us that OA could pursue policy analysis and advocacy within the framework of our primary mission of helping the poor to achieve a higher standard of living. We maintained the integrity of the Oxfam name while not shying away from controversy. We gained new friends throughout the country who read and used our study for their own activism and gained new allies in Washington who saw OA for the first time as an effective advocate for more informed and pro-poor US policy.

Soon we were drawn to another crisis in Central America that pitted our on-the-ground experience against State Department objectives. In 1982 repression of rural peoples in Guatemala affected our development work there, and we were concerned with the prospect of the US resuming military aid to the Rios Montt government. In May 1982, we published the second Impact Audit; this one entitled *Witnesses to Political Violence in Guatemala: The Suppression of a Rural Development Movement*. The study was led by Shelton (Sandy) Davis and Julie Hodson of the Anthropology Resource Center, then an NGO based in Boston.

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27 It is still an open question whether all three agencies were targeted for disinformation because of their vocal stands on behalf of human rights in El Salvador and opposition to US policy or whether the others were named in an effort to disguise that the real target was Oxfam.
Employing a survey methodology for their research, the authors sought expert witnesses from North America who had long lived and worked in rural Guatemala. Reggie Norton, British Oxfam’s field director in Central America until 1982, wrote the preface in which he presented the context for our study.

For many years, the US has been giving development assistance to help better the life of the rural population. The events of the last few years, and the witness of those who answered the questionnaire, from which this report was compiled, should make the Administration think again. What sense can it make to give development assistance and arms to the Guatemalan government when such arms will be used to kill the same Indians that the development assistance is designed to help?

Oxfam America brings together in a very vivid and personal form the views of North Americans from different fields who know the Guatemalan people and have worked for and with them for many years. Like me, I suspect, they went to Guatemala with no real notion of Guatemala's ills and with no political bias about the country's general situation and direction. That is the value of their impressions and conclusions. They know Guatemala from within; they know the people, their sufferings; they have experienced the callousness of the government, the brutality of the army, the poverty of the peasants. Their witness, therefore, is of importance to us. It should also be of importance to the US government.28

We sought to anticipate the concern that OA was veering into the field of human rights organizations. The authors identified two limitations of human rights reports that we believed we could address:

First, neither a tally indicating numbers of people kidnapped, tortured, and killed, nor personal accounts of violent incidents capture the consequences of political violence for everyday life and society. A mere counting or recounting of instances of violence cannot tell us what it is like to try to live, work, study, and even pray in a society in which terror has become an expected and even predominant component of everyday life.

Second shortcoming... stems from the difficulty of gaining information about human rights violations in rural areas. Guatemala is a country where nearly 75 percent of the people live off the land and more than 50 percent of the people are Indians...

There has been a great deal of ignorance about the history of social change in Indian areas of Guatemala. The image portrayed to the media is that of a sudden political awakening of a somnolent Indian population. But for several decades ... thousands of Indians have been active in rural cooperative, literacy, health, and other development programs. US missionaries, private voluntary agencies, Peace Corps volunteers, agronomists, health-care workers, and cooperative promoters have played an important role in this non-violent, popular movement.

In the last four years, the Guatemalan military has systematically attacked the roots of this movement, destroying its leadership, and forcing many of the survivors to join the guerrillas. The current political violence in Guatemala is largely an outgrowth of this government's attempt to repress the 30-year rural awakening.29
If the first impact audit on El Salvador blazed a new trail for international aid organizations in policy analysis, this second audit was likely the first time an aid organization systematically documented and analyzed the destruction of rural society. There were four broad social consequences of rural violence described in the interviews:

1. debilitating effects on food production, commerce, tourism, labor migration;
2. dismantling of health services and health education resulting in increased disease and psychological problems;
3. a breakdown in religious and family institutions; and
4. massive displacement of the population.

When the draft report was nearing completion, I sent it to the other Oxfams. As noted already, sharing the name Oxfam meant that we needed to be sensitive to the reaction of our autonomous but sibling agencies. Brian Walker, director general of Oxfam GB, responded immediately and urged extreme caution. His view was that release of the report would make Oxfam workers, especially indigenous ones, a lighting rod for heightened violence. We would be politicizing the name Oxfam at a time when rural development workers, already suspect in the minds of the death squads, were being assassinated.

We withheld the report.

Some months later, Walker had a change of mind. He informed OA that Oxfam GB would be releasing an annual report stating that scores of rural development workers funded by Oxfam had been killed in the year past. Walker felt that the violence was now so extreme that Oxfam GB had to suspend operations. He was prepared to go public and asked us to arrange appointments in Washington for him to lobby against US military assistance. We did and we published and distributed the report to every US representative and senator.

Though the report did not spark the same intense media coverage and student mobilization of the El Salvador report, it was used across the US by constituencies concerned about Guatemala and US policy. Shelton Davis left the Anthropology Resources Center shortly thereafter when The World Bank hired him. For the next twenty years, Sandy forged the Bank’s social impact policies and procedures for projects affecting indigenous peoples.

**IMPACT AUDIT: US EMBARGO OF AID TO KAMPUCHEA**

The impact of US foreign policy on the poor was the subject also of our third Impact Audit, *Obstacles to Recovery in Vietnam and Kampuchea: US Embargo of Humanitarian Aid*, in 1984. Oxfam America had a special commitment to Kampuchea, after becoming deeply engaged in emergency response to a food crisis that occurred at the time of the fall of the Pol Pot regime in 1979. From that time, it had been involved in working with peasant farmers to achieve greater food security. Our program provided basic farm implements, rice and vegetable seed, fertilizer, repair of a small phosphate factory and rice mills, irrigation stations and the provision of small traditional irrigation pumps. This work and the humanitarian work of other organizations such as the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), and Church World Service (CWS) were now threatened by the application of the Trading with the Enemy Act to Kampuchea.
The audit, co-authored by Joel Charny, Southeast Asia Projects Officer for Oxfam America and John Spragens, Jr. of the Washington-based Center for International Policy, described the implications of the US foreign policy position toward Kampuchea:

For Kampuchea, under the Trading with the Enemy Act, is designated an enemy of the United States and therefore subject to a complete trade embargo. Any financial transactions with Kampuchea—along with the other ‘enemies’ (Vietnam, Cuba, North Korea)—by an American individual, corporation or humanitarian agency must be licensed by the US government. The State Department has used the power granted to the Executive by this law to deny license applications submitted by American aid agencies to ship privately donated humanitarian aid to the people of Kampuchea and Vietnam. In effect …all the people of Kampuchea and Vietnam, as poor as they are and with all that they have suffered, are named enemies of the richest country on earth, the very country which contributed so much to their agony.30

We contended that the best humanitarian aid would help to build the capacity of the people to support themselves and expand peasant agriculture and highlighted how the US government was standing in the way of progress, treating the people of Kampuchea and Vietnam as pawns in an ongoing Cold War. We documented a string of licensing denials over the past several years, including denial of licenses for things such as school kits of basic educational supplies for children in Kampuchea, for seed processing and storage equipment for agricultural cooperatives in Vietnam, and even denial of emergency food and medicines after a typhoon in Vietnam.

Several of these denials were reversed after public campaigns, but others were not. The State Department, after delaying the decision on the emergency food and medicines for six months, denied it on the grounds that the emergency no longer existed.

The audit highlighted a 1981 State Department memorandum on Kampuchean assistance that specifically ruled out the use of US funds for rehabilitation and development, citing agricultural aid “which would lead to surpluses” as an example. With restrictions such as this, other projects were not even submitted to State in order not to waste our staff time and resources.

The Impact Audit clearly illustrated how US “humanitarian” policy regarding Kampuchea and Vietnam was distorted by its hostility toward Vietnam. Acknowledging that the US gave generously of its food aid to stave off famine in Kampuchea during this emergency period in 1979,

...its political interests in undermining the Heng Samrin government [of Kampuchea] conflicted with its interest in seeing humanitarian aid reach the majority of Kampuchea’s population. Thus, even as the United States contributed to the relief effort on both sides of the conflict, its Embassy in Bangkok did everything in its power to discredit the People’s Republic of Kampuchea and its administration of aid to the interior. According to the US interpretation, the stockpiling of food in Phnom Penh’s warehouses in late 1979 represented willful denial of humanitarian aid, not the fact that there were less than 200 trucks in the entire country. …OXFAM was severely criticized for being a dupe of the Vietnamese, and the US Embassy in Bangkok later spread a false rumor that rice seed sent into Kampuchea by the OXFAM/Non-Governmental Organization Consortium had been tainted with a deadly mercury-based fungicide which would poison Khmer peasants handling or eating the seed.31

31 p. 90
I believe that OA’s independence came not only from our financial self-sufficiency but from a deeply held philosophical notion of human rights that transcended all other obligations including that to our own government. Without breaking the law, we sought to resist the obstacles to recovery in Kampuchea and Vietnam. Our efforts were guided by expert legal counsel and we were not encouraged by our options under due process.

The work of international NGOs was all the more important due to severe restrictions on United Nations agencies (as discussed in the papers by Charny and Short). As the Kampuchean representative to the United Nations remained in the hands of the Khmer Rouge, UN agencies could work in Kampuchea only under a special mandate renewed annually by the General Assembly. The aim of the General Assembly was to condemn Vietnam’s invasion of Kampuchea and to force all foreign troops out. The Kampuchea Resolution since 1979 prohibited UN agencies from activities other than emergency assistance.

The frustration of the Oxfam team in Kampuchea was palpable. They could not become a mini-UNDP or FAO. They could not stop the threat of another serious food shortfall and they had to continually contend with efforts to block genuine development assistance.

The audit concludes:

The United States, which has used its power so destructively in Vietnam and Kampuchea, has the opportunity to use its power creatively to end this debilitating political stalemate. The government of the United States, with the American people, must begin working urgently for reconstruction with the government of Vietnam and Kampuchea. Having attempted repeatedly without success to reach strategic ends through the use of violence and embargoes to punish and to bleed, the United States must take the first step towards building a new relationship with Indochina. After so much violence and suffering there remains a road not taken – the path of negotiation, reconciliation, and eventual respect and friendship. Without this reconciliation, which the United States must dare to initiate, the Vietnamese and Kampuchean people will continue to be victims of isolation, war, and violence. They have been our ‘enemies’ long enough. The time cannot come soon enough when the war has truly ended in Vietnam and Kampuchea.32

The audit set the tone for and the standard of work for Oxfam America during almost a decade of advocacy on behalf of the people of Kampuchea and Vietnam, until the trade embargo against both was lifted in 1992.

CONCLUSION

Oxfam America’s work at home and abroad has been based on unwavering objectives to lessen vulnerability to poverty and disease, to pioneer new thinking about development and to test innovative strategies and models. From its origins, we knew that even innovative and successful development efforts would ultimately fail without a policy environment conducive to their sustainability. Working at that level of policy to lower the barriers to participation was the goal of the first policy analysis and advocacy programs.

The world of development policy is immense. As an American development organization, United States policies were most immediately evident to us. The influence of the US throughout the world was such that we felt a special responsibility to respond to it when necessary.

32 p. 128
Our early efforts focused on those policies that had the most immediate impact on the people with whom we worked—the misguided, US-supported land reform of El Salvador; the possible resumption of military aid to a regime in Guatemala that was repressing development efforts among the poor; and finally the way that US policy constrained our efforts to help Kampuchea and Vietnam move from disaster relief to development.

While we focused our early efforts on these problems, we participated in numerous international forums and world conferences in order to build an NGO community as a major constituency for just development, trade, and the environment. We contributed in some measure to the beginnings of this global civil society and watched it grow from a handful of northern NGOs at the first World Food Conference in 1974 to hundreds of southern NGOs at the 1979 World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development. We helped organize there the world’s first counter-conference bringing together scores of rural development organizations from poor nations to testify to the myth of development being proclaimed by national delegations. They spoke of real problems of rural repression, of corruption, of the real impact of disasters and aid on the livelihoods of the poor.

Fundamental to our early efforts and still an underlying belief for many civil society organizations is that we act as world citizens with allegiance first to a common humanity and with the responsibility to root out the causes of preventable suffering. I look back on this now and see the beginnings of a “rights-based approach to development.” To be different than partisan actors with unexamined interests, we sought that our kind of development would be rooted in examination of underlying causation and that our analysis should lead us to effective strategy, monitored and evaluated, revised and even scrapped if necessary. We did not seek to challenge our own government but our analysis led us there.

Oxfam America today is distinguished by a broad range of policy advocacy but it is still firmly rooted in the experience of the poor. These efforts have their origins, as described in this chapter, in the pioneering and even courageous work of the organization during the turbulent years of the late 1970s and 1980s. If organizations go through eras in which institutional memory is lost, this chapter serves as a reminder that the team from an earlier era waged the good fight for a just and equitable development.
“The earth shows up those of value and those who are good for nothing.” A peasant judgment quoted by Jean Pierre Vernant in Mythe et Penseé Chez les Grecs.
—John Berger, Pig Earth, 1979

“Humanitarian aid is often required because of abject political failure. It is neither intended, nor is it able, to resolve political crises that governments have created or at least failed to address.”
—William Shawcross, The Quality of Mercy: Cambodia, Holocaust and Modern Conscience, 1984

So much needs to be done, so much more radically, that no estimates, however optimistic, could undermine the case for trying to do much more, much better, and faster.
—Robert Chambers, Rural Development: Putting the Last First, 1983

In this paper Michael Scott, Oxfam America’s first Overseas Program Director, reflects on the evolution of Oxfam America’s overseas work. It looks at the various influences that shaped the overseas program, including the antecedents of the British Oxfam’s program, Oxfam America’s development philosophy and principles, and the Cold War context in which Oxfam was operating. He acknowledges the important and sometimes path-breaking contributions of former colleagues, while reflecting candidly on some of the growing pains Oxfam experienced in its second decade.

INTRODUCTION

In June 1977, I became the first overseas program director at Oxfam America, having never heard of Oxfam or known of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) before the quirky courtship that led to my employment. How could I—despite six years’ residence, work, and
research in Ecuador and Mexico for national and international development organizations, extensive travel, and a doctorate in anthropology—have missed the distinctively named Oxfam? I, like most Americans, was not familiar with the organization or its well-established humanitarian tradition. Had I been British, the name would have been as familiar to me as CARE or the Goodwill is to Americans. Had I lived in Boston where it had modest visibility, I might have known of Oxfam America, but it had none in my home state of California and none in Andean or Amazonian Ecuador or Mexico, where I first learned about development on the ground.

My first impressions, based on a meeting with an Oxfam America staffer who happened to be in California, were perhaps more revealing than I wanted to admit and frankly not entirely promising: At first brush, it seemed an organization long on enthusiasm but short on substance. In contrast, on the telephone, the new executive director, Joe Short, was long in word but so short on budget that the organization was unable to transport me from California to Boston for an interview. Courtesy of my in-laws, my wife, 2-year-old son and I found ourselves on a family visit in Washington, DC, where Oxfam America organized an interview over dinner with board members Felix Knauth and Bob Terry. A now defunct, distinctly lowbrow American icon eatery, Hot Shoppe cafeteria, was their fitting choice and it was, of course, Dutch treat—nothing fancy or taken at the expense of project partners. (This was enough for my father-in-law to conclude that the organization was certainly cheap and possibly kooky.) The conversation with Bob and Felix was appropriately direct, practical, and down to earth. I was impressed they knew their stuff.

If only I had realized what was being revealed about the organization that was about to transform my life during the next nine years: Its parsimony in all things related to spending, including compensation; its seat-of-the-pants creativity and problem solving; its ethically inspired passion about social justice; its refreshing perspectives on the limits of state power; its challenge to the existing way of doing aid; its insistent demands made upon board, staff, and volunteers; its proclivities of engulfing those associated with it; its potential for extraordinarily rapid growth; and its board-dominated character.

Further along in the hiring process and at last in Boston for more interviews, I remember driving the director’s vintage VW bug through gray slushy streets, returning from yet another meeting and wondering if my feet would ever get dry and how exciting this work might be. Little did I know that I would soon be totally immersed, head to toe. Though I had significant operational and policy experience in development complemented by post-graduate degrees, I had no idea what I was getting into as an NGO program director, but then that had never been a reason for me not to try something new. However, I did know what I brought to the bargain. As a middle class white man having lived and worked in rural Latin America, I was keenly aware of the burden of privilege I felt. My Anglophile parents nurtured an internationalist perspective, insisting I read their Manchester Guardian weekly air-mail edition. My abiding interest in cultural differences was deeply rooted and nourished in the diverse community where I was raised. I came of age in the 1960s in a university town with a history of dissent, so I was familiar with a range of political perspectives. A high school friend’s father had his livelihood destroyed by an intrusive federal government, victim of the witch-hunting anti-Communists of the House Committee on Un-American Activities.
As an undergraduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, I was an activist of the Free Speech Movement, blocking the campus police car holding an arrested civil rights activist, sitting-in at the administration building, picketing for racial democracy and against the US-Vietnam war.

As a budding ethnographer, I spent a summer in and around Indian reservations in far northern California, and later in rural southern California; this gave me an experiential sense of contested identities, class, and race during the early days of the Indian revival movement. A house guest of one Indian leader, I remember she insisted: “I’d rather be ‘Red than dead’,” the moniker on T-shirts sold in the modest reservation museum she established. Wanting to learn to speak Spanish, I organized my own study abroad semester at the National Autonomous University of México in Mexico City.

Unwilling to participate in the disastrous unfolding wars in Southeast Asia, I sought refuge as a Peace Corps volunteer, despite the declaration of a professor I admired who said in effect: “If you don’t like the war, avoid any connection with the US government, including Peace Corps.” It was the luck of the draw that the experimental Peace Corps training I received during four months in rural Puerto Rico fortunately, but painfully, stripped me of my pretensions of academic learning, and set me along a different path as an active learner/doer, all the while providing intensive immersion first in Spanish and then in Quichua—the Incan language. I ended up taking three, rather than two, years of Peace Corps service partly because I was so deeply engaged, first in organizing a grass roots Indian peasant movement in the highlands and then in issues of indigenous cultural survival in the Amazon.

Paradoxically, firsthand Peace Corps service provided ample evidence to feed a profound skepticism of governments and their aid programs, especially those of the US, but also to nurture an abiding respect for the dignity and genius of many poor and powerless individuals I had the good fortune to know. Compounding this paradox, I received a government graduate fellowship under the National Defense Education Act, and though I was asked to do no more than pursue studies for a doctorate, apparently my graduate education would enhance the nation’s security. Later in México, I worked with a challenging international team of iconoclastic agrarian reform specialists who had previously advised the democratically elected Allende government in Chile, only to flee its demise at the hands of the tyrant Pinochet. This UNFAO team was led by the brilliant economist and avuncular Solon Barraclough, who delighted in reminding us that when negotiation grew difficult, his Mexican counterpart would place a .45 caliber revolver on the table.

After three years in México, I wanted to live in the US again. It was time to reclaim my native culture, to become an anonymous American and less of an exotic spectacle always on display. Maybe Oxfam America offered a stateside vehicle for me to continue to honor those commitments I made to the poor and powerless during my formative years. Just maybe this was a middle ground I could traverse between home and abroad. Apparently I said enough of the right things to get an offer from Oxfam America, which I eagerly accepted but was less than enthused about the accompanying big salary cut.

In writing this memoir, I have dredged deeply into memory, aided by a wonderful Oxfam America reunion celebrated in the summer of 2007 and exchanges with former colleagues, though I have purposely avoided reading others’ accounts before writing my own. The process has unfolded over a year, giving ample opportunity for deeper memories to come to the fore and for rethinking first reflective impressions. While no less fallible than any other
account, I have sought to make an empirically based critical reflection about what mattered to me without falling into a self-congratulatory heroic narrative of no bumps, no boring everydayness, no failures. At the same time, I hope I have avoided publicly washing organizational laundry as well as the boring discourse of apparently inevitable success and triumph. No organization is without its challenges and opportunities gained and lost, but few organizations have the courage to take a hard retrospective look to learn as well as appreciate what’s been accomplished. Though my view is partial and through the lens of the overseas program, I have looked at the contingent and the consequential of my Oxfam America experience, both at home and abroad, in the hopes of providing a thread for learning.

INVENTION AND REINVENTIONS

Since its founding in the US in 1970, Oxfam America has lived two lives in several unfolding incarnations. My firsthand knowledge spans a decade from 1977 to 1987.


The invention of Oxfam America as a US NGO in 1970 in Washington, DC, had three roots: (1) the British Oxfam, (2) the humanitarian crisis marking the birth of Bangladesh and the independence of the former East Pakistan and, consequentially, (3) the media attention around the international crisis. It was a time of great change and idealism, including the first modern concert for international humanitarian relief thanks to the selfless generosity of Ravi Shankar and George Harrison. Like many NGOs, Oxfam America was invented by concerned citizens to respond to a major human needs crisis that overwhelmed existing relief organizations and demanded public attention. But its first organizational life was short lived: Oxfam America did not survive the wave of humanitarian concerns about the disaster that begat it.


Its second life began in 1973 when its brave refounders took on the extraordinary challenge of recreating Oxfam America in Boston. Over several years of great vision and sacrifice by board and staff, Oxfam America acquired considerable strength and momentum, though it remained dependent upon the British Oxfam for its major program functions. Major accomplishments included establishing staff continuity and basic organizational systems, and buying a row house at 302 Columbus Avenue, which served as an anchor for a decade. Contributions by John Thomas, Robert Terry and Joe Short cover this early history. By 1977, with the hire of a new executive director, and other new staff in leadership positions, it was ready for its first reinvention.

First reinvention—Growth and independence (1977–1983)

The changes in this period began modestly when the overseas program had, for the first time, two full-time staff: me and Nancy Chevalier, a support person, and a $200,000 grants budget. With Joe Short’s hiring and increased staffing (and competencies), there was rapid and radical growth in revenue leading to greater organizational capacity, program autonomy, and increasing public visibility, which in turn reinforced growth. It was a breathless stage of program creativity, growing organizational complexity and revealing internal tumult. I was in the middle of this growth experience as the overseas program became much bigger (from $200,000 to $3.7 million a year), far better staffed (from 2 to 24), and much more strategic
(program strategies supported, in some cases, by field offices). In sum, Oxfam America became independent in its program capacity, and no longer relied on its British patron or on its board for staff functions. Outgrowing its brick row house, it acquired and rehabbed a larger building nearby, for its third Boston-area home.

Second reinvention—Consolidation and union shop 1984–1995

Though the seeds were planted in its prior stage, by 1984 in its second reinvention, the agency became a union shop at the behest of its workers who overwhelmingly, despite significant differences among them, supported a radical shift in internal organizational dynamics. Chastened, the board and the now formal managers reflected on this uninvited reinvention, and began a long process of reconciling organizational interests and staff demands. There were wholesale staff management replacements, beginning at the top, with a new executive director, John Hammock, followed immediately by new education and advocacy program leadership. The overseas program pursued directions that had been established in the prior stage, at least initially. This second reinvention was characterized by a second long-serving executive director who presided over a period marked more by consolidation than creativity and dramatic growth. Perhaps it was time for Oxfam America to catch up with itself and intensively address its internal challenges.

I suspect there are at least two more reinventions, associated with the two successive relocations of the Boston office, the emergence of Oxfam International, and a third long-term executive director, Ray Offenheiser, and continuing significant organizational growth, but I have no firsthand knowledge of these. My focus is on the first reinvention and the beginning of the second in Boston, when I was the overseas director.

OXFAM FAMILY

In the 1970s, if there was a gravitational center of the Oxfam world it was Oxfam House located on Banbury Road in Oxford, England. It sat near the rural edge of town, far from the old industrial sector, in the upper stories of an unremarkable modern building whose first floor entrance was one of its 600 shops of turnaround clothing, junk, and third world crafts. It’s hard to imagine CARE, UNICEF or the Ford Foundation having an equivalent entrance so thoroughly rooted in its national character and so down to earth, but then they didn’t have the grand “house” after their names, either. (Oxfam America briefly considered calling its modest digs Oxfam America house, but mercifully rejected this notion as slavish and inappropriate for the US.) A longstanding household name in Britain and one of the three top charities in income, Oxfam enjoyed such ubiquity that one of its campaign posters was shown on a refrigerator in the 1971 feature film, Sunday Bloody Sunday. Oxfam was variously an active, then reluctant, parent of a half dozen much smaller Oxfam organizations in Australia, Belgium, Canada, and the US, which, even lumped together, were not as large or significant as Oxfam. It was a loose affiliation of organizations sharing a single name, and similar humanitarian goals. Each inevitably reflected its particular history and distinct national character. For example, the once unitary Oxfam Canada split into two separate organizations, one Francophone (Oxfam-Québec) and the other Anglophone (Oxfam-Canada). Each of the Oxfam agencies was

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an independent organization, legally incorporated as a separate entity in its home country, unlike some other international NGOs with a unitary international structure governing different national members.

Without doubt, Oxfam America owed a great deal to the British Oxfam. Its name was its major asset, provided courtesy of the British Oxfam, during a period dominated by expansive thinking by Oxfam’s first and longest-standing director, Sir Lesley Kirkley. The American Oxfam owned its second Boston home, a red brick row house at 302 Columbus Avenue, thanks in part to on-site advice and financing from Oxfam. Visiting Oxfam staff from Oxford provided valuable program guidance in Boston, enhancing Oxfam America’s organizational capacity. Moreover, most but not all of Oxfam America’s overseas projects were identified, developed, and largely or partly funded by Oxfam using its extensive system of field offices, project vetting and administration. (A significant exception was Oxfam America’s longstanding, direct, and independent relations with the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee.) Typically, Oxfam America reviewed a selected small number of projects and offered financing of those it wanted to support by transferring funds to Oxford. In return, it received project proposals, descriptions, and updates. In 1976, the American Oxfam had no field staff or even full-time staff to worry about overseas program development or project identification, let alone monitoring and evaluation. In its early Boston second life, Oxfam America was nominally and legally independent, but functionally reliant upon its British patron.

For a time, the phrase the “British Oxfam” grated on certain British ears, because of course there was only one Oxfam and it didn’t need a national modifier before its name. As for the other “Oxfams,” well, that was contested terrain, at least during the 1970s and 1980s with the advent of Oxfam’s second director, Brian Walker. Hired for his managerial capacity among other strengths, he felt that too much had been given away, especially the enormous investment in the name Oxfam. Other national organizations bearing the same name could, in the worst-case scenario, squander and besmirch without facing the downside consequences that the original organization would, perhaps inordinately, suffer. Oxfam America did not see its future as essentially a source of financial support for the British Oxfam, but sought a partnership of greater equality in an Oxfam family of organizations. Walker’s insistence on name divestiture was a stunning reversal from the original internationalism that gave rise to the Oxfam family. It seemed a peculiar if not small-minded expression of patron-client relations, hardly a partnership. However, one can imagine the worries on Banbury Road if, say the Belgian Oxfam’s policy and programs in the West Bank differed, or if the press got wind of something or worse yet if there was a public incident. As a result of these pressures over the name, the Australian Oxfam changed its name to Community Aid Abroad–CAA. (It is now back to Oxfam Australia, I’m pleased to learn.) Pressure was brought to bear on other Oxfams, as well. Once in the top floor director’s office on Banbury Road, Walker presented me the case for name divestiture. I listened and reported back to Boston, though clearly for emergent Oxfam America this was at best a non-starter if not a threat to survival. Other Oxfams seemed to take a similar perspective, except the Australians. During this difficult period, we had to ask ourselves, was responsible stewardship morphing into territoriality? Was British nationalism, however temporarily, trumping internationalism? It turns out that later the pendulum would swing back to the upsides, even farther than during the initial period of expansion and with greater integration with the creation of Oxfam International in 1995, a confederation of 13 organizations. In the increasingly globalized world, the major NGOs, including Oxfam, have found strength in closer cooperation among the national organizations.
But even during the name debate period of the 1970s and 1980s, there was regular collaboration on substantive overseas programs with the British Oxfam. At Oxfam House, some of the old guard still held forth, including several who served in the Friends’ Ambulance Unit, a volunteer service founded by individual British Quakers, and mostly staffed by registered conscientious objectors. Manifesting Oxfam’s profound Quaker roots, these individuals were active in China (1941–1946), and in asides would dazzle me with stories about playing bridge with Chou En-Lai. There appeared a seamless link with Oxfam’s mission of internationalism, relief work in areas under both civilian and military control, working as a pacifist and civilian body responding to the greatest need and cooperating to create a new world of good will and positive service. There were no equivalent old-timer staff with similar experience at Oxfam America, and while both organizations were secular, there was no equivalent Quaker root in the Boston-based organization either.

The language of humanitarianism was essentially shared, albeit with some variations. For example, the British Oxfam’s program of social services for orphans, infants, and the ill was not consonant with Oxfam America’s emphasis upon development and economic self-reliance. When it came to disaster responses, Oxfam had an established program unit, procedures, in-house technical expertise, warehouses with feeding kits, blankets, and portable sanitation units for servicing temporary camps of thousands of displaced persons or refugees. Moreover, Oxfam was one of a half-dozen founding members (1963) of the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), created to coordinate British NGO responses to large-scale international emergencies. Oxfam America had nothing to match this, nor did it seek to develop a similar capacity with kindred US NGOs, but it did contribute financially to Oxfam initiated relief activities and actively learned from these experiences.

For example, during the devastating Guatemalan earthquake of 1976 when 22,000 died, Oxfam’s Central America field director, Reggie Norton, made a critical and early determination that a major bottleneck for poor Guatemalans was economic access to roofing material for rebuilding. The price of corrugated iron laminas was about to be driven well out of reach by peaking demand. As so often occurs, someone was about to make a killing at the expense of the poor and powerless in the midst of human tragedy. But Oxfam made the gutsy decision to buy a significant share of the roofing material the market had on offer before the price took off. It then resold it at a fair price to poor Guatemalans for rebuilding. In addition, with technical advice from Fred Cuny, an American disaster consultant, the Oxfam program included straightforward seismic improvements in wall reinforcing using local materials. These approaches addressed the major source of the earthquake’s mortality, namely falling tile roofs, and also promised to enhance survival in the inevitable future seismic events (corrugated iron roofing is very light by comparison with tile). Here, the link between appropriate disaster responses and medium-term development seemed self-evident. In contrast, certain agencies gave what they had, which though it may not have been needed, appeared to respond to the humanitarian crisis. So, despite the fact that Guatemalan farmers just had a record food harvest, US food aid program providers were eager to contribute food, though there’s considerable evidence to support the argument that food aid would diminish crop prices and further hurt Guatemalan farmers just at their hour of need (while helping US farmers and politicians). Oxfam America learned critical lessons about appropriate disaster responses, use of technical expertise, timeliness of decision-making and empirically based strategies that would be put to use during the next decade. Indeed, in late 1977 Oxfam America responded to the tidal surge disaster in the Bay of Bengal, sending staff member Nathan Grey and consultant Fred Cuny to...
India for a firsthand assessment. Five years later, Cuny was persuaded to organize his disaster lessons learned in a useful Oxfam America sponsored publication titled *Disasters and Development*. (See Simon’s contribution for more details on this.)

**OXFAM AMERICA’S OVERSEAS PROGRAM**

In 1977 Oxfam America had an overseas annual grants budget of $200,000, a dozen new projects in as many different Third World countries, two full-time staff, and a clattering, temperamental Telex machine, the tangible communications lifeline with the British Oxfam and its field offices. Total agency staff numbered a dozen, with most juggling multiple jobs, including the labor-intensive Fast for a World Harvest, the organization’s signature event. But the overseas project funding was the main draw, without which no solidarity effort, public education or policy claims could be legitimately made. By 1983, the overseas annual grants budget had grown to more than $3.7 million, peaking higher during disaster appeals. Overseas staff increased by a factor of 12 to two dozen, and included not only Americans, but also nationals of other countries. Soon there were seven program regions each with its project officer, half of them women, and there were three field offices with plans for four more. Two hundred projects were funded every year. What an exciting time it was to be in the midst of such remarkable growth!

The overseas program was essentially a grant-making activity in that it provided financial resources to other organizations, typically local Third World NGOs, to carry out agreed upon activities to alleviate poverty and powerlessness. In essence, the program provided a service by linking those with resources in the rich world to those in need of resources in the poor world. At the time grant making was limited to certain poor countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Rather arbitrarily, it excluded poor areas of the US, not because there was an absence of poverty in the US, but simply because of program specialization. This proved an unsatisfactory response for many. Giving money away looks easy from the outside, but I learned that as a grant maker I needed to say “no” with some frequency: to projects, to ideas, to new regions. We were not funders to the world and needed to steward our modest resources for optimal impact, and we hoped, rationally.

Grant-making to address poverty sounds simple, but good intentions are definitely not a guide to or measure of success. It is a tall order with many challenges and complexities, not to mention lots of unknowns. Usually the program did not provide technical support, materiel or operational services using its own staff, though this deserves further discussion; rather it sought to enhance other organizations’ capacity to carry out the work by providing them with financial resources. The overseas program did not propose a single or simple one-size-fits-all solution for addressing development and disaster problems across the globe; rather, it sought to creatively leverage its modest resources in response to promising locally defined responses. Oxfam America’s activist-grant making demanded insightful analysis based upon empirical, on-the-ground understanding of how different societies operated, especially poor agrarian societies.

These bare facts were sufficient to confound at least some if not many, including a well-established journalist who, in conversations with us, revealingly could not imagine how “they,” the project partners, could put financial resources to work when in his understanding what “they” needed was things—food, technology—sent from America’s shores. He did not seem to understand that a very competent Iowa corn farmer, if plunked down in eastern Peru or West Africa, would be pretty helpless without having the technology, financial, and technical
support available at home. There are probably as many competent Iowan farmers as there are Peruvian or West African farmers on a per capita basis. What makes them fundamentally different is the wealth of resources and technologies the Iowan can tap, including timely and accurate market information, competitive financing, functioning physical and social infrastructure.

Money is fungible, as I would often explain. It can become many different things and continue still to morph. As grant makers, we transformed it into critically needed fuel purchased locally to transport locally produced food from surplus to deficit areas of Zimbabwe. It was transformed into printed material designed for new readers to maintain and enhance their fledgling literacy and numeracy skills in Bangladesh. It was transformed into improved granary designs to diminish post-harvest food losses among poor farmers in Nicaragua. And into training for Sri Lankan villagers to learn to make malaria-bearing mosquito larvae surveys, and into solar-powered potable water pumps in Somalia for displaced people, and so on, through a rich as well as pedestrian—don’t forget those chickens—litany of project particulars.

Appearances to the contrary, not all aid money is equal in value. Oxfam America’s grant money was of particularly high value because it was unencumbered, in the main. It was not tied to a country or activity, and could be used to buy the highest aid value. Usually that meant buying locally and multiplying the value of the money spent. If the Sri Lankan malaria project needed bicycles for its village workers, the project we funded could buy the bicycles in Sri Lanka where they were made, enhancing the local economy as well as ensuring spares and repairs of locally known technology. In contrast, if the money were tied to US or Japanese purchases, one can readily see the diminished value, increased complexity, and delays required by foreign purchase, shipping, and the supply chain for maintenance and repairs. Unencumbered grant money added enormous flexibility, as well as the occasional wild goose chase, to the overseas program. Moreover, Oxfam America did not fly the flag, that is use only US made goods and services; rather we selected the best available, beginning with the local, self-reliance logic. Oxfam America did not erect signs proclaiming its participation in a project, which is the usual requirement of government and large-scale foreign aid activity. Oxfam America did not take money from its government, and thus avoided this among other constraining problems.

Other agencies specialized in moving large quantities of food, or organizing vaccination campaigns, or providing major capital funds. By comparison, Oxfam America’s overseas grant making program was general in that it covered many different sectors and activities from health to adult education and training to microcredit to production and marketing. The program was not just or always famine relief as the acronym Oxfam—Oxford Committee for Famine Relief—implied. Food security — universal access to sufficient food for a healthy life — was a common and powerful theme in many regional programs, but not all. In special circumstances, particularly in disaster responses, the usual grant-making approach was often modified. For example the “Tools for Peace” program of collecting and shipping used tools and equipment was justified as both a powerful mobilizing tool at home to advance OA’s advocacy agenda and a tangible net positive contribution to those in need in Central America. It was very labor intensive even with significant volunteer assistance, and it could not be justified solely as a cost-effective delivery of goods, even if they were donated. In this case, Oxfam America was making a political statement contrasting Oxfam America aid that promoted peace to US aid used to in support of a US geopolitical agenda.
Oxfam America had, in fact, developed a critique of similar, so-called “mercy flights.” Rapidly delivering cargo to those in dire need is popular with the public and the press, but often as not it is hard to justify as substantively addressing the problems it appears to solve. The high cost, inefficiency, and emphasis on the dramatic technology of delivery can perhaps be justified with very high value cargo and a functioning system on the ground to use it, but otherwise it is a shibboleth of self-serving aid mentality. The most effective work is far less dramatic as well as less costly. Oxfam America was part of such a flight from the US to Ethiopia during the famine in 1983, but only once during my tenure. Oxfam America rejected the use of “starving children” photographs because they denigrated those who we were trying to reach, and reinforced racist stereotypes, though from a strict fundraising perspective they were effective. Similarly, the agency rejected so-called “mercy flights” and goods collecting as inappropriate and ineffective.

Once it achieved sufficient size, the overseas program moved from a largely one-off series of projects pragmatically selected across three continents to a program that had staff with sufficient expertise and regional knowledge to develop strategies that allowed us to more systematically pursue program goals and objectives over three-year periods in seven regions of the world. If general in approach, the overseas program was also specific in that each region developed and implemented a tailored program that responded to local opportunities and organizational capabilities. Specific projects then corresponded to the region’s program priorities, giving more focus and coherence that permitted a closer measure of achievements and more learning. Such priorities also meant excluding all manner of requests, many no doubt very worthy of support that did not fit the region’s particular focus.

At its best, the overseas program pushed the envelope, choosing creative solutions that made a tangible difference in ways that mattered at least in the short term if not for a longer period. Even if the particulars did not work out or were not clearly ascertainable, we still believed that by engaging pressing issues in potentially innovative ways we were making a contribution. It was important to have the capacity and audacity to take calculated risks. At worst, there were missed opportunities, insufficient analysis and follow-up, setbacks, delays, and even occasionally funds that could not be adequately accounted for by project holders.

After creating project officer roles and a regional program model, the next crucial step was to establish field offices to have a continuous on-the-ground-presence, rather than simply having Boston-based project officers travel their respective regions several times a year. Establishing field offices took several years to sort out. It required new systems of fiscal operations and control, establishing legal status, and a host of other adjustments. The payoff potential was significant in quality of overseas work, including closer relations with project partners, better capacity for project identification and monitoring and more immediate knowledge of the context. Field offices offered immediate credibility to the overseas program and agency, but also carried costs: they were more expensive, created complicated field/home office communications dynamics, and were under less management control. By the end of my tenure we had a hybrid model. Some regions had field offices (India, Peru, and Zimbabwe) and others operated out of Boston (Southeast Asia, Horn of Africa and West Africa), although there were plans to establish more field offices. Most working days, however, were not characterized by such heady themes, rather we struggled to get our jobs done by the end of the day and still have some time and energy for life beyond work.
Most of the emphasis and energy went into cultivating, negotiating, and analyzing proposed projects in the run up through several stages of project vetting. If the up-front emphasis was impressive in stewarding resources, the same cannot be said for the resources applied to figuring out the results or consequences. It is straightforward to account for the inputs provided (diesel fuel purchased, day-old chicks acquired, days of training given) and still another much more challenging question to figure out to what effect. Were literacy levels maintained, improved or not? How did the additional income generated for landless households get used? Over time did the new granary design work out? Did the solar pumps represent a wave of the future or a one-off event? How successful was the small-farmer marketing cooperative at amortizing the capital investment in refrigeration? How many of those economically marginalized women were able to maintain their increased income? I believe there are probably as many partially answered questions of this kind as there were projects funded. In the regional program mode we were able to learn more and do a better job.

As it was, each region was quite distinct not only in its themes and priorities, but also in its coherence. What held the pieces together was an emphasis upon what is now known as capacity building: small-scale, grassroots, peasant/pastoral/worker-based strategies focused upon enhancing security of livelihood, food, and cultural identity. A general consensus developed on the basis of experience that $500,000 was a reasonable annual grants budget for one staff to manage in each region. Of course, larger sums could be spent, but a firmly held view was that too much funding could have negative effects and that the level of organizational development we sought was reflected in small-scale grants, ranging from $5,000 to $50,000. I came to think of this as a kind of grant-making acupuncture. If there was sufficient knowledge and expertise that could identify opportunities to make a qualitative change, then the relatively small-scale grant could pay big dividends over time.

It’s also true that certain partner agencies increased their scale of operations over time, as is the case with the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC). In 2007, the Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation discovered exactly what they were seeking in BRAC, providing it with a generous grant in the millions of dollars. Thirty years ago, long before Gates came on the scene, Oxfam America regularly funded BRAC. Taking a leap based on its excellent track record, Oxfam America granted $134,000 to BRAC’s Training and Resource Center in 1976 (a huge grant for Oxfam America at the time), a project that was later shared with British Oxfam, which was looking to enhance its development work in Bangladesh.

**DISASTERS AND DEVELOPMENT**

**Cambodia**

As an aged DC-3 aircraft laden with emergency supplies and several NGO staff descended toward Phnom Penh in 1980, Cambodia’s moist tropical air engulfed it, heightening the senses but dulling energy. Signs of war were everywhere, detritus from both old and new wars, including paper currency from previous regimes floating around the razed remains of the central bank. The airport had only recently opened for a few western international relief flights, after the invading Vietnamese Army consolidated its presence in Cambodia, permitting access to a trickle of international aid staff, but only after cumbersome prior negotiation. I had recruited Tom Wickham to carry out an assessment field trip to Cambodia, and he and
I were among the dozen passengers on the funky flight from Singapore. Wickham, a family farmer from Long Island, was an excellent example of the remarkable expertise that Oxfam America was able to engage. He was one of a handful of deeply knowledgeable rice and irrigation experts on Southeast Asia, and a person of profound ethical convictions. Years before receiving a doctorate in agriculture engineering, he had been a volunteer in rural Cambodia. The place was so remote that it was weeks after Westerners were officially kicked out of the country that the news finally reached Wickham, who was evacuated by elephant. He had a remarkable mix of expertise and practical experience, a wealth of professional connections, not to mention negotiating skills that proved central in defining Oxfam America’s food security program in Cambodia. Joel Charny had set up our visit and the ensuing week-long field trip to the countryside where, accompanied by a government “minder,” we got a firsthand look at Cambodia’s countryside and sketched out the first elements of the program.

Brian Walker, Oxfam Britain’s second director, had invited Oxfam America to join the consortium and place a staff member inside Cambodia, but because border aid work was anathema to the new government in Phnom Penh (and without a doubt its Vietnamese patrons), dropping our border work was a condition for joining Walker’s consortium. Establishing the consortium had been a daring highwire act for Walker and now we were facing a decision that I saw as a fork in the road: continue its compelling relief efforts at the Thailand-Cambodia border along with many other western NGOs or gain access to Cambodia itself by joining Oxfam’s consortium and foregoing border work. Working directly in Cambodia was a powerful draw because it meant firsthand on-the-ground assessment of the situation. Besides, border work would be continued by many agencies already engaged there. Also, to honor the principle of working neutrally, financial contributions could be made to border work, without making it public and therefore torpedoing the arrangement inside Cambodia. Having made its organizational decision, it was my difficult job to tell the passionate Thailand program director, John Dennis, to transfer the border operation to other agencies.

In the rearview mirror now, this decision appears straightforward, but at the time it was fraught with the emotion and conflict in a highly polarized context; some may remember it as a time when the agency zigged when it should have stayed the course. There was no clear dividing line between the good and bad, and no course clear of contradictions and paradoxes. Not surprisingly, there was a paucity of reliable information and an avalanche of anecdotes, assertions, and spins, often conflicting. Few, if any, of the governments had much credibility. One pole was the US government, still harboring resentment over the “loss” of Vietnam, whose government it had not yet recognized. Instead, Washington focused on Vietnamese aggression while conveniently overlooking its major role in creating the chaos that led to the extremes of the Khmer Rouge and the destabilization of Cambodia. For its part, Vietnam’s long-term negative cultural view of Cambodia may have conflicted with its short-term need to install a client state led by former Khmer Rouge cadre, even as they railed against their ex-colleagues. Neighboring Thailand had legitimate security interests and was already hosting major refugee populations, though refusing them long-term status, and was home to a large western press and aid presence. From Bangkok, communication to and from western capitals was as easy as it was frequent, offering another western-influenced perspective. The regional power China was determined to teach Vietnam that it could not invade a neighboring state without prior approval, and thus invaded and occupied contiguous parts of northern Viet-

2 Maggie Black’s A Cause for Our Times: Oxfam, the First 50 Years, covers the Cambodia story in compelling detail.
Cambodia was a watershed for the agency. The virtue of staff in place in Cambodia proved critical, as it provided “ground truth” responses to all manner of assertions spun from various capitals and perspectives, powerfully reinforcing the value of having field staff. The virtue of remaining wholly independent of government funds was tested, debated, and reaffirmed. The prospective offer of US government funding was tantalizing in that it provided a way to challenge some of the government’s own assertions with its own resources, but in the end was, correctly in my view, rejected after serious internal debate. The agency achieved public prominence because of Cambodia’s central place in media attention, and its growing revenues reflected its greater visibility. It had grown in the context of a disaster that captured media attention unlike most disasters that, if not underreported, rarely capture much if any public attention.

Remaining non-partisan

I remember a call from a man presenting himself as a journalist from the *New York Times*. It turned out to be a ruse and I found myself in an intense exchange with an American man, who had once been an ardent supporter of the Khmer Rouge government, before he learned of its horrors and recanted his views. He had completed a hard 180-degree turn, and was now on a mission to ferret out those who might share his once misinformed views. Because Oxfam America was working in Cambodia, in Vietnam and in Nicaragua, he believed the agency was simply a leftist stooge masquerading as a humanitarian organization. It didn’t seem to matter than the overseas program also included Sri Lanka, India, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Peru, or Guatemala—whose governments represented a wide and contradictory sampling of ideology and political orientation.

From time to time we received complaints about our funding decisions. Yet Oxfam America had developed and operated from a simple, but compelling, humanitarian mission: to provide aid to and solidarity with those civilians in need in poor countries. Oxfam America was very conscious about ensuring that our humanitarian and development action did not take partisan political sides. It was for this reason we opted for a mix of countries, contexts, and activities to avoid simple pigeonholing. That said, an organization concerned with the root causes of poverty does have a political analysis and an organization working in zones of conflict may find itself standing up to the more powerful, sometimes very literally.

Whether courageous or foolhardy it was a remarkable moment when Rusty Davenport, Oxfam America’s Central American director, visiting Honduras’s La Virtud refugee camp across the river from El Salvador, witnessed the abduction of unarmed Salvadoran refugees, and ran after the armed and uniformed abductors who headed back to El Salvador, all the while snapping photographs of the event. His documentation of the blatantly illegal act he witnessed could have easily resulted in his death, not to mention the death of those persons being taken away with their hands bound behind their backs, but mercifully ended with the release of the captive refugees. Apparently these events were closely monitored in Washington, as I discovered to my surprise that elements of the US government knew more about Rusty’s whereabouts and the event sooner than I did, even though we were in telephone contact early on. In any case, his impulse and actions expressed the fundamental spirit of the organization
about taking sides: aid to those who evidently need help.

The application of this fundamental approach could prove not only daunting, but difficult to explain. For example, the Horn of Africa, torn by enduring conflict, posed significant challenges for an even-handed humanitarian approach. In one visit to the region in the early 1980s, I conferred with actual and potential project holders as well as government representatives in Ethiopia, and later in the Sudan. The visits also included ones with opposition groups. I met with political representatives of the Oromo Liberation Front, in a modest mud house near the end of the international airport runway, while a colleague met with Eritrean and Tigrayan groups. These represented but a sample of the many players.

As a practical matter, staff responsibilities were eventually split in such a way as to have one Addis-based staffer covering Ethiopia and related matters, and a Khartoum-based staffer covering Eritrea and contested parts of Tigray. This was hardly perfect, but it was better than having a single staff member attempt to do both. Subsequent events underscored the importance of being multi-handed as Ethiopia’s old tyrannical government fell: Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia, while the new rulers of each country and erstwhile allies in arms pledged a bright future, only to both deliver a new tyranny to their respective peoples and war against each other.

The question, whether yesterday’s Marxist-Leninist guerrilla leader is today’s entrenched government dictator, is answered in the positive in Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Zimbabwe, but very differently in Cambodia, Central America and Mozambique. Humanitarian action must be deeply rooted with detailed local knowledge and as even-handed as possible. It must speak truth to power and to ideological posturing.

**STRUCTURE AND STAFFING**

Having two bosses was a new wrinkle for me. Instead of simply reporting to the executive director, I also was the staff liaison with an active board of directors committee called the Project Committee and more particularly with the head of that committee. Consequently, the executive director delegated considerable responsibility to me as overseas program director, and ceded considerable power by giving me a direct link and regular communication channel to the board of directors. The Project Committee made the agency’s grants decisions. For some trustees this was a highly desirable committee assignment as it decided how the lion’s share of the financial resources were allocated. But it also required specialized knowledge, heavy work, including extensive reading and frequent committee meetings plus the regular board requirements. This committee was made up of a mix of board members, mostly with international experience in development, and volunteers, typically academics with relevant sectoral or regional experience. No other board committee exercised so much power so regularly, with the exception of the executive committee to which it was linked by overlapping assignments. Thus, my hiring was not solely by the executive director but was vetted by board members including the Project Committee.

Following Oxfam’s Quaker model, the committee made consensus decisions by reading project documents generated by staff and deliberating on them during formal meetings, getting a sense of the group. Consensus meant that all members, board and volunteer, had to agree with the decision or stand aside; one dissenting view was sufficient to delay or result in
a negative decision. For the non-Quaker inclined, this looked too wooly and overly process oriented, but it generally worked well for those who could appreciate and work with its virtues, even if it looked insufficiently decisive to some. It was not unusual for the committee to send back a project proposal for further information. Sometimes this information was simply not available, as those generating the project proposals in the field worked with considerable constraints. As Oxfam America developed its own capacity to define programs and identify projects within them, it also developed a staff-based internal review process that replicated the committee process. If anything, it was even more critical. One consequence was that project officers established criteria of what was needed to move a project proposal forward and effectively put it into practice.

With more project officers, staff knowledge and experience was often deeper and broader than the overseas committee and board. With more capacity came more work for the project committee, so three regional subcommittees were created (one each for Asia, Africa, and Latin America/Caribbean), each with at least one director assigned to it, for most project vetting. The full project committee retained its overarching policy and issue-oriented focus on such things as a war zones policy. The evolved Project Committee retained its board-dominated membership, but the regional committees were supplemented by volunteer advisors. My job included recruitment of volunteer committee members, but one very productive member I was fortunate to inherit. John Wyon, MD, Harvard University public health specialist, India expert, and British citizen was emblematic of dedicated committee volunteers.

The overseas program was primarily staffed by full-timers but also consultants, volunteers, and interns, and eventually divided among regional programs each with its projects officer and support personnel. Since the program was growing at a radical pace, it was in constant flux with new positions being created and new staff being hired. At its most evolved and more or less steady state there were two dozen core staff, all of whom I hired but only some of whom I directly supervised. When I began, I was the sole projects officer with the rather grandiose title of overseas program director, with a field of virtually the entire Third World. Fortunately we were soon able to add additional projects officers, the first of whom was African—a Somali national, Ahmed Farah, who covered the Horn and southern Africa, while based in Boston. Soon there would be a total of seven Projects Officers covering, respectively, Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Horn of Africa, Southern Africa, West Africa, South America, and Central America/Caribbean (the same regions it covers today, with the exception of South Asia and the addition of the US). As Oxfam America became better known, it attracted many job applicants with impressive credentials, but I looked for particular experiential and skill sets, which were hard to find. My short list included persons with significant relevant experience in poor countries, including language fluency, deep cultural knowledge and profound empathy for the marginalized. Advanced academic training was a plus, and we had several with MA and PhD degrees, but only if it also included and did not eclipse the experiential skill set. Those imbued with strident ideological persuasions, but bereft of pragmatic understanding of the limitations and opportunities of providing tangible assistance to the dispossessed, weren’t hired or did not last.

What an exciting and extraordinary mix of experience and skills we had as a group that guided the overseas program during its formative stage.

Joel Charny, a returned Peace Corps volunteer from the Central African Republic with a master’s degree, started at Oxfam America as a volunteer. With French language skills at the
ready, he took up an Oxfam America field position in Cambodia in the Oxfam Disaster Consortium, and went on to manage the Southeast Asia program. After my departure, he became the overseas program director, making an appropriately storied and long agency career, which he concluded as acting executive director.

The immensely talented Marty Chen spoke three languages of India where she had lived for years, earned a doctorate, and created and implemented a very successful women’s program well ahead of its time despite doubts on the part of Oxfam UK’s field director that there would never be enough women’s projects in India to justify such a focus. For good measure she established Oxfam America’s field office in India.

Having worked in the Ecuadorian Andes and Amazon before there was an Oxfam presence and in the early stage of the Indian movement, I was determined to pursue an Oxfam America program in the region. Later, as overseas director, I visited an Oxfam project in the Peruvian Amazon. After a 12-hour all-night bus ride from Lima up over the Andes and steeply down to the small rainforest town of Oxpampa, I was promptly threatened with arrest if I was Dick Smith—he had alienated a powerful local figure with his pro-Indian work.

This was quite an introduction to Richard Chase Smith, who eventually became Oxfam America’s South American regional director. There, he established the Lima field office and developed an extraordinarily rich program at the intersection of cultural survival, human rights, and environmental sustainability. Like me, Dick had been a Peace Corps volunteer and earned a doctorate in anthropology, but unlike me he made a lifetime commitment to pursuing indigenous peoples’ issues while living in South America. Indeed, he still does in his post-Oxfam America work.

There were many other outstanding projects officers, including Deborah Toler, Laura Kullenberg, and two who have since passed on: Jill Harmsworth and Rolando Lopez.

During my tenure we were fortunate not to lose any staff to the many perils they encountered while working abroad, including violence and war, not to mention bad roads, dangerous vehicles, and a host of other hazards less common at home. Most of us had more than one close call. Many of us were often sick from being exposed to diseases in our travels, despite all precautions and prophylaxis, and I hope that none of these proved of lasting consequence. Unfortunately we did lose project partners and friends to different causes, including endemic and specific political violence. None of these untimely deaths and grisly murders was linked to overseas program activities. All human rights field workers are at risk by social and political forces beyond their control. In some instances I believe the overseas program may have provided some protection via a higher public profile, but no one should underestimate the threat to those responding to human needs as well as those in need by vested interests in existing arrangements.

It was an amazing team, but as the overseas program rapidly expanded in reach, staffing, and complexity, it became unmanageable under the existing set up. Though it took some convincing, a new position was finally approved that immediately added sanity to my work life, and paid extraordinary dividends to the overseas program and agency. No overseas program hire was more important than that of Carol Gupta, the first associate director of overseas programs. It was she who saved the program bacon, time and again by her human resource talent, managerial capacity and ability to create effective monitoring and control systems. Car-
ol had all the talent and experience that I lacked, and thus proved a wonderful complement at a critical stage when I had reached, if not exceeded, my own level of management competence. Her commitment to participatory management and staff development enabled the overseas program to flourish while discontent dogged other departments. For example, she instituted a practice that all staff, not just project officers, would read and critique the project proposals being submitted to the board. The goal was to foster a sense of empowerment among support staff, as well as develop a deeper understanding of the work. She also instituted a management strategy of mutual accountability: all the people who reported to her submitted monthly work plans, she submitted hers to them. At the end of the month, they mutually reviewed progress against stated objectives. It helped to formalize work plans in writing and staff learned it was safe to criticize Carol, and she learned it was safe to criticize me. As a result of these and related practices, the overseas department became more egalitarian.

Such human resource talents could have been used across the agency, addressing the endemic personnel and management issues, and just might have changed the course of the agency’s next incarnation as a union shop. Perhaps this was the observation of the next executive director, John Hammock, when he hired Carol to become his deputy, but by then the organization had already taken another tack, and she soon resigned, finding the position untenable.

**AN ORGANIZATIONAL TURNING POINT: OXFAM-AMERICA UNIONIZES**

All humanitarian aid agencies have institutional imperatives from payroll to board renewal required to survive. Each agency develops its particular institutional culture, indeed, history that shapes its interior life, its working conditions and its prospects. But many fail to survive while others become hollowed-out cores or are eclipsed by still other organizations they helped create. Still others carry on or reinvent themselves in various guises. None is a utopian manifestation of a perfect world. Indeed, too many NGOs are so poorly managed that their mission and everyday actions are at odds—even in inverse relation to each other: The more idealistic the goals, the more poorly managed the agency. The virtues of working in a humanitarian aid organization do not necessarily imply a healthy working environment, fair working conditions, wages, and benefits. This was as true of Oxfam America in the 1970s and 1980s, as it was of many kindred organizations with lofty goals and difficult working conditions. The blinding light of a morally justified mission can result in poor personnel policies and practices, including deficient or absent job descriptions, work planning and monitoring, spans of control, hiring, firing, and compensation. While the agency’s public image couldn’t have been more positive, the interior life of the organization for those working there ranged from positive to extremely negative, varying significantly by department. The difficulties were heightened with rapid agency growth: The faster the growth, the greater the demands upon management and organizational functioning. In the case of Oxfam America, had quantitative growth ambushed qualitative capacity? Staff successfully organized a unionization drive to the shock of many on the board and in management who read it as management failing, if not a mark against credibility. After all, if the agency sought social justice abroad, why couldn’t it get its own house in order?

I had not signed up to become a manager in a union shop, but that’s what happened in 1983 when the organization reinvented itself in union-management terms. Though I am pro-union to the extent that unions support accountability, transparency, effective participation, and
decentralized decisionmaking, I found the transition to a management/union situation thoroughly unpleasant. It was all the more galling after Carol Gupta’s signal management contributions to the overseas program, including systems addressing the nitty-gritty of fit between job descriptions and actual work demands, work planning and accountability, performance evaluations and feedback, and other effective measures. In my view, which I think reflected a broad consensus, the major quality of work issues had been successfully addressed in the overseas department. Other departments lacked these features, and also because of different staffing patterns and work demands, by comparison did not have the same coherence, unity, and level of job satisfaction as the overseas program. No matter how well or poorly managed the program or department, the entire organization unionized. As a result, my working relations with staff shifted both subtly and grossly, but generally gravitated to a more formal and even adversarial dynamic. Across the agency, consequences varied from the laudable, such as better staff compensation and benefits, to ludicrous, with such self-indulgent demands as a day off for pet birthdays. Even as it yielded improved wages and a sense of empowerment, which I supported, the impact of unionization in the overseas program was more ambiguous from my perspective.

Why did Oxfam America unionize and what did it accomplish? More particularly, to what extent did the union improve organizational health, job satisfaction and performance, democracy, and justice in the workplace? Was the union able to effectively deal with the internal conflicts or was it another layer of complexity in an increasingly large organization? Could Oxfam America have taken an entirely different direction and become a worker-managed enterprise, with high levels of participation and accountability, following several models readily found in other kinds of organizations? I wish there were ready, convincing, or straightforward answers to these questions, but I haven’t come across them yet.

All organizations have internal issues and conflicts, sometimes productive and other times deleterious, and many have unions. Oxfam America was no exception, even with 12 staff in 1977 there were issues, but these became compounded with a rapidly growing staff of about 50 by 1983. Without increasing revenues, the conditions for organizational survival would have been much more challenging, leading, I suspect, to less fertile ground for extended internal conflict. In this sense, unionization can be seen as a consequence of agency economic growth. But civic sector or non-profit organizations, such as Oxfam America, lack the clarity of the bottom line of the private sector with its quarterly statements or the regulatory achievements of the public sector with its enforcement record. For civic sector organizations the internal struggles seem to gravitate around the ethical issues that define the mission. The union represents an ethical statement at the center of civic sector values, even as it appears to some as a contradiction. NGO unions are not unique. As it turns out, several international NGOs are unionized, including Oxfam Britain, the American Friends Service Committee, and more recently, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, with advice from Oxfam America’s union.

On a more positive note, by the time I left in 1984, Oxfam America looked very different than it had when I arrived in 1977. At that time, it was made up of more men than women, especially in leadership positions, and there were even fewer people of color in its ranks, despite the fact that the vast majority of its presumed beneficiaries were people of color, and probably a majority of them were women. There were notable exceptions, including Alison Smith on staff, and Hanna Papanek, who chaired the Overseas Committee. This discrepancy would change as a matter of Oxfam America policy and effort. One important moment was when
Catherine Henn became board chair in 1982. By 1984 in the overseas program half of the regional Projects Officers were women. Grappling with institutional racism at home, Oxfam America would have persons of color in key positions, including directors of fundraising, education, and eventually overseas programs.

**EDUCATION AND ADVOCACY**

“Speaking” to many audiences

Education and advocacy are integral to my conception of international development and were a focus of my work as overseas program director. My first Oxfam America trip abroad was to the Sahel region of Niger, West Africa, and in particular to Abala, a small, remote market town. This was the site of a very successful pastoral nomadic herd-restocking project that had been identified by Oxfam UK, whose country director, Brendan Gormley, had arranged my visit. The devastating African drought of 1968–1973 had wiped out entire livestock herds, leaving the Wodaabe Fulani impoverished, dependent on food aid, and sedentary residents in displaced persons camps. An Italian monk, the extraordinary Brother Angelo, with a dozen years field experience and profound cultural knowledge, revived an ancient pastoral restocking custom of exchanging female livestock and adapted it to disaster recovery needs. “Locally purchased livestock was loaned for a period of three calvings at which time the borrower returns the original animal (or its equivalent value in kind or cash) and retains the three offspring.”3 The outcomes were remarkable: 1,500 Wodaabe were back at their preferred livelihood as pastoral nomads, no longer dependent on food aid; Oxfam America’s $50,000 capital for livestock purchase had multiplied into a much larger sum as livestock prices recovered; Oxfam UK’s and Oxfam America’s collaboration was further cemented as the project had been identified by the British, passed on to the Americans for funding; and the project offered a model of an effective and locally controlled pastoral development strategy. Using my training in ethnography, visual anthropology, and photography, I read into the pastoral nomadic literature and thoroughly documented my two visits with hundreds of photographs and hours of sound recording, all made possible by Brother Angelo’s deep rapport with the Wodaabe. As a development and disaster policy advocacy statement, Brendan Gormley and I co-authored a formal analysis of the project, “The Animal of Friendship: An Indigenous Model of Sahelian Pastoral Development in Niger,” published in a volume, *Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Development*.

Writing for a policy and academic audience is one thing, but reaching out to the public is quite another. I put together a slide show for staff, board, and constituent groups who were always hungry for project news and particularly receptive to good news. A handsome people living in a dramatic environment, the Wodaabe were open to being photographed. The slide show was very warmly received, striking a deep empathetic chord among many viewers even as it raised profound questions challenging orthodox notions of brick-and-mortar development, and modernization.

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At this point, a new and remarkable figure entered the story. Pat Hughes, former priest, activist, and member of the Packard Manse community, transformed my field notes, literature search, photographs, and sound recordings into an accessible and compelling slide-tape for general education with the production of “Habbanaae: The Animal of Friendship,” a very popular presentation sent out to many Oxfam America groups around the country. Pat’s beautiful genius was his ability to transform complex and difficult subjects faithfully into a compelling popular idiom. Twenty-eight years later at an Oxfam America reunion and to my complete and continuing surprise, I overheard a familiar looking figure recite verbatim lines from the slide-tape’s conclusion. Marc Belanger had worked in the education department and was responsible for distributing material including “The Animal of Friendship,” and remarkably still remembered the narration word for word.

In my first Oxfam America trip to South Asia, I visited project partners, especially BRAC, with whom there was a longstanding and close association. In Dacca, I met an NGO colleague who was articulate, critical, and outspoken on the subject of food aid, a central feature of the international aid package to Bangladesh. This person knowledgeably explained how international food aid gushed into Bangladesh’s food system but did not even trickle to those most in need, among other anomalies. In my view this perspective needed amplification, but my source would be compromised if named. So we agreed upon an anonymous interview, which I recorded and then wrote up and published as a development education pamphlet, “Food Aid: For Better or Worse.” It was the first of several joint publication ventures between Oxfam America and the Institute for Food and Development Policy, founded by Francis Moore Lappé and Joseph Collins, which is now known as Food First.

There were worries in some Oxfam America quarters that such a controversial subject, published by the same organization providing project support, could embarrass or even compromise Bangladeshi project partners and was incompatible with the organization’s main overseas mission of providing assistance. Yet, contributing to the public discussion about foreign aid policy was for many of us a central organizational goal, but one that required a strategic hand, not a simple speakers platform. This was a theme we continued to explore and in 1982 Oxfam America published Against the Grain: The Dilemma of Project Food Aid, co-authored by Tony Jackson and Deborah Eade.

In 1979 Joe Collins, a Cuba expert and well-known researcher, invited me to join him in researching the Cuban food system by actually going to Cuba and taking a firsthand look at exactly how and how well Cuba was providing for its people using the universal lens of food. On the outside, it was a Food First project, but on the inside there was a lot of Oxfam America participation, including a big chunk of my time, facilitated by Joe Short’s generous and courageous interpretation of his charge as executive director. Our research initiative was no doubt helped by Cuba’s reaching out to US organizations, including the Boston visit of Manuel Lee from the Cuban government’s North American solidarity organization. With characteristic moxie, Collins had put together an ambitious research agenda and would not easily tolerate interference from anyone. And so it was one morning in Havana that I met with Manuel Lee and reported that Joe Collins had already left that morning for Oriente via airplane and would

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*Years later I learned from the former American Friends Service Committee representative in Bangladesh, Sue McCord, that she had been hassled by the government of Bangladesh for her alleged role in the publication even though she correctly protested her innocence. With a keystroke I had changed the sex of my source in order to protect him and unwittingly led authorities to her.*
return several days hence. Such independence and entrepreneurial zeal in research was characteristic of Collins, but was an anathema to the reigning Cuban mentality—which is why he left before telling Lee. Poor Lee nearly collapsed at his desk, fulminating about his loss of control with a litany of negatives that could result from unsupervised and unauthorized foreigners’ activities. Indeed, a year later Lee was no longer the liaison to visitors such as ourselves. We were told he was laboring as a bookkeeper in another enterprise, and ascertained that his change in employment was not related to us.

If independent research by two Americans visiting Cuba was extraordinary for Americans at the time, such an enterprise was also unusual for Cubans. In the countryside we were usually taken for Eastern Europeans or in my case possibly Guatemalan or Bolivian. With perhaps half of Cuban households split between the island and the US, our American status was usually warmly received. While there were outstanding individuals who provided data and insights well above the call of duty, such as contacts in the ANAP, the Cuban National Association of Small Farmers, the dominant view of government functionaries was understandably constricted by years of US patronizing and hostility toward Cuba and a profoundly isolating insular mentality of risk avoidance. But we got lucky with a big break. From the post office across the street from our modest hotel in Havana’s Vedado district, we sent repeated telegrams to the office of the President of Cuba, describing our project and requesting an interview. During another frustrating and legendary slow hotel meal, our friendly waiter, nicknamed Angola after his country of military service, announced a call from the presidency. Collins and I raced to the lobby phone and then nervously offered each other the honor of actually answering the call. The upshot was two extraordinary taped interviews with Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, distinguished economist, sagacious political leader and vice president of Cuba. Carlos Rafael was particularly frank in explaining the logic and origins of the innovative farmers’ free market, the business acumen of truck drivers, as well as the trials and tribulations of food policy with el comandante en jefe. He not only provided a profoundly insightful analysis of the Cuban food system, including a critical view of the lack of entrepreneurial talent among Cuban managers, but he also gave us legitimacy and access. When the functionary mentality took over in other Cuban contexts, we would regularly invoke Carlos Rafael’s name, which almost invariably opened up exchanges. The sole photograph on his office wall was of Ernesto “Che” Guevara, with whom he famously engaged several decades earlier in a revealing debate about the tactics of the Cuban revolution. After publication of No Free Lunch: Food and Revolution in Cuba Today (1984), we learned via intermediaries that Carlos Rafael considered the book a serious and legitimate treatment of the Cuban food system. A decade later in 1996, Oxfam America bravely supported a Cuban food security restudy project by Solon Barraclough and myself as consultants. Despite field visits to Cuba and initial traction on both sides of the Straits of Florida, the project was ultimately rejected by the Cubans. I have often wondered if our proposed restudy, which included a macro and micro economic look at the US embargo’s impact on the Cuban food system, would have garnered the necessary support had Carlos Rafael not already passed at a ripe old age.

A COMMON MISSION, BUT ORGANIZATIONAL TENSIONS

If public education and advocacy were central to my conception of overseas development work and Oxfam America’s priorities, the reverse—overseas work as central to public education and advocacy—seemed to be true of the growing education program department.
Perhaps in principle this appears a near perfect synergy or at least grounds for fundamental collaboration with the overseas program department, but, in fact, it often proved a skirmish line in a turf battle. The core Oxfam America approach was to have advocacy grow out of overseas experience and dialogue with partners, rather than reflecting an imposed, US-based agenda. Alternative models included variations on the primacy of education and advocacy and the diminished or secondary role of overseas program funding, thus inverting the agency’s priorities and public face.

Those who advocated for the primacy of education and advocacy work argued that the overseas program budget was trivial compared with needs. At a macro political economic level, this was certainly true, but the agency’s priorities of working at the grass roots and by preference with non-state institutions was based on a pragmatic, operational approach: given the macro problem definition and the specific concrete situation on the ground, what can we do that will make a tangible improvement in the lives of those burdened with poverty and powerlessness? Paradoxically, given our demanding selection and performance criteria, opportunities for funding were limited and labor intensive if we were to find outstanding projects where we could work with types of organizations and foster the type of lasting relationships we believed would make a meaningful difference.

One example of these difficulties occurred when the executive director asked me to make a slide-tape presentation on Nicaragua, where he and I had just visited. The presentation was to be along the lines of what I had done with the Animal of Friendship. With lots of work and help from many sources of photographs, and again with Pat Hughes’ remarkable post-production skills, a Nicaragua presentation was created that drew a parallel between the American Revolution and events unfolding in Central America, as an interesting starting point for Americans not versed in Central American history.

It was not well received by the education department, which much to my surprise offered harsh and resentful criticism of its ostensible weaknesses, including a rejection of the historic parallels with the American Revolution. I suspect the problem had less to do with the content than who was given the responsibility of making the education document. We were never fully successful in addressing these tensions, despite considering some innovative staffing solutions. In the long view, both program departments did some outstanding work, but I believe even more could have been achieved with greater organizational harmony.

OVER & OUT

Moving on is an underappreciated fact of life for organizations: Everyone moves on, some sooner, some later. Yet, there is a disproportionate emphasis upon recruiting and hiring, and not enough on exit strategies for both individual and organization. Oxfam America was better at establishing patterns of service for its board of directors than for its staff: two years of service, renewable upon mutual agreement for up to six years. This arrangement provided an orderly and even graceful transition for both parties as it put in motion a process of ongoing organizational renewal.

During my tenure, the overseas program adopted a similar practice of terms of tenure for its project committee volunteers, those unsung heroes who brought their considerable analytic talents to recommending program and project decisions. No such term of service arrangement
was extended to staff, though I believe in retrospect that limited terms of service for executive
director and key managers has considerable merit. Instead, we had annual evaluations, but
these seemed more a matter of form than substance.

I recently learned there is precedent for measured tenure, as David Bryer insisted upon a five-
year term as director of the British Oxfam, which was renewed once for a maximum ten years.
Had this arrangement been in effect for Joe Short during Oxfam America’s first reinvention, he
would have completed a second five-year term, giving ample time to develop a deep pool of
candidates to replace him. As for me, I’d like to think that a similar arrangement would have
put me on notice to better prepare my own departure, as well as yielding a more successful
agency transition to the next overseas director.

After nine years as overseas director I was spent, burned out from international travel,
meetings, and other organizational demands. It had been an excellent fit for almost all of those
years, and I especially relished the opportunity to grow a program. In contrast, consolidat-
ing an existing program would have been boring. However, near the end it became more of
a nightmare. I wanted my life back, but my identity was so wrapped up in what I had been
doing that I felt more like the proverbial deer caught in onrushing headlights. In figuring out
an exit strategy, several colleagues noted that I seemed to enjoy mentoring younger staff, and
that despite my long held protestations to the contrary, that just maybe I would like teaching.
Now, after 20 years of teaching, I can continue to admire their insight and appreciate their
courage in telling me something I wasn’t really ready to hear. According to student feedback,
aside from enthusiasm and energy, I’ve got fabulous firsthand stories to tell. I teach from my
experience, as well as formal training, and Oxfam America plays a big part in that experience.
The same Oxfam America experience also ushered me into continuing international develop-
ment work, but always tempered by short-term commitments. I continued to write about food
security (The Rich Have Already Eaten: Roots of Catastrophe in Central America), evaluated a kin-
dred agency (We Are The World: An Evaluation of Pop Aid for Africa), carried out NGO planning
missions in southern Africa, and United Nations evaluation missions in Central and South
America, the Horn of Africa, Afghanistan, and Myanmar.

CONCLUSION

Oxfam originated in the humanitarian interstices between warring states, as it sought to
relieve suffering of civilian populations. Forged on an anvil of meeting human need, it both
challenged and cooperated with states to achieve its goals. More often than not, states rejected
its mission and its projects, yet it persevered. Today the world is much different, but the need
for feisty, independent humanitarian action on a world scale is as great as ever. Militarism
and unilateral state interventions abroad are resurgent and radically reduce human rights
everywhere and basic political rights at home. Powered by extremist ideologies, states create
a simple binary world between the honorable us and the evil them, as in the West versus the
rest, all the while claiming to be mainstream. As a legitimate instrument of governance, the
state is being eclipsed by its own incompetence and corruption. One needs look no further
than the Federal Emergency Management Agency performance before, during, and after
Hurricane Katrina’s long expected and devastating arrival in and around New Orleans. In this
and many other instances of the last several decades, fewer believe that the state is capable of
bringing about the social and economic changes once thought possible only via government.
Neither left (for example, the USSR and Cuba) nor right (for example, France and the USA) has made a convincing case for a credibly better, viable future. Indeed, many of those at the controls of state power are dismantling its capacity for good under the guise of taming the evil beast or defending it against external threats.

Progress heralded by the new age has incurred very high costs, including a uniform global culture replacing diverse local cultures. By conservative estimates the number of languages in the world is reduced by some 300 annually from a total of perhaps 7,000. The processes that eliminate languages also diminish cultural diversity. Yet, our species origin and long-term survival is closely intertwined with emergent diversity, not increasing uniformity.

All the while, the world is being wrapped ever more tightly around the principle that consumerism will address our fundamental individual and social needs, even as it diminishes our real prospects. Advertising colonizes more public visual and sound space, as it reaffirms the process of the commodification of everything. This powerful logic transforms nature’s bounty, water for instance, into a billion dollar bottled water market for those who can pay the price and critically diminished access to water for majority populations that cannot. It also corrupts humanitarianism by transforming it into a cost of doing business—crumbs for public consumption while wealth is radically reallocated from bottom to top. Remember the prominent women’s garment label that promised a share of profits for children’s charity, without mentioning that its miserably low child labor wages created poverty even as it promised a remedy? Though more wealth has been created than ever before, the same processes that provide for material improvements for some have also generated significant numbers of poor. The numbers of poor may be greater in absolute terms than at any previous time. There are about 1 billion people, one sixth of humanity, who are absolutely poor by all measures of material wealth, from income to longevity.

We are reminded that the social and economic system is fundamentally built upon a complex and poorly understood natural system that provides the basis for life. The more we learn about the natural system and its interface with the social system, the greater the wonder that we as humans are able to survive at all, and the more perplexing that we are now knowingly eclipsing our future prospects by profligate misuse of natural resources and denial of overwhelming evidence that we have overreached the limits of growth. From biology to economics, there is plenty of evidence that the current system is fundamentally flawed and will undergo a systemic transformation over the next several decades. What everyone does in the interim will help determine the new system to emerge. Lest this litany of woes drive out real prospects for a better future, we must seek to balance critical intellectual perspectives with the sense of spirit or heart. We need audacious organizations that operate from the heart with creativity and insight, that represent the most dignified of human impulses of deriving satisfaction from the betterment of others even though it does them no immediate good. We find ourselves at a crossing—the intersection of human rights, sustainability, democracy, and social justice. Now more than ever there is reason for brave, independently funded, internationally minded civic sector organizations, like Oxfam America, to come into being, to renew themselves and to strengthen their reach and resolve for humanitarian goals, to link those who can see a sustainable and just future, credibly better than the present and entirely possible, with those who are marginalized by contemporary processes of change.
As Muhammad Yunus, who put micro loans on the world stage in founding the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh, reminds us, the solution to poverty and powerlessness is not far removed from the problem, contrary to conventional wisdom. A home-grown American brilliantly expressed the dream of universal moral possibilities when he said in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech: “I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits” (King, Jr. 2001:105).

REFERENCES


DEDICATION
As I write this memoir, I am reminded of the profound debt of gratitude that I owe to many persons who helped me during my Oxfam America years, including the following who are, alas, no longer with us: Ayesha Abed, Solon Barraclough, Fred Cuny, Jill Harmsworth, Pat Hughes, Rolando López, Ignacio Martín-Baró, Oliver Scott, Jim Thornblade, John and Elizabeth Wyon, and Haleh Wunder.
CHAPTER 9

Oxfam’s Cambodia Response and Effective Approaches to Humanitarian Action

Joel R. Charny

The paper analyzes the achievements and weaknesses of the Oxfam response to the Cambodia emergency in the context of principles and approaches to humanitarian action. It concludes that while there were many significant strengths to the Cambodia response, it violated one core principle, that of impartiality, while failing to be sustainable and partner with local institutions. Oxfam America, however, made a significant, though temporary, contribution to the relief effort, one more in keeping with its core approach, by supporting agricultural assistance directly to peasants at the Thai-Cambodian border.

INTRODUCTION

The 1979 Cambodia crisis was the quintessential complex emergency. Inside the country, the People’s Republic of Kampuchea, the government installed by the Vietnamese after their December 1978 invasion that overthrew the Khmer Rouge, struggled to establish its control over the devastated survivors of the latter’s brutal rule. Dismissing claims of widespread food shortages as propaganda intended to destabilize it, the government blocked access to international humanitarian organizations well into 1979. Meanwhile, thousands of Cambodians, finally freed from the Khmer Rouge and wanting no part of living under a communist government controlled by their traditional enemy, headed for Thailand. At the Thai-Cambodian border, the Thai government initially turned them away. After grudgingly accepting them, it placed the refugees along the border in camps dominated by the fledgling political resistance movements to the Vietnamese-backed government in Phnom Penh.

Four short years after the apparent end of the wars in Indochina, Cambodia was in turmoil. Although rice production under the Khmer Rouge was adequate to feed the population, they distributed it based on political criteria, favoring party cadre and the peasantry, while punishing former urban dwellers and others considered enemies of the state with long work hours.
and starvation rations. The Vietnamese invaded at the time of the 1978 rice harvest, and the Khmer Rouge burned fields and granaries as they retreated to deny food and seed stocks to the victors. Finally, with the country in chaos as battle lines shifted and survivors tried to escape the Khmer Rouge, Cambodia’s 1979 rainy season rice production promised to be meager. A man-made famine loomed.

**OXFAM’S INITIAL RESPONSE**

Oxfam UK (as it was then known), the original and by far the largest of what was then a loose federation of six organizations sharing the Oxfam name, was among the first international humanitarian agencies to send an assessment mission to Phnom Penh in August 1979. Jim Howard, Oxfam’s legendary disaster response coordinator, conducted the assessment, and his powerful accounts of what he witnessed helped galvanize the world to the scale of the Cambodia emergency. Howard spent two weeks in the country, assessing conditions in the area around the capital and in a province to the southwest. He reported seeing hundreds of marasmic children at a clinic on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. The clinic had “absolutely no drugs or medicines—serious cases of starvation—clearly just dying for lack of food…. “ Outside Kompong Speu town to the southwest, “the villages all contained starving people and clearly many of the people I saw couldn’t possibly survive more than several months on what they had available. … This was starvation at the worst Biafra level… .” Howard predicted that 2 million Cambodians would die within three months without a massive humanitarian relief effort.1

As these events were unfolding, Oxfam America was a tiny organization, with a budget of $500,000 and an overseas department consisting of three professional staff. While the agency had been founded at the time of the Bangladesh famine in 1970, its expertise rested primarily in long-term development. With its limited financial and human capacity, Oxfam America was able to fund a smattering of development projects, many of which were identified by Oxfam UK.

Thus, when Oxfam UK began to organize the large-scale response called for by Jim Howard, Oxfam America had no choice but to follow its lead. Recognizing that the required scope of the program would dwarf even its substantial capacity, Oxfam UK decided to organize a multi-agency consortium, which included not only the Oxfams, but other major funding and operational agencies in Europe, Australia, and the United States that wisely decided to merge their efforts under the Oxfam umbrella rather than attempting to establish individual programs. The Oxfam NGO consortium included 27 agencies, which together raised $40 million for Cambodian relief, a total which seems paltry by the standards of 2007 but was impressive at the time. Oxfam America’s total contribution to the consortium was $4.2 million from September 1979 through December 1980, a remarkable achievement for such a small agency and testimony to the visibility and dynamism of Oxfam’s Cambodia program.

In addition to Jim Howard’s powerful eyewitness reporting, Oxfam’s signature contribution to the initial phase of the Cambodia response was its willingness to accept conditions imposed by the Cambodian government and to agree to work only in areas under its control. While the Vietnamese-backed government had finally recognized that outside assistance from

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western aid organizations was essential for the very survival of its citizens, it was concerned about the budding resistance at the Thai-Cambodian border, which included the remnants of the Khmer Rouge, with its leadership intact. The bargain presented to Oxfam UK’s Director General Brian Walker in late September 1979 was simple: The condition for basing a team in Phnom Penh and mounting a program to reach people in need through government channels was agreeing to conduct no operations in the border camps. Walker agreed to this condition, allowing Oxfam to become the first non-governmental organization to initiate large-scale aid operations inside the country.

This decision violated a fundamental principle of humanitarian response, that of impartiality—the imperative to respond to need based on humanitarian, rather than political criteria. By expressly agreeing to work with only one group of suffering Cambodians, those under the control of the People’s Republic of Kampuchea, Oxfam was making a partisan choice. It was agreeing to deny its assistance to the tens of thousands of Cambodians, many of them in desperate circumstances, who were massing in the border camps. While the people in the camps were ripe for political manipulation by the resistance, from the perspective of humanitarian principle they had an equal claim on Oxfam’s concern and assistance.

The decision to work only inside the country was especially problematic because ultimately virtually all the major aid agencies, including the leaders of the multilateral Joint Mission, UNICEF, and the International Committee of the Red Cross, mounted programs both inside the country and along the border. Oxfam was not only the first but the only large organization to accept the government’s terms for humanitarian access.

The context for Oxfam’s decision was Jim Howard’s haunting prediction of 2 million dead in three months without a massive relief effort. And it would be 2 million dead on top of the 500,000 Cambodians that had been killed during the civil war from 1970 to 1975 and the nearly 2 million that had died during the brutal rule of the Khmer Rouge. This was not a time for humanitarian niceties or quibbling about principles—this was a time for action. Thus, when Walker announced the agreement with the government, far from being widely criticized, Oxfam’s decision was praised as a bold step by a non-bureaucratic humanitarian actor to overcome political obstacles to reach famine victims. The agreement placed Oxfam permanently in the forefront of the relief effort inside the country, which proved to be a huge boon to its publicity and marketing efforts for the Cambodia response.

Oxfam also had a strong humanitarian rationale to focus its assistance inside the country: The needs of the people remaining inside were far greater than the international assistance that was likely to be available to them. Despite the dramatic exodus to the border area, the vast majority of the Cambodian people chose to remain inside the country, somewhere between 6 million and 7 million, compared to roughly half a million that moved towards Thailand. Further, political and diplomatic opposition to the Vietnamese-installed government was virtually universal outside of the Soviet Bloc. This opposition translated into a reluctance to respond inside the country on the grounds that aid provided there would strengthen the illegal occupation. Partially for these political reasons and partially because of ease of access through Thailand, aid to the border camps far exceeded aid provided inside the country on a per capita basis (Shawcross 1984: 390-396).

Finally, Oxfam’s strengths as a development organization made it better suited to respond inside Cambodia. While the food shortages were acute, Oxfam staff recognized that given the
extent of the destruction of Cambodian society and institutions over the previous decade, the emergency response had to be comprehensive. The relief effort inside the country was going to involve far more than handing out food and organizing camp-based medical care. The recovery of the people of Cambodia depended on supporting local efforts to restore agricultural production, re-establish the educational system, improve transportation infrastructure, and rehabilitate consumer-oriented industries.

THE OXFAM AMERICA FOCUS ON AGRICULTURE

From the very first shipments of goods by barge from Singapore in October 1979, the Oxfam consortium program moved beyond meeting basic relief needs to supporting reconstruction. Early shipments included not only food and medicines but agricultural supplies, such as hand tools and vegetable seeds, twine and spare parts for the fishnet factory in Phnom Penh, and chemicals for the Phnom Penh water works. The focus on industries that produced basic goods for agricultural producers and consumers was probably Oxfam’s most significant contribution to the early phase of the overall relief and rehabilitation effort. The Consortium especially contributed to the rehabilitation of several textile factories in Phnom Penh that produced badly needed colored cloth and traditional Cambodian checked scarves (krama).

Oxfam America earmarked the majority of its financial contributions to the consortium program for agricultural inputs for the 1980 rainy season rice crop, the success of which would determine whether food shortages would persist. This focus reflected the reality that Cambodia had been food self-sufficient in the 1960s and enough rice land was available to feed the current decimated population. It also fit with the prevailing program approach of the agency, which, taking a cue from the work of Joe Collins and Francis Moore-Lappé, stressed “food first,” the importance of supporting the efforts of the peasantry in the global south to meet their own basic food needs.

The primary obstacle to a successful rainy season planting season was the lack of rice seed due to the poor 1979 harvest. Seed had to be in the hands of Cambodian farmers as early as April and no later than July for planting in time to be harvested between November and January, depending on the region and the variety planted. Oxfam was the leading non-governmental supplier of rice seed, supplementing the efforts of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization. In addition to rice seed, Oxfam also provided fertilizers, irrigation pumps, and plow tips and hoe heads for agricultural implements.

In March 1980, out of concern that not enough agricultural assistance was reaching the peasantry in time for the impending rainy season planting, Oxfam America initiated a program outside of the framework of the consortium, getting involved in a “land bridge” effort to supply peasants coming to the Thai-Cambodian border for food with basic agricultural supplies to take back with them for planting in the interior. The agency hired its own staff person, John Dennis, an agronomist with experience in Thailand, who helped conceptualize and organize the program, choosing local rice varieties and other basic inputs that made up the “subsistence agriculture package.” Dennis linked the Oxfam America seeds and tools supply effort with programs being implemented by other agencies to vaccinate draft animals and repair ox

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2 The following account closely follows the Cambodia section of the author’s article reviewing Oxfam America’s disaster response efforts, “Coping with Crisis: Oxfam America’s Disaster Responses,” in John Osgood Field, The Challenge of Famine: Recent Experience, Lessons Learned (West Hartford: Kumarian Press), 1993, pp. 147-171.
carts. The joint effort meant that all the basic production and transportation needs of Cambodian peasants coming to the border, mainly from western Battambang province, Cambodia’s rice bowl, could be met in the course of one round-trip to the border (Charny 1993: 155).

The beauty of the cross-border program was that it responded directly to peasant needs and involved unmediated assistance to them. Dennis and his colleagues could speak directly to farmers to assess conditions inside the country and adjust the inputs being provided accordingly. While the program could not be monitored because security concerns precluded the possibility of following the peasants back to their homes, Oxfam America was certain that it was providing badly needed assets directly to people in need. At worst, the peasants might lose their supplies to soldiers and bandits on the return trip, a risk they were willing to accept, or they might opt to sell the goods they received to meet other household needs. Putting new steel rims on ox cart wheels and vaccinating draft animals were invaluable services with no chance of misappropriation.

Oxfam UK, however, was not pleased with Oxfam America’s involvement in the land bridge. Even though consortium staff members were increasingly frustrated with the restrictions being placed on their ability to travel outside Phnom Penh and monitor the massive aid program, Oxfam UK’s leadership insisted that the Oxfam America program violated the agreement with the People’s Republic of Kampuchea to work solely inside the country through government institutions. In the run-up to a major mid-term assessment meeting of the 27 agencies making up the consortium, scheduled for Amsterdam in early July 1980, Oxfam UK insisted that Oxfam America either halt its involvement in the land bridge or withdraw from the consortium. The Oxfam UK ultimatum was the subject of heated discussion within Oxfam America. Halting all work inside Cambodia was inconceivable given the extent of the need and the support that Oxfam America had provided to the consortium program from the outset. Yet how could the agency agree to shut down the cross-border agricultural program? Not only was it effective but it was being marketing aggressively to Oxfam America’s growing constituency as the brilliant innovation of a small agency to avoid bureaucratic obstacles and get self-help assistance directly to those most in need.

Oxfam America’s leadership had not yet decided what to do when Vietnamese troops attacked the main cross-border distribution point at Nong Chan in late June. The Vietnamese had concluded that the cross-border effort, by drawing Cambodians away from their homes in the interior, even if only for a few days at a time, was destabilizing the western part of the country and hindering the government’s attempts to establish control over Cambodia’s people and territory. With the future of the cross-border operation in doubt after the attack, and with the Amsterdam meeting of the consortium looming, Oxfam America decided to end its involvement at the border and re-commit to the Consortium. Its reward for this decision was finally getting a slot on the staff team in Phnom Penh to improve the flow of information that it was receiving on the achievements and problems with the relief effort.

Oxfam America maintained its support to the consortium for the balance of 1980. When the 1980 rainy season rice harvest yielded 1.46 million tons of rice, more than double the production of the conflict-affected planting the previous year, the food emergency ended. The consortium officially closed its operations in early 1981. Oxfam UK, weary of the hassles of managing a complex multi-agency international effort, rebuffed entreaties from some consortium members, including Oxfam America, to maintain an ongoing joint program. Oxfam
America then helped to organize an informal collaborative effort, including Oxfam Belgium, Novib (Holland), and Socialist Solidarity (Belgium), which collaborated on programs focused on agriculture and rural development in the post-emergency period. This collaboration was later formalized as the Partnership for Development in Kampuchea (PADEK), with Novib as the lead agency. Oxfam America was active in PADEK until 1993.

THE CAMBODIA RESPONSE AND APPROACHES TO HUMANITARIAN ACTION

As significant as the Cambodia relief effort was for the institutional development of Oxfam America, the nature of the response meant that it did not set a precedent for future humanitarian action, neither by Oxfam America nor by Oxfam UK and the other members of the Consortium program. Indeed, the basic approach of the Cambodia operation deviated significantly from Oxfam America’s later disaster response policy and what has become accepted wisdom as to the most effective way to respond to large-scale emergencies (Charny 1993: 148–152).

For agencies that carried out overseas programs based on partnership long before the concept became a development tenet, the Oxfam consortium’s Cambodia program was remarkably devoid of meaningful relationships with local institutions, especially ones representing popular concerns. The political reality in Cambodia was that unmediated contact with local people was virtually impossible. The government was communist in ideology and a centralized Stalinist bureaucracy in form, and although quite weak in practice, exercised enough control to restrict the movements of foreign NGO workers and instill fear in the general population that contact with the aid community was to be avoided. The People’s Republic of Kampuchea forbade the establishment of independent local organizations. The only institutional relations possible were with government ministries or party organizations, such as the women’s union.

Oxfam consortium staff established many productive and rewarding personal relationships with Cambodian officials, many of whom showed remarkable dedication to the cause of rebuilding their shattered country. But these relationships were in the context of an aid process that involved foreign organizations supplying badly needed materials to central government entities, which in turn distributed the goods, sometimes according to agreements worked out with the donor agency and sometimes not. At its heart, the consortium was a large-scale procurement operation.

Monitoring was problematic for many aspects of the consortium program. Independent travel was impossible outside Phnom Penh, and even in the capital foreign ministry guides assigned to each agency accompanied staff to meetings. This control was tolerable for monitoring assistance in Phnom Penh, much of which consisted of spare parts for factories or supplies for particular institutions, such as schools and orphanages, the receipt of which could be easily verified in discussions with those in charge. But it made monitoring the distribution of the rice seed, fertilizers, and irrigation pumps that were the core of the agriculture program virtually impossible. Periodic set piece distributions were organized for the benefit of the international organizations, but there was no way to travel in the countryside unaccompanied and interview peasants as to the extent to which they were receiving outside assistance.
The entire relief effort was top-down. National government officials defined the needs, made requests to UN agencies and NGOs based in Phnom Penh, which in turn met those needs to the extent possible by delivering goods to the national authorities for onward distribution. In the early stages of the relief effort, before the government established its protocols for how it would be conducted, international personnel had some involvement in the process of assessing local needs. But as the months went on, there were fewer and fewer opportunities for even controlled assessments of local conditions. Opportunities to talk directly to vulnerable Cambodians and devise local or regional responses to their needs were extremely rare.

The Oxfam NGO Consortium program was also unsustainable. Many of the overseas program staff of Oxfam UK recognized this at the time, and were vocal in their criticisms of the relief effort as a gross violation of Oxfam’s basic approach, which emphasized funding small-scale projects designed to encourage organizing for social change and facilitating local control of resources for self-help development. But once the relief effort got going its momentum was unstoppable.

There were at least three problems with sustainability. First, Cambodia had been at war or in revolutionary turmoil for almost a decade, and had, therefore, missed out on technical advances in rice production that were widespread elsewhere in the region. Cambodian peasants continued to plant traditional, rain-fed rice varieties and used virtually no chemical fertilizer, even though the soils were poor in nutrients. With traditional seed in short supply, however, and compatible varieties from other countries, such as India and Bangladesh, difficult to procure, the aid effort consisted largely of green revolution high-yielding rice varieties that depended on timely doses of fertilizer and water from irrigation pumps, all of which had to be imported.

The relief effort, therefore, supplied technology that Cambodian rice farmers had never used when they had barely emerged from a decade-long period of destruction and famine. They had to use this imported technology for the rice crop upon which their survival depended. Yet, as Oxfam staff well knew, in a disaster situation peasants are more likely to rely on the customs and practices that have ensured the survival of the people and their culture. This goes a long way towards explaining why despite the tons of rice seed that inundated Cambodia, it was practically impossible to find these varieties in farmers’ fields in 1980. The only plausible explanation, especially considering that little food aid reached the rural areas (Gottesman 2003: 81-6), is that peasants ate the international rice seed and either planted traditional varieties or subsisted on alternative crops and food that they gathered in ponds and forests (Charny 1984: 92-3).

The second problem with sustainability was a consequence of the centrally planned economy and the monolithic state control of what little productive capacity survived the depredations of the previous decade. Simply put, the prices of goods bore no relationship to the actual cost of producing them. This meant that while the strategy of rehabilitating consumer-oriented industries such as the fishnet and textile factories in the early days of the relief effort was brilliant, the factories themselves were unable to recover their costs to buy raw materials and maintain their equipment. Once Oxfam stopped supplying spare parts and raw materials, factory managers had no choice but to go back to patching things together as best they could, a strategy doomed to failure as cheap Thai and Vietnamese goods poured into the country.
Finally, a critical component of sustainability, the training of counterparts, was off limits to Western aid organizations for ideological reasons. While some informal training was possible through the process of Western technical experts working side by side with their Khmer counterparts, the government prohibited the aid agencies from providing technical training of any kind. Oxfam America was in touch with a number of experts in rice agriculture, one of whom had Cambodia experience, who would have jumped at the opportunity to take up a temporary assignment at the agricultural college on the outskirts of Phnom Penh. But the government rebuffed this and other similar offers. Training in all fields was the purview of experts from Vietnam and the Soviet Bloc to ensure ideological purity and the creation of a new generation of Cambodians with an understanding of genuine Marxist-Leninist doctrine, not the perverted version of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge.

The scope of the relief effort stretched the technical capacity of Oxfam UK and the member agencies of the consortium. They had no in-house technical expertise in important components of the relief effort, especially the industrial and transport sectors. The bane of the consortium secretariat, housed in Oxford and staffed by Oxfam UK, was the recruitment and assessment of technical personnel, some of them nominated by consortium members. Few world class experts were willing to work for NGO salaries in war-torn Cambodia, and the recruitment process was hit or miss. As a result, mistakes were made, some of them costing tens of thousands of dollars. One Oxfam engineer, who arrived on the scene after the emergency period, wrote a scathing internal report questioning the competence of the experts making decisions on how to spend publicly donated funds (Shawcross 1984: 389).

In this context, the Oxfam America agricultural program at the Thai-Cambodian border holds up rather well. The content of the subsistence agricultural package derived from direct discussions with Cambodian peasants. As a result, the emphasis was on traditional seed varieties and technologies, like fish nets and plow tips, that were familiar to them. Oxfam America identified an agriculturalist with the background and language skills appropriate to the situation. The main gap, as noted above, was the impossibility of monitoring the program due to lack of security. And it was this very lack of security, combined with internal institutional imperatives, that forced the agency to re-commit to the Consortium program and halted the implementation of the cross-border work.

CONCLUSION

In the history of Oxfam relief responses, Cambodia is the outlier. With the possible exception of the response to Hurricane Mitch in Central America, neither a joint program led by Oxfam UK (now Oxfam Great Britain) nor an individual response by Oxfam America has ever been anywhere near as comprehensive. Indeed, over time Oxfam Great Britain has gone in the opposite direction, narrowing their primary emergency relief focus to a single sector — water and sanitation — and becoming a recognized global leader in supplying clean water to survivors of man-made and natural disasters.

The most important positive contribution of the Cambodia operation was political. Oxfam showed real courage in leading the way in responding to an emergency in a country that the world outside of the Soviet Bloc might otherwise have completely ostracized. Just four short years after the fall of Saigon, resentment and fear of the Vietnamese were widespread; when they invaded Cambodia the powerful governments that make up the international
Community could easily have treated the consequences as a political-military problem rather than a humanitarian one. Oxfam’s leadership helped ensure that there was a humanitarian response to the needs of the Cambodian people.

The Cambodia operation also pioneered what has become standard practice among the Oxfams: joining together under the leadership of Oxfam UK to respond to a major emergency. Pooling the resources of 27 agencies gave the consortium heft and leverage, and avoided overburdening the stretched Cambodian authorities with having to manage and monitor a slew of small agency programs.

The Cambodia operation changed Oxfam America indelibly. By having the wisdom to follow Oxfam UK’s lead into Cambodia, the agency established itself as a bold organization with the capacity to respond to humanitarian needs wherever they may be found, even in embattled countries governed by the political enemies of the government of the United States. In the space of a year Oxfam America went from being a marginal organization, virtually unknown outside New England, to one with a national profile and enough of a donor base to enable the agency to hire regional project officers for the first time, which in turn allowed the agency to develop independent long-term development programs. The Cambodia relief operation positioned Oxfam America to become the vibrant and important organization that it remains to this day.
REFERENCES


This chapter describes Oxfam America’s first program in Bangladesh and India which was also its first gender program. Between 1980 and 1987, the program made nearly 150 grants to 60 NGOs in the two countries that sought to promote the economic empowerment of women from poor households. The NGO partners in the program organized women by neighborhood or trade; provided financial, business, or social services to them; and advocated for policy or legal changes in support of women workers. Oxfam America not only provided financial support but also engaged with its partners in strategy design and advocacy. The chapter situates this early gender program within the evolution of the gender and development field, and analyzes its defining features in relationship to that evolution. The chapter is written by the founder of that program, and so, is both personal and historical.

GETTING STARTED

In 1980, I was asked by Oxfam America to start a program in India and Bangladesh. During the 1970s, my husband Lincoln Chen, our two children, and I had lived and worked in Bangladesh. In 1970, with East Pakistan and expatriate friends, I co-founded a relief organization to rehabilitate victims after a devastating tidal wave. The following year, after being evacuated from East Pakistan, Lincoln and I joined others in the US in an advocacy effort to increase public awareness of the civil war in East Pakistan and, later, to put pressure on the US government to recognize Bangladesh. We also played a small part in the founding of Oxfam America. After we returned to Bangladesh, I was asked by Fazle Hasan Abed, the founder of BRAC—now the world’s largest NGO—to start and head its women’s program, which I did from 1975 to 1980.
In the late 1970s, Oxfam America provided a grant to BRAC’s women’s program—specifically its operations in Jamalpur District. I remember taking Joe Short, then director of Oxfam America, on a field trip to Jamalpur around 1978. As I drove my car down the narrow country road lined by villages to Jamalpur town, Joe worried that I might hit one of the many chickens which scurried to get out of our way. We were accompanied, among others, by an energetic Catholic nun from the US, called Sister Mike, whom we collaborated with on developing women’s craft products. One vivid memory is of Joe Short (who is quite tall) being shown macramé products woven from jute fiber by Sister Mike (who is quite short).

My other qualification for the Oxfam America job was that I had grown up in India, knew many NGOs in India, and spoke Bengali, Hindi, and Urdu. This background did not assuage the concerns of Oxfam Great Britain (then, simply, Oxfam) that some Oxfam America upstart had the audacity to start a program in India, the “jewel in the (Oxfam) crown,”—and this was before they knew that the upstart was a woman. When Leslie Tuttle, an Oxfam America colleague, and I arrived at Oxfam House in Oxford for our initial briefing, the staff thought that Leslie and I—given our gender-neutral names—were men. Many of the male Oxfam staff were not used to working with women; some could not look us in the eye. The crowning blow was that we proposed to start a program focused on women. One flabbergasted male Oxfam colleague, with long experience in India, asked: “What kind of program for women will you develop in Bangladesh? Maddressahs (religious schools) for girls?” I described the BRAC women’s program which focused on organizing rural women around their social, legal, and economic concerns and converting their subsistence activities (in poultry, craft, embroidery production) into viable commercial activities. They listened but remained skeptical.

Given Oxfam’s concerns, Leslie and I agreed to participate in a week-long orientation to “development in India” by two key Oxfam partners in India: Vikas-bhai and Juyal-bhai who lived and worked in the sacred city of Varanasi. Vikas-bhai was in Delhi, when Leslie and I arrived, and took us out for dinner the first night to a hostel for industrial workers on the border between New and Old Delhi. Leslie and I apparently passed his “test”—sitting on the ground, eating with our hands, and chatting with the workers. On the way home to the Indian International Centre, where Leslie and I were staying, Vikas-bhai stopped his jeep at the India Gate, jumped out, and bought us each a strand of jasmine from a flower vendor. Vikas-bhai explained that he would not be in Varanasi when we were there, but offered to have us stay at his flat and have Juyal-bhai show us around. After a week of field trips in and around Varanasi to NGO projects supported by Oxfam, we apparently passed the Juyal “test” as well. Now that we had been properly introduced to development issues in India, Oxfam seemed more comfortable with the idea that we planned to develop an Oxfam America program in Bangladesh and India that focused on working poor women.

The UN Decade for Women had been launched in 1975 at the First World Conference on Women in Mexico City. In 1980, to mark the midpoint of the decade, a Second World Conference on Women was held in Copenhagen. The official delegates to the Copenhagen conference adopted a platform of action that emphasized employment, health, and education for women. But in 1980, the international women’s movement was still quite young. Critiques of the early “women in development” (WID) approach were just beginning to surface. A new approach—later to be called “gender and development” (GAD)—was just being formulated. Maxine Molyneux (1985) had not yet drawn her pivotal distinction between women’s practical needs and strategic interests; a distinction later made by Caroline Moser (1989). Moreover, other
key publications that helped frame the gender and development field had not been written, including:

- the writings by Naila Kabeer (1994) and Anne-Marie Goetz (1997) on how gender relationships, and related patterns of inclusion and exclusion, get institutionalized in households, society, and other rule-setting institutions
- the comparison of feminist, neo-classical, and Marxist paradigms of household economics by Nancy Folbre (1986)
- the integration of gender into macroeconomic analysis by Diane Elson (1994) and others.

However, by 1980, in Bangladesh, India, and other developing countries there had been significant developments on the ground. Both BRAC in Bangladesh and the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in India were founded in 1972 and had, by 1980, completed their first pilot phase of operations. Both were ready for take-off in their respective ways: BRAC grew to become the world’s largest NGO providing integrated development services to the poor (mainly women), and SEWA grew to become the world’s largest trade union of informal workers (all women). I was able to draw on the early experience of BRAC and SEWA in developing Oxfam America’s program. Modeled on those two organizations, the program sought to increase women’s economic security by supporting their economic activities and women’s power by building local organizations of women. In brief, the program was designed to promote women’s economic empowerment.

THE PROGRAM

During late 1980 and early 1981, I made a couple of field trips to India and Bangladesh from Boston, where I was living with my family and writing a book on the early years of BRAC women’s program (Chen 1983). The purpose of these field visits was to identify NGOs working with women that Oxfam America might support and to map out the range of strategies and issues involved in promoting women’s economic empowerment. Fortunately and fortuitously, in mid-1981, my husband, Lincoln, was asked by the Ford Foundation to be its representative in New Delhi covering India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Given our impending shift to India, Oxfam America asked me to be their representative in New Delhi covering Bangladesh and India. I ended up starting Oxfam America’s first gender program and opening its first field office. This program was also, I believe, an early, if not the earliest gender program in the Oxfam family. By early 1982, the program was up and running, and by the end of 1982, Oxfam America had made grants to over 20 NGOs working with the following categories of women workers:

- street vendors in Madras and Ahmedabad cities, India
- home-based producers, including lace makers in rural Andhra Pradesh, India; palm-leaf mat weavers in Tamil Nadu, India; cloth painters in Bihar, India; and embroidered quilt-makers in rural Bangladesh
- labor and service providers, such as home-based caterers in Mumbai (then Bombay), India;
• post-harvest rice processors in rural Bangladesh; agricultural day laborers in rural India; and
• rural dairy producers in rural India; and rural poultry producers in Bangladesh

Over the next four years, Oxfam America made 125 grants to 60 NGOs in both countries that, in different ways, promoted the economic empowerment of such women workers.

Over time, some of the NGOs supported by Oxfam America developed a complex mix of interventions, including: organizing women into area, issue, or trade-based associations; providing a mix of financial, business, and social services; and advocating for appropriate policy and legal reforms. I worked closely with many of the partner organizations helping design their strategies in support of women. Operationally, we found that sub-sector analysis was useful in identifying appropriate interventions, as it helped us focus on the constraints, risks, and opportunities. Together with Oxfam America’s partners, I developed an approach to sub-sector analysis that focused on the sectors in which large numbers of working poor women are concentrated and, using participatory methods, identified the key sector-specific constraints, risks, and opportunities faced by women (Chen 1986).

In practice, sub-sector analysis took various forms. A partner organization in South India, which supported women who wove traditional palm-leaf mats, submitted a proposal to Oxfam America to build a work shed for the mat-weavers and develop an embroidery project for other women. I asked whether there was a local tradition of embroidery that could be developed. When the head of that NGO said “no,” I asked him what kind of paid work the other women were engaged in. He reported that the women were brick workers. I scheduled a trip to the project and met with the women, quite young, who worked in the brick fields. When I asked what problems they face, the women quickly responded: “The men make the bricks, we lift and carry them (to and from the kilns that fire the bricks).” When I asked the women whether they would like to learn how to make bricks, they replied: “We would like to learn how to make bricks, but also to be masons.” I told the partner organization that I was willing to recommend that Oxfam America give a grant for the work shed, provided they trained the women to build it. An older male staff member of the NGO retorted: “The work shed will collapse.” I assured him that I would recommend a supplemental grant if the work shed collapsed. The next time I visited the project, I met the women on the flat roof of the work shed where they were about to spread the final layer of cement under the supervision of a master mason. Other than contracting an electrician to install the electrical lines, the women had built the entire work shed themselves: and it was as solid as the bricks it was made from. The NGO helped the newly trained women masons register as a masonry cooperative—the first women’s masonry cooperative in the state. The cooperative soon began to compete successfully for construction jobs.

In addition to negotiating grants, and helping partners carry out sub-sector analyses, I worked closely with Oxfam America partners and other practitioners to increase the visibility of working poor women and to advocate for appropriate policies and regulations. To highlight the numbers and contribution of working poor women, we pulled together statistical data and other information on the informal economy, as most of the working poor in Bangladesh and India, especially women, work in the informal economy. In brief, situating the working poor women in the informal economy proved to be a useful advocacy tool; while sub-sector analysis proved to be a useful operational tool.
In addition to the first women’s masonry cooperative, some of the highlights of the operational and advocacy work included:

- The first national conference and book on women in dairying in India (Chen, et al. 1985), resulting in the first state-government project on women in dairying under the National Dairy Development Board and, for the first time, the hiring of women dairy extension workers and veterinary care training of women dairy producers

- The first national conference on the informal economy co-organized with SEWA in New Delhi, India

- The first national conference on women in agriculture co-organized with the Centre for Development Studies in Thiruvanthapuram (then Trivandrum), India

- Revival of traditional crafts: Mithila cloth paintings in India, nakshi kantha embroidery in Bangladesh (Chen 1984)

- Promotion of silk spinning and weaving by women in both countries, including revival of tasar (raw) silk production in Bangladesh and India; introduction of mulberry silk cultivation for the first time in Rajasthan, India; and hiring of women extension workers for the first time by several state government silk departments

- Early pilot projects in wasteland development in India in collaboration with the Society for the Promotion of Wasteland Development (SPWD) and the National Board for Wasteland Development (Chen 1993).

The following story illustrates the dynamics involved in these changes. With SEWA and an activist named Viji Srinivasan (then working for the Ford Foundation), through a mix of pilot projects and advocacy, we tried to mainstream women—who were responsible for the bulk of activities associated with dairying—into the extension services and cooperatives of the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB). On one occasion, we arranged for a group of SEWA members to receive training from the NDDB on veterinary care. I was invited to the last day of the training course to preside at the graduation ceremony. When I arrived, the NDDB trainers told me how difficult it was to train illiterate women. We were soon called into the classroom where the women sat awkwardly at small wooden school desks. The topic for the final training class was “artificial insemination.” After the trainers had finished introducing the topic, one of the women raised her hand. When called upon, she asked: “If you can artificially inseminate cows, can you artificially inseminate women?” Other women joined in to ask how this might be done. The trainers were dumbstruck and a bit embarrassed—not knowing how to answer. It was clear that the women were not hard to train—they understood very clearly the implications of what they had just been taught.

The NGOs that Oxfam America supported in Bangladesh and India employed a range of approaches. Some of the NGOs were what might be called pro-women, rather than feminist, in that they focused on women’s identity as workers (more than as women), on market relationships (more than household relationships), and on class politics (more than gender politics). Many were development NGOs that had added a focus on women in their operations or a women’s wing to their organizations. Few of the NGOs implemented the complete set of strategies and interventions that are needed to increase women’s economic security and power, as this requires a combination of trade union, cooperative, feminist, and development strategies.
But between them, the set of partners demonstrated that economic empowerment of working poor women is feasible, even in communities where women’s economic mobility is limited by caste or religious norms and in markets where the working poor, especially women, have limited access and even less bargaining power.

In mid-1987, my family and I returned to the US, and I left Oxfam America. From 1987 to 1998, the gender program continued under the leadership of two Indian activists: Viji Srinivasan and, then, Gurinder Kaur. In 1997, feeling that its resources were spread too thin, Oxfam decided to eliminate two regional programs: South Asia and the Horn of Africa. After working for Oxfam America, Viji Srinivasan moved to Bihar, one of the poorest states in India, to set up her own women’s NGO. After working for nearly two decades in Bihar, Viji died suddenly a few years ago while traveling by train to her hometown of Chennai in South India. Since working for Oxfam America, Gurinder Kaur has continued to work on issues related to women’s empowerment. While eliminating the South Asia program, Oxfam America continued to support gender programs in many countries around the world.

LOOKING BACK

Looking back, where did this early Oxfam America program “fit” in the evolution of the field of gender and development? In 1990, Eva Rathberger wrote an article tracing trends in research and practice of this field, characterized as the evolution from WID to WAD to GAD.

WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT

The term “women in development” came into use in the early 1970s, after the publication of Ester Boserup’s seminal book, *Women’s Role in Economic Development* (1970). Boserup was the first scholar to systematically delineate on a global level the sexual division of labor in agrarian societies and the changes in the division of labor with economic development. This recognition that women’s experience of development and of societal change differed from that of men was, then, institutionalized in the form of research that focused on women’s experiences and perceptions of development and of practice that focused on integrating women—particularly their productive activities—into development strategies. This approach was later criticized for its acceptance of existing social, economic, and political structures and for its focus on women’s productive work to the neglect of their reproductive work (Rathberger 1990).

WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT

The “women and development” proponents argued that women have always been part of—been “integrated”—in the development process, and that the work that women do both inside and outside the household is central to the maintenance of their households and of society at large. The WAD proponents criticized the WID proponents for failing to recognize that women are integrated and, more importantly, that integration serves to perpetuate existing inequalities between women and men. While taking a more critical view of women’s position, the WAD proponents also tended to focus on women’s productive work to the relative neglect of their reproductive work.
Gender and development

The GAD approach started from a more holistic perspective: looking at the social construction of gender, in the social, economic, and political spheres, and the assignment of specific roles, responsibilities, and expectations to women and men. GAD proponents look at the totality of women’s work and lives, both productive and reproductive. They also see women as agents of change—rather than as passive recipients of development—and stress the need for women to organize themselves for more effective political voice (Young 1987). The more socialist GAD proponents recognize the importance of class distinctions and class solidarities, while the more feminist GAD proponents pay special attention to the situation of women within the family or “private sphere” and on the relationships between men and women. From my perspective, the Oxfam America program contained elements of all three approaches.

Focus on and recognition of women’s productive work

The program focused primarily on women’s productive work but also recognized women’s double-day and long working hours and the need for child care. For instance, an early grant to SEWA supported the creation of crèches for working mothers run by low-caste women: an innovative attempt to overcome two constraints to women’s work in India (care responsibilities and caste stigma).

Focus on integration for some women, recognition for others

In rural Bangladesh in the late 1970s and 1980s, due to social norms restricting women’s physical mobility, women were excluded from many market activities as well as many public schemes and services. For instance, when the government and international community started food-for-work programs after the 1974 famine—women were excluded from working in these schemes until pressure was built by a coalition of NGOs to encourage women’s participation in existing food-for-work schemes or special all-women food-for-work schemes. This early advocacy to integrate women in food-for-work led to a long-term commitment by the government of Bangladesh and the food aid donors to provide employment to women through innovative food-for-work schemes, including: roadside plantations of mulberry trees for silk cultivation, start-up food subsidies to women who took up poultry rearing (Chen and Ghuznavi 1980). In India, among high caste Hindu and Muslim communities, women are also often excluded from market activities as well as public schemes and services. For these women, integration or inclusion is also an issue.

Also, much of the productive work of women in rural Bangladesh in the late 1970s and 1980s was for subsistence. The Bangladesh grantees helped convert many of these subsistence activities into commercial activities that would generate some cash income for the women. This involved helping the women gain access to markets in which they had never competed (for eggs, poultry, and livestock), creating markets for products that have never been sold commercially (embroidered quilts made by women), and recreating markets for traditional products that had declined in quality or disappeared altogether (raw silk). For these women, integration in the form of market access was the issue. However, many of the working poor women in India, especially urban street vendors and home-based producers, had a longer history of competing in markets. For these women, recognition of their integration in—and contribution to—the economy was the issue.
Highlighting of women as economic agents

The program focused on women as economic agents. The operational framework—sub-sector analysis—was used to identify where women are situated in different sectors of the economy, and with what consequences. The policy framework—informal economy—was used to measure and highlight the significance and contribution of women’s informal paid work to the economy. Both frameworks were used in the joint advocacy efforts: measurement of the informal economy—and specific categories within it—disaggregated by sex contributed to the public recognition of the contribution of informal workers, especially women, to the economy; sub-sector analysis of women’s role in different sub-sectors—e.g. dairying—contributed to the public recognition of their contribution to that sub-sector.

Focus on class and gender relationships and dynamics

The empowerment dimension of the program focused on increasing women’s bargaining power in the marketplace and in the institutions that set the rules of the economic game, (e.g. dairy boards, tripartite arbitration boards). However, to compete in the marketplace, women also needed increased bargaining power within their homes and with the elders (all men) of the community. In rural Bangladesh, when BRAC first started organizing women, it was their husband or mother-in-law who initially prevented them from going to meetings or otherwise moving about outside their homes. But the resistance of family members was often short-lived—especially if the relatives saw some financial advantage to their women working with BRAC. But then the resistance by the elders of the community would mount, as the women were no longer willing to work for others at pitance wages. In some cases, the elders would instruct the local imams to sanction the women who attended BRAC meetings: using gender ideology for class interests (Chen 1983).

Primacy to organizing women

Like the GAD proponents, the Oxfam America program saw organizing of women as key to the empowerment process, to bringing about structural changes in their work and lives. The partner organizations found that organizing women around their work identity or around economic issues was the key to economic empowerment. Some partners organized women by trade, for example, as street vendors, home-based producers, waste collectors, and more. Other partners organized women by neighborhoods around issues of common concern, ranging from the need for drought or flood relief, the exorbitant interest rate charged by moneylenders, the need to repair their homes, the sanctions of village elders and local imams, to the need for higher wages or better prices. Organizing around work identity or economic concerns did not preclude those local organizations of women taking up other issues, including fighting cases of domestic violence or divorces (in rural Bangladesh).

In short, while the Oxfam America program drew on elements of the WID and WAD approaches that were current at the time, it also contained elements of what later became known as the GAD approach. Most importantly, like the GAD approach, the program sought to promote a transformative agenda. In this case, that meant to increase the bargaining power and economic security of working poor women in order for them to be able to transform their terms of employment or doing business and, thereby, to meet their practical needs and advance their strategic interests.
Looking back, what impact did this early program of Oxfam America have on the working poor women, on our partners, on the gender and development field, and on Oxfam America? It is hard to say. I know that the program was ahead of its time in many ways and that the approach is still valid and still needed today. Many of our partner organizations have thrived; some have withered; a few, notably, BRAC, SEWA, and the Working Women’s Forum, have gained international reputations for their work with women. Oxfam America cannot take credit or blame for these trajectories. I know that Martha Nussbaum, professor of philosophy and law at the University of Chicago, has long championed BRAC’s early women’s program and the work of SEWA as examples of what she calls “Aristotle in practice.” By this she means challenging the dominant structures of society when they work against the interests of women and other disadvantaged groups, while remaining sensitive to local culture and norms.

I know that Oxfam America adopted gender as a cross-cutting issue in all of its operations and began supporting gender and development projects around the world. As with other organizations, it has been difficult to fully mainstream gender as an issue that cuts across all operations and structures in Oxfam America and its sister Oxfams. However, I know that Oxfam America and its sister organizations, including Oxfam International, have tried to address both the productive and reproductive aspects of women’s lives in their operations and the gender roles, relationships, and dynamics within their organizations. But, again, the early gender program in Bangladesh and India cannot take credit or blame for these developments.

What I know for sure is that I benefited professionally and personally from working with Oxfam America and its grantees in Bangladesh and India. My work today represents a continuation of my work with Oxfam America. I continue to draw inspiration and lessons from BRAC and SEWA in particular. Upon returning to the US in 1987, I rejoined the Harvard Institute for International Development (where I was a visiting scholar in 1980 to 1981) and, shortly thereafter, began teaching at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government. My research and teaching have focused on the intersection of employment, gender, and poverty. I have retained my ties with South Asia and the field of practice by carrying out research studies and consultancy assignments in Bangladesh and India—often with BRAC or SEWA.

In the early 1990s, I collaborated with Renana Jhabvala of SEWA and Marilyn Carr of UNIFEM in editing a volume of case studies of membership-based organizations of working poor women in South Asia (Carr, et al. 1996). During this collaboration, we began dreaming about a global movement of organizations of working poor women in the informal economy. SEWA had recently helped form an international alliance of home-based workers (HomeNet) whose first initiative was a global campaign for an ILO convention on homework. In 1995, to help them during the final year of the campaign, SEWA and HomeNet International asked UNIFEM to convene a regional policy dialogue with Asian governments on home-based work and asked me to collect statistics on home-based work worldwide (Chen, et al. 1996). When the International Labour Conference of 1996 passed the ILO Convention, I received a postcard from Ela Bhatt and Renana Jhabvala of SEWA which read: “The Convention passed. The employers had their ideology, the workers had their statistics.” With that victory, we realized the power of statistics and of the joint action of activists, researchers, and international agencies. A year later, we formed the global research policy network Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO).
Now more than a decade old, WIEGO seeks to improve the status of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy by increasing their official visibility through better statistics and research and by increasing their representative voice through more and stronger organizations. By increasing their visibility and voice, WIEGO hopes to improve employment opportunities, legal rights, and social protection for the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. The individuals and institutions in the WIEGO network are drawn from three broad constituencies: membership-based organizations of informal workers; research, statistical, and academic institutions; and development agencies of various types (non-governmental, governmental, and inter-governmental).

WIEGO serves as a “think tank” for a growing international movement of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. That includes an international alliance of street vendors (StreetNet International), national and regional HomeNets in Asia, and other membership-based organizations of informal workers. Together with its allies in the international movement of women in the informal economy, WIEGO seeks:

• to put work, workers, and workers’ organizations at the center of development discourse, policies, and processes;

• to investigate how different groups of the working poor in the informal economy — especially women — are linked to the formal economy and inserted into the global economy, and with what consequences;

• to identify appropriate policies, regulations, and practices in support of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy.

When I reread my 1986 report on the first Oxfam America gender program, before sitting down to write this chapter, I was struck by how much of that early program is reflected in the WIEGO vision. Twenty years later, I am still working on the same issues with some of the same colleagues, only now on the global stage. Throughout my career—as practitioner, scholar, teacher, and advocate—I have focused on working poor women, on market relationships, and on economic development. I know that my focus and perspective is grounded in my years of engagement with working poor women in Bangladesh and India.

I am grateful to Oxfam America for giving me the opportunity to develop its first gender program; and for inviting me to write these personal reflections on that early chapter in its history. Special thanks are also due to the countless working poor women who over the years have welcomed me into their homes, only to be bombarded by my many questions about their lives and work. For providing the ongoing inspiration, steady focus, and moral compass to my work, I remain deeply indebted to them.
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CHAPTER 11

Lessons from Lebanon, 1982–83

By Dan Connell

Humanitarian response sometimes enmeshes an international agency in controversy, as Oxfam America discovered with its work in Lebanon. Dan Connell offers his perspective on Oxfam America’s truncated humanitarian effort in Lebanon and how it led him to found Grassroots International.

Introduction

After Israel invaded Lebanon on June 6, 1982, print and broadcast media were awash with disturbing images of civilian victims, as so often happens with a disaster, natural or man-made. But the humanitarian response to this one was slow to get going, chiefly because the politically complicated region lacked the engagement of most mainstream aid agencies at the start of the crisis.

One of the few positioned to deal with the consequences of the war was Oxfam Great Britain (then known as Oxfam UK), whose field staff had long experience in Lebanon and had won the trust of a wide range of local players. The British quickly dispatched disaster specialists to Damascus and key points within Lebanon to assess the spiraling human needs and manage the distribution of assistance, even as they sent out an urgent appeal to sister agencies.

Facing an ebb in fundraising that summer and sensing an opportunity, Oxfam America’s development director Oliver Scott urged the agency to jump in. He found support from the overseas program director, Michael Scott (no relation), who had wanted to explore program options in the region anyway. So, with executive committee approval, Oxfam America pledged $250,000 and launched a major advertising and fundraising appeal. Almost immediately, however, the agency discovered why so many others had stayed away—and why allowing development to lead programs can be dangerous.

The first challenge was finding neutral sources for information and presenting an appeal that reflected political balance. Oxfam America went with the Swiss-based International Committee for the Red Cross for figures on civilian dead and wounded, as the ICRC had decades of experience in such conflicts and extensive staff on the ground. In addition, Oxfam America cited a number of Jewish and Arab organizations as sponsors. But the ads nevertheless provoked immediate outcries from both Jewish and Arab groups offended by their content.
Israel was contesting the ICRC numbers, and a sixteen-page newsletter distributed by pro-Israel groups in the Boston area provided a detailed counterargument to this and talking points for other contentious aspects of the conflict. This armed them with a level of detail that Oxfam America staffers (and local media) lacked when challenged, as they were almost immediately. Meanwhile, one of the Arab sponsors for the Oxfam America ad was the American Lebanese League, a backer of one of the most extreme right-wing Christian militias involved in the conflict whose appearance on Oxfam America’s appeal triggered a barrage of phone calls questioning the agency’s claims to neutrality.

As a result of these attacks, the decision was quickly taken to hire a short-term consultant to coordinate the effort, which is where I entered the picture. As a journalist with a long, if informal, relationship to Oxfam America and with extensive experience in war zones (mostly Africa), as well as contacts in Lebanon from prior visits, I got the job. I started work on Thursday, July 8.

The next day we established an interdepartmental task force to coordinate the response. Then we brought in a program advisor, Assaf Kfoury, a Lebanese-American academic in the Boston area with strong personal ties to the all-secular humanitarian agencies in Lebanon, as well as to the main progressive political currents, whom I had long trusted for his ability to maneuver within Lebanon’s complicated sectarian scene without getting sucked into its vortex. Nine days later I left for Beirut.

This turned into the most difficult and draining consultancy I ever took on—not just because people were shooting at me from all directions as I sought to navigate the chaotic battlefield in Lebanon, but also because the crossfire followed me home, never letting up.

INTO THE LINE OF FIRE

Lebanon, a country roughly the size of Connecticut, is bounded on the west by the Mediterranean, on the east and north by Syria, and on the south by Israel. Its approximately 3 million citizens in 1982 were divided among seventeen recognized “confessional” (religious) groups, the largest of which had their own armed militias answering to warlords who controlled fairly well-defined territorial enclaves.

These confessions were the basis for the state’s arcane political system, set up under a 1943 agreement known as the “National Pact” that gave the presidency to the Maronite Christians (favored by the French who controlled the colony between the two world wars), the office of prime minister to the Sunnis (who had ruled during the Ottoman period), and the largely ceremonial position of speaker of parliament to the more populous but long disenfranchised Shi’ites. Seven years into a bitter civil war, Lebanon’s second since the 1950s, the state had all but ceased to function.

But that was not all.

The Lebanese shared their land with close to a million refugees and immigrants, more than half of them Palestinians who had either fled Israel in the wars of 1948 and 1967 or Jordan in the 1970 conflict there. Yasser Arafat’s Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was headquartered in Beirut and ran the refugee camps as a state-within-a-state; though outside the camps the Palestinians experienced intense discrimination at the hands of the Lebanese and lived...
for the most part in extreme poverty and insecurity. The PLO, itself deeply divided among its own constituent organizations and armies and chronically inept at governance, had done little to remedy this apart from setting up showcase projects in the larger cities.

Aligning itself with the Muslim and secular National Movement against the predominantly Christian Lebanese Forces in the 1970s, the PLO had plunged headfirst into the civil war. This tangle of overlapping alliances and conflicts provided the context both for Israel’s 1982 invasion (its second foray into Lebanon in four years), whose stated goal was the destruction of the PLO once and for all, and for my subsequent humanitarian mission.

With the Beirut Airport closed, I flew into Damascus, Syria, where I hired a taxi for the halting, half-day journey across Lebanon. We drove through the Bek’a Valley, clearing dozens of military checkpoints controlled by one or another army or militia on our serpentine route to Beirut, whose western sector was then under the National Movement and its PLO allies and besieged by the Israelis and their Lebanese Forces allies. Heavy fighting alternated with one-day ceasefires, during which it was possible to cross the Green Line from East to West.

I arrived on a relatively quiet day, got out at the last Lebanese militia checkpoint and carried my small shoulder bag across the no-man’s land that divided the two sectors, picking up a Lebanese taxi once I turned a corner and got out of the line of fire. The driver took me to the Mayflower Hotel, where low-end journalists and aid agency personnel stayed, along with Yasser Arafat’s younger brother Fathi, who headed the Palestine Red Crescent Society. Upscale reporters, UN officials and other high flyers stayed at the Commodore, two blocks and a world away on the far side of the once bustling Hamra Street and its shuttered boutiques. Down the hill was the barricaded entrance to the American University of Beirut. After I checked in, I turned on the TV only to find a “Dynasty” rerun, adding yet another layer of unreality to the dreamlike scene.

I awoke to artillery blasting apart the neighborhood from several directions at once as Israeli jets buzzed the city, breaking the sound barrier almost directly overhead. The sounds were as disorienting in their sudden, enveloping fury as they were terrifying. This was, of course, the point. Hard, though, to know what defensive moves to make—how to put two walls between yourself and the incoming rounds, as you are always advised to do in such situations. Where was it coming from, I wondered in my jet-lagged stupor?

Only one place to go and that was down to the basement, where I joined most of the other residents for the next four hours. Almost as soon as the shooting stopped, everyone began to move at once, darting outside to check on friends and family, buy food and other supplies, or take care of whatever other business they had. It was eerily “normal” and yet not normal at all. But the Lebanese had been coping with this to one degree or another since the country descended into civil war in 1975. The main difference now was the intensity—and the sheer magnitude of the destruction.

**ASSESSING THE NEED**

Over the next three weeks I traveled back and forth across Beirut and throughout much of the Israeli-occupied south, where fighting had stopped but where the detritus of war was everywhere visible. Damour, already battered during the early years of the civil war, was now a bleak ghost town, reduced to rubble. The historic port of Tyre had suffered an estimated
$75 million in damage to its schools, hospitals, and other social infrastructure. Sidon sustained even more damage, while entire rural villages had been flattened. But the worst effects were to be seen in the Palestinian camps.

Ein el-Hilweh, one of the largest, had been devastated by a mix of aerial bombing and land-based and naval artillery fire. Many buildings left standing during the attack were later dynamited or bulldozed in an apparent effort to force the refugees to leave—stripping the PLO of the sea in which it swam. Some 20,000 Palestinians squatted in the ruins with another 40,000 dispersed in the surrounding area, according to relief officials on the scene, but the Israelis were not allowing them to rebuild or even to set up tents. These numbers, like everything else, were of course heavily contested.

The Israelis and the aid agencies had wildly differing statistics on the dead, the wounded, and the displaced. For their part, Lebanese officials simply left the Palestinians out of their surveys, counting only the casualties and the damage suffered by the country’s registered citizens. This reduced most journalists and aid workers to collecting bits and pieces of anecdotal evidence that we could compare with one another’s observations. But even this was not easy—when I tried to photograph the damage in Ein el-Hilweh, an Israeli officer chased me out of the camp at gunpoint.

Meanwhile, some relief supplies were arriving for Lebanese civilians under the auspices of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). They came by truck from Israel and were distributed by evangelical Christian organizations (mostly American) with strong ties to Christian Lebanese militias, one of which—Saad Haddad’s South Lebanon Army—had controlled a buffer along the border since the Israeli invasion of 1978. The SLA also hosted the “Voice of Hope” radio ministry of George Otis’s High Adventure Mission, which was to grow into a global broadcasting operation.

No doubt the food, blankets, and other supplies were appreciated. But the proselytizing that came with them was stirring up a hornet’s nest of anger and suspicion toward foreigners among both the Shi’ite and Sunni Muslims of this region that further complicated my ability to move around. Meanwhile, only the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), set up in 1948 to deal with the “temporary” problem of Palestinian refugees, and the ICRC were permitted by the Israelis to distribute aid in the camps.

Yet there were also remarkable emergency efforts underway from within both affected communities—Lebanese and Palestinian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), often working together, whose volunteers were circumventing the many checkpoints to assess need and deliver goods and services in much of the occupied south. Oxfam GB, which had a representative in Sidon then, had links to many of them. I piggybacked on these relationships.

I also carried letters of introduction from several Beirut-based NGOs given to me at Assaf Kfoury’s behest after he telephoned them from Boston to endorse OA’s work. This helped enormously, as I was passed along the chain from one aid group to another, all of them forced to operate in semi-secrecy for fear their staffs would be detained or worse if discovered by the occupation forces, which were embargoing aid coming south from Beirut. I also had a wad of hundred-dollar bills hidden under my clothes to purchase local goods for urgent needs—an improvisation we had put into place in Boston for just such a circumstance.
Meanwhile, the fighting continued in Beirut where hundreds of thousands had been rendered homeless and whole neighborhoods uninhabitable by the frequent bombardments from air, land, and sea. Casualties mounted at a rate of several hundred each day of combat. Here, too, the worst damage was in the Palestinian camps, though there was destruction throughout the city. Nearly all the twenty-five hospitals had been hit, water pipes were broken, shops and small factories were demolished, roads had become nearly impassable, communications equipment was wiped out, and schools and municipal facilities had ceased to function as mountains of uncollected garbage accumulated along the streets.

Some images I will carry with me forever: a small boy poking through a smoking stack of trash, presumably for food, as rats scurried by his feet; a man slumped in a chair in a make-shift emergency room at the American University of Beirut with smoke pouring out of his nose from a phosphorus shell that had left a burning fragment deep inside him; an eight-story apartment building in Fakhani reduced to rubble and dust—along with its residents—by an enormous penetration bomb dropped, so the story went, in an attempt to kill Arafat who had reportedly been there an hour earlier.

But there were also the courageous nurses and doctors who labored with little or no sleep in makeshift hospitals set up in underground parking lots two or even three stories down—the only “safe” places in the city. There were the ambulance drivers who raced through the rubble whenever the bombardment let up to retrieve the wounded. And there were the many volunteers from all the city’s “confessional” groups, Muslim and Christian alike, who banded together to deliver food and other goods to the needy, regardless of their personal or political allegiance.

Though the emergency effort in Beirut had far more to deal with on a day-to-day basis than that in the south, it was much better organized and resourced, even with the war and the accompanying siege. A Joint Lebanese/Palestinian Committee of governmental and nongovernmental agencies and relief groups working with the UN, the ICRC and other outside agencies (including Oxfam GB) coordinated the division of labor and the distribution of resources across West Beirut.

Member organizations also ran their own projects, ranging from childcare to trauma counseling, several of which I identified for consideration as partners via Oxfam GB. Prominent among them were the Lebanese Association for Popular Action (known as Amel), a social and medical organization that ran emergency clinics and rehab projects in communities across Lebanon, and the Association Najdeh, a remarkable Palestinian women’s NGO that managed highly participatory self-help projects in the refugee camps.

I left Beirut on August 3 determined to urge Oxfam America to commit to an ongoing program of rehabilitation and development with these and other local organizations. I was also convinced that this would position the agency to educate our constituency about the complex and oft misunderstood social, cultural, and political milieu at a time when nearly all other voices on the region were highly partisan—or simply silent.
ON THE HOME FRONT

Once back, I found myself in the midst of a firestorm as pro-Israel activists in Boston were challenging the negative coverage that country was receiving and bombarding Oxfam America with criticism for our involvement with the Palestinians. One letter began, “Dear Nazis,” and demanded to know why we were supporting “terrorists.” This was clearly not going to be a typical disaster response.

Nevertheless, I did a number of media appearances, including one on ABC-TV’s “Good Morning America” and another on NPR’s “All Things Considered,” and I did a series of interviews with the Boston Globe, the Mutual Broadcasting System, ABC radio and others. My Oxfam America handler was communications specialist Chris Cartter, who coached me on how to turn the subject of each exchange back to what we were doing on the ground and on how much help was still needed. He even accompanied me to New York for the ABC interview, though he had to sleep on the floor of my Plaza Hotel room as the network only covered expenses for one person, and Oxfam America had a tight budget for media support. I also flew alone to New York and Washington to meet with major donors and representatives of church groups and leading Jewish and Arab organizations to explain our work and to solicit their views and concerns.

But the criticism we received from outside—and our critics’ daunting command of detail—rattled staffpeople unaccustomed to the vitriol that this region elicited. At the same time, staff and board were split over the issue—and about the basic question of whether Oxfam America should be in the Middle East at all. The debate mainly revolved around criticism of Israel, which some took issue with on its merits while others worried that it would undermine the state’s very legitimacy and ought not to be voiced whatever it did in Lebanon. Still others argued that, unlike Africa, Latin America, or Asia, the Middle East was a prosperous region awash in oil money and did not need or merit Oxfam America’s aid. I was left to both referee this heavily freighted intellectual and emotional conflict and to improvise an acceptable organizational response.

My initial mandate was for a three-month emergency program centered around a general appeal for funds that would be forwarded to Oxfam GB, though I had been privately assured upon my hiring that I would be given the opportunity to make a case for extending the program once back from the field. However, there were early constraints placed on media work, limiting it to support for fundraising, and there was a lid placed on education work, partly due to the nature and duration of the commitment and partly to the controversy that came with it. As the summer wore on, the only publication I was permitted was an op-ed in the Christian Science Monitor.

As time began to run out on the short-term response, I lobbied for an extension—and for consideration of a full-blown Lebanon program. I was supported by Mike Scott, who suggested we tie it together with a promising women’s textile cooperative in the Israeli-occupied West Bank with whose founder and director he was in contact and which, like most of the projects I came back with from Lebanon, received assistance from Oxfam GB. Between this and the partnerships in Lebanon, we would have a modest platform on which to build a regional program.
The tensions within Oxfam America over this came to a head at the September 1982 board meeting, when I presented a sixteen-page “Lebanon Disaster Project Report,” urging an extension of our commitment and outlining what a program might look like in Lebanon and the West Bank. The debate was intense, the questions pointed, the exchanges heated. The result was a hung jury.

The board was sharply divided over a number of questions, from the risks associated with working in this highly charged political environment—there and at home—to whether we had the organizational capacity to do this effectively. And there were one or two who thought we should not be in the Middle East at all. The upshot was a vote to extend the emergency response for another ten months.

For some, this was an affirmation of Oxfam America’s historic commitment not to cream off relief monies in a disaster without strengthening local capacity to cope with the next crisis. For others, it was a commitment to explore future options. (Oxfam America had in 1981 adopted a set of guidelines for a disaster response pledging that its primary commitment of resources would always be to reconstruction and development, reinforcing the agency’s commitment to foster self-reliance.) And for still others, it was simply a way to postpone the final reckoning. But whatever drove it, this limited commitment was carefully defined to focus on rehabilitation and not long-term development, so that a swift exit, if ordered, would be feasible. This would be decided at the December board meeting once we had more to go on. Meanwhile, there would be no education program.

THE INTERREGNUM

During the next phase, I went to Lebanon three times.

The first field trip came in late October and early November, shortly after the evacuation of the PLO from Beirut and after the Sabra and Shatila Camp massacres during which hundreds of Palestinian refugees had been slaughtered by rampaging Lebanese Christian militiamen. The war was officially over but not the carnage.

The Reagan Administration had brokered an agreement between Israel and the PLO that allowed the besieged Palestinian militants to depart Beirut by sea for the northern port of Tripoli from where its members would be scattered throughout the Middle East and North Africa, leaving the Lebanese capital in the hands of international peacekeepers from Italy, France, and the US.

The Palestinians sailed off on September 1 after a raucous “victory” parade through downtown Beirut, taking with them members of more than a dozen other armed rebel movements from across Africa and the Middle East that had maintained weapons procurement offices in this wide-open city only to find themselves trapped when war broke out. Two weeks later, however, Phalange Party leader Beshir Gemayel—a Maronite Christian hardliner chosen as Lebanon’s president in mid-August with backing from both the US and Israel—was assassinated by a Syrian intelligence agent. The Israelis responded by storming into West Beirut to root out PLO guerrillas thought to have been left behind during the withdrawal.

The next day, September 16, Israel’s Defense Minister Ariel Sharon, who commanded the IDF during the invasion, invited Lebanese militiamen to enter the Palestinian camps and purge
them of armed elements, an act for which he was later reprimanded by a high-level Israeli commission and temporarily relieved of his post. The first militia unit, carrying an assortment of guns, knives, and hatchets, went in at 6 p.m. and immediately began executing civilians. Estimates of those killed over the next forty-eight hours run from 700-800 to more than 2,000. This was the backdrop for my return.

I flew directly to Beirut this time, toured the city with our local partners, visited projects, interviewed war victims, met with fellow aid workers and international observers, and gathered mountains of data on the scope of the post-conflict needs, all the while striving to take the pulse of this war-weary society and asking as many people as possible: What precisely can we do for you that others cannot?

The Israelis had pulled out of West Beirut by then and the multinational peacekeeping force was back on the streets, but though the remarkably resilient Beirutis were once again rebuilding whatever they could to give the city an appearance of rebirth, the dominant emotion was a thinly disguised fear that the worst could—and almost certainly would—happen at any moment. This gave a frenetic edge to many of our encounters. The pace of life had speeded up, as if it were rush hour, every hour.

And there was no shortage of horror stories to feed this chronic sense of apprehension. Each day young children appeared at neighborhood clinics with limbs blown off after picking up two-inch long, brightly colored metal bomblets—I still have a shiny green one (explosive charge gone) on a bookshelf at home—that had been scattered throughout the city during the fighting. They had rained down from anti-personnel bombs—six-foot pods that opened at low altitude over the city during the fighting. I recall one that had been inscribed, “From Reagan to Begin with love.”

After a week of this, I was joined by Robin Grossman, Oxfam America’s associate development director. After meeting with key informants in Beirut, we went south to tour the Israeli-occupied Lebanese communities and Palestinian camps to assess the situation there. What were the needs? Who was working effectively to meet them? What obstacles did they face? What did local NGOs need that they either did not have or lacked enough of? And what could a small, independent American aid agency do that others could or would not?

Our efforts were made far easier by our association with Oxfam GB, which along with the Mennonite Central Committee and the American Friends Service Committee were the only outside agencies working with Lebanese or Palestinian organizations that were not directly linked to the occupation.

There were, however, many Christian evangelicals still operating out of Israel. One such coalition of US and European missionary organizations was distributing a relief package with a New Testament in Arabic, a blanket, a bag of sweets, and a blue Frisbee inscribed with the words “God Loves You” in English. And there were endless streams of curious visitors.

What we heard often from those Lebanese and Palestinians with whom we spoke was that they felt victimized twice—first by the war and then by the parade of gawkers who trailed in the army’s wake. Relief workers surveyed them over and over again on their basic needs. Journalists probed them for their wrenching personal stories. Photographers zipped in and out of the worst affected areas to capture their anguish—and run away with it. The Palestinians had become objects in a human zoo, but they were not seeing results of being on display. Many were angry. At one camp, a troop of young boys threw stones at us when we approached.
The Israeli soldiers operating checkpoints throughout the south were also on edge. Many Lebanese who had resented the PLO for its bullying swagger and had greeted the IDF as liberators now chafed under occupation and were impatient for them to leave. The sight of Israeli tourists shuttling back and forth to Beaufort Castle in convoys of huge commercial buses under armed IDF escort did little to mitigate this.

Meanwhile, IDF units were under orders to prevent reconstruction in the urban refugee settlements and were only allowing UN-supplied tents for the displaced Palestinians. We were often harassed as we sought entry to the camps, which were cordoned off from surrounding Lebanese neighborhoods with rings of razor wire. Inside, conditions were appalling. Ein el-Hilweh in the coastal city of Sidon had only two water taps for some 20,000 people, mostly women and children as many of the men had either fled or, if fingered by hooded informers, had been carted off to prisons farther south or across the border.

What many asked from us was to tell their stories, to make their needs and their aspirations visible in the US, which most believed held the key to long-term stability and peace. This was fueled by perceptions of a deepening American involvement in Lebanon based upon the Reagan administration’s very public embrace of the Christian militia-based regime of Amin Gemayel, who had replaced his murdered brother, and by extravagant promises of bilateral aid.

Grossman and I crossed into Israel at the UNIFIL post at Naqoura—the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, established after the 1978 invasion and still there in 2007. We went from there to Tel Aviv where we interviewed Jacobo Timerman—the Argentine journalist jailed by the junta there for his human rights work who had sought refuge in Israel only to find himself in a society he perceived to be as militarized as the one he’d just left (and who wrote *The Longest War: Israel in Lebanon* to protest it)—as well as members of a newly energized Israeli anti-war movement. A day later, we met with Israelis and Palestinians in Jerusalem involved in parallel and at times linked efforts to promote co-existence between their two peoples. It was a heady time for Israeli peace activists, who claimed to have mobilized 400,000 people for a demonstration in Tel Aviv after the Sabra and Shatila massacre.

We also visited Charles Shamas’s innovative coop in the West Bank city of Ramallah, coming away impressed with his deeply personal commitment to make a difference in the lives of the Palestinian women who worked on the project and with his conviction that this could be replicated elsewhere to promote hope and build stability across the region. No doubt we were predisposed to soak up good news, but we both came away truly excited.

**BACK IN THE USA**

Our exhilaration was short-lived, however. During our absence, support for the Lebanon work within Oxfam America had sharply eroded. The reasons for this were complicated. Among the chief factors were the obvious ones—the politics of the Middle East and the fear of donor losses—but there were also intra- and inter-departmental rivalries and a growing weariness with the demands that this issue placed on the organization. The continuing criticism of what OA did or said—or what people thought we did or said—was taking its toll, and there was a feeling among many not directly engaged by the politics that this was just not worth the cost, whatever the rights and wrongs of it.
We had by this time met and exceeded the funding target of $250,000. Among the restricted
gifts for the Lebanon emergency was a single $100,000 donation from the Hutterian
Brothers—a Christian community in Nyack, New York, that shares Anabaptist roots with
the Mennonites—who decided to postpone the construction of a new building so they could
put all the cash they had set aside for it into the relief effort. We also received generous
support from several small trusts and foundations, along with a number of donations from
Lebanese Americans facilitated by Kfoury, but contributions were beginning to fall off.

As they did so, some at Oxfam America were asking if there was a reliable constituency for
ongoing work. The answer was not yet clear. Meanwhile, would we lose existing donors if we
remained in the Middle East? The large volume of angry mail and phone calls we continued
to get indicated that we would, but precisely how many was also not clear, as the authors of
this criticism had not been correlated with our donor base, and we did not know whether the
threats to cut us off were real or not.

This was also a time of considerable tension within the organization over questions of power
and accountability, the extent and kind of staff participation in decision-making, equity for
comparable work across departments, the impact of an ongoing restructuring of management-
staff relations, and more. Such a turn inward was an almost inevitable consequence of the
agency’s growth in size and internal complexity and the changes that come with it, but they
had been neglected for far too long and had therefore built to an explosive point that would
soon lead the staff to unionize.

New issues were coming up as we became increasingly compartmentalized and as structures
of authority became both more hierarchical and less transparent—all this in an organization
that, like most non-profits—characterized itself as a “family” and that touted its mission as
bringing justice to the downtrodden. What about us, some wondered? Aren’t we bound by
the same principles here? This debate gave all our political disagreements an added under-
current of emotional intensity, even as it sapped people’s will to take on new and unfamiliar
challenges. It was not an auspicious time to take on such a complicated and demanding issue
as the Middle East, but there was even more going on.

I had come to Oxfam America with an agenda of my own, independent of my wish to see the
agency work in the Middle East. With seven years involvement in Eritrea’s war for inde-
pendence from Ethiopia under my belt and with a growing awareness that a terrible famine
loomed there, I was equally determined to get Oxfam America involved in Eritrea and had
been periodically briefing Oxfam America program staff on the situation there since the late
1970s with this in mind.

Here was a remarkable African movement that was uniting and transforming its ethnically
and religiously diverse society even as it fought to liberate it from colonial rule. I had been
writing about it since 1976 for both mainstream and left media in the US and Europe—for pa-
pers ranging from the Washington Post, the Miami Herald and the Boston Globe to the New York-
based Guardian, as well as for Reuters, AP, the BBC and numerous others—so I brought to the
table not only my passion for the work but also a unique store of knowledge and connections.

The problem was that this, too, was a knotty issue and pushed a different set of emotional
and political buttons at OA. The David-and-Goliath aspect had long intrigued me, as had
the Eritreans’ fierce commitment to self-reliance in the face of the bruising superpower
competition that wracked the rest of the Third World, but it was the level and quality of the popular mobilization taking place behind the battle lines and the simultaneous effort to achieve gender and class equality that made Eritrea so interesting. And, I thought then (and continue to think now, despite the brutal reversal underway there since the resumption of war with Ethiopia in the late 1990s), there was much to be learned about how nation-building and “development” work. Nor were there any American aid agencies there.

But, like the Israel/Palestine issue, the Eritrea/Ethiopia war triggered powerful, reflexive responses. For starters, the conflict pitted a leftwing liberation movement against a self-described “socialist” state backed by the Soviet Union. The US, for its part, distrusted the rebels and was staying out of the fray in the hope of eventually displacing the Soviets from Ethiopia and rebuilding its historic alliance with the East African powerhouse. In this view, little Eritrea was expendable.

This was also a time when many on the left argued there were only two camps in the world—the socialists and the imperialists—so when they saw the USSR backing the military junta in Ethiopia, which had dethroned a feudal emperor, redistributed land, and nationalized much of the economy, they took it on faith that the Eritreans were on the wrong side. I had been blasted by the Trotskyite Workers World, for example, as a “tool of imperialism,” willing or not, for writing favorably about the Eritrean movement, and I had engaged in a grueling two-month exchange in print over this with the Australian journalist Wilfred Burchett, an erstwhile icon of the Vietnam-War-era left. But the tendency to see the world in dualistic terms (what academics today would term a binary) influenced many post-Vietnam liberals as well, who were loathe to get involved with Eritrea under these circumstances.

Meanwhile, in a through-the-looking-glass refraction of the arguments against criticizing Israel, there were some pan-Africanists who thought it wrong to criticize Ethiopia—wrong to support a liberation movement fighting a black-ruled state while there were yet white ruled states in Africa (South Africa and Namibia). And this was not just any black-ruled state—Ethiopia held mythic status as the only African country not to fall to European conquest (at least not for long) and had been a global symbol of hope for people of color since the end of the nineteenth century.

If the timing for a debate on a program with Palestinians and Lebanese under Israeli occupation was not propitious, wrapping it into one on Eritrea did not help. Still, I thought the rightness of both causes would carry the day, and I wrote memos, cajoled colleagues, and convened countless interdepartmental confabs to make the case. Not surprisingly, my earnestness was itself a drag on this debate as the agency was migrating away from the solidarity-style engagement that I brought to it toward a more “professional” and detached posture on all issues.

By mid-December the writing was on the wall.

As we neared the date for a program department vote on whether to take the Lebanon program to the board for approval and with dissension already evident within this relatively small group for a range of both political and oddly personal reasons, program director Mike Scott invited me to his house for a private discussion. With apologies he told me he had to withdraw support from the Lebanon initiative. It was not going to succeed, he said, given the lineup within the organization, and continuing to push it would only divide the staff and board further. It was time to move on.
Perhaps, he added, the agency could reengage with the Middle East at a future date but not now. Moreover, he planned to propose an outside consultant to assess the options for work in the Horn of Africa and recommend the direction Oxfam America should go in, taking the issue of Eritrea off the table for the time being, too.

The next day, the department split over the issue of staying in Lebanon and declined to recommend extending the program. It never went before the board for consideration.

My options at this point included other work at Oxfam America—there was, for example, a position in the education department—but no prospect that either area of my expertise and experience would become part of the agency’s core program. Faced with this, I decided to leave. But there were still more than seven months to go before the Lebanon work was done. What to do with that time? How to build on this extraordinary experience? How not to let it simply evaporate after all that so many others had endured to bring it to this point?

**BIRTH OF AN UNRULY STEP-CHILD**

I returned to Beirut in February 1983 to ask local partners just how important it was to have a US link and would they want one if I left Oxfam America to do it elsewhere—or even tried to start up an agency myself. It was a wacky notion—I had no experience running such an organization, no funds and no backers—but I was on fire. In fact, I had no clear idea of what would or should come next—only that this was no time to walk away.

Lebanese and Palestinian aid workers, human rights advocates, and NGO reps were emphatic: Stay involved. The United States is the key to what is happening here now. We need a bridge. Whatever money you can send will be helpful, but European agencies are stepping up, so funding is not the central issue. It’s the voice that matters—we need the American people to hear us, to know us. Stay connected and tell our story.

On return to Boston, I began to talk with others at Oxfam America about doing just that. I found ready reception from Chris Cartter, the communications specialist who shared my anger at what he and I both took to be a betrayal and who was ready to leave with me to keep the work going. I also found a fire burning in program advisor Assaf Kfoury, who was both outraged that Lebanon would be so abruptly abandoned and chagrined over the fact that he had leaned heavily on his extended family, friends, and political contacts to donate to Oxfam America, rather than to Lebanese charities, in order to break down the community’s historical isolation. As many disempowered minorities have discovered, though, inclusion can be ephemeral in stressful times—especially when the levers of access are outside one’s control.

I also found receptiveness among people I knew through other political work—including several prominent activists frustrated at their growing isolation at a time of declining political engagement throughout the society in the early 1980s. A core of us began to toss around the idea of creating a multi-issue organization to bridge the chasm between traditional political solidarity and mass-appeal humanitarian work, a left development agency that would use its connections to lived experience in crisis areas to do information and advocacy work targeted at the media and the public, filling the niche that OA was inadvertently opening as it grew in national influence and moved toward the center. Out of this conversation was born a “People-to-People Project for Social Change” or, as Mike Scott dubbed it, P2.
Cartter and I would be the new agency’s only paid staff members. The board would consist of Kfoury, long-time Palestine rights advocate Nubar Hovsepian, American Friends Service Committee Middle East director and future head of Americans for Peace Now Gail Pressberg, Eritrea rights advocate and future drafter of independent Eritrea’s constitution Bereket Habte Selassie, and South African poet and anti-apartheid activist Dennis Brutus. We would start with programs in Lebanon and Eritrea and build from there, we decided. We would expand our Palestinian program to the West Bank and Gaza and add South Africa and the Philippines as soon as we had the resources.

For much of the rest of my time at Oxfam America, I commuted to Philadelphia to work with AFSC on an assessment of the human rights situation in Lebanon, which they later published, while I worked to put together the infrastructure of a new non-profit aid agency, whose name evolved into Grassroots International by the time we incorporated on May 1. Though we did not officially open our doors in a one-room sublet in Cambridge’s Central Square until August 1, Cartter and I sent out our first funding request to potential institutional donors—a famine emergency appeal for Eritrea and northern Ethiopia—in early June. And Oxfam America gave us the restricted funds left from the Lebanon fundraising campaign—$5,000—to get our doors open.

Meanwhile, I went back to Lebanon in April to wrap up Oxfam America’s relationships there, announce the imminent formation of Grassroots, and gather data for the AFSC report. A few days after I left the tense city to return to Boston, suicide bombers blew up the American Embassy, killing sixty-three people, including a freelance journalist and friend whom I had contracted to follow up on the field research for Oxfam America. She happened to be in the building when the van carrying 2,000 pounds of explosives detonated. I never knew whether she had been there on Oxfam’s behalf, but her death haunts me still.

This was all the more poignant as my last public act on behalf of the Oxfam America program was an op-ed I wrote for the Washington Post titled “For Lebanon’s Poor: No Relief” that appeared on March 11 and was reprinted in the International Herald Tribune. In it, I warned that the emergency was not over and that “as a guarantor of the peace process, the United States will be increasingly held responsible for new violence.” I closed by saying: “The US government and private US aid agencies have a disproportionate influence on the situation in Lebanon. The question now is whether this influence will be used for good or ill. The history of Lebanon argues that there is no middle ground on these issues. If not dealt with today, they will be answered for tomorrow.”

REFLECTIONS

Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon had a profound and lasting impact on the politics of both countries, and the ripple effects were felt throughout the region and beyond. As the first explicitly offensive Israeli military campaign waged outside its borders, the war provided major impetus to a heretofore anemic peace movement inside Israel. It also opened the Jewish state to criticism from many of its friends and allies for the first time, especially for its complicity in the brutal massacres at Sabra and Shatila, after which Peace Now filled the streets of Tel Aviv with tens of thousands of Israelis protesting the invasion and its aftermath.

The conflict also sparked a radical realignment within Lebanon and unleashed the long suppressed majority Shi’ites as a force, first under the leadership of traditional politicians and
then under the newly formed Party of God, or Hezbollah, which was helped by Iran, also a new player on the scene then. At the same time, the weakening of the PLO and the dispersal of its leadership and troops led to major shifts within the Palestinian national movement, as the West Bank and Gaza took center stage for the first time and as the two-state solution to the conflict gained significant traction.

Meanwhile, in October 1983 and in early 1984, the USS New Jersey unleashed its massive 406mm guns on the Lebanese mainland in what Navy officials characterized as the largest shore bombardment since the Korean War. Many Lebanese saw this as evidence the US had sided with the Christian right and Israel in the ongoing Lebanese civil war, and the images of Israeli and American bombardment that were broadcast throughout the Arab world heightened regional resentment against both countries. Osama bin Laden later claimed that the sight of our Lebanon bombardment was one of the factors that radicalized him.

Within Oxfam America, both the hasty entry and the abrupt departure from Lebanon had an unsettling effect on an already tense workplace, surfacing differences in organizational philosophy and style as much as politics. This was the first time the agency had leapt into action during a crisis and found itself taking flak from partisans on both sides. Oxfam America had built its constituency during a series of major disasters and conflicts—Bangladesh, Central America, Cambodia—through which it attracted thousands of donors for emergency relief and then converted many into supporters of long-term development. For the first time, this did not happen—at least not to any lasting extent once the program shut down—and that upset many in the organization. But the manner in which the decisions had been taken—at the front end and at the close—set off demands for greater accountability and transparency in decision-making and an end to back-room deals among and between favored staff and top management.

And, of course, the closure of the program led to the formation of Grassroots International, which has ever since maintained a sort of push-pull relationship with its step-parent. More Oxfam America staffers (and a few board members) have since 1983 found a new home at Grassroots, one—Kevin Murray—as its executive director—and members of both organizations have consulted with each other on programmatic issues and often attended each other’s events. I even returned to do a short-term consultancy on the Horn of Africa program in the late 1990s, and top Oxfam America officials have made significant contributions at Grassroots retreats and strategic planning sessions, as the two organizations found common ground in their outlooks and a useful division of labor in their respective programs and public postures.

But it is clear in hindsight that the problems that surfaced throughout the Lebanon program had more to do with the location and nature of the conflict itself and the baggage that everyone brought to the table than with organizational issues, and that has not changed. The Middle East was the most fraught region of the world in which Oxfam America might work—and it has only become more so since 1983. Oxfam America was simply not equipped then to cope with it—nor prepared to invest the time and resources to make itself so.

It takes an enormous amount of time, energy, and organizational resources to work on the Middle East if one is involved with Palestinian issues and is thereby thrust into a position where one has got to challenge Israel on its actions toward them. And there will inevitably be a direct cost for doing so—in withdrawn donations as well as expended internal resources—that is not compensated for by increases in support from other quarters.
Grassroots learned this in the spring of 1985 when a prominent, controversial, and combative Boston lawyer with a taste for publicity showed up one day with two other strong supporters of Israel and threatened to undermine our anti-famine work with the Massachusetts Democratic Party—we were jointly running a “Donkey Project” to purchase pack animals to transport relief supplies within Eritrean and Ethiopian war zones—if we were overly critical of Israel. The delegation produced a file of leaflets Grassroots had signed onto with groups they disapproved of, as well as a summary of remarks I had made on the Lebanon crisis to a Quaker group in Cambridge several weeks earlier to reinforce their concern.

This was, to say the least, unnerving, but we stood firm behind the principle that we would criticize whoever put civilians at risk—Israel, Syria, the PLO or anyone else. And we continued to do so as events on the ground called for, even though it may have prevented us from organizing similar campaigns with other state parties.

But if an organization is ambivalent or, worse, divided, as Oxfam America was in the early 1980s, this sort of persistence will be impossible, as the cost is spread among many who are not behind it and as they inevitably (and not unreasonably) demand to know why this should be the case when they did not sign onto it.

Clearly, a lot more effort ought to have gone into consensus-building within the staff and then within the board as the 1982 emergency program was first unfolding, though it may be that the intervention was doomed from the start due to unbridgeable differences. In that case, a lot of people here and there were misled, a lot of energy squandered, and a legacy of bad will created that might have been avoided if there had been more clarity at the outset.

Having said all this, however, I am also convinced that those who come to work at any NGO with a set of beliefs and principles built around social justice need to accept that it is not just another job; that they may find themselves in uncomfortable situations with one or another issue; that they take on an obligation to learn about such issues when they sign on that first day, challenging their own inbuilt prejudices and standing up to outside pressures (institutional or even family) when pushed to do so; and that they are bound by this undertaking to accept the possibility of personal discomfort, even material consequences, when the organization’s core values are tested. This just comes with the territory.

In that vein, I continue to believe that as a leading secular aid agency committed to a rights-based development philosophy, Oxfam America has an obligation to be in the worst areas, the most difficult crises, the most divisive conflicts—and to use its standing in the community to promote justice at every available opportunity, as well as to provide effective on-the-ground aid.

Perhaps Oxfam America needs a Grassroots International to break the ground now and then, even to run interference at certain points, but it needs also to do the advance planning on areas where it is not yet involved, to get up to speed when such a challenge as this presents itself, and then to commit the resources and demonstrate the staying power needed to fulfill its vision of building “a world in which all people shall know freedom to achieve their fullest potential and to live secure from the dangers of hunger, deprivation, and oppression”—without any exceptions.

Organizational Evolution in an Ever-Changing World
One of the defining events in Oxfam America’s evolution was the Ethiopia Famine, which came to public attention soon after John Hammock became executive director. As an organization that was already experiencing growing pains, the sudden increase of income and profile presented both new opportunities and challenges. Another defining reality of the epoch was the end of the Cold War struggle between the US and the Soviet Union. The final years of the Cold War were particularly ugly in the intensity and violence of the proxy wars in Central America, the Horn of Africa and Southern Africa. It seemed more important and more difficult than ever to influence US government policy. At the same time Oxfam America was trying to address the implications on the ground through its work with refugees, the internally displaced, and those caught in the crossfire both literally and figuratively, through measures such as punitive embargoes.

The end of the Cold War was a period of great optimism, with its emphasis on democratization, the role of civil society at both the national and international levels, and the expectation that greater political and economic freedom would usher in a period of greater prosperity and government accountability. Yet draconian structural adjustment policies were actually exacerbating poverty for many poor people globally, new kinds of conflicts and complex emergencies proliferated—most notably in Rwanda and Somalia—and aid organizations, including Oxfam America, were re-examining their strategies to address these new realities.

This period saw many internal debates, including how much advocacy Oxfam America should do and what forms it should take. Some of the debates were quite heated, in part because Oxfam continued to attract highly committed activists with strong opinions. What is not fully captured in these essays is the full range of innovative programming that was occurring in the regions—from work with indigenous organizations in South America, to funding of an eclectic range of emerging organizations in West Africa, some of which have since risen to prominence, to mature work with women’s organizations in South Asia. In this period, Oxfam America also established a US program, focused primarily on African-American and immigrant organizations in rural areas. Nonetheless, these essays give a flavor of what it was like to work at Oxfam America during these years, the values that continued to attract and motivate staff, and the willingness of Oxfam to continue to take on big issues and find strategic openings in the interest of addressing social and economic injustice. John Hammock’s period as executive director ended with another event, which was to be even more transformative for Oxfam America than the Ethiopia famine was—the incorporation of Oxfam International.
This paper consists of reflections on my time as executive director of Oxfam America from 1984 until 1995. It was an extremely eventful time at Oxfam, beginning with the Ethiopian famine of 1984, a watershed for the agency, and spanned the presidencies of Reagan, Bush, and Clinton. In this piece I want to share candidly some of my experiences. Being executive director was never easy; it was certainly challenging, but never dull.

OXFAM AND DEVELOPMENT

Oxfam America was created in the 1970s to fill a defined niche. It was to be “a thinking man’s development agency.” It was created to be independent of government, secular, and focused on a progressive vision of empowering the impoverished and oppressed. By not accepting government monies, it would be able to speak out against US government policies that undermined, blocked, or inhibited overseas development. Oxfam America would also be able to work in countries excluded from US government development dollars, for example, at that time, Vietnam and Cambodia. The original board of directors was not concerned about growth and budget size, but rather about quality, in-depth understanding of issues, and independence of action. Oxfam America was established to challenge the very nature of the international development system.

Oxfam prided itself on its development work. Its staff minimized the importance—and even the relevance—of humanitarian relief work. Oxfam was interested in addressing the root causes of poverty—not throwing money at keeping people alive. As summarized in our logo, Oxfam was about change, not charity.
Oxfam America’s most successful programs during that era were those that were built upon strong analysis and solidarity and trust with key organizations. In South America the analysis of the region showed that indigenous peoples were the most oppressed and marginalized; in India we focused on marginalized women. Success meant funding not just small traditional projects but also funding land-rights marches and advocacy in Ecuador and asset ownership by women in India. In Central America, Oxfam America’s analysis suggested that the main issue for the oppressed and impoverished in the 1980s was the war being waged by the US in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Oxfam America, as an American organization, complemented its work on the ground with strong policy advocacy in the US aimed at changing policies that were causing or exacerbating poverty in the region. It worked in solidarity with committed local partners—to the point of standing in solidarity with partners when they were confronted by the military.

Oxfam did not implement its own programs; it funded local organizations. The following were intrinsic to the Oxfam approach, though they were standards to which we could not always fully live up.

1. Ownership/Participation: The community, local NGO or agency had ownership of the program and project. It was not just community participation in providing workers, in “doing” projects, or in attending meetings. The results of effective participation were to become community assets—organizations, skills, public works, public infrastructure.

2. People as People, not Victims: People were not victims or even beneficiaries but owners of a change process. This meant consulting and listening and building on the abilities of local people.

3. Non-Partisan: Putting the needs of partner communities first, not the political gain of a particular political party or group. This meant not being tied to any one political party or partisan idea of change.

4. Solidarity-Trust: Building trust with local community partners, especially through the development of bonds of solidarity between the NGO and the communities. This meant that the relationship was not limited to a specific project.

5. Sustainability: Training the community and empowering it to maintain the work that was begun to the best of its ability and potential. This meant appropriate technology and programs that the impoverished could own and manage.

6. Division of Labor: Preserving and building the institutional structures that allowed for effective work. Oxfam was the funding, not operating, agency; it was the international policy advocate, not the participant in local politics.

7. People Count: Giving authority and decision-making power down the chain of command so that programs were flexible.

8. Timing: Understanding the local reality and context in order to act in the most relevant way within the given political context at the most appropriate time.

9. Flexibility: Not being dogmatic about approved programs and budgets. Development is a dynamic process and adaptability to change is part of the process.

10. Accountability: Being held responsible for one’s actions—not just to Oxfam America headquarters, but especially to the local owners and partners.
Walking the Talk: Development, Humanitarian Aid, and Organizational Development

Though Oxfam perceived itself as a development organization, throughout the 1980s and early 1990s it found itself in almost every major international emergency. It grew dramatically in the 1980s with its decisions to work in the killing fields of Cambodia and to respond to the famine in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Its work with victims of US-fueled war in Nicaragua and El Salvador defined not only its program in Latin America but for several years its image and work inside the United States.

From its first emergency response Oxfam felt that it was not enough to work with the population suffering from the disaster. Saving lives and relieving human suffering was fine and had to be done. But Oxfam’s role was broader: to look for the causes of the emergency and then to advocate for the eradication of those causes. For Oxfam emergency relief and advocacy were not competing; they both were integral parts of the response.

In a book published with the support of Oxfam America in the early 1980s, Fred Cuny stated that emergency relief and disaster were linked, that the best disaster response took into account local capacity, local know-how and built on what was there. Oxfam adopted the idea that the best humanitarian aid was done by local partners and supported by outsiders. We did not talk about a relief-to-development continuum, rather we thought in terms of the integral nature of relief and development activities. Relief had to incorporate the actors that took a lead in development; development had to reduce risk and vulnerabilities.

Oxfam America did not want to segregate relief from development and, so, did not follow Oxfam UK’s example and set up a separate humanitarian unit. Oxfam America also felt that its focus needed to always be development—not just helping people address immediate physical needs. For this reason, our development field officers handled emergencies, being the most familiar with development actors in their regions. In some particularly high-profile emergencies, such as floods in Bangladesh or war in Mozambique, the executive director’s office led the response—and therefore always linked the work on the ground with education, advocacy, and fundraising.

Below, I focus on the interplay between humanitarian aid and policy advocacy. In each of the cases, humanitarian emergencies were either caused or exacerbated by government action or inaction. Each one posed for Oxfam America—and for me in particular as executive director—choices where we sometimes had to balance competing imperatives or assess institutional and personal risk. They are indicative of the types of choices and tradeoffs that often confront agencies concerned with humanitarian issues.

I look at one case of government harassment under the Reagan administration, which was unhappy with our work in Central America. I look at two cases where Oxfam stood up for justice, in one case working against an embargo (Cambodia) and in another endorsing one (Haiti). In both instances we combined policy advocacy with public demonstrations, in one case at some personal risk. Next, I look at a case where we took a more “inside the beltway” approach to addressing suffering in Sudan. While Oxfam prided itself on its willingness to speak out, these decisions were not always easy and I look at two cases where there were organizational repercussions. In one instance, Oxfam decided not to speak out on an unpopular government policy

Fred Cuny, Disasters and Development. Oxford University Press, 1983
(Ethiopia) in the interest of protecting a relief response. In the other, we advocated an unpopular position to ensure an emergency response (Somalia). I end with a candid account of the Oxfam response to a hurricane in Bluefields, Nicaragua, where Oxfam decided to mount a high-profile, material support effort to challenge the embargo against Nicaragua. It was, in hindsight, a misplaced effort to join the emergency, “send-stuff” bandwagon promoted by our competitors, in which we got burned. Each example, in its own way, is instructive.

Policy advocacy and government harassment: Nicaragua and El Salvador

President Ronald Reagan was determined to stop communism in Central America. His government funded the Contra war against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua and shored up the El Salvador government in its war against the FMLN, a guerrilla group that controlled sections of the country. Oxfam worked in both Nicaragua and El Salvador. We funded agricultural groups in Nicaragua; in El Salvador, we funded programs in both government and FMLN territory.

We also advocated vigorously for an end to the embargo on Nicaragua and for an end to both wars. We led a Tools for Peace Campaign throughout the United States and raised awareness on the embargo that prohibited the shipping of these tools to Nicaragua.

After pressure and a government authorization, the tools (boots, shovels, hoes, and the like) were shipped. I was part of a delegation of non-profit leaders who visited Congress advocating for the United States to halt its funding of the war in El Salvador. Oxfam America was quite visible in the campaign within the United States against US policies in Central America.

Strong advocacy impacts not only programs but agencies, as well. In the last years of the Reagan administration progressive agencies working on Central America advocacy felt harassed. The offices of several small, Central American solidarity groups housed at the Old Cambridge Baptist Church were broken into. I became increasingly concerned that the Reagan administration had singled out Oxfam America. When our Tools for Peace shipment to Nicaragua was blocked by the US government, we had threatened to take the issue to court. Soon after that, in 1987, Oxfam America was audited by the US government for the first time. I worked closely with our pro bono lawyers from Goulston and Storrs. In the course of their work for us, they became concerned that the Oxfam America offices in Boston might be bugged and asked me not to call them if I was to discuss sensitive issues pertaining to the US government. I would walk down two blocks to the Howard Johnson Hotel and call our lawyers. At one point we decided that it would be prudent to check the office for bugs. I called the Massachusetts chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union to see if they could recommend someone who could do this. After a number of discussions with various people, a person was found and a date and time established.

The person was to come at six o’clock on a weekday. I met him in front of the office building. I felt as if I were in a movie. The fellow had on a trench coat, spoke with an eastern European accent and carried a large satchel. He entered the building and within thirty seconds was storming out with me trailing behind him. He was incensed that there were people still in the building. Nobody should know he was there and what he was doing.

People at Oxfam always worked late. I told him I would clear the building and to come back in thirty minutes. To be honest, I cannot remember what I said to the staff. I know I did not tell
them the real purpose of my getting them out of the building. Fortunately everyone complied quickly and when the de-bugger returned, the building was empty. He spent the next three hours unscrewing every telephone, checking each office. He was meticulous and thorough. He found nothing. I never told the staff about this episode and despite what he had not found, I still continued to make phone calls to the lawyers from the hotel.

Oxfam was audited by the IRS in 1987 and again in 1988. There could be no doubt that being audited for the second year in a row was harassment. The government auditor spent the first two days looking at all the records of Oxfam America. He then turned to a careful analysis of our work in El Salvador. Each day I would meet with the head of our administration and finance department, and she would report that the auditor was continuing to press on with his audit of El Salvador. I, in turn, conferred daily with our lawyers. After a week of looking at our programs in El Salvador, the auditor seemed no further along. He continued to pore over the materials we had given him and kept asking for more and more back-up information for all our Salvadoran projects. Our finance director was at her wits end. Our lawyers recommended that we try to get the auditor to write down his major areas of concern, which the finance director did the next day, requesting that he please write down the main areas of his concern so that we could better gather the information that he needed. He jotted down seven or eight things that he was particularly concerned about. The finance director and I went back to our lawyers with his list that afternoon. One of the items on his list read, "Was Oxfam America’s El Salvador program in line with the US government foreign policy?" Clearly, the auditor was overreaching his authority. This line of questioning was not legal.

The fact was that Oxfam America had assiduously avoided funds from the US government in order to be totally independent from government. We prized Oxfam’s independence that allowed it to criticize government policy and to work in areas shunned by the US government. In the case of El Salvador and Nicaragua, it was clear that Oxfam America was pushing up against the limits of an administration’s interpretation of the role of civil society in dissenting from its policies.

We discussed the possibilities now open to us. One option was to go public with this information, accusing the Reagan administration publicly of harassment, and at the same time use this audit as an opportunity to further our message on Central America. I was convinced that most Oxfam America donors would accept, even welcome, this type of action. Our lawyers, as was their custom, were quick to point out the potential pitfalls of this strategy. They agreed that it had good potential for advocacy and fundraising. It was clear that as individuals they too would love to press the case in the media. However, they cautioned that the very existence of the institution was at stake. Should the IRS rule against Oxfam America, Oxfam could lose its tax exempt status.

There was an alternative strategy proposed. The lawyers felt that they could make the case known behind the scenes to the director of the Internal Revenue Service. The lawyers proposed to call the head of the IRS under former President Jimmy Carter to lay out the full brief to him about what was happening at Oxfam America. It was their hope that he would then call the current director of the IRS to urge him to have the audit dropped. Of course, there would be a veiled hint at possible legal action against the IRS should this not happen. We all agreed that this was a prudent first strategy. It was clear that if this strategy did not work that we would go to the more public option.
The call was made. The next day, the auditor was removed from Oxfam America by the IRS. The lawyers’ strategy had worked to perfection. Oxfam America was not audited again. We had lost an opportunity to confront the US government but had preserved the legal status of the agency.

A vigorous and healthy civil society demands that it constantly be on vigil to maintain the adequate relationship between itself and government. Governments have rights and responsibilities. When they step over the line and threaten institutions and individuals within institutions, these same institutions need to have the courage, the conviction and the wherewithal to stand up to that threat. But doing advocacy against government raises the possibility of government action against the advocate. It is a risk Oxfam took repeatedly in this era.

**Advocacy and standing up for justice: Cambodia and Haiti**

In both Cambodia and Haiti, Oxfam took strong positions on US policies while assisting its partners inside the countries. In Cambodia, Oxfam objected to the US embargo and other government policies related to Cambodia and did all it could to provide humanitarian aid to suffering Cambodians. In Haiti, Oxfam America supported the US government’s embargo in an effort to remove a military dictator. In both cases, Oxfam America took its policy positions from its partners inside each country and complemented direct assistance with vigorous advocacy in the United States.

**Cambodia** In the mid-1970s, Pol Pot took over in Cambodia and launched one of the most devastating, radical peasant revolutions ever witnessed by humanity. Cities were emptied of all inhabitants, professionals were either killed or demoted to the ranks of laborers, and all opponents were murdered. The estimates of death range from 1 million to 2 million, and the economy was in a shambles with widespread food shortages. In 1979, the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia, pushed the Pol Pot regime out of most of the country and installed the Hun Sen government. The United States and its allies denounced the Vietnamese invasion, declined to recognize the Hun Sen government as the legitimate government of Cambodia—and incredibly—continued its legal recognition of the Pol Pot regime. The United Nations followed suit and continued to recognize the Pol Pot regime headquartered in Thailand.

The international relief and development community flocked to the Thai-Cambodian border to help refugees fleeing from the Vietnamese invasion. Those fleeing were mostly Pol Pot supporters and Pol Pot militia. Agencies affiliated closely with the US government worked exclusively on the Thai border with these Cambodian refugees.

In contrast, Oxfam America (in alliance with Oxfam UK and other members of the Oxfam family) decided to work inside Cambodia, not on the border. It denounced the US position of siding with the perpetrators of the killing fields in Cambodia and argued that the US government policy of refusing aid to the people of Cambodia was based on the legacy of the Vietnam War and was wrong. It developed a campaign to publicize the dire situation inside Cambodia. Oxfam was willing to take a high-profile position in support of the people in Cambodia, and the first boat carrying international relief into Phnom Penh carried relief supplies and the executive director of Oxfam United Kingdom and Ireland.

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2 For a more detailed discussion of the Cambodia work from Oxfam America’s perspective, see the papers by Charny and Short in this volume. To understand the importance of this work from Oxfam UK’s perspective, see Chapter 10 of Maggie Black, *A Cause for Our Times: Oxfam, the First 50 Years*, Oxfam Press, 1992.
Over the next several years, Oxfam America would continue to work on the Cambodian issue. It would provide funds for community reconstruction, agricultural development, and institutional strengthening inside Cambodia. It would also work on campaigns inside the United States to stop the US recognition of Pol Pot regime as the legitimate government of Cambodia. In 1986 Dith Pran, the New York Times photographer who laid bare the story of the killing fields, joined an Oxfam rally in New York City against the Pol Pot regime. During that same Cambodian campaign, Joel Charny and I went on a three-day hunger strike in front of the United Nations to protest the seating of the Pol Pot regime at the United Nations.

Cambodia was Oxfam at its best. The organization challenged the US embargo of Cambodia and consistently pressed for the expansion of the humanitarian exemption to work inside Cambodia. It did this with a long-term effort to build support for changing US government policy. At the same time, Oxfam provided essential support for the rebuilding of Cambodia at a time when all major international avenues of development aid were cut off to that country. It could take these kinds of positions both because of its independence from US government funding and a donor base interested in more than short-term relief. In Cambodia, Oxfam America lived up to the expectations of its original organizers.

Haiti

Haiti has had a torturous history. For years Haiti was ruled by François Duvalier (Papa Doc) and his son, Jean Claude “Baby Doc.” The Duvalier regimes were oppressive, tyrannical, ensuring Haiti’s status as the poorest country of Latin America. Then, in 1990, Jean-Bertrand Aristide was elected as president of Haiti. Aristide was a populist, some felt a demagogue. He clearly was progressive with strong support from the Haitian people. He did not have strong backing from the Haitian elite or the US government. He also did not have the backing of the Haitian military. His hold on power was short: Elected in 1990, he was overthrown in 1991. A military commander, Gen. Raoul Cedras, took over the reigns of power in Haiti. It was clear that Cedras planned to remain as ruler of Haiti for some time, but the democratic forces inside and outside Haiti continued to grow throughout the 1990s. Pressure to get Aristide back as president of Haiti to serve at least part of his six-year term kept increasing. Aristide continued to mobilize support within the United States. Opposition in Haiti was constant, though underground.

Oxfam America developed a strong program in Haiti and under Aristide began to fund rural community development and agricultural development programs. Oxfam’s partners, enjoying unheralded freedom of expression under the democratically elected Aristide, became successful in generating community participation in Haitian projects. All of this came to an end with the overthrow of Aristide and it was quickly apparent to Oxfam that its programs, which involved the organization and mobilization of rural poor, could not continue. In turn, Oxfam’s partners let Oxfam know that the most important issue before Haiti was the return of democracy to the island. Our Oxfam partners called for Oxfam to be actively engaged in advocating for the overthrow of Cedras, urging us not to fund development projects or humanitarian aid that would be manipulated by the Cedras government.

Taking the lead from our partners, Oxfam came out squarely in favor of the embargo that the US government had imposed on Haiti. I testified before Congress that the best route to development was through the impositions of sanctions and the overthrow of the Cedras government. It was impossible to divorce political tyranny from the oppression of our partners. The best development aid to Haiti was no aid at all.
Colleagues at CARE and at Harvard University disagreed with us bitterly. Both argued that the embargo was hurting the very poor, that the embargo was not the appropriate tool of foreign policy in this case. Both urged the US government for massive humanitarian exemptions to the embargo. Oxfam, with the endorsement of its partners, opposed all watering down of the embargo, arguing that humanitarian aid would only prolong the life of the Cedras government. Oxfam felt that the embargo should be strengthened and that concerted pressure on the Cedras government would lead to its downfall in a short period of time.

In the Boston area, Oxfam America began to network with Haitian groups in exile and to participate actively in the Haitian network of activists interested in restoring democracy. Oxfam’s position was not partisan in arguing in favor of President Aristide, per se. However, since the restoration of democracy meant the restoration of President Aristide to his legal term in office, clearly, Oxfam was taking a position that could be perceived to be a partisan political position.

It was into this milieu that I traveled to Haiti. A group from Roxbury Community College decided to organize a citizens’ trip to Haiti in September of 1993. The group was formed of university professors, religious people and citizens. I participated in this trip as an individual, not officially as the president of Oxfam America. I knew that the insights I would learn on this trip would help my work with Oxfam. I also felt, however, that this was a trip to witness for democracy and that it should be done as an individual, not as a representative of Oxfam. I was, however, forever grateful that one of the other members on the delegation, Dessima Williams, was a member of the Oxfam America board of directors.

We had planned the trip so that we would be in Port-au-Prince on the day in which President Aristide was supposed to return to Haiti. The city was under martial law and under total control by the armed forces. The night before the supposed day of return for President Aristide, our group sat in the orphanage in Port-au-Prince and discussed what we might do to mark the anniversary of the pro-democracy forces in Haiti. We knew that no Haitians would dare to stand up for democracy on that day. After discussion, we agreed that we would hold a prayer vigil in front of Sacred Heart Church in Port-au-Prince, the church in which Aristide’s minister of justice had been assassinated just months before. We suspected that this would not be taken lightly by the authorities, but we were prepared for the consequences.

That night as we slept on the roof of the orphanage, we heard shots, some close by. The next morning, we awoke to an eerily silent city. There was absolutely no one on the streets of Port-au-Prince that day. Fearing trouble, people had stayed home. We had developed a one-page handout on our prayer vigil, giving the time and the place.

That morning, we met with several members of the international media who were in Haiti to cover the non-return of Aristide. We did everything that we could to get the word of our vigil to members of the international and Haitian media. At the given hour we traveled the deserted streets by minibus to Sacred Heart Church. When we arrived at the church, we found that the international media was there to meet us. There were no members of the Haitian media present. We clasped hands; we prayed; we talked about the need for democracy, and then we locked arms and sang, “We Shall Overcome.” The international media filmed our singing. We all nervously expected the Haitian military to show up at any time, but we also knew that what we were doing was the only pro-democracy expression in Haiti that day. It was the image of us singing that would be sent out over the international wires worldwide. Sixteen people from Boston had taken it upon themselves to go to Haiti and be present, to be a witness for democracy.
The international media played a key role in ensuring our safety that day. Our meetings with the highest levels of the US government and the United Nations on that trip also helped preserve our safety, ensuring our return to the United States.

It took the presence of former president Jimmy Carter and the threat of American military intervention to remove Cedras from power. Nonetheless, Oxfam America’s insistence that political change was essential for effective economic and social development and its willingness to advocate tirelessly on behalf of Haitian democracy helped maintain the momentum for the overthrow of the Cedras regime. In addition, the people who participated in the trip to Haiti were everyday citizens, citizens who decided that they needed to act. People can make a difference, but at times they must take risks.

**Oxfam America, the inside the beltway advocate: Sudan**

Organizations can either decide to storm the barricades or work inside the system to bring about change. In the mid 1980s, Oxfam America tried to do them both. While it was aggressively challenging the US government policy in Nicaragua, it also worked to form a coalition that included conservative Republicans in Congress to expand US aid to the Horn of Africa and, more specifically, Sudan.

The war in Sudan was dragging on; people on all sides of the conflict were dying. Oxfam America believed that to end the war, outside governments had to intervene in a peace-building process. The US government had demonized the Sudan government and hailed the antigovernment rebels. Oxfam America could have taken a strong stand against US government policies. Instead, we opted to try to work the system in Washington.

I went to speak with a conservative Republican congressman who was interested in the Horn of Africa. He had a one-sided view of the conflict in Sudan. He felt Christians were being persecuted in Sudan and, therefore, Sudan was important to him. I told him that Oxfam wanted to build a broad-based coalition to get Congress to increase aid to Sudan.

He listened intently. I asked him to join us and several of his colleagues in a press conference on this issue. When I finished my pitch, he looked at me intently. Then he said, “You guys are flakes on Central America. But on this one you are right on target. I would be glad to participate in this press conference to bring awareness to the problems in Sudan.” Oxfam America, the outside critic and mobilizer on Central America, was meeting Oxfam America, the inside-the-beltway, inside player, trying to be a mover and shaker within Congress.

This tension is not at times easily resolved. During the Reagan administration, Oxfam America was almost always “an outsider organization.” It preached, it protested, it railed against US government policies that hurt the poor. During the George H.W. Bush administration, there was more openness in government to a broad spectrum of Oxfam America positions. Oxfam America was not totally excluded from this administration: It could make its case, though mostly it was ignored. During the Clinton administration, Oxfam America had many more friends inside the government. It was more active in participating directly with government policy makers and agencies to help form government policy. The focus of attention under the Clinton administration became the executive branch, not Congress.

There is tension between being an inside player, who risks being co-opted or changed, and being outside player, who retains a prophetic, yet often ignored, voice. As Oxfam America grew,
and particularly after it became part of Oxfam International, it began to be more and more an inside the beltway player.\(^3\) That is, it became less a burr in policy makers’ saddles and more a participant at the discussion tables. This may be considered maturation or a departure from Oxfam America’s original goals.

**Speaking out and being silent: Ethiopia and Somalia**

Some agencies say that they are apolitical and that they do not do advocacy. Oxfam did not buy this argument. If you did not participate in advocacy you were accepting the status quo and that by itself was an advocacy position. Being silent was an option—but it was an advocacy option.

Two experiences from the 1980s and early 1990s bring this lesson home. In the crisis in Somalia, Oxfam America was very vocal in its advocacy. In Ethiopia it was silent and by its silence accused of supporting intolerable policies in that country. No decision is easy and in hindsight decisions can be second-guessed. In complex situations there are always organizations or people making rational arguments that are diametrically opposed to the decisions taken. The one reality is that the buck stops with the executive director and the board of directors, who must take ownership of decisions made.

*Ethiopia* I became the executive director of Oxfam America in the fall of 1984, just before the news of the Ethiopian famine hit the United States. The response of the American public was overwhelming and a large global relief effort was put in place. In the midst of all of this humanitarian action, the communist government of Ethiopia was fighting a war against what it considered secessionist Eritrea. This was the same government that had refused to acknowledge the famine and had implemented Soviet-style, centralized state farms. In the midst of the massive aid operation to Ethiopia, the government announced its new policy of “villagization.” This was a program of forced relocation, taking farmers off their farms and herding them into villages where they could live in a centralized location. The government of Ethiopia justified this by saying that it would be cheaper to provide services for people if they lived in towns. It would also not impact farming because these small farmers would be able to walk to their farms and continue to produce.

There was an immediate hue and cry by human rights organizations against villagization. This was forced relocation undertaken not in order to provide better services for small farmers, but rather to control and make easier the security of the state. This was clearly a move designed to further state control over civilians, most of whom were being relocated against their will, as part of its drastic measures to stay in power. These measures would have a devastating effect on agriculture precisely at the time when the international community was mounting a major relief effort into the country.

Oxfam staff had been doing quite a number of press interviews about the desperate condition of Ethiopians. We had mounted a fundraising and public relations campaign to try to raise funds and the visibility of Oxfam America in the United States. The Ethiopian crisis was to become the largest fundraiser in Oxfam America’s history and would catapult Oxfam America into being a national player in relief and development.

\(^3\) The agreement formalizing Oxfam International was not signed until 1995. However, the affiliates had very extensive relationships with each other leading up to the decision to incorporate, so we were already thinking of ourselves as Oxfam International by the early 1990s.
In the middle of this, my press officer asked me to go out with her to lunch. I was eager to do so, given all the media work we had and would be doing around Ethiopia. I was stunned, therefore, when over lunch she accused me of acquiescing to the Ethiopian government’s villagization program. She made it very clear that she thought Oxfam America should stand up and advocate against such Ethiopian policies and against the human rights abuses taking place in Ethiopia. She understood that Oxfam America was providing relief to people in need, but she felt strongly that it was a moral duty to stand up against injustice, oppression, and human rights abuse.

I decided—with little hesitation—not to agree with my press officer. First, we were working in Ethiopia and Eritrea. I thought if we advocated on this publicly we would be thrown out of Ethiopia. This would leave us with a difficult position in Africa (and with the Africanists on the Oxfam board) where there was a strong bias in favor of keeping existing national boundaries, not helping parts of states to secede. Second, I felt that we could do more good staying inside Ethiopia and advocating quietly to the Ethiopian government. (The reality was that this did not happen much at all and certainly not with any effectiveness.) Third, if Oxfam was thrown out of Ethiopia it would not only lose out on the media and fundraising that this crisis offered; it might also have to give back much of the money that had streamed in for Ethiopia. Fourth, we would have a hard time convincing our supporters of why we were doing this at the time of such global efforts such as We Are the World, Live Aid and the incredible outpouring of compassion for Ethiopians.

It was not a difficult choice. But Oxfam was roundly criticized by human rights groups and by smaller NGOs run by past friends of Oxfam, who worked exclusively in Eritrea. And my excellent press officer quit and went to work for another organization that advocated forcefully on the issue of villagization. I felt proud of her for living her values and standing up for what she believed in.

At the time I felt comfortable with the decision Oxfam made. Over time I have not been so proud of this decision made in my first months at Oxfam, though I am not at all sure that I would not make the same decision today.

Somalia In 1990, reports from Oxfam International and independent press sources claimed that up to 1,000 people a day were dying in Somalia because of lack of food. The Somali state had collapsed, and various factions had been fighting for some time for control of the capital city and the country. As the country disintegrated into war, food became scarce and people suffered. Because of the alarming reports, the Oxfam family decided that it should push for United Nations interventions into Somalia in order to provide humanitarian assistance. I decided, after talking with my board chair, that Oxfam America should take a very active, public position in calling for military intervention by the United Nations into Somalia. The Oxfam America press office mobilized its resources and I joined three other large international NGOs at a press conference calling for United Nations military intervention into Somalia to save lives. I was on several national news programs the very week that we knew that the Bush administration was considering military intervention into Somalia. The Oxfam America position was clear: What was needed was a small United Nations military force in order to help supervise the distribution of needed food.

In London, critics of this call for military intervention singled out Oxfam. They questioned the validity of reporting on the number of people dying, claiming the numbers were exaggerated.
They insisted deaths had already peaked and were coming down and argued that there was no need for military intervention. Oxfam America and Oxfam International persisted.

Clearly, the decision of the Bush administration to invade Somalia for humanitarian purposes was not caused by the advocacy of Oxfam America. However, there can be no doubt that the position of US non-government agencies that were championing intervention made this decision easier. The Bush administration could use the arguments of the humanitarian agencies to justify its invasion. Of course, the Bush administration did not work through the United Nations initially. Rather, it sent a massive military force into Somalia—way more than we felt was needed. But still, the basic principle of military intervention for the provision of humanitarian aid was clearly promoted by the NGO world and by Oxfam America in this case.

Decisions advocating military intervention were much debated internally, but we reached a conclusion which I felt was consistent with our mission. A year later, the board of directors of Oxfam America questioned why Oxfam America had called for military intervention in Somalia. This decision had not been made with the approval of the full board and subsequently there was agreement that this should not happen again. Oxfam America changed its policies to make it much more difficult in the future to advocate for military intervention in humanitarian efforts.

**Material support, more than we bargained for: Bluefields, Nicaragua**

Even in the late 1980s Oxfam was conscious of the educational opportunities that surround disasters. Disaster response was not just about relief to victims of the emergency, but also about education and getting the broader Oxfam message out.

In 1988, a massive hurricane struck the coast of Nicaragua. It devastated the town of Bluefields and the surrounding areas on the Caribbean coast. Because there were US sanctions against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, the response by the US government and the international community to this disaster was limited.

I received a phone call within days of the hurricane from one of the leaders of the Moravian church in the United States, a denomination that is particularly strong in Bluefields. Moravian churches in the United States were organizing to collect relief supplies for the people of Bluefields. They wanted Oxfam America to help deliver these goods inside Nicaragua.

The internal debate within Oxfam did not last long, but it was intense. On the one hand, program people argued that sending stuff collected from the United States to Bluefields was exactly the type of relief effort that Oxfam America often criticized as being inadequate and ineffectual. The idea of foreigners flying in to rescue “helpless” Nicaraguans grated the programmatic sensitivities of Oxfam staff. Moreover the supplies sent were only of momentary use, provided that people actually sent useful items. This type of aid completely overlooked the long-term structural reasons for the devastation.

On the other hand, the need was great. The devastation had left people hungry and homeless, while the international response had been meager. The Oxfam press people thought this was an exceptionally good media opportunity for Oxfam America. Sending emergency aid to Nicaragua would get media coverage because of the war and by providing humanitarian aid to Nicaragua Oxfam could focus on the impact of sanctions and war on the most impoverished. It was hoped that the relief effort would be undertaken in such a way as to take
advantage of opportunities for advocacy around the broader issues of Nicaraguan development. Fundraisers at Oxfam felt that this was a no-brainer. It would lead not just to more publicity for the organization, but to more funding. We decided to move ahead on the project.

Oxfam America was not in the business of emergency relief. It was, therefore, quite difficult for us to locate a plane and crew for this mission. We finally contracted a private airplane that had just finished major maintenance work in Colorado.

We decided to hold our national press conference in Miami and sent our press director to Miami to organize it. We knew that the plane leaving from Miami would be controversial, particularly to the Nicaraguan community living in Miami who supported the Contra War and opposed the Sandinista government. Most of the exiled Nicaraguan community felt that any help to Nicaragua, regardless of the emergency, was a direct support to the Sandinista government.

The plane first went to New York and Washington, DC, to pick up its cargo, before arriving in Miami. In the meantime, we had been working on the media and felt we had commitments by all the major media outlets to come to a press conference early the next morning at the Miami airport. We talked to the pilot briefly that night before we all went to bed. The next morning we were to load the final goods into the plane, have the press conference, and head off to Nicaragua.

Instead, we woke to find the plane had disappeared. It was an embarrassing moment. We quickly called off the press conference. The plane had been confiscated by the authorities in Miami, who claimed that the airplane did not have the legal papers required for it to fly out of the United States. The authorities confiscated not only the airplane, but also the contents inside the plane. That meant that all the goods donated by the Moravian Church now stood in the plane outside a US government hangar at the airport.

I spent the day talking to our lawyers in Boston. We were concerned that this was a politically motivated action on the part of the authorities. Our lawyers very quickly established that regardless of the motivation, the airplane in fact did not have the adequate papers to fly overseas. Apparently, the owners owed taxes to the US government and had been attempting to use this humanitarian effort to try to get their airplane out of the United States without paying these back taxes.

This sent us into a frenzied mode on two fronts. First, we argued with the authorities that the goods inside the plane should not be confiscated, that they should be released to Oxfam America for shipment to Nicaragua. Second, we engaged in a frantic search for an airplane to send the goods to Nicaragua. Federal Express saved the day. They could release an airplane from Memphis for one day to go to Nicaragua, but we had to guarantee that the plane would fly down and back on the same day. We agreed.

After much argument and discussion, the Miami airport authority released the impounded goods to Oxfam America. Within three days, we had secured the Federal Express plane and the project continued. In order for the plane to go and return in one day, the plane needed to depart Miami before dawn. There was no opportunity for a press conference or public education. By this time, we were just glad to get the relief supplies to Bluefields. The other objectives were secondary.

Obviously the response to the Bluefield’s emergency did not go as planned. The primary objective of getting goods to people in Bluefields was met. The other objectives of the program had
to be aborted. It was not a successful program for increasing awareness about Oxfam through the press or for keeping the Nicaraguan issue alive in the United States. There was no follow-up Oxfam America involvement with the Moravian Church after this emergency response. In fact, the number of problems the mission encountered led some in the Moravian community to question Oxfam’s effectiveness.

It was, however, one of my press officer’s and my most memorable experiences! How could it not be with the intense days of working to secure media, followed by frantic attempts to salvage the mission, off-loading relief supplies, and transporting a plane-load of wounded Nicaraguans back to Managua? The rush of emergencies, the frantic action, and the potential for publicity and fundraising is alluring. The “I-went-to-Nicaragua-for-lunch-trip” became legend, though it amounted to terrible humanitarian aid, worse development aid, and did not fit at all with Oxfam’s approach to either.

INSIDE OXFAM AMERICA

Oxfam America in the 1980s and 1990s was focused not only on its mission overseas; it took seriously as its mission a responsibility to model a new type of organization—one that built equity into its very structures. This was difficult within a society that does not value equity.

Together with the collective bargaining unit (the union), management and the board pushed diversity during this period—in salary equity, in race, in world view, in ways of communicating, in styles of learning, in political positioning, in attitudes toward authority. Oxfam strived to be a safe place for gays and lesbians as well as people of color—a place where people could express themselves in ways uncommon in workplace environments. It was an empowering and frightening time. It was certainly a time of tension and turmoil in the organization. Some pushed Oxfam to live out its values inside the organization; others got tired of institutional navel gazing and deviation from a total focus on our programmatic mission.

Here, I focus on three aspects of workplace equity: salary, race, and volunteers. There were other issues also crucial for workplace equity, that I shall not highlight here. They include battles over gender within Oxfam, which had been won before the mid-1980s; and the inclusion of gays and lesbians within Oxfam, which happened during this time with little fanfare or struggle. A third major issue at Oxfam was the extreme questioning of authority by all. It was a young management and staff, steeped in the concepts of empowerment and justice. They were interested in working out these concepts inside the organization, not just in its programs. This created constant battles over decision-making, roles, and authority. This was never fully resolved.

Salary equity

As international NGOs have become more professional in the new century, salaries have increased dramatically. In the 1980s and 1990s Oxfam held firm to the idea that the gap between the highest- and lowest-paid staff member should not be too wide. We held to a four-to-one ratio, from highest paid to lowest paid.

We had two models. The first was Ben and Jerry’s Ice Cream that had a policy of maintaining a seven-to-one ratio of highest to lowest salary. The second was Oxfam Canada, which paid
everyone in the organization the same salary, except for the executive director, who made a little more. This model of total equity might be appealing to radical egalitarians, but it was not for Oxfam America.

We did feel that if a secretary could make ends meet on $20,000, an executive director should be able to do the same on $80,000 or less. I often struggled with a board of directors that did not agree with this limit to management salaries. On the other hand, as a humanitarian agency, we had to deal with a different set of public expectations. At a community meeting in Tacoma, Wash., I had finished speaking about Oxfam and its work overseas and was shocked at the first question I received from the audience. “How much do you earn?” I explained a bit of the rationale for the Oxfam salary scale and then stated that I earned $60,000. The woman, who would most probably never earn $60,000 in her life, looked at me and said, “You pretend to help those starving people in Africa and you are here to raise money to help those people and you are making $60,000. That seems obscene to me.”

The Oxfam board did not have a policy on workplace equity. Instead, management had an informal policy that people at the bottom end of the scale earn approximately 20 percent above market and people at the top of the scale earning between 10 percent and 20 percent below market. People who were hired for 20 percent more than market were highly satisfied and motivated. There was good staff morale among clerical and support staff.

Over time, however, through yearly salary increases negotiated under the collective bargaining agreement, their salary levels became so high that they became entrenched in the organization. They could not find another job outside of Oxfam America for the kind of money they were earning. They were locked into Oxfam. Oxfam was locked into them.

On the other side of the ledger, we needed higher salaries to attract and keep competent professionals. This policy meant that Oxfam only attracted professionals with a social conscience willing to work for salaries significantly lower than market. This made it more difficult to attract professionals. But even in a non-profit-making corporation how much is enough? What should be the spread between the lowest and highest paid employee? My view is that current practice in the new century has gone too far in rewarding top executives. Non-profits have become big business. The professionalization of non-profits has led to skyrocketing salaries for executives. Working in senior management for a large international non-profit is now not a question of doing well while doing good, but of doing exceptionally well.

At Oxfam, there was another economic equity issue. We wrestled constantly with the issue of our salary scales in the United States and the salaries that we offered to our employees overseas. The salary of a professional in Boston was considered outlandish for a professional working in the Global South. Should Oxfam pay its Indian staff working in India the same as its US based staff? Should the country program director who is Indian based in India receive the same salary as an American country director based in Peru or in Boston? Oxfam had a policy of trying to hire nationals for the top regional positions, making this even more important.

There is no easy solution to this dilemma. Should you pay everyone with an American salary scale so that there is equity among staff with the same basic level of responsibility? If you do, you find that you are paying local staff exorbitant amounts that place them way outside of the local market pay structures. If you do not, then they are doing the same job for unequal pay. At Oxfam we opted to pay all regional program directors, regardless of nationality or where they worked, on the same pay scale. This meant that the Indian regional director living in
India was compensated under the same pay scale as the American regional director in Peru. This led to one form of equity within the organization.

Racial equity

An organization that works overseas with people of color should be staffed predominantly by people of color. Equal opportunity is not enough; aggressive affirmative action is essential to make this happen.

When I became executive director of Oxfam America, 5 percent of the staff was people of color. The Oxfam staff was pressing management for an aggressive goal of minority hire and a strong affirmative action program. The new employee union at Oxfam America made affirmative action an essential element of the collective bargaining agreement. Our management lawyer said that the union’s demands were way in excess of what was required or what could be legally justified if Oxfam were sued.

For months I accepted the management lawyer’s arguments. Affirmative action became the hottest issue in the union negotiations. Finally, one day I asked myself what I wanted—not what the law was or what the lawyer recommended. To be an effective organization Oxfam America needed to have staff from the Global South in which we worked. It also seemed that as a progressive organization on the forefront of empowering disadvantaged people we should be leaders on affirmative action.

Management finally embraced both the concept of affirmative action and an aggressive goal of minority hire. Over the warnings of the management lawyer, we agreed with the union demands. Oxfam hired an affirmative action officer and began the long-term process of making the institution friendlier to people of color. We embraced the business rationale that since we worked in countries overseas that were populated by people of color, that our staff should not just reflect the percentage of people of color in the United States, but rather in the world.

Our goal was ambitious: 30 percent of our staff would be American people of color and an additional 15 percent would be from the Global South—at all levels of the organization. We wanted to ensure that people of color did not only come into low paying jobs, but were also integrated into the management and board of the organization.

Crucial for success in meeting these goals was the constant leadership and reminder to all managers of the importance of the issue. On every hire, Oxfam America received exceptionally qualified white applicants. It became important for us to distinguish between the minimal skills that were required to do the job well and exceptional skills. People of color often were qualified and could do the job well, but would not be chosen because of the super qualifications of white candidates. It became essential to understand the difference between hiring a qualified person who could definitely do the job well and a super-qualified person. Management constantly had to be reminded that an important goal of the institution was that our staff make-up had to reflect our program constituency. Crucial to this were strong equal opportunity and affirmative action programs.

The institution also had to come to grips with structural racism in its job descriptions. Job qualifications and requirements were traditionally written in such a way as to highlight educational qualifications more attainable by whites, though experience, not academic achievement, was a more crucial qualification. We struggled over the wording of job descriptions.
We also struggled over the need to hire someone immediately, as opposed to holding jobs open in order to find qualified people of color. Attracting and hiring qualified people of color in Boston into international, non-profit work was not easy. Often people of color from other parts of the country would be concerned about working in Boston, a city with a very negative image among blacks at the time, due to the ugly conflicts over school integration and busing during the 1970s. In some cases we hired consultants to tide us over during our long search processes, giving us the time to recruit, find, and hire people of color.

By the time I left Oxfam, over 50 percent of the staff were people of color. Attaining and maintaining this goal was a continual struggle. In an organization that has only 100 staff members, each hire has a tremendous impact on the percent of people of color in the agency. Maintaining our commitment to affirmative action required vigilance.

Once Oxfam America began to have a significant number of people of color at all levels of the organization, this in itself presented other issues for the agency. Blacks formed a caucus. They were concerned about racism inside the agency. I remember a particularly difficult session at a staff retreat. The retreat was facilitated by two excellent outside consultants, one white and one black. At one point they did an exercise called the fishbowl. I was placed in the middle of the circle with a black staff person.

It was a painful encounter. Because of my upbringing in Cuba and my years of work with Latin Americans, I had always felt partly Latino. I knew that my heritage, my race and my lifestyle were not Latino, but I felt a certain empathy that I hoped went beyond that of many whites.

My colleague in the fishbowl was ruthless: I was white, a symbol of the power structure still running Oxfam America and was particularly insensitive to the needs of blacks.

My style is not normally one of confrontation. I was taken aback by the blunt and direct talk. I felt personally attacked. The facilitators encouraged me to respond and to express myself clearly. But my tendency to avoid conflict prevailed. I did not respond in anger or in kind. It might have been better to do so.

I responded to the encounter internally, with frustration, anger, and bitterness. It took some time for me to comprehend fully what my colleague was telling me. I was representing the white power structure of Oxfam America. Try as I might to feel empathy, even feel Latino, I was not a person of color. I could not understand the depth of the anger and despair felt by some of my colleagues on the issue of race.

Internally at Oxfam America, we instituted a number of programs to deal with the issue of race. The affirmative action officer invited guests to speak to the staff about issues of importance to people of color in the United States. This same affirmative action officer provided monthly reports to the staff about how we were doing with our hiring goals.

Through its collective bargaining agreement, Oxfam instituted a travel lottery for our union members. Each year, two people would be chosen by lottery from the pool of staff that had not traveled at all internationally in the previous two years. This made it possible for our data entry people, our secretaries, and others who were not constantly flying overseas to travel to see our programs. These union travel scholarships meant that our members of our staff were able, many for the first time, to go overseas to see our work in action. Although this program
was not set up specifically with race in mind, it clearly was taken advantage of by people of color who qualified.

In the 1980s Oxfam often stood in solidarity with partners against US government policy. I was very committed to that role. It was a different feeling when staff stood in solidarity against me on a couple of occasions when people of color were facing disciplinary issues. It was particularly painful for me and made the situations more difficult when staff claimed that racism was underlying management decisions.

It is difficult for one organization or one institution to be successful in this struggle by itself. The institution works within a racist society and is populated by people who have their own perceptions, their own values, and their own racial history. Racism is still rampant in American organizations and institutions. It is just easier for us to feel comfortable with our own kind. It is even easier at times to feel more comfortable with foreigners, with people of other cultures, than it is to feel comfortable with people of color in our own society, in our own culture.

Dealing with racism inside the workplace is difficult but essential. It is a crucial issue of social justice in our society. Yet, by focusing on racial equity, the organization can unleash an explosive, potentially divisive issue. It cannot control where this will lead and will certainly consume staff time, energy, and resources, as it did at Oxfam. This remains a crucial battleground for civil rights and social justice in American society.

HELPING INDIVIDUALS THROUGH VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

The NGO sector is often referred to as the voluntary sector, and many people wish to contribute their time to organizations like Oxfam. To be perfectly truthful about it, managing volunteers is a two-edged sword. As a consequence, at Oxfam America we had continuous discussions about the role of volunteers. On the one hand, volunteers took time, were not as professional as full-time staff and could be loose cannons and cause embarrassment. On the other hand, volunteers were cheaper, could fill in tasks that full-time staff could not undertake, could complement and enhance a program, and could bring into the organization people who then became educators and donors.

Organizations also are powerful agents of individual change and opportunity for people beyond paid employees. Three cases come to mind. The first was a black teenager who came in every day after school for two to three hours to help in office and administrative issues. This teenager attended school just blocks away from Oxfam. Oxfam for him was liberation. He hated the routine and the prison-like atmosphere of the school. At Oxfam he was treated as a respected individual and given responsibility. He was able to shine. Volunteering at Oxfam gave him hope and helped change his life.

A second volunteer was an elderly gentleman, the father of a staff person at Oxfam. He came every day for two years. He was nearing the end of his life. Originally from out of state, he had few friends and contacts in Boston. Oxfam gave him a new family. He quietly performed his tasks every day. Volunteering at Oxfam gave him meaning and purpose and relevance.

A third volunteer was a gifted musician and carpenter. He helped organize a large special event, the WorldFest, in the Boston Common. The vision and mission of Oxfam resonated with him. He wanted to be involved in fighting injustice in Central America and the tangible
way for him to do this was by organizing and then performing at WorldFest, an outdoor celebration of diversity, to promote Oxfam. It helped give meaning and relevance to his life. When he died at an early age due to leukemia, his volunteer work at Oxfam America was celebrated as an important part of his life.

I firmly believe that there is an important role for volunteers in international NGOs—particularly within their home countries. Professionalization need not exclude volunteers or limit them to menial jobs. Far from it. NGOs help individuals find meaning in life, while the volunteers bring NGOs passion, skills, and out-of-the-box thinking that is so crucial for large bureaucratic agencies.

**KEY TRANSITIONS IN A MATURING ORGANIZATION**

The 1980s and early 1990s were a time of transition for Oxfam America. The agency was evolving from a start-up, Northeast-bound operation to a national, established agency. Here, I want to focus on three important aspects of this transition: the board of directors, fundraising, and campaigning.

**Board of directors**

The board of directors in the mid-1980s was still a founders’, or start-up, board—heavily involved in programs. It was not sitting around the kitchen table and volunteering to do whatever needed to be done; that had been true in the 1970s. But the board still wanted to be involved in the internal workings of the agency. Some staff had special relationships with board members that could, and did, undercut the management of the agency. Roles were not clear.

It took some time and much pain to get clarity on the different roles and functions of board, management, and union. At one point, my associate director and I threatened to resign after a particularly interventionist board meeting. We felt that if the board was allowed to follow through with its decision that we would not have the authority to run and manage the agency. We called the board chair and insisted that a specific action taken by the board be rescinded. It was. That was the beginning of the end of direct board intervention in the day-to-day operations of the agency. Staff members would still sign petitions and take them to the board, but the board began to understand the difference between a board of directors and management.

Acrimonious negotiations between the union and management would spill over into board-management issues. Personnel issues, particularly discipline or firing of staff, often led to contentious sessions with the board. Some board members, because of their politics and orientation, sided with union against management and found it uncomfortable to side with management within the Oxfam America reality. Other board members who came from the corporate sector did not understand management’s soft policies towards employees, policies they felt helped to maintain an unclear relationship between management and union.

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Oxfam was committed to shaping a board reflective of its values. In looking for new members, the board continuously strived for gender and racial balance. Marie GaddSen, my strongest ally and our Afro-American chair while I was executive director, was keen also to try to bring racial diversity to the boards and senior managements of the Oxfam International family. (She was not successful.) The Oxfam America board strived for diversity of members from the private, the academic and research, and the non-profit and foundation sectors. Board members also were sought for their expertise in some aspect of the program—overseas development, fundraising, human resource management, administration and finance, press or organizational development. It was always quite a task to find individuals who would fit all the various categories needed within the board, especially since we also wanted half of the members to come from the Northeast to contain travel costs for meetings.

The 1980s and the 1990s witnessed the transition of the board from a founder’s board to a more institutional board. That said, it was not a fundraising board. I had a difficult time getting the board to agree to a policy that all board members should contribute to the organization—even a token amount. I felt this was essential to show the commitment of the board members to the organization.

A solid relationship with a board of directors is based on trust. This trust allowed Oxfam to react quickly in difficult situations. I developed this type of relationship with Larry Brown, chair of the board for much of my tenure as executive director. Often a phone call to the chair of the board or to members of the executive committee could result in a quick decision to move the agency in a new direction. Oxfam was able to respond to Rwanda, to Somalia and to a number of other crises very quickly because of this.

However, I discovered that trust is fragile. Late in my tenure, the board wanted to give a bonus to one of our managers for doing an excellent job. I did not object to the fact that the manager had done an excellent job. I did object, however, to singling him out for a bonus when other managers had done exceptional jobs in their own lines of work. The executive committee approved the bonus. I dragged my feet and did not carry out their decision in a timely fashion. This caused consternation on the executive committee as they questioned my loyalty and truthfulness in carrying out their wishes. This incident eroded much of the trust I had built up with the board.

Board members, for the most part, relished their role at Oxfam America. They were involved in an exciting and progressive organization. They provided vision, direction, and insight. Eventually they got out of day-to-day operations and focused on policy. They began to be more involved with fundraising and campaigns. Between board meetings they provided assistance in multiple areas: They organized special events in New York and elsewhere to raise awareness for the agency. They visited our programs overseas. They wrestled with key and difficult policy issues. And they took time to go on retreats to focus on organizational development. For board members, their participation was steeped in idealism and a commitment to social action. Board members provided inspiration, and, in turn, were inspired by Oxfam.

**Fundraising**

The famine in Ethiopia and President Reagan’s election were the best things that ever happened to Oxfam America’s fundraising. In the fall of 1984, with a flat budget of approximately
$4 million a year, Oxfam had a deficit that was going to lead to layoffs. The Ethiopian famine not only saved Oxfam from this fate, it was crucial in Oxfam’s transformation into a national agency. Oxfam raised $16 million in that next year. So many checks came to Oxfam that the checks piled up, taking over our conference room. Oxfam had no systems in place for handling this type of volume—cashing the checks, thanking the donors or even effectively following up with additional fundraising.

Oxfam prided itself in being a development agency—most definitely not a humanitarian one. And yet, Oxfam’s financial growth was directly tied to humanitarian emergencies. The tragic events in Cambodia, in 1980 when Joe Short was executive director, and in Ethiopia, in 1984 during my tenure, drew the two largest infusions of new donors and new dollars into Oxfam America. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, smaller emergencies that made the news accounted for most of the bump-ups in our income.

This, in itself, led to heated debates inside Oxfam. Why was the fundraising department using emergencies in its donor acquisition program? Why were the fundraisers sending out letter after letter on Ethiopia, the Bangladesh flood or Rwanda when Oxfam did not even have an emergencies unit? How could the fundraisers (and the educators) simplify the complex development issues into simple (almost mindless, it seemed) sales letters? And what were the legitimate uses of images, particularly of white “saviors” posing as development workers with hungry black kids?

Oxfam’s fundraising was defined by several key realities: Oxfam did not take government funds; the board of directors did not raise funds; Oxfam would not use starving babies (or what later was called the pornography of humanitarian aid); and Oxfam worked in controversial countries (Nicaragua and Vietnam among others) and did not shy away from taking strong positions on issues related to development.

It could not count on corporate America, both because of its positions and because Oxfam, itself, was deeply reluctant to take corporate funding. We were proud of our independence, from government and from any other entity or individual, including large foundations. This meant that Oxfam had to develop its own fundraising machine based on direct mail and outreach to numerous major donors and family foundations.

Individual donors were key to our survival and success. We spent a small fortune each year on a direct-mail campaign in order to replenish and build our list of donors. We started a pledge program and opened a very successful one-person planned giving program (sometimes referred to as the “God-squad” or “Death Squad,” a little black humor reflecting our qualms about benefiting from someone’s death) to have donors place Oxfam in their wills or in their investment portfolios. And we had an aggressive outreach to individual major donors. Our average donor only gave $100.

President Reagan’s policies in Central America provided fodder for fundraising in the 1980s. We worked in Nicaragua and El Salvador and our campaigning on this issue placed us in the company of solidarity groups in the United States, not mainline development agencies. This did lead to the occasional letter or phone call from donors objecting to our politics—some in very colorful language!
When I first arrived at Oxfam, Oxfam had launched a number of programs that ran counter to US government foreign policy in Central America. We planned some major advocacy against the Nicaraguan embargo and against the Contra War. I was very concerned that this advocacy would have negative repercussions on our ability to raise money. So, I went to see a large donor who was particularly interested in Central American affairs. We had an excellent conversation. He grilled me on Oxfam’s position towards Central America and on our future plans.

At the end of the conversation he made a statement I will never forget: “If you could determine that your advocacy around Central America is losing you funds please let me know. I will help to make up the difference in the funds you are losing because of your advocacy.” He was willing to guarantee our funding base for us to continue to do advocacy. I was truly blown away by his level of confidence in the organization, and his commitment to advocacy.

I never did have to call on this donor. I learned that by standing up for what you believed in, by undertaking needed advocacy, Oxfam never lost income. Yes, it would always lose some donors who would accuse you of playing politics, of going too far. But the overwhelming majority of donors would respond positively and contribute more. I am convinced that this was because we stood up for the principles we believed in and we were honest in disclosing our values and what we were doing.

Each major donor had a story. I used to meet with a couple in San Antonio, Texas, at least once a year. They were large donors in the major donor category. One time, Anuradha Desai, Oxfam’s major donor fundraiser, and I stayed in their house, cooking dinner for the family and then sitting back and watching their two young daughters perform skits to entertain the adults. It was a wonderful time.

It was on this same trip that the wife left a book on my bed that she thought I would find important. She gave me the gift of introducing me to Thich Nhat Hanh through the book *Being Peace*. In fundraising parlance I had “cultivated” the family and this led to a sizable gift to Oxfam. In another sense the person “cultivated” was I. This book opened up for me a whole new avenue of meditation and thought.

Oxfam started its US program due to the generosity of one individual donor. I was having lunch with one of our most faithful donors. He had started contributing when Joe Short was executive director, but I had been meeting with him for several years. I wanted him to consider a sizeable increase in his gift. It was only when I mentioned that Oxfam was beginning to think about starting a program in the United States that he got very excited. A few minutes later he promised to transfer to Oxfam all the funds from one of his foundations to endow the start up of what would become Oxfam’s US program.

This type of ongoing personal relationship makes raising money a pleasure. Of course, it is not always like this. I remember a couple in Cambridge, Mass., who were very concerned about Oxfam’s work in El Salvador. They invited me to their house, sat me in a chair in their living room and grilled me for two hours about Oxfam’s work in that country. This professional couple wanted specifics, details, and potential repercussions. They did not even offer me a glass of water during this grilling. I did the best I could, yet felt at the end of the interrogation that I had failed to win their confidence. I was quite surprised to receive their large donation several weeks later.
Late in my tenure at Oxfam, we agreed to accept a $1 million gift from the AES Corporation. It was the first large corporate or foundation gift given to Oxfam and probably opened the donor to a later acceptance of large donations—moving the agency away from its policy of not relying on any large gifts for fear of losing our independence. The AES Corporation is a coal mining company and had a new technology for extracting coal. This was a highly controversial donation at Oxfam. Many felt that the organization was selling out to corporate America and providing legitimacy to an environmental polluter. AES was using the grant for carbon sequestration to offset the carbon generated in its plants. Many felt that we should reject this donation if for no other reason than that it would tarnish our image and our “brand.” It would not be understood by our supporters and would lead to an erosion of trust with our funding base. We consulted with our indigenous partners. We consulted with agencies focused on corporate social responsibility. We agreed to the donation since the funds were to augment an existing Oxfam program. It was given to Oxfam to facilitate its work with indigenous populations who were helping to preserve the Amazon.

I traveled to the Amazon with the president of AES Corporation, where we traveled in canoe to remote areas to talk to indigenous people. While there, we were able to view some of the oil rigs erected by American corporations to drill oil out of the Amazon and the president of AES heard the arguments of the indigenous people directly. Upon his return to the United States, he became an ally for our work for indigenous people in the Amazon, including our advocacy work with oil companies in the United States.

In fundraising, timing and personal relationships are everything. Just as there are many great widgets competing to be sold in the market, there are many NGOs vying for fundraising dollars. The enthusiasm, commitment, and honesty of the fundraiser-point person are crucial. But so is the timing. For example, the major donor gave Oxfam the funds to start the US program in large part because he was no longer able to anonymously give locally from one of his small foundations. His gift to us helped him get rid of that problem.

During the height of the anti-apartheid movement in the United States, Oxfam America decided not to focus on South Africa itself, in part because Oxfam UK was heavily involved there. Instead, we decided to launch a campaign on Namibia, a territory adjacent to South Africa, which was administered under South African rule. It had been engaged in a long struggle for independence and needed strong support from the international community to consolidate that independence and begin its transition to democracy and effective development.

Namibia was extremely resource poor and, although the South African government had finally withdrawn from the country in 1989, relations between the two countries were tense. Oxfam felt that it should try to expand the focus in the United States from just apartheid within South Africa to include this new and emerging state of Namibia, and so Oxfam launched a major campaign.

I traveled to Namibia and then toured the United States to promote the idea of supporting and fostering the development of newly independent Namibia. It never took off as either a fundraiser or an educational campaign. Americans were interested in apartheid in South Africa, not in Namibian development. I remember at a television station in San Francisco, I was being interviewed on the nightly news as part of our Namibia campaign. The local host did not have time to talk to me at all before we went on the air. Her first question to me was,
“You are here to talk about Namibia. Is this some kind of a fruit only grown in Africa?” Clearly Namibia was not part of the consciousness of the United States, and Oxfam did not have the resources to make it part of that consciousness. The timing of the campaign was wrong and it flopped dismally. This was not the case with our Central American campaigns.

**Campaigning: the medium and the message**

Traditionally Oxfam had produced serious, lengthy materials that it made available to its constituents. Following in the Oxfam UK tradition, Oxfam published several books, mostly on Cuba and Central America. Oxfam thought of itself as the thinking person’s development agency because of the depth of its analyses of the countries and regions in which it worked. Its publications spelled out in great detail lessons learned from its evaluations.

There was no doubt that these publications were meaningful for a segment of the Oxfam constituency. Oxfam had a strong base on college campuses. It had more constituents with PhDs than any of its competitors. The in-depth analytical pieces did quite well with these audiences.

It was also clear that this strategy was not reaching the American public. A new director of education argued that Oxfam needed to totally revamp its approach to education. The existing approach was elitist and preaching to the converted. It was too reliant on the printed word and much too verbose to reach a mass audience.

In 1984, I abolished Oxfam’s Public Information Department, which had been primarily communicating to donors and friends. Instead, we created a press office to reach out directly to media outlets. Oxfam first experimented with a strategy to reach community television stations and news offices. We tried this because we did not think that we had the capacity to impact news outlets in major markets. We focused on Boston area markets and community networks. Focusing on community networks never really worked as a strategy, although the Ethiopian famine helped us develop good relations with the Boston media.

We then changed strategies to go after the newspapers and television stations in the major markets in the United States. We targeted the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times* and a few other newspapers. We singled out *Nightline* and the *MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour*.

My press officer and I went to visit editorial boards of newspapers, as well as key reporters and producers of shows. This concerted practical strategy began to pay off. Oxfam began to be a player in the national media, while consolidating its primary position in the Boston area. Oxfam staff accompanied the *New York Times* representative in the first trip to El Salvador after the signing of the peace accords. I accompanied ABC News to Bangladesh to cover a devastating flood; press conferences in Washington on Sudan, Haiti, and Somalia received excellent coverage. This had been done with limited resources, but with tenacious work and a clear focus.

In the early 1990s the new education and outreach director wanted to take Oxfam beyond its reliance on print, targeted at a relatively narrow audience, and reach out broadly to the US public. Contrary to past practice, she wanted to make a concerted push to raise the profile of Oxfam nationally both by recruiting celebrity supporters and instituting agency-wide national educational campaigns. She argued that celebrities would get Oxfam America on the
news and open the door for Oxfam to be able to send its message to an expanded audience in the United States. She wanted to get the agency air-time on regular US television. Some staff claimed Oxfam was joining the media circus, more interested in publicity than in the content of the message. Oxfam was giving up reflection, analysis, and depth to raise name awareness and funds. Over strong objections from some staff, we began to implement this new strategy.

Oxfam had always held Hunger Banquets in colleges and schools. We now updated the concept by holding a high-level, high-visibility hunger banquet in Hollywood. It was attended by Edward Olmos, Cybill Shepherd and other celebrities. It was widely covered in the media. I was so unaccustomed to this style of work that I had to go shopping for clothes with my press officer before this event for a totally new and “acceptable” look. I have never before or since spent so much on clothes in one day!

We took advantage of Danny Glover being in Zimbabwe filming a movie and I went with him to visit an Oxfam project. He was high-profile with the movie *Lethal Weapon*. On our return, we attended an anti-hunger rally at the University of California. He also did a public service announcement for Oxfam America that aired on television and radio. He asked Mel Gibson to join him in a 30-second spot that stated that hunger was a lethal weapon.

But it was the next strategy that brought with it the emergence of a new lingo at Oxfam: Oxfam Lite. To reach a broader, younger audience, the education department worked to get Oxfam mentioned in the prime time TV teen drama *90210*, a very popular show at the time. It followed the lives of rich young people in Beverly Hills. One of the stars of the show was from Canada and knew the work of Oxfam Canada. After a great deal of negotiation, the show agreed that Oxfam would be the charity named on the show by the star when he was asked what his favorite charity was. Oxfam set up a phone bank of volunteers to answer questions from viewers who were interested in learning more about Oxfam. The show aired. The actor mentioned Oxfam. He briefly described its work and why he supported the organization. At the end of the show a toll free number was listed. The response was overwhelming with thousands of people calling to find out more about Oxfam. The organization had reached a whole new audience. Unfortunately, Oxfam was not equipped to deal with this massive influx of young people. We did not take advantage of this opportunity.

The question for Oxfam America remained. How do you undertake an educational campaign? Do you reach out to educate the American people through the mass media or do you direct your educational efforts at policy makers, opinion leaders, and academic experts who have the ability to influence decisions? It is possible to do both, but it is expensive. Oxfam did not have the resources to effectively reach out on these two fronts simultaneously. After this experimentation and with continued strong internal opposition to the program, the strategy of reaching out to a mass audience through more concise, simpler messages became less important than Oxfam’s new attention to advocacy in Washington, DC.

One of my final accomplishments near the end of my tenure was opening an advocacy office in Washington DC. We had always tried to bring our message to Washington through testimonies in Congress and press conferences in the nation’s capital. Now the decision was made to spend funds to open an Oxfam America office there. This was a far cry from earlier when the Board mandated that most funds raised by Oxfam had to be spent in direct projects overseas. Oxfam finally accepted that policy advocacy was a key component of its program—not just a tag-on with minimal resources.
CONCLUSION

As you can imagine, working at Oxfam was probably the most intense experience of my work life. I had joined Oxfam because of its social justice mission and saw it as an opportunity to live my values. It was not easy. Equity in the workplace was not the mission or an explicit goal of Oxfam America. However, by challenging Oxfam to confront diversity, in its small way it challenged the conventional white, northern, elitist paradigm of development. It provided a laboratory for people to learn how to work together, feel safe to express themselves, and to try to help bring about a more equitable, if imperfect, workplace. This was not smooth or easy; it was downright painful and challenging for all of us involved at the time—for those in authority and those who challenged all authority. Looking back, however, it was a major achievement of all of us who worked at Oxfam at the time.

I also learned that knowing what your values are does not necessarily give you the answers to strategic or management questions. Programmatically we made some good calls and some bad ones. We struggled with internal management issues, trying to find the balance between participation and efficiency; equity with fairness; the passionate and the professional. But we were willing to take risks; we had an open environment where everything was debated. It was an amazing place to work.
Managing unexpected explosive organizational growth—in this case fueled by the outpouring of support in response to the 1983/84 Ethiopian famine—comes with added challenges when the staff is made up of passionate, committed, opinionated activists. Oxfam America experimented with an innovative management model amid a greatly expanded workload. The result was an experience that was intense, sometimes conflictual, and ultimately rewarding.

**INTRODUCTION: OXFAM AT ADOLESCENCE**

It was the Thursday before Thanksgiving in 1983 that I first became aware of Oxfam America. I was a grant writer working for the Community College of Rhode Island when, on a lunch break, I went to the school cafeteria and decided to pay money not to have lunch. There was a table with literature, posters, and buttons and a couple of student volunteers asking people to skip lunch and donate their couple of dollars to Oxfam’s Fast for a World Harvest, to help feed hungry people overseas. So, I joined the fast and wore my button proudly that afternoon. I can remember how impressed I was to read the fast materials, which talked about the poor in the Third World as struggling “partners” empowering themselves to overcome poverty and hunger in their communities. I liked the economic and political analysis Oxfam offered to explain the causes of hunger, a refreshing departure from blame-the-victim approaches that seemed to dominate the conversations about world hunger. Oxfam America’s work made sense to me, and when I saw an ad in an August 1984 paper for a grant writer for Oxfam America, I leaped at the chance to be part of its noble mission.

Oxfam America had a funky feel, yet a passionately driven work culture back then. It was housed in a two-story former movie production studio, tucked back from the street at 115 Broadway on the edge of the cozy Bay Village neighborhood on one side and Boston’s Theater District on the other.
Inside Oxfam America, life was intense. Young idealists were drawn to Oxfam because of its social justice mission to empower the powerless. Without exception, everyone worked long hours, motivated by their sense of solidarity with the struggles of the poor and the oppressed.

Oxfam was openly and boldly concerned about US foreign policy, which we saw manifesting itself as a virtual “war against the poor.” This was especially true in Central America, where unionists and cooperative organizers—both Oxfam project partners in El Salvador—were the target of the military-sponsored death squads. The death squads were funded by the US government and their leaders were trained on American soil at the infamous School of the Americas in Georgia.

Because Oxfam America was independent of US government funding, we were free to protest the US’s geopolitical support of repressive regimes—regimes that often brought great suffering and further impoverishment to the poor.

At that time, Oxfam America had a staff of about forty young activists who took seriously the mission to empower the powerless. This strongly held ideology was a major strength of the organization because it engendered great passion and commitment on the part of staff, management, board of directors and donors. The strong motivating belief in the values of equality, participatory democracy, and empowerment had become so central that Oxfam America staff members sought an alignment of internal management practices, particularly a broad distribution of power and decision-making authority. This came up against a senior management that at the time was working to establish tighter control over the direction of the program and daily operations, motivated partly by a need to exercise greater oversight over scarce resources, but also due to a lack of experience in participatory management.

The staff’s concern about the internal dynamics in the organization over time fueled a struggle for power and eventually led to the forming of the employees union. Staff in the new bargaining unit argued that the union would empower the staff and provide a mechanism for bringing greater democracy to the workplace—something Oxfam America’s grant funding supported in communities overseas. Staff members also wanted to use the collective bargaining process to address what they felt were basic supervisory and management inadequacies of Oxfam America’s most senior staff. Although we did not necessarily realize it at the time, Oxfam was stumbling through its organizational adolescence and entering into the sometimes painful road to maturity—including more structured and formalized relationships and procedures.

The union insisted that among other things, Oxfam walk the talk in its day-to-day operations. Just how to do that was a major challenge for management and staff alike. There was no consensus on how to structure the daily operations. Management authority was in a constant state of flux, and managers had their own internal debate about what was the appropriate model for what we all felt was a unique organization.

In August 1984, John Hammock became the new executive director of Oxfam America. John was entering Oxfam after it had been through a prolonged period of internal struggle and resource scarcity. Its revenue growth had reached $5 million but had stalled, in part because fundraising for international development had become more difficult during the time of the Reagan Doctrine, which was fostering a xenophobic mindset that was affecting the mainstream American donor base. John had many things to address, but one of his mandates from the board was to apply visionary leadership to the organization’s management challenges, especially the ongoing internal power struggles.
In October, 1984, the American public, moved by a full-blown emergency in the Horn of Africa, called on US private voluntary organizations, like Oxfam America, to rise to an enormous challenge. The work of getting Oxfam’s internal house in order, which had only just started, would have to wait until after the cataclysm of the Ethiopian famine.

HORROR GRIPS US: THE ETHIOPIAN FAMINE

On the evening of Tuesday, October 23, 1984, the NBC Nightly News aired raw footage taken by an Ethiopian videographer that showed scores of dead bodies being carried away on stretchers to massive makeshift graveyards in famine-stricken Ethiopia. Mothers and children emaciated, literally starving to death. No food. No water. Seemingly, no help, at least not fast enough. I arrived in the Oxfam America office earlier than usual the next morning, around 7:30, and phones were already ringing off the hook. Everyone arriving to work that day dropped everything and answered the phones: “Yes, Oxfam is responding to the famine in Ethiopia. You can send your check to…” By 8:30 a.m., the phone company began blocking Oxfam’s phone lines because, at over 300 calls an hour, residents in the Bay Village community had temporarily lost service. It was the beginning of an unprecedented national mobilization of humanitarian aid, driven by the sheer horror of the TV pictures. Nearly every US international PVO had its address posted and phone number in every local paper in the country collecting donations to aid famine victims in that drought-and-war ravaged country in the Horn of Africa.

The existence of this famine was not news to us or to Washington, DC policy-makers. I remember Oxfam America’s overseas director, Michael Scott, had returned from a State Department meeting with US PVOs on the famine in Washington just two days before the newscast. Mike reported back to us that, unbelievably, the Reagan administration was sticking to its position that there was little it could do to aid Ethiopia under the Soviet-aligned Mengistu regime and it would not respond to the worsening crisis. It was true that in early 1984, while his countrymen were facing a famine, President Mengistu had spent an estimated $100 million on the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the birth of communism in Ethiopia. It was also true that during his reign, Mengistu created a famine-prone situation by undermining the centuries-old tradition of family-owned agriculture plots with the formation of huge state farms where everyone worked for the state and owned no land. One of the fatal flaws of this new arrangement was that family grain stores were not replenished, leaving no drought insurance. It was a failed national policy and Mengistu’s people were reluctant to admit it. By mid-1984, it was widely known that the famine had already gotten out of control and Soviet relief shipments were inadequate. When he finally turned to the world for help, the US was among those who initially said “no” for geo-political reasons. But that position would soon change once the horror of the famine reached Americans in their living rooms.

The October 23 news broadcast of the images of starvation changed the Reagan administration’s position literally overnight. By the end of the first day of this massive public response to imperiled Ethiopians, Reagan himself got on the national news to announce the release of a boatload of wheat, immediately setting sail for the Mediterranean to aid the famine victims. I remember thinking that Reagan, the same president who was pursuing policies fueling low-intensity conflict to thwart the threat of communism Central America, resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala, had suddenly
grown a humanitarian heart. But in many respects, this shipment was a public relations move. The grain shipment would take weeks to arrive and meanwhile an estimated three to five thousand Ethiopians were dropping to starvation every day.

Oxfam America’s Horn of Africa coordinator, Laura Kullenberg, was quickly dispatched to Ethiopia to get a firsthand situation report. Her daily Telexes added to our sense of urgency, and her slide show at the staff meeting upon her return just a few weeks into November had everyone in tears. We all felt compelled to do whatever necessary to respond, as best we could, as a humanitarian aid organization that was concerned about building local, sustainable capacity and empowering the poor.

Joe Kennedy, a prominent Massachusetts political figure and businessman with a social conscience, soon organized an airlift out of Boston carrying needed medicines and supplies to control the outbreaks of cholera, dysentery, Rift fever, and other calamities attacking the weakened bodies of masses of people who had been without food for many days and weeks. USA for Africa soon formed with the best pop musical talents producing *We Are the World*, which sold millions of copies and culminated in a major concert for Africa in the spring of 1985. Oxfam dispatched a number of us, including myself, to get firsthand information.

Those of us who visited the famine area during that time will never forget the heart-wrenching scenes we witnessed. I accompanied a small delegation of wealthy businessmen to visit Bati, a small town turned famine camp in the Wollo province north of Addis Ababa in April 1985. There we witnessed scenes that could only be described as apocalyptic. Certainly, for an estimated 1 million Ethiopian famine victims, it was the end of their world.

Upon arriving, we could see from miles away several thousand sick and bedraggled people who had walked for days in search of a feeding center. In the hot sun they sat patiently and quietly on the barren dirt grounds surrounding the camp, still with no water or food. Inside the camp many thousands more were huddled and receiving a small ration of cooked mush once a day. A makeshift hospital took the most severely dehydrated and put them on IVs and gave them shots of tetracycline to fight infection. The smallest children needed “butterfly” IVs for their tiny veins but these sets were in short supply and at night, when the temperature would drop, their unprotected small frames became still with death.

Oxfam UK at the time had produced the “famine biscuit,” a protein and fat-fortified soft cookie that was a life saver for many. But many, whose mouths were riddled with open sores from dehydration, found it too painful to take the nourishment of the biscuit. Almost six months into the relief efforts, long lines of volunteers could be seen leaving the camp, carrying stretchers of the dead, winding their way up and over a hill to a burial area far enough from the camp for disease prevention. We walked among the victims and witnessed scenes of horror, grief-stricken mothers holding their dead babies, while other women intoned, “oo-loo-loo,” a call out to God to acknowledge the child’s passing and to send their child’s spirit to heaven. These scenes of death and dying in the famine camps in Ethiopia were beyond the American experience, beyond anyone’s comprehension. By April, the media and much of the public had begun to “move on” to other issues and concerns, something I felt acutely having just flown 12 hours from home, yet here the crisis was clearly still massive.

It had been officially estimated that as many as 1 million Ethiopian lives had been saved by the massive world mobilization of aid to the horrific famine, equal to the estimated number
who perished in the famine. As the American emotional response to the famine wore down, the focus of the donor public, who had parted with many millions of dollars for Ethiopia, turned to questioning the effectiveness of short-term humanitarian aid and the promise of long-term development solutions—Oxfam America’s strong suit. While it had engaged in immediate response, a significant proportion of Oxfam America’s funds would go to medium-term rehabilitation and recovery efforts and longer term investments that would reduce vulnerability to future droughts.

Internally at Oxfam America, the weeks and months of controlled pandemonium, in which staff threw themselves into the disaster response, gave way to a new set of concerns: managing the enormous inflows of new donors and funds. While this was in some respects an enviable problem, it was not without its complications. Oxfam America was still dealing with the internal strife begun prior to the emergency, and now new strains were introduced by our massive humanitarian response.

**INTERNAL DEBATE ON DISASTER VS. DEVELOPMENT FUNDRAISING**

The American public response to the Ethiopian famine nearly tripled the financial base of Oxfam America within a three-month period. It wasn’t until the summer of 1985, a full eight months after the news broadcast, that the flow of donations for famine relief finally slowed down. During the months of intense fundraising for Ethiopia and Africa, those of us on the fundraising staff had little time to raise funds for Oxfam America’s work in other regions of the world. This caused frustration with the overseas department that was juggling the new demands of programming enormous resources for Ethiopia and Africa, while trying to make quite limited funds stretch for the rest of the world. Internally, some of us on the fundraising staff were accused of being ambulance chasers and disaster junkies whose suppliers were one-time contributors who were only moved by the plight of helpless victims of those emergencies that made the evening news. Program staff felt that our fundraising and communications messages had strayed away from Oxfam America’s foundation as a development organization.

Indeed, it would not be too strong to say Oxfam America historically had been scornful of disaster fundraising by US-based international PVOs, which tended to portray the world’s poor as helpless victims, often represented by dehumanizing images of starving babies. Even during the Ethiopia work, we at Oxfam were committed not to use such negative imagery. Even so, we were aware that disaster stories would often create the same sense of unending, unchangeable misery and crowd out the positive community development and empowerment stories in the conversation we were having with our donors. Despite the criticisms, there was no fundamental disagreement in the organization about the type of educational conversation we should be having with donors, and by year-end 1985 we were back on message.

In fact, we discovered that only about one-third of the donors who responded to the Ethiopian famine ever contributed to Oxfam America again, which in retrospect is actually a very respectable retention rate. (With greater experience, we learned that 20 percent was the usual retention rate for first-time donors responding to an emergency.) However, most of those who did renew their giving were still giving 10 years later. And the steadfast strength of this new and committed donor base created an organization with a financial base twice as large as before the Ethiopian famine.
POST-ETHIOPIAN FAMINE ORGANIZATIONAL GROWING PAINS AND GAINS

With organizational and financial growth came new opportunities to improve the work of Oxfam America both internally and externally. With a more balanced allocation of financial resources across the organization’s overseas programs, a wide range of creative and effective projects were funded. Projects in Ethiopia, for example, focused on supporting and promoting appropriate agricultural technologies and later the support of viable project partners that developed plans and community organization for sustaining development efforts over time. More funding and expanded programs meant a growth in staffing and organizational complexity.

But with that relative prosperity came a renewed debate about the nature of Oxfam America’s internal organization. This was fueled once again by dissatisfaction among the staff with management’s lack of participatory leadership, especially when it concerned staffs’ involvement in program and policy decisions about the organization’s core work. John Hammock once again turned to his mandate to solve the internal organization problem. John agreed that involving the staff in key decisions and democratically working toward consensus was consistent with Oxfam America’s philosophy and practice overseas. How to do it effectively and efficiently was going to be a matter of significant trial and error over the next few years.

Our staff prided itself on having a high intellectual discipline about our work. But we learned that having a shared analysis of the roots causes of poverty and hunger in the developing world, and being on the same side of the issues in solidarity with the poor, did not mean that staff and management were in alignment about what constituted good organizational health and functioning. Given the type of people that Oxfam America attracted and given their social justice commitment, it was inevitable that expectations for internal organizational management were exceptionally high. A complicated situation was made more complex as the newly formed union reinforced an outspoken and assertive style amongst staff that many in management felt to be unnecessarily adversarial.

Almost a year had passed since the organizational upheaval resulting from the Ethiopian famine, when John and the management team launched an organizational attempt to create a democratic workplace. Workplace democracy (WD) had received a fair amount of attention in recent years, with the models of cooperative ownership, such as Spain’s Mondragon Experiment, lending insight. As developed at Oxfam America, instead of management leading and directing the work, the votes of staff and department representatives were solicited for nearly every issue of the organization, from the details of the organization’s annual work plan and budget to decisions about overseas projects. A full staff, two-day retreat trained the organization in the model, and a management-staff leadership team toiled daily to direct the new system for organizational decision making, testing it for several months.

Unfortunately, the benefits of Oxfam’s WD model were never realized. While there was a temporary uplifting of staff morale, action was slowed and work piled up given delays in reaching consensus on so many issues large and small. Staff members expended enormous amounts of energy and time on WD, diverting attention from the daily responsibilities, responsibilities that had grown with the organization’s growth spurt. Most staff would nonetheless put in the extra hours to stay true to the core work of the organization—funding partner development projects in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, educating the American public, and raising funds—but higher morale quickly gave way under the stress of hours of meetings and many extra hours of work.
It was with utmost sincerity that John, with the support of the board, undertook our workplace democracy experiment. His intention was to create an organization as a true and exemplary agent for social justice and change in the developing world that could serve as a model for the masses of US PVOs working overseas. While the model itself proved not to be sustainable, collectively we learned a great deal. While some argued adamantly that ultimately we did not go far enough, Oxfam’s leadership consciously sought to find ways to delegate power and authority to all levels in the organization to increase a sense of ownership. The challenge for management was to become better at identifying those critical issues and points in time for staff input and finding the right balance of staff participation in decision-making with the need for efficiency and effectiveness.

While these times were filled with great frustration for the staff and management alike, there were times of exhilaration as we sought to create our model of an exemplary international development organization. One could say, in retrospect, that this learning process was very costly. It sometimes felt that the organization turned in on itself just when the issues of our project partners in the developing world were getting more critical, more life-threatening, and more atrocious every year. In the end, however, learning how to function as a much larger, multi-million dollar agency required that we suffer the pains of growth and struggle through the development of our human organization, so that we could, indeed, turn out a better program to benefit the poor and suffering.

Managing change in any organization is a challenge, particularly in one where everyone has a strong opinion. What was great about Oxfam America was inextricably linked with what made it a challenging place to work: Strong beliefs and fierce commitment led to fierce arguments. Yet, Oxfam management and staff were willing to experiment, to learn, to put in the extra hours, and to keep talking things through to resolution. Both as individuals and as an organization we grew in the process of serving our various publics – our overseas partners, our donors, policymakers, and the general public – as we responded to the Ethiopia famine and dealt with the implications of our growth in the 1980s.
CHAPTER 14

Finding My Feet: Reflections of a Program Officer on Her Work in Africa in the 1980s

Deborah Toler

Deborah Toler shares her recollections of her work as an Oxfam America program officer for Africa in the 1980s. Deeply committed to Oxfam’s work, she was also willing to question basic assumptions and challenge some of the discourse on issues of gender and participation, in part influenced by her own experiences as an African-American woman. This highly personal reflection brings to life some of the key people she worked with and the inspiration, challenges, and danger of doing solidarity work in countries such as Zambia and Mozambique in the 1980s. She draws broader lessons and raises some provocative questions for international organizations currently working in Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The 1980s were a heady time to be working for Oxfam America. Looking at the organization today, it is hard to imagine that when I began in 1984 our entire budget was under a million dollars per year. But our impact within the development community outstripped our small budget and staff. We did not accept funding from either the US government or corporations because we wanted total flexibility in determining who and what we funded in our overseas work (we did not have a domestic program at the time). In my entire professional career since, I have never encountered a more dedicated, ideologically unified, harder working group of people.

Given our funding agenda in the 1980s, all of the above elements had to be in place to carry out the social and economic justice agenda Oxfam had identified for itself. For those too young to remember, the 1980s were the decade of US President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Both were ardent anti-Communists. As a young African-American activist and feminist, I saw their ardent anti-Communism as a mask for an imperialist agenda. This was late in the Cold War era and Reagan and Thatcher were both committed
to fighting any semblance of popular revolutionary movements in the global South. What attracted me to Oxfam was its engagement in the political issues of the day and their analysis of the destructive role of US foreign policy.

The US and British governments wreaked political, economic, and military havoc in regions where Oxfam America funded. The Reagan administration was so stridently anti-Communist that it funded counter-revolutionary groups attempting to overthrow Marxist-oriented governments in Central America and Africa—the Contras attempting to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua and the UNITA rebels attempting to overthrow the MPLA government in Angola, for example. That administration also provided various forms of covert, and in some instances overt, support to repressive governments, such as the brutal dictators running El Salvador and Guatemala and the apartheid government of South Africa.

Oxfam America was among a handful of genuinely progressive US nongovernmental organizations at the time (along with Grassroots International, the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, and the American Friends Service Committee) that used an analysis of a country’s or region’s political economy, including a critical analysis of the role of US foreign policy, to shape funding strategy. Specifically, we began with issues of economic and social justice, and in the case of southern Africa, of racial justice to determine what organizations we would fund. The Overseas Department and the Education and Outreach Department shared the same analysis. Given the conservative political climate of the time, it amazes me now that our fundraisers were able to raise money for our work.

I was the program officer for the southern Africa program which, along with the Central America program, was one of the more overtly political of the overseas programs at the time. Program officers had a number of responsibilities. First, we had to write what was known as a program paper which outlined the central historical, political, and economic contexts of our regions. It also specified what Oxfam America funding strategy should be, given those realities. A program paper was vetted first by our fellow colleagues within the overseas department. These discussions were lively affairs with a lot of back and forth. I was always impressed by the insights I received from my fellow Africa team members: Jill Harmsworth, Laura Kullenberg, Debbie Clain, and Rob Buchanan, as well as the Africa team manager Christine Ocali and Overseas Director Mike Scott. Even more astonishing to me at the time, program officers from unrelated regional areas – Joel Charny (Asia) and Dick Smith (South America) and Rusty Davenport (Central America) – always contributed useful insights about fundamental issues, such as working in war zones or with refugees. A program paper also had to be approved by our regional committees of outside experts. In the case of the Africa committee these experts were primarily progressive academics.

A program officer also had to write project applications, the documents requesting specific funding for specific projects and organizations. These applications had to be placed within the context of the overall program paper, had to identify objectives, strategies, primary target group or beneficiaries, and had to include a budget which typically received the most scrutiny from the regional committees. The process was detailed and lengthy, in part because we had such limited funds with which to work. This changed when money began pouring into the agency during the Ethiopian Famine of 1984-1985. Prior to that, program officers were competing for scarce project funds. After that, the reverse was true: We were under tremendous pressure to fund as many projects as quickly we could. Some money came in earmarked
for Ethiopia or “the famine in the Horn,” but most of it was donated with no strings attached. Some US non-governmental organizations (NGOs) got burned by media stories charging they had been irresponsible for not spending monies raised for the famine. Those of us in relief and development work knew that the short-term needs in such an emergency would soon be outstripped by the investment necessary for the long-term recovery phase. But getting that story across to the media and the general population was always difficult.

The real heart of a program officer’s job, however, was travel to the region to monitor how existing projects were faring and to identify new funding possibilities. Typically new projects came from extending the funding for an existing project, funding new projects submitted by a local partner, or in partnership with another expatriate NGO.

### SOUTHERN AFRICA AND SOLIDARITY FUNDING

In the 1980s, apartheid South Africa economically and militarily dominated the entire southern Africa region. The surrounding African states—Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, and Angola—were known as “the frontline states” because they were literally on the frontline of the war to end apartheid. Keep in mind that South Africa also illegally occupied Namibia at the time. Zambia had refugees from both Namibia and South Africa within its borders. Most of these refugees were permanently settled in Zambia. It was also no secret that the African National Congress (ANC) and Namibia’s liberation movement, the Southwest African People’s Organization (SWAPO) had offices and refugees in all the frontline states. In addition, SWAPO launched its attacks against South African forces primarily from Angola.

South Africa’s response to the frontline states’ support for the ANC and SWAPO was multi-faceted. Its destabilization efforts included economic, political, and military forms of pressure. South Africa used the regional dominance of its corporations, the powerful migrant labor draw of its mines, the frontline states’ dependence on South African railways and communication networks, its surrogate military forces in Mozambique (i.e., RENAMO) and Angola (UNITA), and its own commando and air attacks to dissuade the frontline states from supporting the ANC and SWAPO within the region.

In 1984 Mozambique had been forced by both South African military and economic pressure, and US and British diplomatic pressure to sign the Nkomati Accord. Under this agreement South Africa agreed to cease its military attacks and military support for an internal rebel group known as RENAMO in exchange for Mozambique closing its borders to the military wing of the ANC and closing ANC offices. The US had also pushed for Mozambique to allow the return of South African investment in the Mozambican economy. The Nkomati Accords were a major setback for the ANC and a major humiliation for the Mozambican government. By the time I began working in the region it was clear that South Africa had no intention of keeping its side of the agreement.

In the case of our southern Africa program, Oxfam America was both a solidarity partner and a relief and development organization. Even if we had wanted to avoid the dilemmas that come with taking on a solidarity role, as an American NGO we would have lacked the necessary credibility to function as a relief and development organization in the region without first demonstrating our solidarity with the region’s popular struggles against apartheid South Africa. Southern African governments were quite naturally (and in the case of religious
conservative-oriented American NGOs, correctly) suspicious of all US and British NGOs requesting permission to work within their borders. Equally important, local NGOs totally unrelated to the ANC or SWAPO wanted demonstrable evidence that Oxfam America understood that the poverty they were addressing was part and parcel of South Africa’s domination of the entire region.

Our solidarity work took place on two fronts. First, our education and outreach department did a marvelous job of writing and distributing educational materials about what was going on in southern Africa and our government’s role in the people’s suffering. It also took the lead in organizing the agency’s response to the movement calling for sanctions against the apartheid regime and to the international divestment movement—the attempt to get US corporations with investments in South Africa to pull out of the country. This latter strategy involved the entire organization participating on more than one occasion in street demonstrations. Even board members and regional committee members who lived in the Boston area frequently participated in those demonstrations.

Our solidarity work also involved funding ANC and SWAPO humanitarian work. To say this was dicey is a supreme understatement. In the first place, any funding associated with the ANC or SWAPO could bring US government scrutiny of our tax exempt nonprofit status. In addition, our own ethos as a humanitarian organization meant we obviously would not fund Umkonto we Sizwe, the ANC’s armed wing, nor SWAPO’s military wing. Hence, we took extreme measures to ensure our funds did, in fact, go to the ANC’s and SWAPO’s refugee work. Note that every remotely progressive NGO and religious organization in the world, not to mention the Scandinavian governments, were funding the ANC and, to a lesser extent, SWAPO.¹ The ANC had so many donors that they divided us into groups assigned to specific liaisons. Even so, I typically had to wait hours, if not days, to meet with my assigned liaisons in Lusaka.

Our major solidarity funding was for the huge 1,300 hectare ANC farm 40 kilometers outside Lusaka, Zambia, called Chongela. The Swedish government had provided the money for the initial purchase of the farm. There a cadre of committed ANC trained agronomists and farm workers primarily produced meat, dairy, and vegetables for ANC refugees in Zambia. I can still see the faces of some of those men and women. The head of the farm was a 24-year-old movie-star handsome, 6-foot-2-inch Indian with an unforgettable smile, named Sahdan Naidoo. He and I had an unspoken agreement: The price of my admission to Chongela was a fifth of Johnny Walker Black. Sahdan had a wicked sense of humor and was quick to laugh.

Bongiwe Nomandi Njobe was the assistant coordinator for the farm project and she provided the necessary financial reports on my visits. Moss Mthunzi was the farm’s chief mechanic. All three had received advanced agricultural training in Bulgaria.

Each visit to Chongela began with me touring the facilities, making note of improvements since my last visit. The showpieces of their hog production were two huge boars and an enormous sow, respectively named Reagan, Botha (Pik W. Botha, then South Africa’s Prime Minister) and Thatcher. After the tour, the farm’s managers would produce the requisite report demonstrating Oxfam America’s funds had gone only for producing food distributed to ANC refugees. Note that Chongela produced enormous quantities of vegetables and meat

¹ American Friends Service is a Quaker/pacifist organization and because both the ANC and SWAPO had military wings they did not fund either organization.
and was even able to export produce for feeding refugees in neighboring countries. After the tour we would then have a fantastic meal of the farm’s produce. And then the “serious” work began.

That work consisted of sipping Scotch and talking politics. I am getting emotional as I write this section because I realize that nothing in my work experience since has compared to those handful of afternoons at Chongela. Those men and women were more than prepared to lay down their lives to not only end apartheid, but also to ensure that a free South Africa meant immediate and massive improvement in the lives of South Africa’s poor majority. Moss and Sahdan both used to rage against the “willing seller, willing buyer” land redistribution program the British government had imposed on Zimbabwe at its independence. They swore that South Africa’s “#$%* Boers” would lose their monopoly on the country’s best land and that meaningful land redistribution would take place immediately in the free South Africa. Discussions often then veered into what kinds of policies would be needed to help smallholders make productive use of the land. Looking back on it, I can’t recall discussions about possible roles the IMF, World Bank or much less the US and British governments would attempt to play in a free South Africa. If I am correct and that never came up, then that speaks to a real revolutionary naivété on all our parts.

I had assumed that my Chongela friends would eventually be very high up in a free South Africa’s ministry of agriculture. In 1997, Bongiwe did, in fact, become chief executive in the Department of Agriculture. Sahdan and Moss did not make it. In 1989, four years after I first met them, I was returning from an extended trip to Mozambique when I picked up a newspaper in Harare and read that two ANC workers at Chongela—Sahdan Naidoo and Moss Mthunzi—had been assassinated. Their assassin was a co-worker posing as a former South African agent seeking to be rehabilitated as an ANC member. Sahdan was 28 years old. Oliver Tambo and Chris Hani were among the ANC dignitaries who attended their joint funeral in Lusaka.

Because I got to see how some of the people slated to become development policy officials (as opposed to politicians) thought about policy in a post-apartheid South Africa, Chongela was for me personally an extremely rewarding project. But Oxfam America also funded a program with the women’s wing of SWAPO and the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College (SOMAFCO).

Located in ANC settlements in Mazimbu and Dakwa, Morogoro Tanzania, SOMAFCO was an educational complex for students and teachers who had fled South Africa’s “Bantu education” system. The facility included primary and secondary schools and emphasized the dignity and unity of mental and manual labor. It was well known among those of us working in the region for its revolutionary pedagogical techniques. The students and teachers at the complex saw themselves as preparing for reconstruction and development in a post-apartheid South Africa and an independent Namibia. This complex received less funding than Chongela and other ANC programs, but its long-term potential impact was at least as great.

Unfortunately, I was only able to visit the facility once. I had no problem passing the ANC’s security clearance but the Tanzanian government’s own security clearance was so tight that on the one time I finally received permission to visit and arrived at the site, there was a dispute between the ANC officials and the Tanzanian security people about letting me on the

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premises. I mention this to illustrate the extreme tension under which the host governments in the region operated during this time. They paid a heavy price for supporting freedom in South Africa and Namibia. Still, I was able to see enough and to speak to enough people to appreciate the ANC’s plan for a radically different education system and content in a post-apartheid South Africa.

Our largest program in Zambia fell squarely within the realm of more traditional development. It was a program devoted to increasing women’s income. The original and largest foreign donor was Canadian University Services Overseas or CUSO. Like Oxfam, CUSO was a progressive NGO with whom we frequently partnered on projects. CUSO had an office in Lusaka and hired a Zambian woman named Abigail to liaise with women’s income-generating projects all over the country. I have been struck in the years since how much of “empowering” women has boiled down to helping women find ways to earn or save money, presumably money they and not the men in their lives would control. Improved access to education and healthcare, property rights and so on are also promoted, but having their own money has clearly been a longtime objective of NGOs promoting the empowerment of African women.

Because its scope was national, the CUSO program gave me the opportunity to travel widely across Zambia. I was able to see firsthand the diversity not just in landscapes but in ethnic “scapes.” How very different, for example, Lowzi women and their communities were from Bemba women and their communities. The projects ranged from agricultural projects, such as growing cotton and raising chickens for egg production, to craft making for the tourist market in Lusaka. The most successful income generating project was a school uniform project located in a medium sized rural town.

This program made me question some of the key assumptions of Women in Development discourse about women’s oppression and the blanket critique of African men who oppress “their” women. When CUSO and Oxfam America did a detailed participatory evaluation of the program, for example, we were chagrinned to discover that the women themselves emphasized class issues. Unbeknownst to us, the poorest women in these communities had neither the time nor the membership funds to participate in the projects. In addition, very often well-connected women in the community — the chief’s wife, the schoolmaster’s wife, and so on — were typically controlling the projects and the related funds. In addition, women participated in the income generating projects in hopes of improving their families’ lives — not necessarily to have their own independent source of income. And perhaps most important, the women themselves valued the social interaction far more than any additional income derived from the projects — which was a good thing since the latter was negligible in most of the projects.

**MOZAMBIQUE: WORKING IN A WAR ZONE**

My role in our Mozambique program was primarily that of a facilitator. The real program work was done by our program consultants, Nancy “Sam” Barnes and Rebecca Reiss; and by our Harare field office members, Bud Day and Kitwe Mhlanga. The reasons were simple: First, I did not speak Portuguese; Sam and Rebecca were both fluent. Second, the logistics of working in Mozambique were a nightmare. Mozambique’s Portuguese colonizers had done next to nothing in the way of constructing transportation or communication infrastructure and had destroyed what little that did exist when they were forced out of the country in 1975.
Although I could easily get flights from Harare to Maputo, Mozambique’s capital, where we funded a few projects, our major projects were located in less accessible areas of the country. Our largest program was an integrated development program in Magoe District, Tete Province. We had to rely upon unreliable internal flights from Maputo to Tete in order to visit that project. Our third program was a water supply program located in Manica Province and the easiest way to get there was simply to drive from Harare because this province borders Zimbabwe. The Harare field office not only kept tabs on the Manica program, but also flew to Maputo if the need arose.

The third reason our program consultants and Harare field office were so important to the Mozambique program was the war raging inside Mozambique. The Mozambique National Resistance (RENAMO) was formed in 1976 by white Rhodesian officers seeking a way to prevent newly independent Mozambique from supporting the ZANU and ZAPU guerrilla forces, then fighting the white Rhodesian government. RENAMO was soon taken over by South African armed forces determined to maintain Mozambique’s economic dependency on South Africa and as a way to prevent the country from becoming a base of operations for ANC fighters. Opposed to Mozambique’s Marxist-leaning Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) government, RENAMO sought to disrupt the country’s economy and infrastructure. It destroyed roads and bridges, sabotaged oil-storage depots, and so on. It was a brutal movement well known for its wholesale massacres of civilians and its use of terror to recruit child soldiers. By the late 1980s RENAMO’s insurgency had caused at least 100,000 deaths and led to the creation of more than 1 million refugees. Sam, Rebecca, and our Harare office were able to keep close tabs on the impact of the war on our projects. In addition, they identified emergency funding needs for Mozambican refugees in Zimbabwe and for internally displaced Mozambicans.

Oxfam America’s Mozambique program was unique in that we funded and worked directly through local government. With the exception of the Maputo Green Zones program, there simply were no indigenous NGOs in Mozambique. The Portuguese colonizers had not allowed space for the development of civil society and left the country so suddenly that FRELIMO had not had the time to promote civil society institutions in the areas it controlled prior to independence. Despite our inherent unease about funding government structures, we funded through them in Mozambique because it was among the poorest, least developed of the frontline states and because the apartheid regime in South Africa was determined to destroy the government’s attempts to implement meaningful development programs for the country’s poor majority.

In 10 short years since gaining independence, the government had made tremendous strides in enrolling children in primary school, starting adult literacy programs, increasing rural access to primary healthcare, providing immunizations against the major diseases that kill children, and especially expanding mother-and-child clinics. A study funded by the Ford Foundation in 1992 noted that from 1977 through 1980 both Mozambique and Angola were implementing policies that by 1985 would have resulted in an under-5-years-old infant mortality rate of 185 of every 1,000—one of the best among all developing countries. Instead, RENAMO and South Africa’s aggression was resulting in rates of 325 to 375 per 1,000.  

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We had three major programs in the country. In Maputo, the capital city, Oxfam America supported the then famous Green Zones program in Maputo, an enormously successful urban food producing cooperative run by women. Most of these women’s husbands were gone for long periods of time working in South Africa. Oxfam fully understood that the women in the Green Zones program were in this situation because colonial Portugal had funded its African empire by tying it closely to South Africa’s economy and in the process physically marginalizing Mozambican men, forcing them to leave their homes in order to work in South Africa’s mines. The Green Zones program not only provided abundant amounts of fruit, vegetables, and meat to its women participants and for local markets, but it also expanded into literacy programs, used windmills as alternative energy sources (this, in 1985) and implemented a number of other groundbreaking activities that benefitted both its participants and the city of Maputo.

Oxfam also funded an integrated development program in Magoe District, Tete Province which included a project to bring clean drinking water to surrounding areas. The projects were designed and submitted by the Magoe District and Tete Provincial authorities who were very much in a “revolutionary modernization” mode. Against my better judgment we allowed a reporter from the *Boston Globe* named Colin Nickerson to accompany us on a trip to Tete province. Mr. Nickerson was upset by the lack of creature comforts. He had no interesting travelling to Magoe to see the heart of our work. Worse, he saw one MIG (Soviet) aircraft overhead, and the next thing we knew we had a headline in the *Boston Globe* reading, “Cubans in Mozambique!”

Yes, there were a handful of Cubans in Mozambique—almost all of them were doctors and agricultural technicians. Worse yet, he put a photo of me talking to a local woman at a gardening project and whoever wrote the caption (when I complained, he insisted he had not written the caption) referred to her as a “native woman.” Note here that the admittedly far more significant Cuban military and civilian presence in Angola was both a provocation for the anti-Communist Reagan administration and a key reason Angola’s progressive MPLA forces and SWAPO ultimately prevailed against the South African military. Those Cuban-assisted military victories precipitated the fall of the South African apartheid regime. The lesson with the *Globe* trip was that while Oxfam had been very successful in shaping the policy debate around land reform in El Salvador in the media, reporters did not share our perspectives on the positive role Cuba was undeniably playing in southern Africa.

In spite of the war and transportation headaches, the Tete Provincial authorities did succeed in digging wells for Tete City and surrounding rural area. Magoe District was more of a mixed success story. I will never forget how proud I was of the new concrete clothes washing basins with built-in washboards near the water pumps Oxfam had funded. They appeared to my eyes as epitomizing the concept of “appropriate technology.” The only problem, on my next visits to Magoe the women were not using the pumps or the washboards. They were walking to nearby streams for both needs. It turned out the women did not like the pumps and washbasins because they were too efficient—they saved time fetching water and got their clothes clean faster and in so doing reduced the amount of time the women had to socialize with one another. It was a striking example of how Western (and my) values of efficiency and easing women’s workloads clashed, in this case, with the women’s own value of social interaction. After a public education campaign on the benefits of drinking the clean pump water, local women did, in fact, begin to use the pumps, but the washboards never caught on.
The Tete Provincial authorities were committed to their work but in many ways were typical bureaucrats. The younger people we worked with in Magoe on the other hand were especially impressive. In addition to the water project, we supplied agricultural materials and supplies for their health clinic. All were put to excellent use. We also provided a moped so workers in the villages could communicate with one another. The moped also served as an “ambulance” for emergency cases beyond the local clinic’s capacity to address. A number of Oxfam America people besides me visited Magoe and, while many did not share my zeal for the leftist FRELIMO government, I think it is safe to say everyone was moved by what the village workers were trying to accomplish and by their gratitude for the small grants we provided.

That is why when we got a Telex that RENAMO had attacked villages in Magoe, I was not the only person in the Boston office in tears. Remarkably, none of our close associates was killed in the attacks, and the one we worked most closely with included in his Telex that he had saved the moped we had funded. Mind you, this young man’s wife had been kidnapped (she was later released unharmed) and he wanted us to know he had saved the moped!

I went back to Magoe one last time before leaving Oxfam America. The villagers were all in temporary camps outside of Tete City. We talked with village and district and provincial authorities about recovery efforts, but there was no way the government was going to let the people return until the military had rid the area of RENAMO. Nervous about funding in a war zone to begin with, I was going to have an uphill battle convincing the Africa committee to fund in the area again. The last Magoe moment I recall was chatting with an Ichabod Crane-thin old man, who held my hand and thanked me for all that Oxfam America had done. I stupidly said something about not worrying, that I was sure the next time I saw him he would be in a new house in his home village. He squeezed my hand, looked me straight in the eyes and said “How do you know that?”

Mozambique is totally different today. Most laud its multiparty democracy without noting that the main opposition, now considered respectable, is the brutal RENAMO. FRELIMO for all its top-down governing faults did prioritize the needs of the country’s poorest rural and urban majorities. The last time I was in the country the county’s infrastructure was vastly improved—the dilapidated Maputo airport is beautiful; lovely hotels abound; restaurants with terrific food are everywhere. The apartment buildings have been rehabilitated but the poor the squatters have been forced out. An evening at one of the previously nonexistent cafes is sure to bring swarms of street children hawking all manner of imported junk—a sight unimaginable in the 1980s Mozambique.

Mozambique raised the basic issue of who should be making policy in a developing country. The country was so overrun with progressive NGOs trying to support a leftist frontline state that the government created an entire Ministry of Cooperation to deal with not only United Nations and bilateral donors, but with us as well. Progressive or not, these international NGOs exhibited the worst hubris imaginable. On more than one occasion Sam or Rebecca and I would leave a meeting intended to coordinate aid responses among the various donors furious because the Mozambican officials in attendance had been informed of, not asked about, aid agencies’ plans. Note also that not all the NGOs in Mozambique were progressive. It was well known that some operated in RENAMO-held territories.4

Towards the end of my tenure at Oxfam America I attended a huge international meeting for donors in Geneva on what was, by then, a major emergency. The war had destroyed much of the country’s agricultural productivity. A longstanding drought had further dwindled food supplies. What amazed me was that the meeting provided only French and English translation facilities—no Portuguese. Fortunately, most well-educated Mozambicans, including those in attendance at the meeting, are fluent in English or French. But the Mozambicans correctly felt the insult. The US government pledged an amount of emergency aid, but added the caveat that all its assistance would be provided through a US NGO well known to be sympathetic to, and operating in, RENAMO territory. The Mozambicans were furious. On the one hand they could not turn down the assistance—they had to get food to all Mozambicans. On the other hand, the US government had put them in the position of permitting RENAMO to gain legitimacy and popular support.

I want to offer one last vignette that illustrates something profound about the difference in the US government’s approach to its citizens and the approach of that government of Mozambique in the 1980s. It raises the question of who is developed and who is not. On one of my last trips to Mozambique for Oxfam America, after Rebecca had taken over from Sam, she declined to accompany me to Tete. I could not understand why she wouldn’t accompany me when she knew how important her translating role was. About nine months later, shortly after I took over the Harare field office, Rebecca told me over tea that she was HIV positive and as a result could no longer travel in rural areas. I was speechless. She was the first person I had known to be HIV+. I mention this because I want to share what Rebecca told me at the time. She said it infuriated her that most people in the States assumed she had become HIV+ from living in Africa. In fact she was sure she had gotten it from one or both of two incidents while she was working for the New York health department. She broke vials containing blood samples from intravenous drug users and prostitutes and she cut herself on both occasions. Moreover, she said, the government of Mozambique had made arrangements to have the latest HIV drug therapies available flown from Europe to Maputo for her at no expense to her. Similarly, the Zimbabwean government was providing regular laboratory tests and hospital stays for her at no expense. In the meantime she said, she not only could not get the New York health department to accept any culpability, she could not get any health care coverage in the United States. Rebecca was an AIDS activist when she died in California in 1991. How was it that two supposed underdeveloped countries could come to the aid of a non-citizen, while our own country, the wealthiest in the history of the world, had no way to cover life and death medical expenses for one of its own?

TANZANIA—THE JOY OF DEVELOPMENT WORK

Oxfam America’s work with the ANC and SWAPO was based on our understanding that the poverty of the black majorities in South Africa and Namibia stemmed first and foremost from the apartheid regime’s political and social oppression of those countries’ black majorities. A similar situation existed in Mozambique where seriously addressing the country’s underdevelopment was not possible in the context of South African state-sponsored terrorism via RENAMO.

Our work in Tanzania was comparatively low key. Prior to my joining Oxfam, the organization had been funding a Dar-as-Salaam-based NGO, called the Community Development Trust Fund (CDTF). CDTF worked closely with provincial and district government officials
to identify community initiatives deserving of more support than the Tanzanian government could provide. It would then try to link its international funders with those projects. When I came on board, Oxfam America had already been supporting a number of integrated development projects in Kigoma province. Kigoma is on the shores of the beautiful Lake Tanganyika. My CDTF counterpart was named Makoti. (I don’t think I ever found out if that was his first or last name.)

Oxfam America’s funding went for basic inputs—primarily agricultural. We were also supporting efforts to introduce ox plowing into the area. I visited Kigoma several times and got to know not only local officials, but also a handful of villagers. While the agricultural inputs Oxfam provided were put to good use, the ox plowing component of the program never really took off. The agricultural supplies were familiar to both farmers and the rural development officers working with them. The oxen, however, were expensive, needed scarcely available veterinary care and ox driving training.

One of the only CDTF project applications I ever submitted which the Africa committee rejected illustrates how even progressive organizations can stumble. From the time I began working with CDTF they had been requesting a lorry for hauling project materials throughout the country. I knew from past experience that our Africa committee disliked funding vehicles. Still, I could understand why CDTF needed a lorry and was able to convince my Oxfam colleagues of the need for a vehicle and CDTF’s ability to maintain it. The Africa committee saw the need, but was unconvinced that it could be maintained in operating order. I recall being particularly irritated by one committee member citing her “been there” credentials to claim Tanzania’s poor roads, lack of mechanics, and irregular supplies of petrol made this a poor proposition. What infuriated me, however, was that at that very same meeting the Africa committee agreed to the purchase of a much larger, much more expensive lorry for Oxfam UK to use in a joint Oxfam America—Oxfam UK Ethiopia project. The committee was willing to fund another vehicle for a wealthy British NGO, but not one for a struggling local African NGO. CDTF got their lorry from another international donor and it was still in pristine condition when I left Oxfam America three years later.

Our Tanzania work provided me with some of the insights I have about how we conceptualize women in Africa. Even today I smile when I recall an encounter I had in a Kigoma village. I had visited the village several times and my feminist self always noticed that women attended village meetings but they always sat in the back and none ever asked me any questions or voiced any opinions. On one visit I requested to meet with the women alone. I asked if any of them had any questions or opinions about the CDTF/Oxfam America project. For several minutes no one spoke. Then a stunning young woman who looked to be about sixteen rose. She carried a toddler on her back and was about to deliver another baby. She asked, “Are you married?” I said, “No, I am not married.” She turned her head back towards the other women in the audience and an immediate murmur rose from the crowd as they looked at one another with raised eyebrows. Then the young woman asked, “Do you have any children?” “No, I don’t have any children.” Pause. “Ahh!” She smiled, “I see. You are still a girl!” And with that I could see my credibility take flight straight out of the school building windows. I was well aware of how important children are to most rural African women’s construction of gender. But my being unmarried was also important in these women’s construction of “womanhood.”

Both of these came into play with one of the few new projects I brought to Oxfam America. The project was in Ngara District, in the northwest corner of Tanzania bordering Rwanda.
I visited Ngara by flying to Kigali and then driving across the border to Ngara, much like our Harare to Manica trips in the case of Mozambique. A dynamic man named Bartholomew had moved from Mbyea District in southwestern Tanzania, and started an organization called the Ngara District Development Organization (NDDO). The organization consisted of energized and committed mostly secondary school graduates determined to “modernize” their communities. Bartholomew himself was extremely charismatic. As a rising star in the Oxfam community he was well versed in our objectives and approaches, including our emphasis on supporting women’s activities. NDDO worked far more independently of local Tanzanian government officials, in part because Ngara is a more isolated district and had fewer government officials working there.

I had one splendid opportunity to spend an entire week with NDDO. It was the only time I did not parachute in and parachute out of a project site. Still, as I realized later, I did not actually converse one-on-one with any of the villagers. All my interactions were mediated through NDDO. Bartholomew and his wife were my hosts. Bartholomew had the very public role as leader of NDDO, but his wife ran the household. She was successful in not only growing food for the household, but also in generating extra money from her agricultural activities. She employed several male non-family farm workers and she ruled that household’s finances.

After a week spent visiting NDDO projects throughout the district, I had one final meeting with the organization. When they asked me for my observations I told them how impressed I was by their work. And I was. I especially liked how they chose not to intervene in village meetings discussing NDDO project proposals and to accept whatever modifications or even total rejections a given village made. I told them only one thing bothered me. That throughout the week I had heard them repeatedly complain that the men in the district would not participate in the agricultural projects, that they could make so much more progress if only the men were not so “lazy.” I told them that in my country black men, like my father, were often depicted as lazy or irresponsible or violent. And that I knew my father had been unable to go as far as he wanted because of the racism in our society, because at the time I was growing up, white society’s fear of black men resulted in a different set of obstacles for them than it did for black women. I then asked them to carefully consider the possibility that there might be some reason other than laziness which might explain why the men in Ngara did not participate in agriculture.

For several minutes there was total silence. Finally one of the young women raised her hands and said “Well, perhaps it is because the men in this area were always herders. Years ago rinderpest destroyed much of the cattle, the government destroyed the rest and has never let us have cattle again.” I suggested it sounded more plausible than the “lazy” explanation. Immediately after the meeting Bartholomew and I got into the NDDO’s car and headed towards Kigali’s airport for my flight. For the first five minutes of our drive neither of us said anything. I was astonished that I had actually drawn on my experience as a black man’s child to discover knowledge known by the community but somehow erased by Western development paradigms. I also thought about how the Tanzanian government had intervened in Ngara’s complex economic and social relations, and in so doing left its men adrift. Could it be that we NGOs sometimes do the same thing with our interventions?

As for Bartholomew, he finally murmured, “I never knew. I never knew.” He was clearly emotional. His home area of Mbyea is an agriculturally rich area where both men and women farm. Bartholomew himself had been a farmer in Mbyea. But the Tanzanian government’s intervention in Ngara had occurred years before his arrival. I would also argue that Western dominated
development paradigms so ready to “blame” African men for what ails the continent were also responsible for his and NDDO’s view of Ngara men.

CONCLUSION

I want to emphasize again how rich and meaningful my experience was at Oxfam America. Nothing since has compared. This piece no doubt sounds more critical of our work than intended, but twenty-plus years later cynicism has a way of chipping away at youth’s idealism. Still, Oxfam America gave its young staff wide latitude in our work, frequently venturing where other even progressive NGOs would not go (for example, our decision to provide humanitarian emergency relief funding to both the Ethiopian and EPLF AND TPLF rebel movements’ humanitarian organizations). In addition, few NGOs did the groundwork we did in collecting information on the regions where we worked and funding based on our progressive analysis of those regions.

As my story about Bartholomew and NDDO illustrates, good development work entails the ability to draw on a range of experiences and perspectives, to question and challenge long-standing assumptions. Who knows, perhaps NDDO achieved a small breakthrough as a result of our conversation and was able to make some big changes regarding the participation of men in their efforts. I am convinced that at minimum all of us devoted to ending global poverty need to rethink our typically unstated, but guiding notion of development as a unilateral process, one which will result in African countries looking and behaving like the West. My story about Rebecca illustrates the moral and ethical component of which must underlie any notion of “development.”

Clearly Oxfam America owes it to its donors to monitor the progress of projects and programs and to ensure financial transparency within its projects. There is a fine line between donor responsibility and overwhelming project partners. In that respect our operational model in the 1980s was ideal—once a project or program was approved for funding, we program officers only made occasional field visits and typically wrote monitoring reports ourselves. During my tenure program officers were based in Boston and for that reason I am less certain we were able to locate the most innovative and effective partners. By necessity we relied heavily upon sister agencies such as the other Oxfams and CUSO. I suspect that changed once field offices were established.

As is surely clear if there was one program area of Oxfam America funding that gave me pause it was in the area of women’s programs. In the years since leaving Oxfam my discomfort with Western NGOs’ portrayals of poor rural African women has only increased. It’s one thing to understand the pivotal roles that African women play in all aspects of rural development and to support them, but it is quite another to view them, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty has argued, as a homogenous group of powerless victims. Supporting African women appears to have translated into a necessity to denigrate African men or “African patriarchal culture.” African men are the key source of African women’s oppression and the key obstacle to their

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5 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” Feminist Review 30, 1988: 61–88. Although this is a dense postmodernist theoretical piece aimed primarily at an academic audience, I still think it should be required reading for every western educated NGO worker committed to working with women in Africa. It crystallized the very concerns I had while working for Oxfam America and confirmed what I have experienced since leaving Oxfam.
“empowerment.” Worse yet, African men are typically portrayed as lazy, irresponsible, HIV carriers or general obstacles to development. It is possible to support African women without denigrating African men or African culture. It is important to pay careful attention to the complexities of power and oppression dynamics in any society; any given African male can be oppressed along ethnic, religious, class, or regional lines in a given context. Issues of class, religion, ethnicity, and extended kinship ties, among other factors, complicate the social and economic paradigm of all African women and men as well. It is, contrary to popular portrayals, entirely possible for a rural African woman to “exploit” a given African male depending upon these contexts. I am not sure Oxfam America paid close enough attention to these kinds of complexities while I was there.

Since leaving Oxfam America my unease about the way NGOs fund women in development has only increased. I have been chewed out by a Ugandan female provincial agricultural officer for “the headaches” we “outsiders” are causing in local households with our “women only” projects. I listened to a brilliant Malian NGO leader explain how her organization had done systematic polling research throughout rural Mali on women’s political attitudes. They discovered, among other interesting surprises, that while these women would readily vote for a female President, female parliamentarians, and female provincial and even district politicians, they would not want female chiefs/village heads. She told me that further research revealed these women are very clear that under current political and social structures they wield a great deal of power at the village level.

The funding we did with the ANC and SWAPO did not, in all honesty, amount to a significant percentage of the overall funds available to them. But it was, in my view, essential that we fund their humanitarian work nonetheless. Keeping in mind the conservative politics of the Reagan administration at the time, we had to challenge its support of the apartheid regime, and our funding provided a launching pad for the excellent work our education and outreach department did. Similarly, we knew we were taking a big chance funding in a war zone when we funded in Mozambique, but at the time Mozambique (as well as Angola) was demonstrating a sincere commitment to addressing the needs of its poor majority. We knew the US government was hostile to the FRELIMO government despite the positive benefits that government had delivered to its poor majority in its first ten years of independence. As a US NGO committed to economic and social justice and to racial equality, we felt—correctly I believe—that the chances we took were worthwhile both symbolically and tangibly. Again, our education and outreach department took the lead trying to educate the American public about these issues but they drew upon our projects and field reports in order to do so. I occasionally wrote public education pieces and did some public speaking and media education work, but the real work was done by our Outreach department.

I have concluded that the best development operational models we funded were the CDTF and NDDO models. Both organizations knew the communities where they worked; both were flexible in their approaches. Both let villagers determine their own priorities and both chose how closely to work with local government according to specific local contexts. Both clearly ran effective programs.

In recent years I have come to the conclusion that there is no real need for Westerners to be on the ground doing development work. Thanks in part to IMF and World Bank mandated civil service job layoffs, most of rural Africa is now awash with talented experienced hardworking Africans, many of whom have started their own NGOs. We should not underestimate the
frustration that these African NGOs and civil servants alike feel when they see comparatively well-off Western NGO workers doing the work they themselves are trained to do. Allowing African NGO workers and civil servants to dominate development work increases the likelihood of challenging what I view as an extremely limited paradigm of development. Note that I do not include Tsunami-like emergencies here. And I do support working in collaboration in with our African colleagues, conducting joint research projects, sponsoring exchange visits and so on. But in terms of running day-to-day agricultural, water, health, education, credit, and similar projects, we do not need to be there.

When I think about the abundance of African talent on the ground, I recall an encounter I had in 1984 with the charismatic leader of Zimbabwe’s Organization of Rural Associations for Progress (ORAP), Sitembiso Nyoni. The Zimbabwe field office was responsible for Oxfam’s funding of ORAP, but Mike Scott sent me from Boston to bring back a report on what was happening during President Mugabe’s brutal military crackdown on opponents in Matabeleland during a severe drought. Matabeleland is the poorest and most drought-prone area of Zimbabwe and ORAP was then the most successful indigenous NGO in the region. After touring project areas with ORAP and Kitwe Mhlanga, Oxfam’s Harare representative, we concluded our visit with the traditional wrap-up meeting. I asked Sitembiso what was the single best thing Oxfam America could do for her organization. Without skipping a beat she replied, “Just give us the damn money and get the hell out of our way.” I guess that about sums up my feeling about development work today. Find the best people you can, the ones really pushing the envelope on behalf of economic and social justice, then just give them the damn money and get the hell out of their way.
CHAPTER 15

Reflections on Working with Rebel Movements in the Horn of Africa

Rob Buchanan

Working in zones of armed conflict presents particular challenges to relief and development organizations. This paper discusses three experiences of working with the relief arm of armed movements in Tigray, Eritrea, and Sudan in the Horn of Africa in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Based on these experiences, the paper argues that ethical and effective relief and development assistance can be delivered, but sounds a cautionary note based on the one case where trust broke down, with life threatening consequences for Oxfam staff.

INTRODUCTION

The decision to work with the humanitarian arms of rebel movements in the Horn of Africa in the 1980s and 1990s was driven by Oxfam America’s policy of providing humanitarian assistance on both sides of civil conflicts where we already had established development programs. The emergency aid would be provided in an even-handed way and always with the prospect of moving to longer-term development aid, as conditions permitted. Oxfam America’s view was that people in need should not be denied assistance because of where they lived, whether under a government of their choosing, an authoritarian regime, or a rebel movement, regardless of its ideology. Moreover, Oxfam America’s policy of not accepting government funds meant that we were free from any political constraints or strings, thereby allowing us to direct our resources to areas—such as those controlled by rebel movements—not normally served by official aid channels.

In short order, we were dealing with what have become known as “complex emergencies” and a key question for us was whether it was practical to deliver humanitarian assistance in conflict zones. In the midst of civil war, we responded to the emergency needs of internally displaced persons and refugees crossing national borders; we ensured staff security in a dangerous environment; and coped with a lack of good logistical infrastructure.
Planning and communication were key to navigating the complex situation we faced in the early 1980s. These included making clear programming decisions, engaging our board at every step, using staff and consultants with expertise in the dynamics of the Horn of Africa, and regularly assessing the effectiveness of our interventions. Despite the many challenges, we did not hesitate to follow our values and geared up for a major relief and rehabilitation effort behind rebel lines in the Horn of Africa.

Oxfam America made the decision to engage with the relief arms of three different rebel movements in the Horn of Africa during the 1980s and early 1990s: the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA), the Relief Society of Tigray (REST) and the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association (SRRA). Although the three organizations served similar functions in their respective areas, each was unique in terms of structure, organizational capacity, personality, and relation to the political and military movements with which they were associated.

The Eritrean Relief Association was the humanitarian wing of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), which had struggled since the 1960s to regain independence from Ethiopia. The Relief Society of Tigray was the humanitarian arm of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), the military movement in the region of Ethiopia just south of Eritrea, which sought liberation from what it considered the oppressive national government in Addis Ababa. Similarly, the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association was the humanitarian extension of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), then opposing the national government in Khartoum for regional autonomy in the south in order to gain a fair share of benefits from the region’s economic resources and freedom from strict Islamic law.

Unlike Oxfam America’s advocacy work in the 1980s against apartheid in South Africa and US government policies in Central America, the decision to work with, and through, the relief arms of rebel groups in the Horn of Africa grew not out of any political solidarity with the aims of the insurgents, but rather practical considerations. Starting with the well-publicized Ethiopian famine of 1983-1984 and continuing for many years thereafter, people living in rebel-controlled areas throughout the Horn were in urgent need of emergency assistance, primarily food. Civil wars in Eritrea, Tigray, and Sudan disrupted the normal cycles of food production and patterns of trade. Many farmers and their families were internally displaced or forced to flee the war to neighboring countries. Oxen were sold to buy food or died from lack of fodder. Farm tools were sold or lost in the disruption. These conditions were exacerbated by ongoing drought, although, had it not been for the conflicts, farmers would have been able to employ traditional coping mechanisms that for centuries had enabled them to survive years of poor rains.

That people were in dire need in areas controlled by the rebel movements was indisputable. However, in order for Oxfam America to assist them, certain pre-conditions had to be met, preconditions set by the board-approved policy on working in conflict zones. Oxfam America needed:

- direct access to communities to do proper needs assessments
- access to those same communities periodically to monitor how our contributions were distributed and used
- a full financial accounting from the relief arms of the rebel movements demonstrating that Oxfam America’s assistance was used for agreed purposes
• a high level of confidence that our assistance was reaching civilians in need and not being
diverted for military combatants to be confirmed by independent monitoring.

Only if these conditions could be met would Oxfam America feel that our humanitarian
interventions in the Horn were consistent with our values and that the relief arms of the rebel
movements were reliable partners.

On examining the situation, we realized that the only way to reach this population was
through the relief wings of the rebel movements that controlled the territory where they lived
or, for those displaced, where they hoped to return. Only by working with the relief arms
of the rebel movements could Oxfam America gain access to the grassroots communities in
which we typically worked.

One troubling issue for Oxfam America and other humanitarian organizations supplying
relief food in conflict areas was that insurgents often lived in their communities and there
was no practical way to provide food aid to families in need without some of it going to feed
soldiers in the rebel movements. Delivering food aid to the rebel armies was out of the ques-
tion, of course, but everyone understood the complex reality on the ground. The calculation
was made that aid should always be targeted toward civilians—vulnerable women, children,
and the elderly—but that it could not be denied because some assistance might be passed on
to family members active in the insurgent movements.

True to our policy of working on both sides of conflicts, Oxfam America was at the same time
implementing emergency assistance, rehabilitation, and long-term development programs on
the government-controlled sides of each of the conflicts. In general Oxfam America staff and
consultants were deployed carefully in order to avoid the dangers of moving back and forth
between the two sides of a particular conflict. For instance, during the Ethiopian famine crisis,
Oxfam America’s Southern Africa program director was temporarily reassigned to assist with
the programming for the rebel-controlled areas of Eritrea and Tigray so that the Ethiopia pro-
gram director could focus on relief needs on the government-controlled side.

There were a few exceptions to this policy. For example, as the regional program director, I
visited both government and rebel-controlled areas from time to time. I never encountered
more than routine government delays in my visa and internal travel permit approvals for
Ethiopia and Sudan. I could have been denied them at any time and would not have been
surprised if this had happened. Fortunately, it never did.

THREE CONTRASTING EXPERIENCES

EPLF/Eritrean Relief Association (ERA)

Oxfam America did not seek to become identified with the rebel’s political or military objec-
tives any more than we sought to align ourselves with the political programs and ideologies
of the governments in Addis and Khartoum. In practice, that distinction became difficult to
draw, as the following examples illustrate.

By the time the severity of the Ethiopian famine gained worldwide attention in 1984,
Oxfam America was already supporting several initiatives for pastoralists and orphans in
the government-controlled area of that country. With the famine affecting millions of people
on both sides of the longstanding civil conflict in Eritrea, Oxfam America quickly put together a program of assistance to provide both emergency food aid and agricultural rehabilitation assistance to populations in need on both sides. In reality, the EPLF controlled most of rural Eritrea while the Ethiopian government controlled only Asmara, Eritrea’s capital city, the Red Sea port of Massawa and the major road (at least during the daylight hours) linking those two towns with Addis Ababa.

While numerous NGO channels for providing assistance existed on the government-controlled side under the watchful eye of Ethiopia’s Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, on the rebel side the Eritrean Relief Association (ERA) was the only option. No NGOs worked independently in EPLF-controlled areas; all worked through ERA or one of the EPLF commissions that served as quasi-government departments. Moreover, at the beginning of the 1983-1984 famine, the bulk of international assistance that poured into Ethiopia, including most official aid, went through channels on the government-controlled side. Only a handful of NGOs were willing to challenge the Ethiopian government by providing relief aid through Eritrea’s backdoor to Sudan.

Fortunately, ERA and the EPLF departments, known as commissions, proved to be effective and reliable partners for Oxfam America. Although clearly linked to the EPLF, ERA had a highly trained and professional staff with expertise in food aid, logistics, health care, construction, transport, agriculture, and other disciplines. ERA relied on the EPLF’s mass administration structures, well-organized transport and distribution systems, and locally elected people’s committees with their relief committees to identify the most seriously affected people and deliver appropriate relief assistance to them. Given Eritrea’s largely subsistence agrarian economy and the severe limitations imposed by the civil war—most agricultural production and other activities in the rebel-controlled areas took place early in the morning, late in the day or under cover of darkness in order to avoid bombing by government planes—ERA’s ability to deliver relief assistance as efficiently as it did was really quite remarkable.

ERA maintained an office in Khartoum, Sudan, and it was to the eastern region of Sudan that thousands of famine-affected Eritreans fled. With program infrastructure already in place in Sudan, Oxfam America initially addressed the effects of drought and war in Eritrea by providing assistance to Eritreans who fled to refugee camps in eastern Sudan. It was a natural extension of that relief effort to then try to assist those still remaining in Eritrea, hoping to keep as many in place as possible. If aid could be delivered to farmers in Eritrea before they ran out of food or assets, they could more quickly return to food production when war and weather conditions permitted.

From 1983 to 1985, Oxfam America made a series of large grants to ERA for emergency food aid. These were primarily grain (sorghum and millet for human consumption, as well as much-appreciated alfalfa and lablab for animal fodder), supplemental food, such as beans and oil, and trucks and an airlift for transport. Oxfam America staff and consultants were directly involved in the purchase in Sudan and delivery of various food, seed, and tools to the Eritrean border, where they were turned over to the EPLF’s internal distribution system for delivery to local distribution committees by truck and camel.

Starting in 1984 Oxfam America began providing inputs for agricultural rehabilitation such as seed, tools, and draft oxen to enable farmers to return to their farms and start producing food again. To expand our rehabilitation efforts, Oxfam America began working with the EPLF’s
Agricultural Commission which was highly organized and included trained agricultural extension workers in local communities. Oxfam America suggested to ERA that we concentrate on a discrete area. The Rora highland area in the Sahel region of western Eritrea was chosen because it had once been a productive agricultural area but had suffered heavy out-migration due to the war and drought, as well as significant environmental degradation. Oxfam America’s program included re-introduction of seed once cultivated in region but lost in recent years, and land-management techniques, including irrigation, terracing, and reforestation.

Over time Oxfam America developed a strong working relationship with ERA and the staff of the Agricultural and Construction Commissions of the EPLF. The following excerpt from an internal Oxfam America program update in 1986 conveys the strong sense of collaboration and trust that marked the relationship with ERA:

> While ERA is the humanitarian arm of an armed liberation movement… it continues to be a reliable and trustworthy partner with Oxfam America. ERA has provided reports and receipts in a timely manner and has responded to Oxfam's monitoring and evaluation requirements… ERA facilitated, within one day, the visit of the Africa Program Director and Oxfam's consultant to Eritrea. The journey to and from Himbol by the Program Director was made with an ERA driver in ERA transport. The consultant was accompanied by an ERA staff member during most of his journey, largely for translation purposes. Where possible, interviews were conducted in Arabic when no ERA staff presence was required. Although Oxfam America was encouraged to take its own transport into Eritrea to facilitate independent observations and interviews, this was not possible… ERA was seen again, therefore, to have a structure that continues to be used effectively for humanitarian activities: goods which Oxfam supplied did reach targeted peasant populations. All farmers spoke well of their activities and were aware of the distinction between ERA and the EPLF itself.

By 1990 Eritrea was affected by ongoing drought and Oxfam America was still providing milk powder and other emergency food aid through ERA, careful not to discourage local food production where it was happening. However, the civil war was never very far away.

Once, during a visit with Oxfam America’s agricultural consultant to the EPLF Agricultural Commission demonstration farm at Nacfa, we arrived at night and remained in a guesthouse – built into the side of a hill and camouflaged like all structures in the rebel-controlled area – for most of the following day. At around 4:00 pm we were taken out for a tour of the demonstration farm, as it was considered safe to venture outside because the Ethiopian government’s bombers normally returned to their bases by late afternoon. While standing in a field listening to the agricultural specialist’s commentary about the crops being tested at the farm, he stopped suddenly in mid-sentence. His well-trained ears had picked up the distant drone of airplane engines. He quickly ordered us to stand perfectly still and not to move an inch. I remember tilting my head slightly upward to see if I could spot the approaching bombers, at which point our Eritrean host anxiously shouted at me to remove my glasses immediately. I quickly did so, and I am pleased to report that the bombers passed by without incident.

After the EPLF extended its control over all of Eritrea in 1991 and established a provisional government, Oxfam America funded an agricultural research and training program, including crop genetic research station, through what had by that time become the Agricultural Department in the country’s capital, Asmara.
TPLF/Relief Society of Tigray (REST)

Tigray is a province of Ethiopia located in the northwest of that country bordering on Eritrea and Sudan. In many respects, Oxfam America’s experience with the Relief Society of Tigray mirrored that of working with ERA. As in Eritrea, Tigray’s rebel movement—the Tigray People’s Liberation Front—controlled much of the rural part of the province, gradually leaving the Ethiopian government in full control of only the regional capital, Mekele and, during the daytime at least, the main route in and out of that city.

Like their neighbors in Eritrea, when the rains failed for several years in succession in the early 1980s Tigrayan farmers exhausted their food reserves, consumed their seed stocks, and sold their agricultural tools and oxen to buy food. When their resources ran out, they headed for emergency food distribution centers in Tigray and across the border to refugee camps in Eastern Sudan. The civil war in Tigray made it impossible for farmers to plant at the right time, and, even when they could, collective farming policies imposed by the Ethiopian government prevented them from building up food or cash reserves to see them through drought years. The exceedingly poor rainfall over several successive years in the early 1980s only exacerbated the crisis.

Like ERA, the Relief Society of Tigray (REST) maintained an office in Khartoum with a professional staff. However, Oxfam America noted early on that, unlike ERA, REST senior staff included no women nor did the organization have a component to deal specifically with the needs of women, a serious omission given the central role of women in agricultural production. It was an issue that Oxfam America would raise with REST once the emergency situation was under control.

Oxfam America engaged a Sudanese consultant to purchase and monitor distribution of relief food and supplies through REST to the refugee camps and to distribution points within Tigray. In addition, Oxfam America funded some small-scale training activities for the refugees in an effort to equip them for some non-farming income-generating activities when they went home to Tigray. Oxfam America always received full accounting from REST for our grants, verified by independent Oxfam America monitoring with the full cooperation of REST.

Despite Oxfam America’s positive experience with REST, by 1987 two Oxfam America board members serving on the Africa subcommittee were uncomfortable with Oxfam America’s plans to shift from relief assistance to funding longer-term development work in Tigray. One board member who was an authority on the Horn of Africa emphasized the historical and political differences between Eritrea and Tigray. The EPLF’s political goal was complete independence for Eritrea; Ethiopia had annexed the former Italian colony in the 1960s. The TPLF’s aim, on the other hand, was regional autonomy from Ethiopia’s central government to be achieved within a national framework. This distinction, it was argued, justified a somewhat deeper level of Oxfam America engagement in Eritrea than in Tigray where Oxfam America support for development activities could be viewed as tilting toward the government. The Africa subcommittee agreed to the policy amendment. As a result, Oxfam America supported only emergency programs and refugee assistance for Tigray until the end of the civil war in 1991.

In May 1991, I embarked on a monitoring trip to Tigray organized by the REST office in Khartoum. With a REST staff person, fellow travelers from Euro-Action Accord and Community Aid Abroad (the Australian Oxfam), and donors to the relief and rehabilitation effort with REST, we set out with Oxfam America’s vehicle, driver, and agricultural consultant
for Gedaref, the major Sudanese town near the Ethiopian-Tigray border. After spending the night at the REST guest house in Gedaref, we proceeded to the border. Once there, we were told by our REST guide, who was in frequent contact with REST/Khartoum, that we would spend the night on the Sudan side of the border and cross the following morning. The next day we assembled at the vehicle, only to be told that we would have to wait. Later that day it was explained to us that the EPLF escort that would take us into Tigray had been delayed. We waited for two days. Arrangements for the escort would take several more days, we were told, so we returned to Gedaref. There we waited for nearly a week. At one point we were told that flash flooding on the Tekeze River, which we would have to cross once inside Tigray, made it impossible to proceed.

Delays were nothing new. One had to be very flexible to travel in Africa and this was especially true in rebel-controlled areas. Even so, we began to sense that we were not being told the whole truth about the reasons for our delay. We were right. After a week in Gedaref, hoping to resume our trip any day, we learned from the local newspapers that a coalition of rebel forces (including the TPLF) had entered Addis Ababa and that Ethiopia’s brutal dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam had fled the country. More relevant to our situation was the fact that the Ethiopian army based at Mekele had fled into the countryside and was reported to be heading toward the relative safety of the Sudanese border, precisely the area we had expected to enter a few days earlier. REST’s excuses for not taking our group into Tigray were now understood as a way of keeping us out of harm’s way at a time of uncertainty and unpredictable military movements in the region. Clearly, REST was told to keep us on the Sudanese side of the border but not to tell us what was actually happening. Because of the ongoing security threat posed by desperate Ethiopian soldiers on the loose in Tigray, we returned to Khartoum, our mission aborted.

After the TPLF consolidated control over Tigray when the Mengistu regime was toppled in 1991, the TPLF became part of the formal provincial administration, now free to run Tigray’s affairs without the historical interference by Amhara administrations in Addis Ababa. Moreover, the TPLF leadership became the dominant faction in Ethiopia’s new post-Mengistu national government.

With the constraints of the 1987 board policy no longer applicable, Oxfam America expanded its program in the region to include short-term aid (for example, emergency medical supplies, and grinding mills for relief food), through REST, as well as longer-term development activities (such as a soil and water conservation, small-scale irrigation and a seed bank), working primarily with Tigray’s Agriculture Department. Oxfam America joined the Tigray Transport and Agriculture Consortium (TTAC), composed of representatives from REST, other provincial departments, and a number of European NGOs supporting and coordinating relief and rehabilitation activities in the province. I attended several meetings of the TTAC at Mekele aimed at planning and raising funds for the considerable reconstruction and rehabilitation needs of the war-ravaged province. In 1992 Oxfam America funded a women’s project officer position within REST, the first of its kind for that organization.

Working with REST was a positive experience. Oxfam America was allowed access to farmers and their communities; we received good financial reports on our grants; and we were able to do independent monitoring. REST protected Oxfam America staff from danger even though it was frustrating to be kept in the dark about military activities.
SPLA/Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association (SRRA)

Oxfam America’s work in Sudan began in the mid 1980s with a relief and agricultural rehabilitation program in the drought-affected government-controlled northern and western parts of the country, and support for a project in the government-controlled southern capital city of Juba. Some of Oxfam America’s work in the north took the form of assistance to the growing number of displaced people from the civil war in the south who had fled to camps around the capital Khartoum. From them, we learned about the desperate conditions in Sudan’s three southern provinces (Upper Nile, Bahr el Ghazal, and Equatoria), a huge undeveloped area with few roads and inhabited mainly by cattle herders and subsistence farmers. The southern region had been left out of Khartoum’s national development plans, and the Muslim-dominated government in the north threatened to impose strict Islamic law on the largely non-Muslim south. When oil was discovered in a southern area bordering the North, Khartoum re-drew the provincial boundaries to ensure full control over the valuable resource.

As in Ethiopia, Oxfam America’s objective was to help on both sides of the conflict, if possible, so we started to look at out how we might work in the SPLA-controlled areas of Southern Sudan. The Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association (SRRA) was the relief arm of the rebel Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM), which had been waging an armed struggle since the early 1980s through the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) against the Khartoum government for regional autonomy and a fair share of national development resources. In 1989 Oxfam America engaged a Kenya-based agricultural consultant and the two of us began discussions with the SRRA office in Nairobi.

Much like ERA and REST, the SRRA was divided into departments. The SRRA staff we met and came to know were well-trained men and women in their respective fields, such as health, education, agriculture, and relief assistance. Oxfam America worked primarily with the agricultural coordinator, an engaging fellow who had received training in the United States and was quite technically proficient.

The SRRA agricultural coordinator welcomed Oxfam America’s interest in focusing our assistance on a specific community, as we had done in Eritrea. He suggested one of many communities that had not so far received any attention from other relief agencies. The place was called Chukudum, an area of mainly grassland and savannah with good agricultural potential near the border with Uganda. In better times the community had been an exporter of food for the region and a thriving center of commerce; a former agricultural research station there now lay in ruins. But since the civil war had swept through Chukudum two years before, farmers had abandoned their fields in the fertile valley to seek safety in nearby mountains.

Working with SRRA, the consultant and I made a trip to Chukudum to assess the situation and develop a program for Oxfam America. With our hired Land Rover and Kenyan driver, we were met at Kapoeta inside southern Sudan by the SRRA agricultural coordinator and an SPLA guard who would accompany us to Chukudum. That visit coincided with the first delivery of relief supplies to the southern region by the UN’s Operation Lifeline Sudan. The UN operation did not start off well. The initial relief convoy of trucks out of Kapoeta to Torit was attacked by local bandits, food was looted and the lead truck was burned. Most of the convoy returned to Kapoeta to regroup and our own travel to Chukudum was delayed for several days until the road could be secured by the SPLA.
When we finally arrived in Chukudum, the local paramount chief and sub-chiefs welcomed us warmly. The village was largely abandoned and we hiked into the nearby mountains to see where most of the people were living. Not much food could be grown there, so people were barely existing on a diet of leaves, roots, and berries. An unexpected consequence of our visit was that, upon seeing the first visitors in years from outside the area, the people of Chukudum began to speculate that it might be safe for them to return to their farms, which they longed to do.

Following our first visit to Chukudum, the people gradually began to come down from the mountains. Oxfam America funded a program of relief food, seed, and agricultural tools to help them restart their farming activities. Once immediate food needs were met and local food production was under way again, over the next several years Oxfam America supported additional and complementary activities at Chukudum including a seed bank, tool production, an agricultural marketing program, as well as school and medical supplies for the community. A women’s group was formed and Oxfam America worked with it to identify its top priorities, leading to funding of mechanical grinding mills and a poultry project. All of this work was coordinated through the SRRA, which provided advice and facilitated our access to the community but otherwise allowed Oxfam America to work on our own.

From the start, it was apparent that SRRA lacked the organizational capacity, staff, and resources of either ERA or REST. Consequently, the bulk of Oxfam America’s funding went directly to suppliers and transporters rather than to SRRA directly. Moreover, SRRA was unable to piggyback on the kind of extensive governance and administrative structures that had been set up by both the EPLF and TPLF in the areas under their control. The SRRA’s effectiveness depended on good working relationships with traditional local chiefs. Furthermore, tribal tensions within the SPLA, whose leadership was dominated by members of the Dinka tribe, would eventually lead to a split in the movement. Though SRRA staff included men and women of various southern tribes, as we would learn, SRRA humanitarian activities and the SPLA itself were viewed with distrust by some non-Dinka communities, including Chukudum. Friction between various tribes weakened the SPLA and SRRA, eventually with serious consequences for Oxfam America. Moreover, it became apparent to me that the lines between the SRRA and the SPLA were not as clear as those between ERA or REST and their respective political/military wings. There were times when I was not sure whether the individual I was speaking to was SRRA or SPLA, as the same individuals were active in both.

Nevertheless, it was also clear that SRRA staff were trying valiantly to do what they could with few resources in a very difficult situation. The historic neglect of the southern region was compounded by the devastation of the civil war, the massive displacement of population, and the lack of infrastructure to facilitate relief activities, let alone the enormous rehabilitation and development needs of the region. Since the start of Operation Lifeline Sudan and increased media attention generally to the plight of Southern Sudan—Oxfam America succeeded at this time in getting the Bush administration to issue the first-ever White House statement of concern about the humanitarian crisis in Southern Sudan—the demands on the SRRA from relief organizations were simply overwhelming its limited capacity.

After a series of discussions with SRRA, Oxfam America agreed to fund the creation of an SRRA staff training facility. Several substantial brick buildings that had been part of the former agricultural research station at Chukudum were refurbished and equipped as classrooms.
and dormitories. Doors, windows, chairs, tables, beds, blackboards, audiovisual equipment, a generator and other supplies were trucked in from Kenya. It was a place where SRRA field staff from throughout Southern Sudan could stay and receive training over a period of days and weeks on a continuing basis. I visited the site later when it was in full use for its intended purpose—as well as one that had not been contemplated. On a steamy tropical evening, I joined what seemed like most of the children and many of the adults of Chukudum in an outdoor space around the training center’s generator-powered television set to watch a video of the American movie “Home Alone.” The film, a comedy about a little boy inadvertently left behind by his parents set in wintertime Chicago, was a big hit. The clash of cultures was mind-boggling but no one seemed to notice but me.

I made a number of trips to Chukudum, usually with Oxfam America’s Nairobi-based agricultural consultant and twice with our director of education programs from Boston. These visits were always coordinated through the SRRA and by extension with the SPLA, which was responsible for our security. As time went on, my trust in our partnership with the SRRA/SPLA began to erode, as illustrated by the following two anecdotes.

In 1992, after traveling by road north from Nairobi and crossing the border into Sudan we reached the UN camp at Kapoeta, where I had stayed on previous trips. The plan was to proceed the next day to Chukudum, normally about a five hour trip over what passed for roads in that region. However, the SRRA staff explained that we would not be able to leave for Chukudum right away. Local bandits, we were told, were raiding vehicles on the road and it was not safe at the moment to travel in the direction of Chukudum. We waited a few days. Then we were told that flash floods had washed out part of the road and a crude bridge needed to be repaired before we could proceed. It would take several more days. Again, we passed the time at the UN camp, at times scurrying for protection into trenches when the sound of unscheduled planes approached and spending one entire day in the bush miles from the camp because of the heightened threat of government bombing of Kapoeta. After several more days of waiting, the SRRA returned to inform us that we could not proceed to Chukudum. We would have to come back another time.

The frustration of traveling so far, only to be turned away on the final leg of the journey was excruciating. I wondered, and not for the first time, if I was being told the whole story by the SRRA. I suspected that I was not and that the reason had to do with the movements of the SPLA. It was at this point that I began to speculate that the SRRA training facility Oxfam America had rehabilitated at Chukudum had been taken over by John Garang, the SPLA leader, and his military command. I had been told on previous visits by Chukudum locals that Garang and his army had been in the area on occasion. While I was not able to prove it, my strong suspicion is that the reason I was not able to travel to Chukudum on that visit was that Garang and his top commanders were in residence at the SRRA training facility at Chukudum, a fact the SRRA would clearly not want me to know as it would violate the agreement on which the Oxfam America’s funding had been given and end any possibility of further support. SRRA, of course, denied that this was the case.

My own gnawing suspicion on this occasion fed into a larger aura of mistrust that was beginning to permeate the SPLA and SRRA. With the war against the north going badly and the 1992 split of the movement into two factions, the general atmosphere among the SRRA, SPLA, and people at Chukudum was increasingly tense and suspicious. In an unguarded moment, an SRRA worker revealed to me that he had heard speculation in the movement that I actually
worked for the CIA. The idea was, of course, complete nonsense, but it underscored the growing strain in the relationship between Oxfam America and the SRRA. Moreover, the SPLA was already at odds with some of the local non-Dinka tribes in areas it nominally controlled, a situation that ultimately brought an end to Oxfam America’s involvement with Chukudum the following year.

In 1993, SRRA requested Oxfam America to provide some vaccine for the small health post at Chukudum in response to a meningitis outbreak in the area. Because it coincided with a monitoring trip I planned to make, it was agreed that Oxfam America would purchase the needed medicine in Nairobi and bring it by road to Chukudum. Just before crossing the border from Kenya into Sudan, an Oxfam America agricultural consultant, driver, and I were joined in our Land Rover by an SPLA officer, as was frequently the case, to provide protection against bandits, cattle raiders, landmines, and any other dangers we might encounter.

A few hours away from Chukudum we stopped at a village, and I noticed the SPLA officer off to the side engaged in intense discussion with the local chief. He said nothing as we resumed our journey toward our final destination. A few miles from Chukudum, our conversation was interrupted by the sharp pop-pop of gunfire coming from across a field to our right. Terrified, we fled into the grassland and trees to the left of the road, with the sound of gunfire all the while coming closer. We became separated and I eventually hid and later found my way to a nearby village. The local chief explained that tensions between the SPLA and local people had been running high and that the SPLA had attacked several villages the day before. People had been killed and many tukuls, the traditional round huts, were burned to the ground. When people from one of the villages that had been attacked heard our vehicle on the road, they assumed it was the SPLA coming back and attacked to avenge the previous day’s violence. When they learned the vehicle was Oxfam America’s and carried medicine for Chukudum, they were horrified. As I would see the next day, our Land Rover had been looted and burned, and the medicine gone. I was also shown one of the still smoldering villages from the SPLA attack two days before. Thanks to the Catholic priest at Chukudum and his truck, I was reunited the next day with my colleagues, but I never saw the SPLA officer again. Our main concern was to get our driver—who had been shot in the foot—for proper medical care. The priest drove us all the way back to the UN camp at Lokichoggio in northern Kenya where we caught relief flights back to Nairobi.

In hindsight, I am convinced the SPLA officer traveling with us knew about the tensions in the area around Chukudum and had been informed about the previous day’s incident when we stopped at the village along the way. For whatever reason, he decided not to advise us of the potentially dangerous situation that lay ahead, and we suffered the consequences.

The reality was that Oxfam America could not continue to work in the region without relying on the SRRA/SPLA for security, and we no longer had full confidence in them. Reluctantly, Oxfam America made the decision to suspend our Southern Sudan program. Because I had great respect for the dedicated SRRA staff as well as the good people of Chukudum that I had come to know personally, I felt an enormous sense of sadness and regret.
CONCLUSION

What general conclusions can be drawn from Oxfam America’s experience with the three rebel movements in the Horn of Africa? First, it has to be said that involvement with the humanitarian wings of rebel movements was not only possible but in most cases highly productive. Not only was Oxfam America able to provide emergency assistance to neglected populations in a timely and accountable manner, but we were able to shift our focus at the appropriate time to providing urgently needed agricultural rehabilitation and community development assistance in discrete communities.

While ERA, REST, and SRRA differed from one another in various ways, they all provided Oxfam America with access to communities in need, local technical expertise and essential security to do our work. So long as practical opportunities existed for us to apply our usual participatory approach to working with grassroots communities, to support their needs and aspirations, to conduct independent monitoring, and to receive full financial accounting for the use of our funds, there were good reasons to work with these organizations. Oxfam America encountered its share of problems working in rebel-controlled areas, but the same could be said of working with government authorities in the areas they controlled.

Internally for Oxfam America, it was critical to have the backing of our board of directors for the work we did with the rebel movements. They viewed Oxfam America’s engagement with them as the principled thing to do, but nevertheless risky for the organization and our staff. We had to be clear with the board and the staff as well as the relief arms of the rebel movements about our neutral role, our strictly humanitarian objectives, and the conditions under which we would engage with them.

At the same time, it is illusory to think about working with the humanitarian arms of rebel movements while avoiding completely their political and military wings. After all, access and security when traveling in rebel-controlled areas are completely dependent on their military capacities. Principle must be flexible enough to accommodate reality. While benefiting from the rebels’ protection and hospitality, it was also important to be clear that Oxfam America as an organization, despite whatever personal sympathies staff might harbor, neither supported nor opposed their political agendas. Nor could we in any way be seen as supporting their war tactics, some of which were frankly abhorrent. Of course, the same standard applied to working with the relief arms of the governments in Addis and Khartoum with respect to the areas they controlled.

In the end, shared humanitarian concerns, professional respect and mutual trust were the mainstays of Oxfam America’s relationships with the rebel movements. Of these, perhaps trust was the most critical ingredient. With ERA and REST, trust grew over time and was never betrayed during my work with these organizations. With SRRA, trust grew more slowly and ultimately faltered due to factors internal to the SPLA. Overall, Oxfam America charted an appropriate and careful course with the rebel movements, making a substantial contribution at a crucial time to relief and rehabilitation among some of the most difficult-to-reach people in the Horn of Africa.
POSTSCRIPT

The three rebel movements and Oxfam America’s relationship with them have evolved in very different ways since the early 1990s. After Eritrea’s formal independence following a referendum in 1993, the Eritrean Relief Association became the quasi-governmental Eritrean Relief and Rehabilitation Association (ERRA) with an expanded mandate to coordinate the rebuilding of the war-ravaged and severely underdeveloped country. Sadly, since independence, the environment for foreign aid organizations in Eritrea has deteriorated dramatically. Due to increasingly repressive policies on the part of Eritrea’s government, which views international aid agencies as undermining the country’s self-reliance, most foreign NGOs have withdrawn. Oxfam America no longer funds projects in Eritrea.

On the other hand, the Relief Society of Tigray, today the largest operational NGO in Tigray, continues to be an Oxfam America partner. The organization has developed a sophisticated public relations capability, with numerous fundraising visits and events in North America and Europe, resulting in a long list of international donors today. Oxfam America is currently supporting an innovative weather insurance program for farmers implemented by REST and other Ethiopian partners. Oxfam America continues to have an extensive program in other parts of Ethiopia.

In Sudan, Oxfam America still does not fund in the Southern region where a peace agreement was brokered between the Khartoum government and the SPLM in 2005. The Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association continues to operate in Sudan’s southern three provinces. However, in early 2009, Oxfam America published a policy report on US aid to Southern Sudan, advocating for an increase in the amount and quality of aid the US government is providing southern Sudan.1

Oxfam America today is providing significant support to a range of partners in the Darfur region of western Sudan, who provide access to clean water, public health education programs, access to small loans, and engage in peace building activities to alleviate the continuing humanitarian crisis that began in 2003.

1 Oxfam America, Smart Development in Practice: Field Report from Southern Sudan, [2009].
CHAPTER 16

The Power of Words, Pictures, and People: Reflections on Oxfam Communications

Sylvia Sukop

For Oxfam America’s communication was as integral to its strategy as its grant making. It consistently sought to shift public perceptions around complex issues of poverty, so that the public would support genuine solutions that addressed root causes. A central part of this reframing was to portray the dignity and capability of the people and communities with which it worked, treating them as purposeful actors rather than victims. The author’s involvement in Oxfam America communications was a formative experience for her and it influenced her careers in significant ways.

In late June 2007, more than 75 former staff gathered in Boston for what was billed as an “Oxfam ‘80s Reunion.” We packed a small Thai restaurant in Jamaica Plain for dinner on Saturday night, and then expanded on Sunday, with families in tow, into a soaring, modern, sunlit hall at Brandeis University for a long and lively lunch. We never seemed to stop talking, even as we posed for a group portrait, spilling all the way down the grand staircase. It was amazing just to see everyone’s faces again, all of us older now but smiles still fresh and our affection for each other and for the years we had shared still palpable.

Workplace reunions are rare, far less common than family and school reunions, so when they occur one might rightfully ask, “What made this workplace so special?” Why would a group of people not affiliated by blood or faith or alma mater choose to participate in such an unusual but no less spirited homecoming? In my own case, why did I skip my 25th college reunion that same month in favor of attending Oxfam’s?

The answer may be different for everyone, but I suspect it has something to do with the distinctive ideals and values behind the mission that has shaped Oxfam America’s work—and workplace—from its founding until today. These include compassion and mutual respect,
People who applied for jobs at Oxfam were usually looking for more than just a job. They were looking for comrades concerned with the root causes and, hence, the politics of global poverty and hunger. They were humanitarians who rejected the facile notions of charity that dominated mainstream approaches to aid and that failed to acknowledge the United States’s own culpability in promoting the very conditions that led to suffering and need. Some were motivated by a desire to make amends by taking personal responsibility in light of their government’s failures. They were critical of US foreign aid and military intervention, and challenged international trade and loan policies that reinforce poverty. They were eager to correct stereotypes and condescending cultural attitudes in relation to the so-called Third World. And they were looking to join a community of like-minded people who shared these goals and were committed to taking action and mobilizing others through grassroots organizing.

At the heart of our struggle was what has since come to be known as “framing” — a way to shift public perception and understanding of complex issues — and the Oxfam I experienced as a young communications professional was every bit the revolutionary training ground in this struggle. At the time, Oxfam funded projects in more than 30 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Staff at every level attended brown-bag lunch seminars to hear reports and recommendations from program officers just returned from the field, or from policy analysts who rigorously debunked the myths of hunger and poverty and showed how no disaster was entirely “natural.” The maps on our walls were Peters Projection, rendering the world’s landmasses more accurately than the maps we grew up with. When there were demonstrations in Boston or Washington, we were out in full force, marching in our Oxfam T-shirts. On the historic day when Nelson Mandela was released from prison (Feb. 11, 1990), many of us gathered at a downtown Boston church to celebrate his freedom after 27 years and the turning point it represented in black South Africa’s struggle against white oppression.

I am forever grateful to my many teachers in the “school of Oxfam” including Joel Charny (Cambodia); Monawar Sultana (India and Bangladesh); Rob Buchanan, Jill Harmsworth, Laura Kullenberg, and Deborah Toler (Africa); Jethro Pettit (Central America and the Caribbean); Kathy McAfee (policy); and Katherine Yih (research). Thanks to Oxfam’s many project partners who visited us in Boston over the years, staff members were also privileged to hear firsthand from “visiting faculty” like Latin American indigenous leaders Rigoberta Menchu and Evaristo Ngukuag.

As press officer for the first three of my six years at Oxfam, beginning in 1984, I handled media relations aimed primarily at the New England market and key national print and broadcast outlets. I pitched stories, drafted op-eds, arranged press tours, and trained our staff for interviews. I also traveled in Sudan and Cambodia to photograph and report on Oxfam...
projects and gave a speaking tour of college campuses to support the Fast for a World Harvest campaign.

For my last three years, through 1990, I served as Oxfam’s chief editor and publications director, pleased to take a break from the capriciousness of the media—because as every publicist knows, what you put into it does not always match what you get out. Now with more control over the final product of my labors, I edited the quarterly Oxfam News along with annual reports, direct mail, grant proposals, and Congressional testimony. I worked closely with the Education, Development, and Policy Departments, and I was honored to be part of a creative and energetic communications team that included Phillip Martin and Rachel Zoll, under Executive Director John Hammock. It was a wonderfully complementary team, anchored by John’s humility and spiritual grounding, energized by Phil’s chutzpah and humor, and elevated by Rachel’s intellect and sense of irony. It felt like a family and I remember taking daily pleasure in our work and camaraderie, and tremendous satisfaction in what we accomplished together.

Of course, there were differences and struggles within Oxfam, not only between management and staff but often of a political nature. Our idealism was constantly being tested, both by the external battles we waged on behalf of the world’s poor and by internal dissent in the home office. People would disagree about the best strategy to achieve a shared goal, for example, or when to compromise for the sake of consensus; in at least one case a staff member resigned over that kind of disagreement. At the same time, the phrase “political correctness” had newly entered our progressive lexicon and, for better or worse, made us sensitive to even lighthearted charges of ideological rigidity.

After Oxfam staff became unionized through SEIU, I served for a time as a shop steward and so was keenly aware of various fault lines during contract negotiations or when staff voted to take action against a management policy. I spent many a late evening huddled around a computer with fellow union members as we strove to articulate our position in written statements that harkened back to those core values we all shared, trying to bridge whatever it was that seemed to separate us in that moment. I remember these as my most stressful times within the organization, but they also demonstrate my abiding faith in words—to make whole, to make peace, to make change.

* * *

The key defining event of my six years at Oxfam came right at the beginning.

A now-famous BBC television report—broadcast in the US by NBC News on October 23, 1984—sparked what would become the largest disaster relief effort in history. Shocking scenes of famine in Ethiopia and emaciated babies swarmed by flies were beamed into American homes where families would shortly sit down to Thanksgiving dinner, their biggest feast of the year. This powerful juxtaposition between the Horn of Africa and our own horn of plenty penetrated public consciousness and created—for better or worse—the perfect media storm.

Oxfam and other NGOs working in the region were already well aware of the mounting crisis in Ethiopia, but their pleas for emergency assistance had been largely ignored. It took the mass media, the coincidence of approaching holidays, and a parade of celebrities to turn it
into a true cause célèbre. British rocker Bob Geldof, moved by the BBC report, enlisted a bevy of other pop stars to form Band Aid and record the single, “Do They Know It’s Christmas?” The song (its problematic title notwithstanding) became an instant hit and ultimately raised more than £8 million ($10.4 million). USA for Africa, another star-studded group of 45 musical artists, followed up with “We Are the World,” written by Michael Jackson and Lionel Ritchie and produced by Quincy Jones; revenues from the single, the album, the video and related merchandise generated more than $63 million for famine relief. And in July 1985, Geldof staged the Live Aid concerts in London and Philadelphia, broadcast globally, which raised another $100 million for famine relief. Oxfam America experienced its own huge influx of donations, with its annual revenues more than doubling from $6,666,042 in FY 1984 to $16,869,600 in FY 1985.

That summer of 1985, hunger in Africa was omnipresent, a pop cultural phenomenon. But like any fashion, it was soon on the way out and the discourse shifted to one of “famine fatigue.”

Most relief agencies used photographs of starving children to raise money. Such images neatly positioned the viewer/donor as rescuer/savior and bestowed a kind of grace on the giver and absolution from further responsibility. Some donors would even keep a photo of the child they “saved.” But given that starvation is the end phase of an extended process with social, economic, biological, and political dimensions, unfolding over time, such images skipped right over more complicated questions of how a particular child came to be starving. That part of the film was left on the cutting room floor.

Oxfam, by contrast, deployed more “empowering” images. We emphasized that Oxfam was a relief and development agency. The development part meant that we were working in a country before, during, and after emergencies, supporting farmers and community-based initiatives, with the goal of enabling poor people to exercise their right to manage their own lives. Oxfam used images of Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans who were strong, smiling, active, and seemingly self-sufficient. They chopped wood, harvested crops, sifted grain, gathered firewood and water, wove baskets and textiles, built houses, fed their children, cared for animals. (Critics might well have asked whether the semiotic pendulum had swung too far. Did no one suffer or starve in the countries where Oxfam worked?) In this visual equation, the viewer/donor was positioned as a partner/investor in projects—read: success stories—that were already underway.

*Boston Globe* photographer Stan Grossfeld won the 1985 Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography for his searing black-and-white images of Ethiopian famine victims, some of which were taken in camps and communities to which Oxfam helped him gain access. Although he made the photographs available to Oxfam’s communications office, we decided not to use them because they were not in keeping with our more “empowering” approach. Still, I have great respect for Grossfeld and his work, and he generously designated Oxfam as the beneficiary of proceeds from the sale of his photographs at a Newbury Street gallery that year.

Timing is everything in the news business. Then as now the window for international reporting was extremely limited. Whether a story gets ink or air time, and what its impact will be, greatly depends on what else is happening at that moment.
In November 1984, we had gone to great lengths to schedule John Hammock, just returned from his own fact-finding trip to Ethiopia, to appear on one of the national morning news shows out of New York. He was literally standing in the wings, about to go on, when his appearance was suddenly called off. The “baboon heart baby,” the first child ever to receive a heart transplant from an animal, had died. Tragic as that story was, its total displacement of John’s report on the Horn of Africa—where millions of lives were at stake—seemed grossly out of proportion.

In addition to the Ethiopian famine, other urgent issues of the Reagan-Bush 1980s included the US-backed conflict in Central America, war in Sudan and Namibia, violence in Sri Lanka, floods in Bangladesh, earthquakes in El Salvador, and hurricanes in the Caribbean. Our communications department always brought to the fore the politics of a crisis situation and at one point developed an effective series of behind-the-headlines analyses of mainstream news articles about countries where Oxfam worked. We would dissect the article by highlighting phrases that reflected political bias or were just plain wrong and, in the margins, would offer a different viewpoint or a correction. Our prototype was a recurring feature we had seen in Harper’s magazine.

While US administrations and foreign locales may have changed over the years, the triggers of devastation and disaster remain the same, as a glance at Oxfam America’s Web site on any given day will testify.

* * *

The advent of digital media—the Internet as well as digital photography and video—has had a dramatic impact on communications at all nonprofit organizations and perhaps especially those involved in social change. Call-to-action fliers that used to be mailed or handed out to dozens or hundreds of people can now reach thousands or millions in a single e-mail blast; footage from a protest or a disaster site can be Webcast live or widely circulated within a matter of hours; petitions and letters to policymakers can be signed with a click. Still, getting global poverty on the radar with so many other urgent causes competing for attention remains a challenge. Attention spans are short and the issues are complex and hard to convey in a brief email bulletin.

It’s hard to imagine that Oxfam did not even have a Web site until the late 1990s. The sheer reach and speed and content-capacity of this new communications tool cannot be overstated. In the late 1980s our communications staff numbered three. In 2008, the Web team alone has three members, in a communications staff of 31. The Web has become an important tool in fundraising and currently roughly 15% of donations are made online. Back in the 1980s the circulation of Oxfam News, our newsprint newsletter, peaked at approximately 100,000; in 2008 Oxfam America regularly sent e-mail bulletins to triple this number, as well as maintaining a list of 115,000 e-activists who have taken at least one action on behalf of an Oxfam advocacy effort. This giant leap in scale of communications corresponded to a leap in income and organizational growth.
Oxfam has at times gained access to even wider audiences by piggybacking on Internet powerhouses like MoveOn.org.\(^1\) I suppose that Oxfam is the progressive movement’s NGO of choice when it comes to emergency response because it is progressive, secular, and independent of US government funding. The folks at Oxfam don’t play the heroic role of “parachute humanitarians” coming into a situation at the last minute. Rather, they are there for the long haul, partnering with local organizations around the world and supporting sustainable solutions. On the home front, they are consistently critical and activist through their grassroots engagement with college campuses and progressive faith-based organizations, and their advocacy work with policymakers on Capitol Hill.

But could an e-mail ever have the same impact as that BBC/NBC television report once did? I doubt it. While an email campaign might mobilize supporters of a cause to take effective action in support of a specific goal, it is not likely to generate instant mass awareness of an issue. We lived in a much less fragmented media world back in 1984. Network TV viewership was more concentrated and, it’s worth noting, less jaded by depictions of “reality.” Today no single news broadcast or e-mail or YouTube video clip is likely to have that kind of sweeping impact.

I spoke earlier of my faith in words. What about images? As a writer and a photographer I am continually negotiating between the two. One never seems complete, or sufficient, without the other and yet they don’t always work in harmony either.

Whenever I gave a public talk about Oxfam I would be confronted with the images-versus-words dilemma. Although I would show slides of the projects I had visited, my more important goal was to share information about that particular country or community, what had led to current conditions there, and what kinds of long-term systemic and policy changes were needed. I soon discovered how pictures could actually get in the way of such information because invariably the audience would begin asking for the story behind the picture, taking time and attention away from my intended remarks.

Photographs have an ineffable emotional power that goes straight to the heart. And because pictures do not speak for themselves we want someone to speak for them. They are wide open to individual projections and interpretations, anxieties, and fantasies—narratives that tend to reinforce our existing beliefs, attitudes, and ideologies, rather than telling us something new. All of photography rests on the most literal act of framing, yet I firmly believe it takes words to really make people see things differently.

At Oxfam I became increasingly troubled by the fact that my job compelled me to traffic in images of people I did not know, submitting their faces, bodies, and identities to narratives

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\(^1\) MoveOn.org highlighted Oxfam America as an effective humanitarian agency in the Spring of 2003 as concern grew about the potential humanitarian impact on civilians of the Iraq War. Oxfam, concerned about its reputation as a non-partisan organization, eventually asked to be removed from the Web site as MoveOn became more stridently critical of the war and President Bush. This did not represent a breach, however, and MoveOn directed some of the funds it raised for the 2004 tsunami to Oxfam.
utterly outside their control. It seemed to fly in the face of what Oxfam stood for. Yet our work (on behalf of those very people) depended on it.

I ultimately left Oxfam to attend graduate school, not only to advance my studies in photography but also to better understand how images actually operate, and why they succeed or fail in meeting the objectives we set for them.

Photography is a powerful medium but it does have serious limitations, among them its conditions of creation, selection, dissemination, and reception. And in any case, bearing witness to suffering (by looking at a photograph) is different from addressing it. We cannot depend on photographs to change the world. Only people—informed and inspired—can change the world. And it remains the task of succeeding generations of communications professionals to inform and inspire using all the tools at their disposal.

The Oxfam ‘80s Reunion brought back many memories, and when I was invited to reflect on my years there, I realized that the arc of Oxfam’s influence in my life could be traced right up to the present. Personally and professionally, working at Oxfam remains one of my most formative experiences, and I gather the same is true for many of my colleagues. Several went on after Oxfam to start their own nonprofit organizations and a high proportion have continued to work for social change, whether locally, nationally, or internationally.

Throughout graduate school in the early 1990s I continued to be preoccupied by Oxfam’s themes. I conceived and organized an interdisciplinary conference at NYU—“Famine in the Media Age: The Politics of Aid and Representation” in June 1994—examining the cultural and political dimensions of world hunger, timed with the 10th anniversary of the Ethiopian famine crisis. I enlisted eight different academic departments as co-sponsors, from Nutrition and Journalism to Education and Africana Studies. Participants included writers and photographers, nutritionists and health workers, food aid specialists and policy makers, educators and activists, historians and cultural critics. Partial funding was provided by an Oxfam board member, Michael Shimkin.

The following year I helped NYU’s Ireland House organize its May 1995 International Conference on Hunger, marking the 150th anniversary of the start of the Great Irish Famine. At that conference, keynote speaker Mary Robinson, then President of Ireland, was joined by 40 renowned scholars in the humanities and sciences—including the future Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, Seamus Deane, Homi K. Bhaba, and Terry Eagleton, along with my friends and fellow Oxfam alumni Joel Charny, Michael Sheridan, and Deborah Toler, and former Oxfam board chair, J. Larry Brown.

As they grappled with issues both historical and contemporary, speakers at both conferences brought to the subject of famine a depth of analysis and complexity of understanding that one could only wish for in the mass media. The absence of more enlightened, ongoing public discussion of these issues remains as serious a problem today as it was 25 years ago.
Joel Charny, one of the organizers of the Oxfam ’80s Reunion (along with Anuradha Desai and Laura Roper), said he was motivated by a desire to stay connected with former colleagues. He had been upset to find out, too long after the fact, that several of his closest Oxfam colleagues had died. He didn’t want that to happen again.

Staying connected, keeping in touch, being in communication—these are all signs of life and of the persistence of the unique and ever-expanding intentional community that was and still is Oxfam. To borrow a phrase from ACT-UP, fellow activists who also got their start in the 1980s, if silence = death, communication = life.

This essay is lovingly dedicated to my comrades at Oxfam America and at Blue Mountain Center where it was written during a residency in 2007.
CHAPTER 17

Expanding and Formalizing Oxfam America’s Advocacy Agenda, 1987–1998

James Arena-DeRosa

Although Oxfam America had engaged in the occasional foray to Washington from its earliest days, by the mid- to late-1980s there was no policy or advocacy staff working at Oxfam America. Yet, at its core, the agency rhetoric was still replete with intimations that government policy—particularly US policy—lay at the root of many problems in the Global South. To genuinely address this challenge, Oxfam America needed a sustained program of engagement with policymakers in Washington, DC. This paper tells the story of how Oxfam America’s formal Public Advocacy Program was built.

INTRODUCTION

Today, it is probably fair to say that Oxfam is known nearly as well for its advocacy work as it is for its humanitarian and development work overseas. Even Oxfam America, which has struggled for recognition in the US, competing with larger and more aptly named peer organizations such as CARE and Save the Children, has substantially raised its policy profile, particularly in key areas, such as trade and agriculture.

Oxfam did not start out as an advocacy organization. However, because of its focus on the structural causes of poverty, it necessarily had to consider not only the policies of the US government but those of Southern governments and international organizations, such as the World Bank, as well.

Increased advocacy presented both internal and external dynamic challenges to the agency, given a changing political context that began with the proxy wars of the Reagan years, to the initial euphoria of the end of the Cold War, and eventually to what we perceived as a more open Democratic administration. This optimism was then tempered by a cruel series of particularly violent localized conflicts and the growing realization of the widespread, adverse impacts of structural adjustment policies on the poor. Each of these shifts challenged Oxfam
America to develop a deeper and more rigorous analytical capacity, a skill that Oxfam America sometimes lacked. It also required constant negotiation between regional offices and US-based staff to choose the issues, develop appropriate positions, and figure out the division of labor between Oxfam America and its partners and allies. These negotiations grew more complex when Oxfam International was founded and Oxfam America found itself in a complex alliance. This paper explores the evolution of Oxfam’s advocacy capacity during my time at Oxfam (1987–1998) and is based on my notes, internal Oxfam America documents, and my personal reflections from 10 years of building and ultimately running the Public Advocacy Program.

**BACKGROUND: EARLY FITS AND STARTS IN THE POLICY ARENA**

When I arrived at Oxfam America in 1987, it had already experienced some exciting and high-profile forays into the public policy arena, starting in the late 1970s. A presence on the ground in Central America and Indochina gave Oxfam America unique insights into US policy in these two regions, and it used this experience to produce impact audits and a series of articles about US intervention policy at a time when the US government was leaning far to the right. In fact, by the mid-1980s the FBI and IRS were looking through agency files to see if Oxfam America was illegally supporting the communist government in Nicaragua or breaking the law regarding assistance to the rebels in El Salvador. (See the contributions by Charny, Short, Simon, and Hammock for more details.)

The mid-1980s Tools for Peace Campaign was an extraordinary campaign that made the humanitarian case for sending tools and seeds to poor farmers in Nicaragua, and eventually sent material aid (via friends in Europe) and later cash transfers. The campaign linked Oxfam America’s overseas development work, our US supporters, and our concerns about US policy in the region. Colleen Westbrook should be remembered for her excellent work on this campaign.

And yet, by the mid-1980s Oxfam America had on staff a group of policy writers who were operating without a sustained, unifying vision on the part of the agency on what it wanted to accomplish in the policy arena. Despite early advocacy work, there was considerable debate over both the value of that work and whether it was an appropriate role for Oxfam.

That debate fell into three categories. First, there was tension between those who simply distrusted governments and thought it was more effective to get money in the hands of people, and those who thought policy issues had to be addressed to create an enabling environment.

Second, there were concerns about who would set the agenda. Should Oxfam America “represent” partners’ interests, or should it ensure that partners had more opportunities to speak for themselves? Third, there was jockeying over who should decide priorities and agency positions and concerns about the implications for each of the departments if advocacy became a bigger part of the work. A final overarching question was whether Oxfam was prominent enough to make a difference.

For a while Valerie Miller, in the education department, led a small, informal group trying to bridge the development and policy worlds at Oxfam America. I actually thought at one point I would be working for Valerie. She commanded the respect of both the development folks and the advocacy staff and had a positive outlook. It was a false start, but in those few months of overlap, and in listening to her, I could see the potential.
Meanwhile, Oxfam’s explosive growth after the high-profile famine in Ethiopia 1984 and 1985 had been accompanied by growing pains, particularly regarding a number of labor-management issues. Some of these boiled over into fights between staff and management about the direction of the agency and its philosophy. I found myself caught in the crossfire as someone who had been brought in because of my political background, and I know there were questions about who was this kid from politics who had never set foot overseas?

Some of the strongest critics were in the education department, where the policy unit was housed and after several rounds of debate and negotiations, John Hammock, the executive director, decided to begin with a clean slate and eliminated the policy unit. By the late 1980s no policy writers remained on the staff, and the three leaders of the Tools Campaign were gone. We were about to start over.

JOHN HAMMOCK CHALLENGES THE NGO COMMUNITY AT THE UN

In the fall of 1988, as speaker’s bureau coordinator, I traveled with John Hammock to New York to the United Nations. Looking back, it was one of those seize-the-moment opportunities where John spoke from his heart about what he saw as the larger problem in development. John had been asked to give the keynote address at the annual gathering of consultative status NGOs, including representatives from UN organizations and UN member states. Hammock delivered a broadside against what was quickly becoming the NGO relief industry: happy to take government money but reluctant to challenge US government and UN policy. He said:

If we are not challenging the structures of poverty then we are doing nothing for our brothers and sisters around the world. How many of you here accept funds from the US government—the same government that prevents poor farmers in Nicaragua from getting seeds and tools, a government that is still punishing the poor in Indochina for mistakes made a generation ago? How many of you sat on the sidelines, while Africa was engulfed in flames due, in part, to government and international inaction, but then were only too happy to accept millions of dollars in food and financial aid for the Horn of Africa? What is this—the UN—here for if we cannot help the poorest of the poor and make a difference in the lives of others?

The rhetoric of ‘teach a man to fish’ has no meaning in a world where the poor lack access to productive resources, when women and ethnic minorities continue to suffer the indignities of discrimination, where transnational corporations exhibit flagrant disregard for the environment and basic human rights, and where our partners seek our assistance in organizing their communities to create change.

All our good deeds are undone by bad policies of our governments; and it is not just bad policies of the Global North. We must be willing to challenge, or support those willing to challenge the misguided polices and practices of southern governments. We must step back from the rhetoric that makes us unwilling to challenge what goes on in the Global South. In addition to challenging our governments we must speak out about corruption and fraud in the countries where we work. If we want our partners to experience real change, this is the path we must follow.

It was not the speech the UN/NGO community was expecting.

As an observer, it was fascinating to watch the response: You could see the faces—a little shocked at first, a bit of stunned silence—and then a sense of liberation that someone was finally speaking truth to power—and a crescendo to a standing ovation. Spanning a 12-year Oxfam career, it remains to this day as one of my proudest moments as an Oxfam employee.
On the plane ride home from New York, I said, “You know John, if you really believe what you said back there, we’ve got to do more than these ad-hoc initiatives where we parachute into Washington or New York and rattle sabers for a day. We need a formal public advocacy program with a long-term advocacy agenda that can build relationships with policymakers to get changes in US development policy.”

We spent the rest of the trip talking about the advocacy program: what would it look like; what its resourcing needs would be; and what kind of staffing and presence I envisioned. We both knew that, before setting up an external policy advocacy program, we had an internal campaign to wage with the Oxfam staff and board. At the next staff meeting, John announced that I was going to be developing a public advocacy program paper for presentation at the next board meeting and would be organizing a series of meetings to guide and inform the process. I then gave a quick overview of the concept.

### INTERNAL STAFF DEBATES AND APPROACHING THE OXFAM BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Looking back, it was the staff members who, after witnessing firsthand the negative impact of US foreign policy, backed the idea of an advocacy program. But at first, we went into round two of the earlier discussions Valerie had led. Most of the staff was hard pressed to find a reason to support the concept of advocacy. On the contrary, they felt it would undermine and undercut our humanitarian efforts. In this first meeting, one of my colleagues angrily said, “You, Mr. DeRosa, are taking food out of the mouths of poor people! We are here to feed the poor!” You can’t get much blunter than that. The more sophisticated opponents to the idea posited that while they agreed that US policy loomed large there were questions: Who were we to comment? Wouldn’t we just become another activist group in DC adding to the cacophony? Where was Oxfam’s legitimacy?

That said, a few key overseas staff lined up behind the concept—especially the Latin Americans, who had lived amid US military intervention and had seen its negative impacts firsthand. Central American program staff members Rolando Lopez and Jethro Pettit, South American program staff members Richard Smith and Juan Aulestia, and Central America program coordinator (and later Latin America regional manager) Michael Delaney would be our staunchest allies. In a series of informal meetings, they communicated that Oxfam partners had, in fact, been agitating for change and wanted Oxfam America to engage the US government on these issues. These discussions helped us set the groundwork for our core argument to donors and the board. Our advocacy work would be an outgrowth of our development experience. It was the next logical step, and it was something our partners wanted. Around this concept the ground shifted and by the early 1990s the Oxfam America board of directors approved the first public advocacy program paper.

We had some key allies at the management level. They included Janet Green, who was running the education department at this point; Ellen Nissenbaum, the legislative director for the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and an Oxfam America board member, who deeply valued advocacy (and also had skills in moving an agenda inside a board); and overseas leaders James Dawson and Joel Charny, both of whom saw the value and potential of a more permanent program. Joel had risen through the Oxfam America ranks to a leadership position as director of the Asia Region, and had seen firsthand the impact of misguided US

There were supportive staff members, as well. Kathy McAfee, a policy researcher, was the one waving the red flag about structural adjustment before most of us had even heard the term.

Similarly, although the board and some fundraisers worried we would lose funds by delving into the policy world, our development director, Bernie Beaudreau, and our communications directors, Phil Martin and later Peggy Connolly, all proved to be important allies in moving the agenda forward. But without Hammock’s passionate and ongoing support, I don’t think we would have ever gotten the program off the ground.

The other key player I should mention is Larry Brown. As board president, he supported the concept of an advocacy program. Given the makeup of the board—mostly academicians and NGO types—and given the early internal battles, I think he was pleasantly surprised to find that we wanted to take the concept to the board and formalize it.

One final point the board was clear on: When it approved the establishment of an advocacy program, Oxfam America would not, under any circumstances, change its policy about US government funding. To have a truly independent voice, we had to continue to neither solicit nor accept US government money. It was a critical and wise decision that would give life to our efforts in Washington throughout my tenure.

**PLANTING THE OXFAM AMERICA FLAG IN WASHINGTON**

In between the Hammock’s UN speech and opening a Washington, DC, office in 1994, the agency embarked on several initiatives to start spreading its wings on policy and advocacy work in Washington.

Overseas director James Dawson and Horn of Africa coordinator Rob Buchanan were instrumental in developing the Sudan Day of Concern, a day (March 12, 1989) of action across the United States with a focus on a big Capitol Hill press conference with senators and congressional representatives. In an effort to head off a repeat of a famine on the scale of Ethiopia, a number of NGOs were looking for the international community to establish safe zones of passage for emergency relief. But civil war threatened the supply lines. The Day of Concern was a wonderful collaboration between all the departments: fundraising, education (particularly the media and public affairs/advocacy units), and overseas. By campaign’s end our fledgling advocacy unit had contacted thousands of donors and supporters who at one point had expressed an interest in our policy work. The result was the creation of what would later become the Partners for Peace and Justice Advocacy Network/Newsletter. We also used the initiative to reach out to key policymakers in Washington. In the context of this campaign, I hired the first advocacy staff person, Shawn Goodwin, and the initiative culminated in events around the country and a Capitol Hill press conference that involved a number of high-profile senators and members of Congress.

In follow-up Hill meetings in the next year or so, John Hammock and I starting making the rounds to key leaders in Congress. Our purpose was to let them know that Oxfam America had a message, and that we wanted to begin to share our experiences with them in an effort to move US policy in a positive direction.
Two of those meetings still stand out in my mind. In one of them, John and I met with Democratic Senator Majority Leader George Mitchell about the ongoing international embargo of Cambodia and the continued activity of the Khmer Rouge, which was threatening to exacerbate the humanitarian crisis in the country and along the Thai border. We learned from him that many agencies had already been on the Hill and were already angling for US government contracts for humanitarian funding. At one point he just interrupted the discussion and commented on how much respect he had for Oxfam America, and that he was impressed that we did not seek government funds. Lee Hamilton, the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs committee, was much blunter. Hammock and I met in the office, and before we even sat down, his first words were: “Well, my staff tells me you guys don’t take any money from the US government—that you aren’t looking to line your own pockets—so, I really want to hear what you have to say.”

These meetings told us that we had an audience and a level of respect. Still, we lacked an ongoing presence in Washington. We needed an office, and we needed something to put us on the map. With the creation of the House Select Committee on Hunger in Washington, Oxfam America reached out to the chair, Mickey Leland, to begin a dialogue. In time, Oxfam America’s board chair, Larry Brown, and Hammock invited Rep. Mickey Leland (D-Texas) to become a member of the Oxfam board. We thought at the time it would give us tremendous entry into Washington circles, and help jumpstart our DC presence. Unfortunately, some weeks later I found myself at a memorial service in Washington for a new friend Hugh Johnson, a Leland staff member, killed along with Congressman Leland in a helicopter crash during a humanitarian mission to Ethiopia. It was a somber summer.

Janet Green then had an idea. Why not conduct a Hunger Banquet on the day of the Fast for a World Harvest, Oxfam America’s signature outreach, in Washington in honor of Rep. Leland?1

Our first event was one of those surreal movement experiences where people come out of the woodwork to help when they hear what is happening. Janet, fast director Jane Crosby, and media director Diana Fried, did an amazing job pulling together the event details. Rep. Tony Hall was the new chair of the committee and was very supportive of our efforts. Ethel and Robert Kennedy’s youngest, Rory Kennedy (who would go on to make films about Africa), joined us. We had extensive TV and newspaper coverage, and after this event we knew we had the potential for something bigger.

Within five years the event had become our signature Washington event. By the mid-1990s over 50 members of Congress were attending the event, angling to see who would sit on the floor, as if they were rubbing elbows with real poor people. A decision was made some years later outside of the advocacy program to end the Washington Hunger Banquets. It had been a great tool to build relationships with some of the DC newcomers and people we had identified as potential leaders on our issues. I can still remember walking down a long corridor alone with Senator Al Gore, just before one of our first hunger banquets, and he was showing me one of his new gadgets, something I had never seen—a cell phone! Looking back on the first few hunger banquets there are some very interesting politicians who came into our circle  

1 In a Hunger Banquet, participants are randomly assigned to one of three groups: high income, middle income and low income. The high income group sits at tables and gets a three course meal, the low income group has to sit on the floor and gets a little rice and water, the middle income group gets rice, beans some bread and a drink. This sets the stage for a discussion on poverty, its causes, and what people can do about it. See Gray’s contribution to this volume for a fuller discussion.
because of those events. Political leaders who stood with Oxfam America, when not too many politicians knew our name, include Gore and other notables, such as Bill Richardson and Nancy Pelosi.

With the approval of the public advocacy program paper, and a few budget cycles later, Oxfam America finally opened a full-time office in Washington in July 1994. Our first director there was Rob Buchanan, with a line report to me in Boston. Before coming to Oxfam America he had been a Hill staffer and at Oxfam America he had program coordinator for the Horn program. His breadth of experience made him a great standard bearer as we opened shop in Washington. Over time the office would add staff, and Oxfam America would eventually move all of the advocacy team to Washington.

THE AMAZON TEAM HELPS MAKE THE CASE FOR ADVOCACY

With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the winding down of the conflicts in Central America, it seemed that the compelling argument that Oxfam America had to engage in advocacy to fight misguided Cold War strategies that were punishing the poor was becoming obsolete. We would soon find that there were plenty of issues that were just as compelling, but in the brief lull, questions again began to be raised about Oxfam America’s investment in advocacy staff. I will always believe that it was the South America team that paved the way to broader agency acceptance of advocacy.

Under the leadership regional director Richard Smith, Oxfam America’s South America program had focused on building the capacity of indigenous federations to advocate for their territorial and cultural rights. Oxfam America was the earliest international supporter of a region-wide Amazonian Indigenous Federation (COICA), as well as providing key support to national and local indigenous federations in both the Amazon and the Andes. In the effort to promote their rights, obvious targets were their own governments and international agencies, such as the World Bank, whose policies impacted their territories. Yet, they also had concerns about the influence of the international environmental and conservationist movements that were pursuing strategies that put traditional territories off-limits for livelihoods activities.

Not only were Oxfam America’s indigenous partners in the region ready to speak to us about the importance of policy and advocacy, they also wanted to go on a speaking and media tour in the US. That speaking tour, organized by Diana Fried, helped consolidate the place of advocacy in the Oxfam America development approach. Traveling from city to city, it included not only public events, but also visits to major donors and chats with board members. Again and again, in telling their story of the challenges in the Amazon, they quickly took the story away from the flora and fauna, and cut straight to the human, economic, and political challenges resulting from both national policies and agendas of northern elites, whom, they complained, cared more about trees than people. Richard and Juan were able to merge development issues into policy and advocacy issues, for the first time clearly embedding advocacy into the field program itself. Advocacy was not simply an ancillary support for our partners’ efforts and not simply creating more political space, it was central to their efforts, and provided substance for our US-based policy advocacy efforts. To me this was the breakthrough that set the stage for the rapid developments for Oxfam America’s advocacy program that were to come.
In 1990 in Iquitos, Peru, the Amazon team brought together indigenous leaders from across the region, northern environmental organizations and foundations, and many organizations that had been working on Amazon-related issues. The gathering agreed to create a North-South alliance, and assigned a steering committee to continue the dialogue.

Immediately after the meeting, Juan and I traveled to the small Bolivian town of San Ignacio in the Amazon jungle. In Bolivia, there was an aggressive effort to title Amazon territories, but not for the benefit of long-time occupants, but rather for non-indigenous settlers and private enterprises. It was an issue of pressing concern for the affected indigenous communities, and they had been struggling to come up with an effective response. We arrived in San Ignacio inspired by the Iquitos meeting and the enormous potential of organizing across traditional boundaries. At this meeting, Juan struck the right balance of having a clear agenda, but being diligent about allowing the process to evolve organically.

After much discussion about a variety of options and ideas, the meeting concluded with a consensus to organize an indigenous people’s march on the capital and to demand recognition of indigenous tribal lands that were being auctioned off under their feet. Oxfam America would provide funding, media, and political support. The indigenous peoples would organize the participants and spread the word to area tribes and peoples. I remember Juan standing at the end of the meeting and eloquently saying, “This is a historic moment. We are ready, now is the time.” Because of the existing organizations of indigenous peoples (many supported by Oxfam America), what started as a discussion for a march of resistance by a small group of a dozen people meeting in a church, ended a few months later with a march on La Paz with 500,000 indigenous people and their supporters. Jamie Paz Zamora, the president of Bolivia came out to meet the marchers. I was back in Boston by the time they reached La Paz, trying to prompt broader coverage of the event, which was hard to come by. However, we had reached the turning point that demonstrated the potential and value of our joint advocacy efforts with partners.

The public advocacy program went on to help create what eventually would be known as the Coalition for Amazon Peoples and the Environment, referred to in shorthand as the Amazon Alliance. In 1993, the advocacy team reunited key players from Iquitos meeting at a Washington conference to create the actual structure of the international alliance. Many larger US institutions provided funding and support. At the beginning, Oxfam America provided a home for the campaign, and, although our actual financial support was modest, our strategic support was immeasurable. Bernice Romero, who was hired as campaign coordinator, would go on to play a key role in the coalition and later become a leader in our Cuba efforts and Oxfam America’s advocacy work in Washington.

After the indigenous march, the creation of the international Amazon Alliance, and Oxfam America’s support of Ecuadorian indigenous people litigating against Texaco for environmental damages, the Oxfam America staff finally began to fully believe in the advocacy program. There would always be debate about strategy, tactics, and message, but the debate about whether or not we should have an advocacy program was over. Within a few years Janet Green and I were getting phone calls from the large development NGOs around the country who wanted to visit; they had seen and heard about what we were doing and wanted to initiate steps to build a more formal advocacy program that would do more than lobby for government funds. Many of these organizations, such as CARE and Save the Children, had reluctantly stood quietly on the sidelines during some of the heated InterAction-sponsored
debates with the USAID and the State Department, when Oxfam America was often called upon to speak up. Even if it was only small steps, we were thrilled that they were seeking our advice and joining the battle. With our internal credibility secured, from that point forward our biggest challenge as a program was making sure we did not overstretch our limited advocacy capacity. Oxfam America had eight regions, and our team still numbered only between four and five people in the early 1990s.

LEVERAGING CHANGE THROUGH WORK IN COALITIONS

On the DC scene, Oxfam America was a small player in an arena in which hundreds of millions of dollars are spent annually to leverage changes in policy decisions. Even among international organizations, Oxfam America was at best medium sized in terms of budget, but small in terms of staff dedicated to advocacy. In trying to get our message out, our best option in my view was to ally with enough like-minded organizations to create a critical mass of financial support and advocacy firepower. This was especially true in the early days of the program when we were able to leverage a small budget and staff to strategically support some important initiatives. This meant, in practice, that often the Oxfam America name wasn’t enhancing our brand, but in my judgment it was the way we could be most effective in moving our agenda.

A key example of this is the Campaign Opposed to the Return of the Khmer Rouge (CORKR). Ultimately, more than 100 organizations and many prominent people were involved, but it may not have come into being without Oxfam America’s support. Starting with a series of ad-hoc meetings with Congressman Chester Atkins and Senator John Kerry, a small group of us in Boston knew that something had to be done about the US hostile stance toward the Hun Sen government and its support of rebel fighters, including the Khmer Rouge. The US position at the time was strange indeed given the slaughter that the Khmer Rouge had visited upon Cambodia between 1974 and 1979. Fueled by residual anger over Vietnam (which had pushed the Khmer Rouge out of Cambodia), the US retaliated by imposing an embargo against the sitting government in Cambodia and supporting an international cabal at the United Nations that included Khmer Rouge representation.

As advocates we were particularly concerned about the damage the Khmer Rouge was causing on the Thai-Cambodia border with incursions and placement of landmines making life extremely hazardous for peasant farmers trying to reclaim their lives. Kathy Knight, who would later join our advocacy team, played a key role in organizing a national call to action in Washington, sponsored by Oxfam America and the fledgling CORKR campaign. Out of this came a national campaign, which ran from 1989 to 1994. It advocated, and eventually got, the termination of military assistance to the Khmer Rouge guerillas, the ending of the trade embargo (1992), recognition of the Cambodian government (1993), and increased humanitarian assistance, particularly focused on clearing of land mines. Its signal achievement was the eventual passage, in 1994, of the Cambodia Genocide Act, after several years of effort, which committed the US government to make significant efforts to bring Khmer Rouge leaders to justice for their massive killings.3

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2 InterAction is a membership organization of US-based NGOs with a focus on international development.
3 No one suspected at the time that only in 2007 would the first Khmer Rouge leader be put on trial.
CORKR was instrumental in successfully advocating for policy change for Cambodia, a country most people cared little about, even if they had heard of it. CORKR was everywhere—testifying in Congress, working the Hill, and traveling on Congressional delegation to Cambodia. True, Oxfam’s name was not front and center, but to me it was more important that the executive director of CORKR consulted me and my colleagues about the message to Congress, and looked to Oxfam America for leadership and guidance. Kathy joined the advocacy unit and continued to work on this initiative along with our new South East Asia coordinator Michael Bedford. Joel Charny—by then an expert on the region as well as our overseas director—brought a depth of understanding of the region that often placed Oxfam at the center of policy discussions when policymakers in Washington wanted a perspective on Cambodia.

Another example of interesting coalition work were our efforts to open up relations between the US and Cuba in the early years of the Clinton administration. In DC we helped to establish the Cuba Steering Committee to work on food and medicine legislation, and licensing issues. Among the groups involved were the Washington office on Latin America, the Latin American Working Group, Church World Service, and the Cuban Center for Democracy. Another strand of the work, funded by the Arca Foundation, sought to broaden coalition work on Cuba, by bringing together businesses, NGOs and operational agencies, and members of Congress who wanted to see constructive change in Cuba. We worked closely with Congressman Moakley (one of the heroes on El Salvador) and his chief of staff, Jim McGovern, although this work was largely behind the scenes. In addition to them, there was a concerted effort by elements within the US business community to make constructive progress on US-Cuba relations. Working in DC, Bernice Romero put together a great lobbying piece outlining how the US embargo was limiting Cuban access to key medicines that could only be secured through the US. In focusing on a very narrow set of humanitarian goals, we hoped to begin breaking the logjam on Cuba.

Bridging program and advocacy, Michael Delaney led our overall efforts on Cuba. We had some initial success in securing one of the first US licensees to support program work in Cuba. Oxfam funded an agricultural cooperative that wanted to experiment with some of their own crops and organic methods, rather than follow the centrally planned and mandated government system. We were threading a needle. The Cuban government was nervous about anyone who was going to challenge their model of production (although it had been badly battered by the end of subsidies from the Soviet Union), and it didn’t want to be shown up by some small upstart agricultural coop. In meetings with the US State Department (and later with the US Interest Section in Havana), I could see they were wary that we might be Castro apologists who would be unwilling to speak out if the Cubans interfered in our programs. We were stymied on two sides, as both sides wanted to determine what Oxfam America planned to publish as results and conclusions of the project—before the project was even launched! The Cuban Agricultural ministry and the local farmers just wanted to try something different to improve local production and overall nutrition for their local communities.

My lasting memory of Cuba occurred during a meeting that had been attended by key Cuban ministers, and featuring an appearance by Fidel Castro, himself. After hours of discussion, and time for informal banter and talk over refreshments, I came to the conclusion that the people who wanted change in Cuba were not at the top. The key to the future was at the mid-level, mid-career leaders who acknowledged some progress that had been brought by the revolution, but wanted so much more for their country. Leaving the meetings with
Mike Delaney, I turned to him and said, “It’s the guys at the top of the Cuban government who have no interest in lifting the embargo—it would undermine their power in a few years. They use the embargo as both a club and an excuse. What a stupid and misguided US policy!” Unfortunately, a Cuban exile group in Miami that did not want a gradual opening with Cuba sent “humanitarian rescue” planes that were shot down by the Cuban Air Force in February 1996. We continued our on-the-ground program in Cuba, but the narrow political space opened up by Congressman Moakley and his chief of staff (and now Congressman), Jim McGovern, had been squeezed tighter.

Oxfam America—even in 2008 with a budget of $67 million—is still a relatively small development organization. Conservative entities have spent a billion dollars in the past decade influencing public policy in America. Transnational corporations legally spend hundreds of millions of dollars a year lobbying governments and international organizations. While Oxfam America and the NGO movement can never approach that scale, we increase the odds of success if we work together. Today, the phrase more likely to be employed within Oxfam America might be “strategic partnerships,” but the underlying reasoning is the same.

COPING WITH INCREASED COMPLEXITY IN A UNI-POLAR WORLD

The end of the Cold War and the arrival of a more sympathetic Democratic administration had generated a real sense of optimism at Oxfam America. However, along with the opportunities, we were also confronted with increased complexities. In the early day of our advocacy work the issues were clear: stop US military aid to El Salvador, end the embargo against Nicaragua, provide emergency relief to the Horn of Africa, end punitive US policies toward Cambodia and Vietnam, speak out against apartheid and South Africa’s grip on the last colony of Namibia, support restoration of democracy in Haiti. These were all issues in which the battle lines were clear, and US policy options were straightforward, and our positions somewhat easy to articulate.

In those initiatives we were not espousing a development alternative, per se, but simply arguing for removing critical barriers to peace and development. In the context of these issues, our policy analysis only required clarity of purpose and was defensible in the context of how these policies were hurting (or could help) our partners. From time to time in policy-maker meetings, Oxfam would espouse a general philosophy of grassroots, community-based development. But what did that really mean in a global context? With the incoming Clinton administration, we would soon find ourselves held to a much higher standard.

Soon after the US presidential election in November 1992, the Clinton transition team called my office. Many of the Oxfam America staff had worked with Nancy Soderberg while she was with Senator Kennedy, and Nancy had become a key Clinton foreign policy advisor during the campaign. We had also worked closely with Vice President Al Gore’s office on a number of occasions. The Clinton administration wanted to rethink the US approach to international development in early 1993, and Vice President Gore would lead a White House roundtable. Considering that at the time we had virtually no full-time policy analysts, the program staff patched together a paper on “new directions” on US foreign policy. In the end John Hammock went to the White House and made an impassioned presentation urging policymakers to give greater thought to the people we hoped to serve, but I always felt we had let a golden opportunity slip. The paper lacked a critical analysis and hard-charging agenda. It gave the Clinton
people something to think about—but it didn’t really guide an action agenda. As a pragmatic idealist, I thought we needed to present more specific arguments and set forth recommendations, versus guiding principles.

I had similar concerns with regard to our Voices for Haiti campaign and the post-conflict aid negotiations in El Salvador. Lydia Williams, who was the first person we hired as an advocate with prior political experience, would be responsible for specific campaigns. After the overthrow of the democratically elected president, Bertrand Aristide in Haiti in 1991, Lydia worked with exile groups to provide space in the US debate for an alternate and authentic voice on the situation. To do so, Oxfam sponsored the creation of the Voices for Haiti campaign, which both called for the restoration of Aristide and also sought to remind the global community about the development challenges in Haiti.\(^4\) When a UN Consultative Group meeting on Haiti was announced, Lydia saw an opportunity to press our agenda, including demands that a broad array of Haitians be included in deliberations.

Mark Schneider, at USAID, had been named President Clinton’s special representative to Haiti. After a fair amount of back and forth with him, one day to our surprise he called Lydia and said, “You know, you’re right. Why aren’t they here at the table with us? Why don’t you ask the Haitian PVO sector to meet and present at the UN consultative group?” Frankly, it was a bit of a shock and came at a time when the NGO sector in Haiti wasn’t really ready. True, after years of Duvalier and the Ton Ton Macoute and now a coup and repression, they had gone underground again. Nevertheless, nobody in the movement was really planning the next step. And we in the US development community should have been prompting them to action.

We experienced similar setbacks in Central America. By the time a negotiated settlement was in sight to end the civil war in El Salvador, USAID was already working with the Salvadoran government on a massive economic reconstruction plan. The domestic side of the FMLN and the democratic alternative were nowhere near ready; we were playing defense from the get go. We did manage to pull together, with the help of the Washington office on Latin America, a roundtable discussion with USAID staff and a set of Oxfam America’s Central American partners and academics who had been looking at aid reform. But it was another missed opportunity; with more foresight we could have capitalized on their presence in DC much more. In both cases, we learned that facilitating a direct voice for people affected by US policies overseas was an important role that US NGOs could play in these situations.

The daunting complexity of the post-Cold War world was brought home by our experience in Somalia. All of us get asked in job interviews about our biggest regrets in our life. Since I can no longer say, “You mean other than the fact that the Red Sox haven’t won a World Series in my lifetime,” I usually talk about the NGO lobbying experience related to Somalia in the early 1990s. Something I always appreciated about John Hammock was his willingness to experiment and take chances. He told me once, “If I go to the board, and report that we were 100% successful, it means we didn’t take enough risks, we did not push enough boundaries, or stand up for what is right.” That said, I still have some regrets about being used by the US government in regard to Somalia.

\(^4\) On a side note, by the time we met Aristide on a visit to Boston he specifically thanked Oxfam for its work and was aware that we had been working with his Foreign Minister on “Voices.”
In 1993, non-government agencies found themselves in the unusual position of advocating for the US military, as part of a UN mission, to intervene in Somalia. Less than 10 years removed from man-made disaster in Ethiopia, and with some modest safe-passage successes in Sudan in the late 1980s, agencies could see the storm clouds brewing again in Somalia. What people sometimes forget when they hear “Somalia” is that the first United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNISOM I, which ran from April-December 1992) was a very successful mission. The UN-US intervention did, in fact, secure safe delivery lines, and ensure that non-combatants and civilians on all sides would have access to food and safe water. Instead, the name Somalia prompts people to think of *Black Hawk Down* and images of a US ranger being dragged through Mogadishu.

The mistake in Somalia was not in trying to keep the peace and minimize civilian loss of life. The problem was that with the advent of UNISOM II (March 1993–March 1995), the US took a complex political situation and tried to pick a winner by going after Mohammad Farah Aideed; eventually the US infuriated factions on all sides. In a short period of time, the US went from peacekeeper and benefactor to interloper. Unfortunately for the NGOs, the government flacks were quick to remind the media that it was the international NGOs who had asked for intervention—obfuscating the details and not parsing the huge difference between what we had asked for in UNISOM I vs. what the US pursued during UNISOM II.

The irony of US failure in Somalia is that it deeply influenced the Clinton administration’s decision about Rwanda, which on a global stage was a much larger failure of the international community. Having been burned on a short-term intervention, Clinton and most of the Western world were too slow in responding to the genocide in 1994. But failure to act sooner during the Rwanda genocide was not just the government’s fault. The US failure in Somalia also drove collective NGO reluctance to speak out and seek intervention on the Rwanda genocide. I had the chance to see President Clinton speak recently, and he talked about meeting victims of the genocide and he apologized for having waiting so long to intervene—and that he was wrong to wait. If only more of our leaders would admit their mistakes.

While we were grappling with these issues, we were to face another layer of complexity, as our hard-won positioning in Washington needed to be adjusted once we became a part of Oxfam International.

**ADJUSTING TO OXFAM INTERNATIONAL AS OUR PRIMARY COALITION**

In 1993, I traveled with deputy director Marcia Thomas to Oxford to discuss the concept of whether and how to create an Oxfam International, a discussion that had been going on at the level of executive directors for some time. Informal protocols developed in Oxford recommended that the next time the Oxfam directors met they start the process of creating a formal entity called Oxfam International. Its primary purpose would be to advocate on public policy issues of common concern.

There was much concern from my Oxfam America colleagues. They were just getting comfortable with the way we were handling our advocacy agenda. To them, it finally all made sense: We had been responsive on a number of issues important to the regional programs and the partners and overseas team had a stake in it. While there were 10 Oxfams involved in the dis-
discussions that presumably would all have a say in strategy and tactics, Oxfam UK already had
the reputation of being the bully on the playground, due to its size. It was the biggest charity
in England, and its policy staff alone was bigger than Oxfam America’s entire US-based staff.
The fear was that creating and joining Oxfam International meant ceding considerable power
to Oxfam UK.5

During the discussions leading up to the formation of Oxfam International, I was concerned
about the risk of our guiding principles and tested ways of working being undermined, if we
were to be overshadowed by Oxfam UK. In a very short time, we would see the shock and
awe of the Oxfam UK machine during a showdown on the 50 Years is Enough Campaign. We
were founding members of the 50 Years campaign, created in 1994 along with Development
Group for Alternative Policies (DGAP) and Bank Information Center (BIC) and others. In
essence, it was a public education campaign designed to articulate and illustrate the shortcomings of the World Bank policies, particularly structural adjustment policies, timed to coincide with its 50th anniversary celebration.

50 Years Is Enough—though it lacked specific alternatives—argued that radical transforma-
tion of the World Bank and its operations was essential. Oxfam International (via the writing
and policy influence of Oxfam UK) argued for a more moderate approach of working within
the institution to create and advance change. Oxfam International argued that reform of the
Bank was possible and that we should work with the Bank on detailed policy alternatives in
areas such as education and debt. These debates were intensive and unavoidable, since
Oxfam America had agreed that Oxfam International should share an advocacy office in DC.
The Oxfam International advocates would focus on multilateral institutions, such as the Bank
and IMF, while Oxfam America staff would deal with the US government.

With Oxfam International and DGAP jousting over 50 Years, I argued for a mixed insider/
outsider strategy that was evolving at Oxfam America. We would stand on the barricades
with 50 Years Is Enough, embarrassing the World Bank for its failings and forcing them into
some type of dialogue and debate. Meanwhile, if Oxfam UK/Oxfam International wanted to
engage collegially with World Bank president Jim Wolfensohn, so much the better. Oxfam In-
ternational would be perceived as a moderate voice, pushing things along at a deliberate pace.
This worked to some extent, but didn’t avoid a certain divisiveness within the broader NGO
movement. The 50 Years people were furious with Oxfam International for sailing into their
turf and, they felt, undermining their strategy, while Oxfam UK and International folks kept
pressuring me to quit the 50 Years Campaign, which Oxfam America formally did after I left.

While we were trying to manage tensions between Oxfam International and the 50 Years
campaign, I think it was the emergence of the Women’s Eyes on the World Bank Campaign
that put Oxfam America where we wanted to be with our World Bank lobbying efforts. In
1994, the advocacy unit was combined with the program analysis and research (PAR) unit
to form the new policy department. Within PAR, Laura Roper and Diane Gregorio had been
pushing us to include a gender analysis into our advocacy work, especially as the debate was
moving further into economic development issues. After the Beijing conference in 1995 there

5 The British Oxfam has changed its name a number of times over the years— from Oxfam (when it was the only one)
to Oxfam United Kingdom, then to Oxfam UK and Ireland, and currently to Oxfam Great Britain. We will use Oxfam
UK in this paper.
was an opening, and Diane, and then later Lydia Williams, helped take the lead in creating the US Chapter of Women’s Eyes on the World Bank.6

The purpose of the coalition was to pressure the Bank to take a series of measures to meet the goals in the Beijing platform. This included forming a partnership with women’s organizations to develop a gender framework for the Bank so that gender analysis would be consistently incorporated and become a meaningful criterion in Bank decision making, as well as advocating for increased investments that would enhance women’s access and control over productive resources and services. In time Lydia, as the US coordinator, was able to find enough high-level allies in the World Bank that commitments were made that all Bank projects would now include a gender analysis component and review. Some might argue it was merely flak catching by the Bank, but if you have the right people at least *thinking* about these things and listening, it is a step on the path to constructive change.

RETHINKING OXFAM AMERICA’S ADVOCACY ROLE

The mid-1990s was also a period of internal changes in the organization. John Hammock left in 1995. Joel Charny was interim president until the end of that year, also serving as the director of overseas program and forging the new policy program. We continued to work on key initiatives and we continued to expand our relationship with Oxfam International. But all of us felt it was important to give the incoming president, whoever he or she was, wide latitude in determining where to take various policy programs.

Ray Offenheiser came on as president at the very end of 2005. He was deeply interested in policy work, and together we made three critical decisions that would launch our advocacy program into its next era. First, we determined that ramping up our analytical capacity was essential. Oxfam America had proved that when given a focus and an agenda, our advocacy team could access the highest levels of power in the world. But we needed to be speaking on integrated global issues—and to do that we needed a deeper analytical framework. Second, as much as the Washington office had provided us with a key listening post and contact with policymakers, it was time for the advocacy leadership and more of the core team to be based in Washington, and further expand both our lobbying and media capacity in DC. Third, while I often met with major donors who supported policy and advocacy, much of our policy fundraising to date was still done, let us say, quietly. The program by then had an annual budget exceeding a million dollars, but had not really ventured into the foundation world. Ray brought both entrée and a comprehensive vision into the foundation world, a world for the most part that had articulated trepidation about support for policy initiatives. As a leader who brought the credibility of on-the-ground experience along with intimate knowledge of the workings of the foundation world, Ray was a trusted broker. In this time period, it was tremendously exciting to be part of Ray’s team long enough to see how he put together the pieces, how he prepared for the board of directors, how he could see on many different levels the value of an integrated program that included policy, advocacy, media, and fundraising. I am fortunate to have been asked to participate in interviewing and reviewing the final candidates for Oxfam’s presidency. And without taking anything away from the others, Ray Offenheiser was the perfect choice for the times, and vaulted Oxfam America into a new era.

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The shift was not entirely trouble-free. One of the things Ray questioned (and he questioned many things upon entering Oxfam) was our strategy of working primarily in coalitions and not positioning ourselves more aggressively in DC. Consequently, he was much less ambivalent about the Oxfam International relationship and very interested in enhancing joint work in DC. While I could understand his arguments, I judged our effectiveness differently. In most of the coalition work that our advocacy team created, I was leveraging a very small amount of Oxfam money and staff time to create national (and sometimes international) coalitions that were largely successfully advancing our issues. Some of these early coalition efforts were financed and launched with less than $20,000, and we were widely regarded as smart, committed, and collaborative coalition partners, in part because we willing subsumed our brand to broader efforts.

CONCLUSION

In some ways there has been a sea change at Oxfam America. I had to struggle for years to get policy work to be a legitimate part of Oxfam America’s strategy. Now policy work is central to its agenda, and Oxfam America has a vice president of policy and campaigning, who oversees a large staff in DC; additional campaigning staff in Boston; as well as field staff in key Congressional districts during its farm bill campaign, which ended early in 2009. Regional offices have their own policy staff members who support both Oxfam America and International advocacy efforts, and Oxfam America is a key player in the Oxfam International alliance.

But many things are still recognizable. Oxfam America continues to refuse government funding; it continues to speak out on controversial issues; it continues to be successful in supporting partners in organizing and articulating their policy agendas around such issues as extractive industries and women’s legal reform. (See contributions by Scurrah and Samuriwo.)

In looking back, given the dearth of staff and funding in our early days, it is amazing what we were able to accomplish and influence. Prompting coalitions was often the best strategy and best path to extend our voice and our reach. As Oxfam International has evolved, with its hundreds of millions of dollars in aid, and representing many hundreds of thousands of constituents around the world, the Oxfam International family does represent the modern transnational non-government organization.

The agency learned some important lessons in the late 1980s and early-mid 1990s. As we moved away from what we often referred to as clear-cut “geo-political initiatives,” it became more difficult for us to articulate long-term viable solutions—a challenge I see that still exists within today’s (2008) debates around global economic governance. In the early day of our advocacy work the issues were clear: Stop US military aid to El Salvador, end the embargo against Nicaragua, provide emergency relief to the Horn of Africa, end punitive US policies toward Cambodia and Vietnam, and support the restoration of democracy in Haiti. These were all issues in which the battle lines were clear, and US policy options were straightforward and our positions somewhat easy to articulate.

In those initiatives we were not espousing a development alternative per se, but simply removing critical barriers to peace and development. In the context of these issues, our policy analysis only required clarity of purpose and was defensible in the context of how these
policies were hurting (or could help) our partners. But with the end of the Cold War, the policy terrain got much more complex for both governments and NGOs. For Oxfam America, the ground shifted further with the establishment of Oxfam International as a major advocacy actor, an actor with a presence in DC.

Used wisely, Oxfam International in some ways offers the best of both worlds to Oxfam America: an active coalition that can lobby several governments at the same time, and a worldwide presence accruing brand loyalty to the Oxfam name. I just think that Oxfam America should always remain vigilant while riding the back of the Oxfam International tiger.

I hope someday a broad range of partner organizations in the Global South will have the funding and institutional support to become equal partners and full members of the Oxfam International family.

But that is a story to be told by other members of the Oxfam team; my home and children are here in New England. After staying on until Ray had hired a new policy department director for Boston and a new advocacy program director for Washington, I joined the Peace Corps as the New England Regional Director, continuing my commitment to international work.
THE OFFENHEISER YEARS:

Becoming a Global Player in a Globalized World
In 1995, Oxfam America was 25 years old, still young by organizational standards, and struggling to transition to a more mature organization. When Ray Offenheiser came in as president, he questioned everything—including the almost sacrosanct policy of not accepting government money. Given new realities in a post-Cold War world—such as the new information and service-driven economy, globalization, the debates about the role of nation states—Oxfam America was asked what it should be doing differently. Partnerships for Impact, the Oxfam America strategic plan for 1997-2001, captured this thinking and prepared Oxfam America for the new millennium. Core values and principles were validated, but new, more focused ways of leveraging change were introduced—seeing knowledge creation and dissemination as a key asset; expanding advocacy capacity and being explicit about the Oxfam America perspective and advocacy agenda; and engaging with partners as co-strategists working towards common ends, rather than simply good organizations that deserved funds.

The pace of change accelerated as the affiliates in Oxfam International sought to align their strategies, and accelerated again when the affiliates agreed that global campaigning was to be part of Oxfam’s core business. All this in a world that has become increasingly tumultuous with the war on terror, protracted conflict in the Middle East, and natural calamities intensified by climate change and vulnerabilities associated with poverty. Oxfam America has developed tremendous adaptive and innovative capacities, and is working on a scale and in arenas that were unimaginable 15 years ago. In some ways it is unrecognizable, in others deeply familiar as a value-driven organization that puts human dignity and rights at the center of its mission, as these essays demonstrate.
Adopting a New Business Model

Raymond C. Offenheiser

Ray Offenheiser, Oxfam America’s longest-serving president, discusses the dramatic evolution of the organization under his leadership. Oxfam America, as a member of Oxfam International, embraced a rights-based approach to development and a commitment to global campaigning that has amplified Oxfam’s impact by addressing key global issues such as the right to education, trade, extractive industries and, more recently, climate change. He also traces the organizational transformation that has supported Oxfam America’s expanding role as a global player.

INTRODUCTION

Looking back, I believe I joined Oxfam America at a very auspicious moment. During my early years as a development practitioner, the kind of work Oxfam America was known for—supporting grassroots empowerment—was seen as unorthodox at best and downright subversive at worst. But by 1996, when I became executive director, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were the new darlings of development discourse and had moved to center stage. States were out and NGOs, particularly grassroots organizations, were in. Also in were globalization, democratic transitions, emerging economies, and human rights. As I walked in the door at Oxfam America, it seemed to me that this was a world that offered exciting new possibilities and greater political space; but to succeed, Oxfam America had to leverage those spaces.

Globalization was clearly a driving force in reshaping economies all over the world. I had seen its impacts firsthand throughout Asia. During my five years in Bangladesh, the country had moved from a barely functioning analog phone system and no national internet providers to satellite TV, cell phones, and a burgeoning information technologies sector. Civil society—exploding across the globe—came of age in the 1990s as previously highly disparate groups attended UN global summits on the environment, population, women, human rights, and poverty and began to build global social networks and emergent global social movements. On the national level, NGOs were moving beyond service provision into national-level advocacy, pressing their governments for improved urban services, investments in microcredit, more inclusive economic policy, more transparent budgeting, and accountable governance.
Democracy had replaced authoritarianism in much of the world, and citizens were embracing their roles as participants in great democratic experiments and learning the complexities of moving from street protest to loyal opposition. Finally, human rights were becoming a more accepted part of social reality and discourse throughout the world.

Oxfam America was part of this change process, and in many parts of the world it was funding and partnering with the very actors driving the change and opening new frontiers. Recognizing many of the challenges and opportunities of this new moment, in the early 1990s the leaders of Oxfam affiliates began the complex process of agreeing to create the Oxfam International confederation. In this era of globalization, these leaders recognized intuitively that greater levels of integration and collaboration were the defining characteristic of the emergent era; consequently, it was necessary to lay the groundwork for Oxfam to leverage its capacity across the globe and increase its impact. Their contribution will likely be seen as one of the most significant decisions in the history of the organization.

Prior to coming to Oxfam America, as I explored this landscape as a development practitioner in both Latin America and South Asia with the Ford Foundation, I was learning a great deal. I learned the limitations of working exclusively at a grassroots level. I began to observe and promote the advantages of working with intermediary NGOs and linking their work with that of think tanks and policy activists’ networks. I began to see that the isolated grassroots group became much more powerful when acting in coalition with others of like mind; and that such an organization, coalition, or social movement of the poor was even more powerful when supported by a simple persuasive idea that had the endorsement of educated national elites and institutions. I saw this with the rubber tappers and “extractive reserves” in Brazil, and I saw it again with microcredit and the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh.

I also learned that advocacy should be seen as an essential and complementary part of more traditional program strategies; advocacy was perhaps the only means of ensuring that proven programs could secure the public sector support they required to be truly solid and sustainable over time. And I learned that advocacy could be done in places where it was never thought possible. Advocacy had to be adapted to the particular political and cultural constraints of specific national settings, but the space was increasingly available to build advocacy capacity on the ground within national civil society movements. Finally, I learned that in the end, states and governments are critically important in achieving lasting change. States are the guarantors of human rights; without competent and effective states, no real development can take place. So while NGOs have an important role to play as development actors, an essential part of their role needs to be building the capacity of state institutions as well.

These were a few of the key lessons that shaped my thinking as I packed my bags in Dhaka and headed to Boston to join my new colleagues at Oxfam America. My challenge was to share these lessons with a skeptical Oxfam America staff and seek to forge a vision that might meld these reflections into a coherent and compelling strategy.

**ESTABLISHING A NEW STRATEGIC DIRECTION**

My arrival to Oxfam America was a bit bumpy, to say the least. The director of fundraising resigned two months before my arrival. The program director was subjected to a vote of no confidence by the overseas program directors the first week I arrived and immediately stepped
down. And the operations director and his executive assistant resigned a few weeks later. What quickly became apparent was the staff’s hunger for direction and a clear set of priorities. So after several months of getting the lay of the land, I initiated what turned out to be an eight-month strategic planning process, relying on internal staff leadership and facilitation, with important support from consultants David Kelleher and Aruna Rao. The process involved the whole organization and relied on several working groups that dedicated many hours to the effort. My goal was to have everyone in the organization embrace a strategic shift that I believed would eventually make Oxfam America one of the most recognized and respected development organizations in the country.

The driving element in the strategic plan, which was called “Partnerships for Impact,” was to move Oxfam America toward becoming a learning organization—an organization that saw knowledge and ideas as a principal currency on the same footing as funds. My vision was that Oxfam America, with its limited funds, might not be the biggest dog on the block, but it could become an iconoclastic idea leader challenging the status quo everywhere it worked. The plan also sought to create more-focused, strategic, results-oriented regional strategies and required that regional programs be built around three themes: development finance, community-based resource management, and participation for equity. “Partnerships for Impact” fully embraced and sought to strengthen our role as an advocacy organization that not only assisted partners to exercise their voice but sought to develop a clear voice of its own. Finally, the plan had what we thought at the time was an ambitious growth target—to nearly double revenue from $13.5 million in 1997 to $25 million within three years. In fact within three years we had surpassed $25 million, setting us on a sustained trajectory of growth.

As important as the strategic planning process was, an equally important transformation was also underway within the Oxfam America board. Coincident with my arrival, the board reviewed a study on its governance practices by the Volunteer Consulting Group that was highly critical and recommended the establishment of a board development committee to initiate a far-reaching set of reforms. Initiated by Barbara Fiorito, carried forward with the support of Michael McLeod, and sustained over several years with the additional support of Bill Thompson and Beth Warren, the board development committee proved to be a very innovative idea.

In practice, the board development committee served as a change management group for the chair and a conscience to the overall board. Under its leadership, the board focus crucially shifted steadily from management to policy, with all members committing to support Oxfam America financially. The development committee then revamped the committee structure and responsibilities to foster more efficient decision making and initiated a process of board recruitment to bring in members based on a range of strategic considerations. The committee moved on to define the role for the staff-elected representative, established protocols for board-staff relations, and created new frameworks for board meetings. The result was a board that has successfully steered Oxfam America through a tremendous amount of change and has set the stage for building a board for the 21st century.

OXFAM INTERNATIONAL

One of the defining realities of my time at Oxfam America has been the incorporation of Oxfam International that established a governance structure led by a board made up of
affiliate executive directors and board chairs and coordinated by the Oxfam International secretariat—a set of decisions agreed to by my predecessor John Hammock. (See David Brown’s paper, “Oxfam America and Oxfam International: Expanding Leverage in a Globalizing World,” for more detail on the evolution of Oxfam International.) In January 1996, we held the first executive directors meeting, in Washington, DC, and drafted the first Oxfam International strategic plan, tellingly named “Towards an Ever-Closer Union,” borrowing heavily from European Union language. In retrospect we scarcely understood the significance this would have for the future of Oxfam America or the challenges and opportunities it would present. One of the platforms of Oxfam America’s 1996 “Partnerships for Impact” plan was to leverage our relationship with Oxfam International. Our relationship with Oxfam International and with our sister affiliates has had its very difficult moments, but on balance it has facilitated our growth and increased stature, helping us deliver more and better development assistance, shape the Oxfam International agenda and affiliates’ practice to effectively realize our values, and become a respected and often unique voice on the key development issues in our own national market. The rest of this chapter will focus on Oxfam America’s much expanded advocacy and campaigning role, since it has evolved so dramatically from my predecessor’s tenure and is now a central part of our business model.

SHIFTING TO A STRONGER POLICY ORIENTATION

One of the first concrete steps I took to signal to Oxfam America that advocacy would be a central part of our work was to establish a strategic partnership with the Advocacy Institute, directed at the time by David Cohen, a partnership that was generously supported by funding from the Ford and MacArthur Foundations. The basic idea of this program was to capitalize on the many years of advocacy experience of both Oxfam America and the Advocacy Institute to develop a set of tools for groups seeking to build their advocacy capacity. These materials would address three basic questions: What is advocacy in its many forms? How is it done? What are some good case examples from real advocacy work that offer lessons to the practitioner? My second intent was to raise the capacity and sophistication of our regional offices’ approach to advocacy which, at the time of my arrival, was at best very uneven.

On our side, this collaboration was ably led by Gabrielle Watson, who effectively engaged with each of our six regional programs to design a learning and documentation process that met their needs. The initiatives discussed in the chapters by Martin Scurrah, Michael Ounsted, and Margaret Samuriwo were all influenced or facilitated by their engagement in the Advocacy Learning Initiative. Another product of this effort was the publication Advocacy for Social Justice: A Global Action and Reflection Guide, which was published in seven languages and is still very much in demand.¹

We also began building the capacity of our policy department by creating a policy research unit, locating the Advocacy Learning Initiative within that department, and hiring a policy director who was well-versed in macroeconomic policy, a significant departure for Oxfam America. The thinking was that this increased capacity would strengthen our analysis and help us develop strategic collaborations with other respected policy institutions, such as the one we developed with the Overseas Development Council on the reform of global financial

¹ David Cohen, Rosa de la Vega, and Gabrielle Watson (2001), Kumarian Press.
architecture. (Given the current state of the global economy, this Ford-funded initiative could be seen today as quite visionary.)

Communication is essential for effective advocacy. Consequently, an effort to which I gave top priority was the development of the Oxfam America website, which was launched in 1997 in time to support that year’s Fast for a World Harvest and the annual Hunger Banquet on Capitol Hill. While very rudimentary by today’s standards, it was a start and gave us a marketing platform on the internet that we desperately needed and that has paid dividends many times over for us. The Capitol Hill Hunger Banquet was the only way at the time that we advertised our presence broadly to policy makers. The event was hosted by Sandy Ungar, the Dean of the American University School of Communications, our guest speaker and honoree was the late Paul Wellstone, and our celebrity server was the renowned Washington Post columnist Mary McGrory. Although these Hunger Banquets had served an important awareness-raising function, this would be the last one on Capitol Hill, as I thought Oxfam America had to move to much more strategic, policy-focused discussions with the Hill and the Executive Branch.

When I arrived at Oxfam America, all our policy and advocacy staff were based in Boston. Given a desire to engage seriously in policy reform, this did not make a lot of sense to me. Toward the end of 1996 I decided that we needed to shift our focus and personnel to Washington, DC. We promptly hired a policy director to be based in Washington, DC and an additional advocate who joined with newly arrived Oxfam International colleagues to establish the Oxfam America presence in the capital. By 1997, we were already making significant inroads with our policy work on humanitarian assistance to Cuba and our advocacy with the Clinton administration before the president’s historic visit to Africa in the spring of 1998, carrying forward the Oxfam International messages on trade, debt, and education. We were also working closely with the Oxfam International advocacy staff on influencing international financial institutions (IFIs) and the G-7 and G-8 at their respective annual meetings. Oxfam International, recognizing the importance of the US media market, agreed to fund a media position based in Washington, DC, adding a crucial staff position to our gradually expanding Washington, DC office. Aside from strong IFI advocacy in late 1998 and into 1999, we also worked with Oxfam International on linking the international community’s commitment to helping Central America recover from Hurricane Mitch to accelerating the eligibility of Nicaragua and Honduras for relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative.

A key part of all my efforts was to get Oxfam America to think more strategically about its public positioning and image. Peggy Connolly was critical in carrying this work forward, both in the US context and in the context of Oxfam International, which was in the process of developing a common brand identity (including a logo). These were exciting times, but not

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2 The website was part of an overall technology upgrade, in which we secured funding to get staff new computers and invested in data management software which, among other things, facilitated financial management and donor tracking. One of the errors that NGOs often make is scrimping on necessary infrastructure upgrades so more funds can go to programs, without recognizing the inefficiencies outdated equipment create. Our computers were so old that when we asked if there was anything we could do with them other than throwing them away, one of our consultants suggested donating them to the Smithsonian Institution.

3 At this Hunger Banquet we gave the Mickey Leland Hunger Leader award to Senator Paul Wellstone (D-Minn.). Representative Mickey Leland (D-Texas), who had made fighting hunger one of his key issues, had been killed in a plane crash in Ethiopia in 1989, not long after he joined Oxfam America’s Board. Sadly, Paul Wellstone died in October 2002, also in a plane crash.
everyone embraced the change I was trying to bring. The notion of branding and brand promotion was alien to a number of long-time staff at Oxfam America, where the thought was that we should not be promoting ourselves, but rather only be promoting the work of our partners. This tied in to some of the resistance I felt, particularly from the regional program, to the notion that Oxfam America should develop its own advocacy agenda and present its own analysis in policy debates, rather than simply carry messages from partners (who didn’t necessarily all agree on issues). These tensions would become more pronounced then gradually resolved as Oxfam International committed to global campaigning.

In 1998, partly as a result of Oxfam Great Britain’s request to be allowed to access funding for humanitarian relief from the US Agency for International Development Office of Foreign Development Assistance (OFDA), we revisited our policy on not accepting US government funding. I wanted to give the board an opportunity to debate whether this policy still made sense for Oxfam America since it prevented us from accessing potentially millions of dollars in aid for humanitarian response and development work. The board reconfirmed that this position was a core part of our identity and important for maintaining our independence when speaking out on key issues. But as one board member said, “If we’re doing this to preserve our independent voice, why aren’t we using it more?” It was a very timely comment that prompted our board to encourage and strongly support the development of our advocacy and campaigning capacity over the next decade.

GLOBAL CAMPAIGNING: EDUCATION NOW

The policy work Oxfam America had been doing in the late 1990s prepared us well for the first Oxfam International global campaign, launched in March 1999. Named Education Now, the campaign was the Oxfam International effort to feed into the broader Global Campaign for Education (GCE). The purpose of the GCE was to hold governments accountable for the commitments they had made at the 1990 UN-sponsored World Conference on Education for All. What Oxfam International brought to the effort was its argument tying the failure to finance education to the overwhelming debt that some countries faced. In effect, Education Now linked the problem of unsustainable debt to declining public expenditure on education and health. While other NGOs had been campaigning for debt relief for some time, the macroeconomics of this debate had virtually no appeal with the general public, and the campaign had made little progress. Oxfam’s contribution—linking debt and education and putting a human face on the issue by making a young girl and her right to an education the poster child for why debt relief was a worthy moral crusade—turned out to be a brilliant and most effective strategy.

After heavy lobbying at the July 1999 G-8 meeting in Cologne by Oxfam International, Education International, and Jubilee 2000, the G-8 ministers announced a new debt-relief initiative, with a heavy emphasis placed on the use of freed funds for education. Oxfam America followed up these expressions of global commitments with intense lobbying in the United States. We were helped by Oxfam International’s publication of Education Now: Break the Cycle of Poverty, by Kevin Watkins, that was launched in the United States with a press conference at

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4 We did reach an arrangement with Oxfam Great Britain that they could access OFDA funds on a pilot basis under specific restrictive conditions. For the most part, they found US government application and reporting requirements to be overly onerous.
the National Press Club with the National Education Association (NEA), American Federation of Teachers, and World Teachers Union. This event proved to be very critical for this campaign. After listening to the remarks of NEA President Bob Chase, Gene Sperling, the president’s National Economic Advisor and Director of the National Economic Council, stepped to the lectern and assured the audience of President Clinton’s support for achieving debt relief and ensuring basic education opportunities for children around the world. On his way out, after giving these assurances, I saw him turn to Rick Samans of his staff and ask, “How are we going to get the president behind this initiative?” Within a week, Bob Chase was invited to the White House to discuss this and other issues, and Gene and Rick became staunch supporters of the debt relief initiative.

The education work provided a key entry point for work on the broader issue of debt relief. During this time, Oxfam America established substantive relationships with the Treasury Department, including Treasury Secretary Larry Summers and Undersecretary for International Affairs Tim Geithner, who later hired Lydia Williams, our chief lobbyist, to assist Treasury in building support for the debt issue on Capitol Hill. We ran numerous events on the Hill honoring diverse leaders, whose support proved critical in securing passage of this legislation. Most notable among these was Representative Spencer Bachus (R-Ala.) and Senator Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.).

Many organizations were involved in these efforts—Jubilee 2000, Bread for the World, 50 Years is Enough, among others—but for Oxfam America it was our first experience at sustained and focused relationship building and lobbying to achieve specific policy change on a global issue. In November 2000, President Clinton signed the fiscal year 2001 Foreign Operations Appropriations bill, which included $435 million for United States participation in the Cologne Debt Initiative and full authorization for the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to tap investment proceeds for off-market gold sales to fund the initiative. Behind-the-scenes members of our staff played a key role in securing an agreement with representatives of the gold industry over how the sale of IMF gold reserves would be managed to limit negative impacts on global gold prices. Of this final amount, $360 million was for the HIPC Initiative trust fund. After the signing ceremony outside the West Wing, I had the honor of serving as spokesperson for the coalition of NGOs that had lobbied for debt relief.

THE CHANGE FREIGHT TRAIN

Under the second Oxfam International strategic plan, “Toward Global Equity (2001–2006),” Oxfam America, along with the other affiliates, agreed to pursue two major organizational change goals. First, we agreed to identify ourselves publicly as a rights-based organization; second, we agreed to invest in building Oxfam International into a global campaigning force. In addition, the Oxfam International board had approved trade as the topic of the first major global campaign, now that Oxfam had gotten its feet wet with the Education Now campaign.

The rights-based approach was readily embraced and, I think, strengthened our work in fundamental ways. It helped us define poverty as social exclusion and therefore think more clearly about how the issue of exclusion plays out in different social, political, and economic contexts. Given that the state is the primary duty bearer in guaranteeing the rights of citizens,

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it refocused our attention on the role of the state, and from there it was a natural progression to see policy work as a central part of our mission. This, along with the notion of becoming a global campaigning force tackling an issue as complicated and wide-reaching as trade, proved to be a tectonic shift for Oxfam America. We had a huge learning curve, both on the trade issue and what it meant to be an effective campaigning force, and I have to say that the first several years of the new millennium were carried out at a dead run. There were many times in that period when a manager would come back from an Oxfam International meeting and meet protests from colleagues about proposals or decisions that had been taken. Quite often these protests would be met by the response, “That train’s already left the station, and we’re already on it.”

Punching above our weight – Preparing and launching Make Trade Fair

The trade campaign was much more ambitious than Education Now, which had been defined as an advocacy initiative, as opposed to a full-blown global campaign. The influencing opportunity at the heart of the campaign was the Doha round of trade negotiations, led by the World Trade Organization (WTO). Internally, Oxfam International had been challenged on the education campaign because it was not strongly rooted in field work, since education was not a funding priority for the vast majority of affiliates. This was even more true in the case of trade. While one could argue that the livelihoods programs that Oxfam funded were no doubt impacted by trade rules, both nationally and globally, this had not been a lens through which these programs were analyzed and developed. Nonetheless, there was a compelling reason to take on trade; the results of the Doha round would have far-reaching impacts on the development prospects of poor countries. Our targeting was made easier because this round was being referred to by the participants themselves as the development round. This titling was offered as a nod to governments in the Global South that, having seen what happened to their economies under increased trade liberalization, had made clear at the 1999 WTO meeting in Seattle that they wanted to see trade rules reformed to promote development in their countries.

The trade campaign, which Oxfam International named Make Trade Fair (MTF), was launched in April 2002 with the publication of the report “Rigged Rules and Double Standards,” another brilliant overview written by Kevin Watkins. MTF was a big sprawling campaign, commensurate with the complexity of the topic. The key issues taken up by the campaign were agriculture (commodity prices and the harm northern subsidies and dumping did to small-scale farmers in southern countries); trade-related intellectual property rights (TRIPs) and the impact of patents on denying poor countries access to life-saving medications; and labor, with a focus on women laborers in the export sector. Much of the effort was focused on the WTO, particularly the work around agriculture and TRIPs. However, we were also drawn for the first time into advocacy directed at private-sector companies, such as major coffee roasters and retailers (related to our work on commodity pricing and fair prices for producers) and pharmaceutical companies (around our work on access to HIV/AIDS patented medicines).

A full discussion of the campaign is beyond the scope of this paper, but I would like to focus on those aspects of the campaign in which Oxfam America was most involved.

Cut the cost
A year prior to the official launch of MTF, Oxfam Great Britain, with the support of Oxfam International, launched the Cut the Cost campaign. The intention was to influence discussions on patents on medicines, specifically anti-retrovirals for controlling HIV/AIDS, at the November 2001 WTO meeting in Doha. The Cut the Cost campaign complemented the broader Campaign for Access to Essential Medicines, spearheaded by Médecins Sans Frontières and the South African Treatment Action Campaign. In February 2001, Oxfam Great Britain published a report focusing on GlaxoSmithKline (a UK-based pharmaceutical), and in July Oxfam America published a study, “Formula for Fairness: Patient Rights Before Patent Rights,” which focused on the Pfizer pharmaceutical company. This report was an intensive effort by our policy research and communications departments in our first really high-profile foray into challenging a private-sector actor on its adverse development impacts. We also spent considerable time with our lawyers to insure that our arguments were supported by iron-clad evidence, and we repeatedly sought information and comment from Pfizer management, which we finally got when we sent them a draft of the paper for review.

The release of the GlaxoSmithKline and Pfizer studies generated a huge amount of coverage, and we felt we had an early campaigning victory when the Doha meeting resulted in the Doha Declaration on TRIPS and public health, confirming the primacy of public health over private patent rights. Subsequently 29 companies withdrew a patent infringement suit against South Africa, and the United States dropped its WTO dispute with Brazil. The campaign was focused on some very specific issues that supported an audacious and morally unassailable goal. This early victory in this initial skirmish with the private sector and WTO gave many in Oxfam a taste of the potential impacts global campaigning could have on millions of lives around the world and built internal confidence and commitment to tackle even bigger and more complex topics.

The global launch of Make Trade Fair
One element of becoming a global campaigning force was Oxfam International’s capacity to penetrate national and international media outlets simultaneously around the world. MTF was launched on April 11, 2002, with press conferences in the capitals of all the affiliate countries, beginning in Hong Kong, New Zealand, and Australia and gradually making their way around the world, ending with press conferences in the United States and Canada. On that date, Oxfam International also issued Kevin Watkins’ “Rigged Rules and Double Standards,” in which Oxfam International claimed a unique position for itself, neither siding with globophiles who championed globalization and free trade, nor anti-trade, anti-globalization globophobes.

Oxfam International did this to break what it saw as an impasse in debates about trade; establishing a middle ground where increasing trade was seen as an essential part of any development strategy, but trade with rules that insured all parties got a reasonable deal. The core premise was that trade was not inherently bad for the poor but that the rules of the international trading system were “rigged” against the poor. The media coverage was spectacular, and Oxfam International certainly succeeded in provoking a reaction. The Washington Post ran the story as the lead on the cover of its business section, with a color photo and the headline,
“New Faith in Free Trade: In Break with Allies, Oxfam Backs Globalization.” Although the Washington Post’s reading of the report was inaccurate, the reality was that Oxfam International was criticized by many well-respected organizations that felt we had been dismissive of them with the “globophobe” label. Oxfam staff, particularly in the regions, had to do a certain amount of bridge building to open up dialogue and reestablish collaborative relationships with some of our allies-turned-critics as the MTF campaign unfolded.

The reaction brought two things home to us: one, that being a very public organization with clear positions exposes us to some types and levels of risks we had not encountered before, and two, that much of campaigning is about managing relations with a much broader range of stakeholders than our traditional program work required. In a campaign, one is dealing with allies and potential allies, NGO critics, the media, and policy makers who range from issue champions to committed opponents. Then add to this the complexity of working on a systemic level, which means working in different policy arenas, at different levels (regional, national, international) and across different industries. By 2002, Oxfam America was dealing with a degree of complexity we hadn’t even dreamed of when the Oxfam International board approved the “Towards an Ever-Closer Union” strategic plan in 1997. Yet it was exhilarating and it reinforced that we were onto something special and were creating a new kind of organization capable of having impact beyond anything we had ever imagined.

PAUSING TO ALIGN STRUCTURE WITH STRATEGY AND HARNESS ORGANIZATIONAL GROWTH

From the time I came into Oxfam America at the end of 1995 to the end of our 2001 fiscal year, our income had more than doubled, from $13.5 million to $29 million, thanks in large part to the excellent work of Stephanie Kurzina, the director of resource development. Our staff had grown from roughly 70 to 150, with increases both in the Washington, DC headquarters and the regions. We were working on an array of new issues, requiring staff to get up to speed on new topics, and recruiting new staff for their specialized expertise. The demands on the staff were tremendous: Because of the centrality of the United States in every policy issue of interest to Oxfam International (from trade to humanitarian issues to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to name a few), because of the importance of the US media market and the size and strength of the NGO sector, and because of fundraising potential in the United States, we never got a pass.

In addition, many of the affiliates took a very critical view of the administration of President George W. Bush and pushed us to be more outspoken, another challenge since we knew our effectiveness in the advocacy arena depended on us being scrupulously non-partisan and maintaining good relationships with both sides of the aisle on Capitol Hill. Finally, because of the attacks on September 11, the context in the United States had changed, and we were still trying to sort out what the implications would be for us financially, programmatically, and even legally (given some of the provisions in the Patriot Act).

Our regional programs, although thriving in many respects, were struggling with multiple demands: to disburse more-significant sums of money in strategically designed programs; to engage with the Oxfam International harmonization process, which was meant to rationalize

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the activities of multiple affiliates working in the same region; and to participate in the trade campaign, which was looking for participation from the regions but did not have a well-developed idea of how and when that would occur. Because MTF had been largely headquarters designed and built around influencing opportunities with institutions located in North America and Europe many regional staff were unsure of their role and the role of partners in the campaign, but they were spending a lot of time in Oxfam International meetings trying to figure that out. Even with increased staffing, the regional directors were feeling the strain.

Over the years, I had put in place many mechanisms to improve planning, coordination, and alignment within Oxfam America. Our communications were light years ahead of where they had been in 1995. I’d instituted strong annual planning disciplines, including an annual performance review of all staff; department directors were taking seriously the need for greater coordination and cross-departmental meetings were now routine; and we had a much improved financial management system, which produced timely and detailed information. However, in early 2002, I decided we needed to step back, take stock, and identify the ways Oxfam America as an organization should move forward.

Rather than going through a major strategic planning process, the senior management team (the departmental directors and I) agreed that we would use the Oxfam International 2001–2006 strategic plan, “Toward Global Equity,” as our strategic framework and that we would focus on creating an implementation plan, with the primary goals of fully adopting the rights-based approach to development and becoming an even more effective campaigning organization. In a process of several months, led by my office and Paul Valentin, the

Managing complexity:
Balancing humanitarian concerns with the political temperature post-9/11

When the United States invaded Afghanistan in retaliation for the September 11 attacks, the military action was greeted favorably by the majority of the US public. Yet as a humanitarian organization, Oxfam International was deeply concerned about civilian casualties from air strikes and from ancillary damage. Oxfam America was particularly concerned about food shortages throughout the country, because we had information from in-country Oxfam staff and partners that World Food Program deliveries weren’t getting across the Afghanistan border in sufficient quantity to restock major internal distribution points, despite public assurances that they were from the US administration and the World Food Program. Faced with this situation, Oxfam America made the bold decision to depart from the majority of the US humanitarian community and call for a humanitarian halt in the bombing to allow for a resupply of foodstuffs.

At the time, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Secretary of State Colin Powell were holding regular press conferences every morning at 10 o’clock and 11 o’clock, respectively. Oxfam America began holding press conferences at 9 o’clock to provide our perspective and ensure that our talking points would inform reporters’ questions at the Rumsfeld and Powell press conferences. Andrew Natsios, the director of the US Agency for International Development, who had been excluded from White House strategy meetings on the conflict, was suddenly invited to join them. He, in turn, promptly shifted his messaging and began to publicly echo our concerns and make assurances that the administration was concerned about providing adequate food supplies and other humanitarian relief to civilian populations trapped in the conflict. The pressure increased to such a degree that although we did not get a bombing pause, the administration was obliged to change its strategy and work with relief organizations to find alternative supply routes via Iran and Uzbekistan into communities across the northern half of Afghanistan.
program director, we reached a number of key decisions. One was that the senior management team would be replaced by a much smaller executive leadership team, made up of three newly designated vice presidents—resource development, operations, and programs—and me. Paul, who became the vice president for programs, would oversee both our regional offices and our campaigning and advocacy work. I thought that this would facilitate better alignment and more dynamism, so Oxfam America could overcome the siloed character of the organization and build greater degrees of synergy between our on-the-ground work with partners and our policy and campaigns work, moving the organization toward operating as a seamless whole.

A second major decision was to take the somewhat ad hoc cross-departmental collaboration that had emerged over time and formalize the creation of very specific work teams that would link field-based programmers with policy advocates, campaigners, communication staff, and fundraisers. With this change, we launched a matrix-managed model of team-based programming. We initially established three campaign teams (for trade, coffee, and extractive industries) as well as a fourth humanitarian team to deal with the rapid response requirements of emergencies, including the policy and advocacy components of our response—all of which had to be coordinated with Oxfam International.

This intensive, telescoped process of planning, which focused on better implementation, proved to be just what the organization needed at that juncture and helped us get through the intensive years of the trade campaign, subsequent major developments (like the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004), and a remarkable growth rate, with our income doubling yet again by 2005.

**MAKE TRADE FAIR – ADVANCING KEY ISSUES**

*Making a difference: The Oxfam America role in the coffee campaign*

In September 2002, Oxfam International launched its global coffee campaign with the publication of “Mugged: Poverty in Your Coffee Cup.” Modeling the launch on the strategy Oxfam International used for the MTF campaign with the “Rigged Rules and Double Standards” report, it launched the coffee campaign report in major news hubs, as well as in the capitals of major coffee-producing countries around the world, during a 24-hour news cycle. We had recruited an impressive mix of heads of state, celebrities, and major political figures to participate in the launch. We scored major front page stories in the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Financial Times,* and during the few days after launch had multiple stories and editorials in countless metropolitan dailies all over the world. After launching the campaign in Washington, DC, I flew to Atlanta, and from there to Bangkok, Hanoi, and Phnom Penh, and found stories and editorials in papers in every one of those locations. In a matter of three days, Oxfam International had taken a non-story to the front pages of papers all over the world, an exciting achievement and an important lesson for our future campaigning.

At this juncture, the trade campaign was using coffee as emblematic of the type of insecurity small producers in developing countries faced from fluctuating and increasingly low commodity prices. In 2002, coffee farmers were facing a genuine crisis, as farm gate prices had plummeted by 50 percent in one year, affecting 25 million producers in 50 countries, who were getting on average $0.42 a pound—about half the price of production. Apart from the severity of the crisis, coffee was chosen for high-profile campaigning because it afforded us the means to reach consumers and introduce them to the complexities of global trade issues in an easily
accessible way. In addition, we were able to join forces with the incipient Fair Trade coffee
movement and offer consumers actions they could take to address the crisis in their own
communities: buy Fair Trade coffee themselves; pressure wholesale coffee buyers, such as
Proctor and Gamble, to pay fair trade prices; and pressure retailers to serve Fair Trade coffee.

The coffee campaign proved important for Oxfam America for a number of reasons. First, in
a relatively short amount of time we achieved significant outcomes that had direct impacts on
the lives of farmers. In 2001, just under 3,300 tons (3,000 metric tons) of coffee were imported
to the United States; in 2003, two years after the start of the campaign, imports had increased
to 9,180 tons (8,330 metric tons); in 2008, imports of Fair Trade coffee reached nearly 48,670
tons (44,165 metric tons), nearly fifteen times the amount imported in 2001.\footnote{Figures from TransFair. The 2008 figure comes from the 2008 annual report, the other figures from the 2006 annual report.}

The coffee campaign also was important for Oxfam America because it proved to be an
excellent mechanism for strengthening the CHANGE Initiative, our leadership development
program for making college students more effective activists for social justice. The students
galvanized around the fair trade issue, pressuring campus food services and other retailers to
serve only Fair Trade coffee and committed to continuing the work after their formal involve-
ment with the CHANGE Initiative ended. Furthermore, a group of students launched United
Students for Fair Trade, a tax-exempt nonprofit that works with both high school and college
students to develop their leadership capacity and promote fair trade.

In addition, the coffee campaigned deepened and expanded our private-sector work, as we
learned a great deal about consumer and shareholder activism. With other fair trade allies,
we undertook an intensive and ultimately successful effort to get Proctor and Gamble, one of
the big four coffee roasters, to start a fair trade line. This engagement extended to a range of
retailers—early adopters included McDonald’s and Dunkin’ Donuts—and has since expanded
to many mainstream buyers, such as Costco, Sam’s Club, and Ben & Jerry’s. Through this
experience, we developed a significant, although somewhat complicated, relationship with
Starbucks, in which we learned that while management saw Starbucks as a socially responsible
company, they were also hard-nosed business people—teaching us valuable lessons about the
imperatives and logic that drive a successful company.

Meanwhile, Oxfam International learned that it could not set arbitrary end dates for its
campaigning efforts. The coffee campaign was originally meant to be a high-profile, intensive
effort that would last about a year. We found, however, that once we mobilized our public
around coffee and engaged partners in the effort at both the national and international levels,
we had created expectations that we could not simply walk away from. For us, it made sense
to continue the coffee work, as we had developed staff capacity, a network of relations, and
momentum around the issue.

In 2005, long after the MTF-related coffee campaign was over, Oxfam America began work-
ing closely with the Ethiopian government to support their efforts to trademark the name
of its premium coffees grown in the Harar, Sidamo, and Yirgacheffe regions. In the US, the
Ethiopian government found that its copyright efforts were being stymied at the US Patent
and Trademark Office. Sources at the Patent Office revealed to the Ethiopian Embassy that
objections to their application had been made with what was reported to be behind-the-scenes
encouragement from Starbucks. After several attempts at outreach to senior leadership at
Starbucks, with the objective of bringing them together with the Ethiopians for a face-to-face discussion, Oxfam America mounted a campaign in support of Ethiopian trademarking rights. This campaign was unique in its use of a variety of innovative tools. A day of action was held during which activists in cities around the world went to Starbucks shops to speak to their employees and customers. The encounters were videotaped and put on YouTube; after Oxfam America email lists were blasted asking supporters to view the video multiple times, it rose to the top of the YouTube ratings. Starbucks responded with its own video and we responded with another. This prompted a front page article in the Wall Street Journal highlighting a first time online debate between a major corporation and an NGO. The article—generally favorable to the Ethiopian initiative—gave further momentum to this effort.

As the campaign unfolded, a variety of other traditional and non-traditional tools were deployed, including full page New York Times advertisements addressed to Starbucks employees on the West Coast and in the Seattle region. We used e-advocacy to mobilize grassroots participation and bring shareholder pressure to bear on Starbucks at its annual meetings through resolutions and floor statements. Finally, in June 2007, after an intervention by Howard Schultz, Starbucks’ founder, a meeting was arranged that brought the Ethiopian ambassador to Starbucks headquarters for negotiations, and a comprehensive distribution, licensing, and marketing agreement was reached between the government of Ethiopia and Starbucks. This agreement allowed Ethiopia to protect its intellectual property through trademark registration that Starbucks agreed to recognize in all national markets around the world.

Cotton and agricultural subsidies

Agricultural issues proved to be the most contentious matters in the WTO negotiations. The issue that gained the most traction—and which Oxfam International believed would have the most impact on the livelihoods of rural communities in the Global South—was trade-distorting farm subsidies to northern producers. These subsidies drive over-production and result in dumping surplus production on the world market, undermining local producers’ markets with cheap imports. To make its case to the public, Oxfam International decided to make cotton the emblematic case with which to powerfully illustrate the egregious hypocrisy of the northern governments that were pressuring southern countries to reduce trade barriers so the United States and Europe could take unfair advantage. Cotton became a compelling centerpiece of an allegory of injustice. We were helped by the fact that in September 2002 the Brazilian government had filed a complaint with the WTO’s dispute resolution mechanism about US cotton subsidies. Brazil’s complaint raised the profile of the issue in the United States and presented Oxfam America with a tremendous opportunity to press the agriculture agenda in the run-up to the WTO meetings in Cancun in September 2003. An important element of this preparation was working with four West African governments (Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mali) to present a united front, along with Brazil, in an unprecedented challenge to the United States on the subsidies issue.

Here was an instance in which the global campaign model kicked into high gear, deploying all the tools we had been developing through discreet campaigns over the previous decade. Oxfam America was able to drive the subsidies issue to the center of the trade debate, as reflected in hundreds of editorials and op-eds published in major dailies all over the world, using Oxfam’s International’s arguments and numbers (drawn from the 2002 paper, “Cultivating Poverty: The Impact of US Cotton Subsidies on Africa”). At the ministerial meetings, Oxfam America was a key behind-the-scenes player, but we also used our brand and
access to the media to carry key policy messages forward regarding cotton in particular and agriculture more generally.

In the end the negotiations broke down over northern intransigence over agriculture. While in one sense the breakdown was unfortunate, in another important sense it represented southern governments holding the United States and Europe to the same standards they were demanding of others. In reporting to the board, I stated:

Oxfam has been referred to by allies and adversaries alike as the star of the Cancun meeting.... Much of this success was owing to the planning and actions that went into the pre-Cancun preparations....OA negotiated the NYT series, entitled “Harvesting Poverty,” months in advance [of the meeting] and then coordinated the global Oxfam response in support of its preparation and publication. Similarly, Oxfam policy staff was asked to brief the African and Asian trade ministers in their preparatory meetings. They incorporated much of the content of the Oxfam analysis into their positions.

So when the meetings actually arrived, Oxfam was ready with a range of actions that included a global press blitz, the Big Noise petition drive, street theatre, an address by Mary Robinson, new policy papers, celebrity photo ops etc.9 During the meetings, Robert Zoellick, [the US trade representative] remarked in a closed address to African trade ministers: “You have got to stop listening to Oxfam.” Similarly, the US cotton growers panicked as they watched the cotton subsidies question become the litmus test for the whole meeting. They got so anxious that they persuaded three Senators from cotton growing states to fly down to Cancun and make sure that the US delegation did not give away their subsidies in the negotiations...The entire campaign machine functioned like a Swiss watch that others watched in awe...One thing is certain. Oxfam came of age as a global campaigning force with this meeting.

The Cancun meetings were the turning point for the Doha Round. The United States and the European Union realized they were not going to get what they wanted from the negotiations. Instead, the United States decided to focus more on regional and bilateral trade deals, with terms far more favorable than what they could get through the WTO. This required a rapid adjustment in strategy and threw Oxfam America into the midst of working with allies in Washington, DC, and in Central America to defeat the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). In April 2005, Oxfam America organized a global week for trade justice, during which grassroots activists supported by Oxfam America held more than 250 events in 43 states. We targeted the US Congress and brought farmers from Central America, as well as Costa Rican presidential candidate and economist Otto Solis, to meet with legislators. We maintained pressure throughout the spring and summer, but CAFTA eventually passed the US House of Representatives 217-215, after very active pressure on Republican legislators by the White House. It was a disappointing loss, but we gained valuable experience lobbying Capitol Hill on trade issues.

Oxfam America arrives as a global campaigning organization

By the end of the trade campaign, Oxfam America and the rest of Oxfam International had developed and refined a methodology for global campaigning that was driven by a shrewd

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9 Mary Robinson was president of Ireland (1990–1997), UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (1997–2002), and honorary president of Oxfam International (appointed 2002).
sense of how to deploy diverse tools to create a compelling and publicly appealing narrative around what were often very complex issues. As Richard Edelman, president and CEO of Edelman, the world’s largest independent public relations firm, commented to me, “I love what you do because you do what I do.” That is, we had learned to do public relations driven campaigning that relied primarily on earned, rather than paid, media. To do this successfully, we had come to rely on a complex mix of competencies and tools, including research, alliance building, popular mobilization, lobbying, and media work. To our surprise we had become quite effective in establishing Oxfam International as an important voice on one of the key development issues of the decade and an important protagonist with whom policy makers needed to engage.

The trade campaign offered us significant opportunities to influence the terms of the debate and restrain the United States and European Union from forcing their agenda through the supposedly consensual WTO process. It also presented us with numerous challenges, which we gradually worked through. One challenge Oxfam America struggled with, as did Oxfam International as a whole, was how to link our country and regional presence effectively in a global campaign, a skill that improved over the course of the campaign, particularly around our work on coffee and cotton.

A second challenge was the need to work multiple fronts simultaneously, particularly as the European Union and United States began focusing more attention on bilateral and regional trade agreements once they saw that the WTO was no longer a venue through which they could ram their agenda. Oxfam America rose to the occasion, becoming deeply involved in the CAFTA negotiations and several bilateral negotiations.

A third challenge had to do with brand risk, with increased presence in the media and strong stands on a range of issues, Oxfam America was exposed to more criticism and challenges than had traditionally been the case. Oxfam America’s media and communication capacity advanced in leaps and bounds during the course of the campaign.

Finally, Oxfam America also realized that while changing global trade rules was essential, national policy (for example, in support of small farmers or health delivery) was also extremely important. As a result, we instituted a new process for developing strategic program papers that required regions to be more explicit about their policy change goals and how they would work with partners and allies to achieve them.

THE 2007 FARM BILL— IT’S ACTUALLY ABOUT TRADE

Through our MTF work, we had come to realize how important the US Farm Bill is, not only to US farmers and agribusiness, but to farmers around the world. In many ways, the US Farm Bill is the world’s farm bill. The Farm Bill shapes the pricing, production level, and to some extent the marketing of US agricultural goods. Although Oxfam International’s involvement with WTO negotiations was winding down with the suspension of the Doha Round, Oxfam America decided that it had the potential to make a strong positive impact on the lives of farmers worldwide if the Farm Bill could be significantly reformed through the elimination of incentives for commodity surplus production and dumping. In addition, we wanted to see a Farm Bill that better supported socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers and that strengthened rural communities through earmarks for economic development initiatives,
enhanced conservation programs, and increased funding for domestic hunger programs and healthy food systems.

To influence Congress, we realized we needed a more focused and more sustained strategy. We established five field offices—in California, Illinois, Kansas, Massachusetts, and Virginia—with organizers who covered a total of 25 states. Their role was to develop relationships with allies, host events, attend conferences, generate media coverage, and eventually lobby legislators from key states on key committees. We aggressively sought out new constituents through various outreach events, including leveraging our relationships with the bands Coldplay and the Warped Tour, through which we recruited nearly 40,000 new constituents, with a more committed group of 563, who we trained as canvassers in recruitment drives during their concerts.

To amplify our influence, we worked in alliance with a broad range of groups concerned with reform of the Farm Bill, including the American Dietetic Association, Bread for the World, Environmental Defense Fund, the Environmental Working Group, the ONE campaign, the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, the Progressive National Baptist Convention, and Taxpayers for Common Sense (internally we referred to this as the right-left coalition, given the mix of political perspectives). With some of these allies we helped establish the Religious Working Group on the Farm Bill, with which we shared our policy analysis, communications materials, and e-advocacy strategies to create a multiplier effect to reach diverse denominational constituencies beyond our core group.

We also developed a strong media strategy. Either I or another Oxfam America staff member appeared on American Public Media’s Marketplace, Cable News Network’s Anderson Cooper 360, and National Public Radio’s the Diane Rehm Show, as well as on Minnesota Public Radio. One particularly important piece of media work was our engagement with the producer from the Public Broadcasting Service program NOW on a story about US cotton subsidies on West African producers in which I was featured, along with Ken Gallaway, our cotton farmer spokesperson from Texas. We also placed an advertisement in key congressional districts and in the online magazine Slate prior to the vote. Our high-visibility “lobby day” event included the presence of Academy Award nominated actor Dijmon Hounsou, who had visited Malian cotton farmers and had become a spokesperson for Oxfam America on the issue.

This outreach helped increase our access to legislators and the White House. During 2007, our highest level of activity to date on an issue, we had 250 meetings with congressional representatives and their staffs, including House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.); Representative Colin Peterson (D-Minn.), chair of the House Agriculture Committee; Senator Richard Lugar (R-Ind.); most members of the House and Senate Agriculture committees; and the congressional Black and Hispanic caucuses. We also met with Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns, as well as with Michael Gerson, a policy advisor and speechwriter for President Bush, and other senior White House staff.

In the end, we did not get the reforms we wanted, although we did get some very incremental commodity reform, slight increases in nutrition and conservation programs, and important provisions for socially disadvantaged farmers, thanks in significant part to the organizing and mobilizing work of our US regional program. In reality, Oxfam America and our coalition allies were facing some heavy opposition, with entrenched interests lobbying legislators in a volatile political climate (Republicans had lost control of both the House and Senate in the 2006 mid-term elections) and with everyone making their political calculations for the
2008 elections. It is estimated that the reform forces spent $20 million in pursuit of Farm Bill reform, the most ambitious effort to date. By contrast, the farm lobby and associated trade associations spent probably 10 times that amount to stop the reform effort—the largest lobbying effort they have had to mount in defense of these policies. If editorials were votes, the reform forces won the argument, but in these highly polarized political times politics trumped rational argument, once again.

Nevertheless, for us this was a generative campaign. Oxfam America was able to make cotton the premier story of the inequities of the Farm Bill. As a campaign organization we reached a new level, using both grassroots and grassroots advocacy, getting unprecedented earned media coverage, establishing and managing field offices, and gaining access to a wide range of members of Congress and high-level administration officials. I believe we won the intellectual argument about subsidies, and it will be hard to find anyone in Washington, DC who will claim to make a credible, disinterested argument in favor of subsidies, beyond the short-term interest of certain producer groups. When our board chair, Janet McKinley, went to a meeting with Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s chief of staff, he threw up his hands as she entered the room and admitted that we were right on the issue but that the need to protect first term congressmen from swing districts required the party to proceed cautiously on subsidy reform.

Establishing our bona fides on agriculture has enabled us to leverage these relationships as we have undertaken work on other agricultural issues. In 2009, working with legislators in the Senate—Richard Lugar (R-Ind.) and Robert Casey (D-Pa.)—and the House—particularly Betty McCollum (D-Minn.), we got bills introduced that promote investment in agriculture in developing countries as a key means of addressing the global food crisis brought on by high oil prices and the diversion of agricultural lands from food to fuel (ethanol) production.

OXFAM AMERICA INITIATIVES

Extractive industries

While MTF was a high-profile, intensive, global campaign, the extractive industries offer a different model that, over a period of ten years, has gradually built up to be one of our most effective advocacy efforts. A multi-pronged strategy with involvement from several regions, the extractive industries initiative has made effective use of media, research, mobilization, and high-level lobbying to change the terms of the debate around extractive industries. Slowly, yet persistently, this campaign has forced extractive corporations and governments to respond to the accountability demands of the communities affected by oil, gas, and mining interests.

Spurred by issues raised by the South America Regional Office (SAMRO), in 1999 Oxfam America hired an advocate for the Washington, DC office, Keith Slack. While SAMRO worked with partners in the region, the Washington, DC office engaged with the World Bank, specifically the International Financial Corporation (IFC), which finances extractives exploration and exploitation. Oxfam America advocated for free, prior, and informed consent (the right of communities to decide if they want extractives industries in their midst and under what conditions) and the right to know about the financial flows and allocation of earnings generated by extractives. Early research commissioned by Oxfam America on the limited-to-negative economic impacts on countries with economies dominated by investments in extractive indus-
tries, as well as a video about a mercury spill in a mining community in Peru, garnered early attention of not only the IFC but also major multinational mining companies.10

Oxfam America’s extractive industries program expanded to include our Central America, East Asia, West Africa, and US regions, each of which has its own campaign effort. In each of the regions we’ve seen major advances in our partners’ competencies and extractive industry agendas. (For a more in-depth discussion of extractive industries in Peru, see Martin Scurrah’s paper.) In El Salvador, Oxfam America supported the emergence of a broad-based coalition, including NGOs, the Catholic Church, and some private-sector companies. The coalition’s work led to the passage of legislation, under the conservative Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) administration, that would ban metallic mining on the basis that it threatens a major national watershed and yields limited national benefit. With support from the Catholic hierarchy, this position has now also been endorsed by the recently elected and more liberal Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) government as well. In addition, the government of Ghana, after years of campaigning work, has agreed to mining reforms, many of which are based on policy recommendations derived from Oxfam America research. More broadly, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) worked closely with Oxfam America in drawing up a mining code for the entire West African region.

The extractive industries work, the first Oxfam America initiative in which the private sector was the primary target, remains a central element of our current strategy. Initially Oxfam America participated in a global campaign, Publish What You Pay, designed to pressure governments and extractive industries to be more transparent about financial flows. We then moved into direct negotiations with individual companies, such as Newmont Mining, focusing on conditions at specific mining sites. As of this writing, we are also engaged at a number of higher-level, global, and multi-stakeholder fora. For example, Bennett Freeman, an Oxfam America board member, represents us on the board of Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, launched by Prime Minister Blair in 2002. We are also actively promoting other multi-stakeholder initiatives, like the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights, which brings together oil and mining companies, governments, and NGOs who agree to subscribe to the voluntary principles. This kind of engagement enables us to advance our agenda, combining both insider and outsider strategies. In 2009 alone we held high-level dialogues with Chevron, ExxonMobil, Hunt Oil, the International Council on Mining and Metals, and Newmont Mining, on the issue of free, prior, and informed consent, among other topics.

Perhaps the most high-profile and innovative piece of work our private and extractives teams undertook was the No Dirty Gold campaign. Launched by Oxfam America and EARTHWORKS, No Dirty Gold was designed to pressure mining companies to develop more environmentally and socially responsible mining practices. Realizing that we had little leverage over the business practices of mining companies in the field, we shifted our strategy toward building a consumer-driven campaign that targeted gold retailers, to get them to put pressure on their suppliers and in turn on mining companies down the supply chain. With a high-profile 2004 Valentine’s Day launch calling for no dirty gold, in 2005 the campaign successfully recruited

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Tiffany & Co. to come out in favor of more sustainable and socially responsible mining methods. No Dirty Gold took out a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* with a picture of a locket accompanied by the skull and cross-bones. Subsequently, in 2006, seven jewelry manufacturers signed a set of principles, the Golden Rules, calling for socially responsible mining practices and set up a responsible buyers group. They were later joined by another 60 manufacturers, representing $14.5 billion in sales.

One of the unique characteristics of the extractive industries work is how well it links local efforts to national and international arenas. A case in point: the complaint that Oxfam America brought against Newmont Mining in 2007 using the complaint mechanism established by the Voluntary Principles process. The complaint centered on alleged abuses by security forces at Newmont’s Yanacocha mine in Peru, including the fatal shooting of a farmer involved in a protest and harassment of members of local human rights and environmental groups. In a mediated settlement with Oxfam America, Newmont agreed to an independent review of circumstances surrounding these events, which was completed in 2009. Also in 2009, Newmont published a two-year review, undertaken at the request of shareholders, that had been prompted by concerns about the company’s relations with mining communities around the world, including those in Peru and Ghana (another country where Oxfam America works with mining communities).

On the political front, building on our relationships on Capitol Hill and our strong in-district and state outreach, Oxfam America, working with allies under the umbrella of the Right to Know, Right to Decide campaign, managed to get a bill introduced in the Senate in 2009, the Energy Security through Transparency Act. The bill had the bipartisan support of co-sponsors Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), Charles Shumer (D-N.Y.) and Benjamin Cardin (D-Md.). We are expecting a similar bill to be introduced in the House shortly and believe it has a good chance of passing.

Despite this important record of success in the extractives sector, it has never risen to the level of a top-line programming or campaigning priority for Oxfam International, although several affiliates work on extractives. Among them, Oxfam Australia has been our closest partner on work in the extractives sector, and Oxfam Hong Kong is now taking up an interest in the role of China in extractive industry projects in Africa. Nonetheless, over the years, there have been numerous examples of effective coordination and co-strategizing, and a self-organized extractive industry working group meets regularly.

**Aid effectiveness**

In 2005, the High Level Forum on Joint Progress Toward Enhanced Aid Effectiveness issued the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. The meeting was focused on official development assistance from bilateral and multilateral sources, although many of the recommendations were applicable to the nongovernmental sector. This seemed a perfect opening for Oxfam America to push an aid reform agenda in the United States, advocating for a long-overdue reform of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961. By now, in 2006, having had much experience and with strong evidence of the importance of solid research for influencing policy debates, I established the aid effectiveness unit, with an initial focus on research to build up a body of compelling evidence to support reform. With funding from the Hewlett Foundation, the team has grown to nine staff members—researchers, communications specialists, and advocates—and has been highly productive, publishing reports on a range of topics, from the structure of
US foreign aid, to field critiques of country programs, to an analysis of the Foreign Assistance Act, to proposals for a 21st-century vision for US development assistance. These reports have been launched with major discussion panels in Washington, DC, that have played to capacity crowds and have been widely disseminated through the internet’s influential policy-makers. Importantly, the publications by the aid effectiveness unit have positioned Oxfam America as a leader in promoting a comprehensive agenda of aid reform.

In addition, we were one of the four founding members of the Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network (MFAN)—with the Brookings Institution, the Center for Global Development, and the Center for American Progress—which today brings together a wide spectrum of US-based international NGOs, academics, policy researchers, and senior policy officials to work together to bring about key reforms. Taking advantage of the good work by the bipartisan HELP Commission, set up by President Bush in 2006 to review US foreign aid, we initiated our work on reform during the primary campaigns for the 2008 presidential election. Working with candidates from both parties, we sponsored major media events, the most notable being a faith and values discussion with then-candidates Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton at Messiah College the week before the decisive Pennsylvania primary vote. Broadcast live around the world, the event gave us access and an introduction to both candidates.

Hence, we found ourselves well prepared to engage with the Obama administration on the foreign aid reform questions. Oxfam America’s unique contribution to the MFAN coalition has been to look at the issue from a customer’s perspective, asking the question: What’s it like to be a recipient of US foreign aid? We have tried to determine the degree to which US aid aligns with the plans, hopes, and aspirations of the nations we seek to assist.

We quickly learned from our review of past reform efforts the importance of securing leadership on Capitol Hill for any reform initiative. With that in mind, early on we developed a congressional strategy and set about implementing it. Our first major accomplishment was a meeting with Representative Howard Berman (D-Calif.), the newly appointed Chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, during which we asked him to take on reform as a major priority. He agreed and has been championing this issue since 2008, sponsoring hearings, setting up a task force, and offering draft resolutions and legislation to signal his intent as chair. We made similar approaches to senators John Kerry (D-Mass.) and Richard Lugar, who like Berman have become voices for reform on the Senate side.

Witnessing this enthusiasm for far-reaching reform coming from Capitol Hill, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton responded by launching the first ever Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review, with the goal of outlining strategic challenges and establishing priorities for organizational change, staff development, and budgets. Similarly, in August 2009 President Obama requested a Presidential Study Directive authorizing a government-wide review of global development policy, to be co-led by National Security Advisor Jim Jones and Director of the National Economic Council Larry Summers, and directed by Gayle Smith, former Oxfam America board member and MFAN co-founder. These initiatives signaled a high degree of engagement of the administration on the issue of aid reform, very often framing the issues in ways consistent with Oxfam America positions. As these processes have unfolded, we have seen a lot of our ideas, language, and data appearing in administration statements and positions. Both houses of Congress have taken up the issue of aid reform, each with bipartisan bills now in committee, and we are confident that we can shape the outcome in meaningful ways.
CLIMATE CHANGE

Currently Oxfam International’s signature global campaign is climate change, a theme that, until recently, was the near exclusive domain of environmental organizations. Already the impacts of climate change on poor and vulnerable people is evident—with the potential submersion of low-lying islands, the disruption of agricultural activity by changing weather patterns, the spread of tropical diseases to higher altitudes and latitudes, and the occurrence of more frequent and extreme weather events. As a development organization, Oxfam International has chosen to stress the need to assist poor nations and poor communities to “adapt” to the threats and realities of climate change. We have championed the need for these nations to receive fair and appropriate levels of compensatory funding from major emitter nations to deal with climate change effects on a large scale. Bridging an historical gap and even antagonism between environmental and development organizations, Oxfam America broke with traditional practice and has proactively reached out to the environmental community in the US. Environmental organizations that have long championed the need to cut and sequester carbon emissions have now joined us in supporting international finance for adaptation. At present we are the only development organization that is a member of the Green Group of environmental CEOs, and we have actively lobbied with them and with other development and faith-based organizations on not only adaptation finance, but also on carbon markets, addressing deforestation and a range of other climate-related issues.

We have two main goals in this work: getting the right language into legislation and securing adequate international funding for adaptation and a range of other issues. The latter is an enormous challenge, as we estimate that the United States should commit $50 billion annually to address climate change, given that it is responsible for 25% of carbon emissions. To demonstrate how far we have to go, at this writing, the bill before the House allocates a paltry $1 billion annually for financing adaptation to address climate change. While the challenge is daunting, we have made amazing progress in imprinting this issue in the minds of congressional legislators and in persuading them that it is a sine qua non of any meaningful global climate change treaty. We have put in place well-oiled campaign machinery; established a high profile on Capitol Hill, as well as with the administration; created a national Sisters-on-the-Planet elite women’s network through our relations with the League of Women Voters and faith-based groups; built a solid foundation of Oxfam Action Corps members working in congressional districts; and built a reputation for quality research and reasoned arguments among elite policy makers and thought leaders. Our constituency building is focused and strategic, from e-activists to Oxfam ambassadors, recruited because of their connections and influence with key policy makers. The House has passed a climate change bill that reflects our ideas and influence. The end game will be determined by the bill that passes in the Senate, which is under debate as I write.

WHERE WE ARE NOW AND WHY

As we celebrate our 40th anniversary in 2010, Oxfam America has emerged as a major voice on key development issues in the United States. We have developed a sophisticated and effective approach to campaigning and advocacy that fires on all cylinders. We have a number of specialized units and teams—on the private sector, aid effectiveness, climate change,
humanitarian response, and extractive industries—staffed by analysts, advocates, and
communication staff who work in tight formation to move key agendas forward. Their work
is strengthened by strong links with regional offices that, in turn, are working on key policy
issues with local partners and Oxfam International colleagues, directing those efforts toward
national and international fora and institutions as needed. In all this work, people we work
with are gaining a sense of agency, recognizing not only their capacity, but their fundamental
right to hold accountable the institutions responsible for their physical security and human
well-being. They have come to appreciate that the policy gains they make can have direct and
tangible impacts on not only their lives but the lives of thousands of others. Even when we
don’t achieve a full victory, the work that is done around capacity building, organizing, and
awareness-raising prepares communities to continue the struggle of asserting their rights.

As I look back over our recent history, a number of key factors stand out that have been
decisive in enabling us to take Oxfam America to an entirely new level of performance
and impact.

**Oxfam America’s membership in Oxfam International**

Our membership in Oxfam International was clearly a major driver of change for the institu-
tion. The ambitions, reach, resources, and competencies available to us through the Oxfam
International confederation enabled us to cast a much larger shadow at a time when we were,
at best, a medium-size development organization in the United States. The relationship was
mutually reinforcing, however. We benefited from the resources, capacity, and visibility of
the Oxfam family, and Oxfam International benefitted from our history in the United States,
our access in Washington, DC, and our reputation for integrity as an international NGO that
wasn’t caught up in the Washington, DC funding game and wasn’t beholden to the shifting
winds of the Washington, DC political world.

**The Board of Directors**

Upon my arrival, Oxfam America’s board was judged by external reviewers to be highly
dysfunctional and in need of significant reform. To the credit of a succession of board chairs,
starting with Michael MacLeod, through Barbara Fiorito, and to Janet McKinley today, our
board has embraced an agenda of change and continuous improvement. With the institu-
tionalization of its board development committee, the board initiated a process of continuous self-
assessment, using a variety of tools and approaches. The board has very consciously sought to
recruit for diversity of skills, geography, and philanthropic potential. Michael MacLeod was
fond of paraphrasing the old Groucho Marx line, “I want to build a board that wouldn’t have
me.” (With all due respect to Michael, even a cursory review of our board today as compared
with our boards of the mid 1970s would reveal how much that principle has, in fact, been
realized.) From a time when the board was very New England heavy, with a predominance of
academics and a small number of business people, we have moved to a board with corporate
CEOs, journalists and communications executives, foundation heads, investment bankers,
attorneys from leading firms, leading NGO executives, and international representation.

Perhaps most importantly, despite all the change of the last 15 years, the board has remained
steadfastly committed to the core values of the Oxfam America, has wholeheartedly supported
the dramatic changes that have taken place in the organization (often pushing for even more
change in certain areas), and has stood firmly with the organization and its leadership in
taking a variety of risks, both programmatically and politically. Today, I would say that Oxfam
America has as strong and healthy a board and board process as any nonprofit could hope for,
and the prospects look extremely good for continuing this trend.

Harnessing the communication revolution
While the benefits of the internet are available to everyone, not everyone optimizes the
potential it offers. In our case, we recognized that we were small and had to raise our voice
and profile to build our brand and become a credible voice nationally on key issues. With the
internet, we made smart choices by continually investing heavily in a cutting-edge communi-
cation infrastructure and by hiring young talent excited by our mission and keen to keep us
ahead of the pack in terms of online innovation. And we gave them the money and encour-
agement to run. Perhaps equally important, however, is the recognition that the technology
is only as good as the content we provide. With that in mind, we have invested in building
a strong team of researchers and writers who can quickly calibrate our messages and style
to our many different audiences and stakeholders.

In addition, we’ve amplified our reach by retooling our traditional Fast for a World Harvest
program; expanding and strengthening the CHANGE program, which develops youth
ambassadors to the increasingly important youth market; building a state-of-the-art constitu-
tent-recruitment program with diverse tools and organizing tactics, from e-communications
to creating Oxfam Action Corps teams at the metropolitan and congressional district level;
building celebrity links to the music and entertainment industry; setting up the Oxfam
America Advocacy Fund as the lobbying arm of Oxfam America; and using clear, results-
oriented e-communications to make our constituents feel connected, engaged, influential,
and part of the successes and failures, victories and defeats of our work.

Big picture thinking and strategic planning for big impacts
We have decisively moved away from being a grant- and project-driven agency to always
looking for how we might succeed in winning a big change that will not only benefit the
residents of one village but might benefit 10,000 villages and perhaps a whole nation. While
generations of Oxfam America staff have held a deep commitment to seeking transformative
change primarily through grassroots mobilization, Oxfam America today believes grassroots
mobilization must be brought together with good ideas, new tools, shrewder political tactics,
a global perspective, and the power of a global brand to back it up. With this kind of fire-
power and a sharp eye for seeking optimal leverage through all our actions, we can be more
confident about taking on more daunting change agendas. It was this kind of thinking
and confidence that caused us to target trade and climate change as our signature global
campaigning issues.

We also have realized that foreign aid is decreasing as a percentage of global foreign direct
investment (only 10 percent today and declining), while private capital is increasing at an
accelerating pace. So the opportunity horizons for the poor in a globalized 21st century world
is going to be determined more by private than by public capital flows. If that is the case,
how can we ignore this reality and in turn, how should we address it? Our response has been
a heightened focus on the role of the private sector in development. As an indication of our
increased capacity, relatively soon after deciding to make the private sector a key target, we
found ourselves being invited to engage in diverse dialogues with a number of major
transnational corporations that have come to see Oxfam America as both a serious adversary as well as a professional interlocutor on many of the more complex ethical and business practice issues that are important to them.

The bottom line: The introduction of increasingly sophisticated planning disciplines has created an environment in which staff are encouraged to think strategically and are given the support they need to implement. We only expect this to improve with the arrival of Jim Daniell as COO and John Ambler’s transition to becoming Vice President for Strategy.

**Recruiting and retaining the right staff**

An organization is only as good as its people, and one of my goals when I started at Oxfam America was to professionalize the staff and deepen management capacity. As we’ve grown and our programs have become more complex, we’ve recruited more specialized, more highly educated, and more experienced staff. We also look for staff who are committed to our mission, are savvy about building relationships and alliances, and who are willing to go the extra mile. With our increased size and greater diversity of programs and departments, there are also far more leadership and learning opportunities, which makes Oxfam America an even more fulfilling place to work.

Our history has been marked by a good deal of tension between staff and management and by less-than-ideal labor/management relations. My hope when coming to Oxfam America was that over time we would address many of the underlying causes of these tensions and make Oxfam America into a consistently great place to work. To achieve that objective has required a steadily increasing investment in the quality and scale of our human resources (HR) function.

Today we have a highly professional HR staff, which has embarked on a very deliberate effort to get Oxfam America recognized publicly as a “Great Place to Work.” Dialogue between management and labor is routine and healthy. A systematic effort is underway to provide a wide range of training opportunities for all staff with the launch of the Oxfam Academy. Periodic environmental surveys are undertaken to test staff attitudes. Salaries and benefits are routinely assessed and adjusted against market comparators and communicated via online compensation summaries for each employee. Field offices have been incorporated into organization-wide HR systems, and the salaries and benefits of field offices have been reviewed and adjusted against global standards. A state-of-the-art intranet is in place to facilitate an optimal corporate communications environment and to ensure that all employees have at their fingertips all the information and tools they need to do their job effectively.

We hope that with this level of ongoing investment, Oxfam America will be seen throughout the nonprofit sector as an industry leader, not only in our programming work but also in the integrity of our systems and the quality of the work environment we offer our employees.

**Funding fuels programs and good programs fuel growth**

The growth of Oxfam America over the last 14 years has been remarkable by any standards, even during the boom years before the current financial crisis. Stephanie Kurzina was the first person I recruited to Oxfam America in 1996, as the Director of Fundraising, and she has proven to be the best recruitment a CEO could ever make.

Under her leadership Oxfam America has diversified its fundraising from an almost exclusively direct mail shop to an organization operating highly professional programs in monthly
pledging, major gifts, bequests, online marketing and giving, foundation and corporate fundraising, and street canvassing. She launched our first-ever major gifts campaign, which raised some $63 million, and she moved us into online marketing, an area that yielded enormous benefits to us both in terms of funds raised and donors acquired during the Indian Ocean tsunami and more recently in the aftermath of the Haiti earthquake. While never a gambler, she has been innovative and willing to take risks and has delivered our revenues on target year after year.

Probably most important, however, has been her commitment to ensuring that we are always seen as responsible stewards of our donors’ funds, innovative in our programming, and highly effective in the ways we communicate about our work. She has built an excellent fundraising team, which has proven capable of raising funds in good times and bad, owing in large part to our loyal donor base and the institutional donors who have trusted us when we wanted to innovate.

FINAL WORDS

Perhaps for those who lived the Oxfam America experience in the 1970s and 1980s much of what I have described may not sound like the Oxfam America you knew or believed in. I would have to agree that much has changed, but I think the core Oxfam America DNA is still in place. There is still a strong desire to speak truth to power, a strong belief in the importance of deep transformative change, an abiding commitment to partnership, ownership, and agency, and a fierce desire to remain tough-minded, adversarial, and independent.

What has changed, perhaps, is the business model that we are using to represent these beliefs and commitments. We have defined ourselves as a rights-based development organization. I believe this has shifted our focus away from investing purely in partners as an end in themselves and focused us more sharply on those institutionalized systems and practices that deny the poor their rights. We have defined ourselves as a campaigning organization, which to us means we no longer believe that all problems can be addressed at the local level through grassroots mobilization. Rather we believe that the poor are victims of asymmetric power relations and that our role as a strategic partner to the poor is to assist them with our resources to address these power asymmetries and force their agenda before the rich and the powerful.

We have come to see the links between poverty at the local level and decisions taken at the national and global level, and we have sought to build a 21st century organization that can embrace this kind of complexity and create the stories that will enable the everyday citizen to connect the dots and be as outraged about injustice as we are. We see ourselves as a learning organization that grows and evolves in response to the learning it is constantly assimilating from the world and the stakeholders with which it is interacting. We have had to build our capacity to see, listen, and learn and to incorporate that learning into how we plan, program, and use our voice.

We have adopted a theory of change predicated on the belief that in the era of globalization and with the information revolution, simple persuasive ideas drive the agendas of social change, and those with the ideas set the agenda. So we are no longer satisfied to reactively let states or multilateral institutions define for us the issues of poverty and their solutions. Rather, we want them to be on the defensive reacting to our vision and our ideas. We no
longer accept the idea that we must bow before monolithic institutions. Rather we must seek to shape them to our purpose. To do that we must strive to see through status quo systems, structures, and behaviors and chart new ways forward. We need to be smarter and more agile than all our adversaries.

In the end, we must be humble enough to realize that all this is not easy, that there is no playbook established for what we are trying to do, and that we are laying new ground in the way we are choosing to frame the fight for justice. But in the end, that is what makes it exciting to work at Oxfam America today. That is what gets our staff up in the morning and excited about what challenge they will confront and learn from each day.

So as Oxfam America prepares to celebrate its 40th anniversary and enter the second decade of the 21st century, it does so boldly and with confidence. And I am willing to wager that all those staff members who at one time or another worked or volunteered for this organization would find it as exciting and formative today as it was for them 20 or 30 years ago—if not more. The energy is there and the passion runs deep, but the resources are much more abundant, the tools more varied, and the opportunities breathtaking in their variety and scope.
Oxfam America has been a member of Oxfam International, a confederation now numbering fourteen international development NGOs, since 1996. The confederation evolved out of concerns with both enhancing impacts and protecting its members from identity risk. This chapter examines the evolution of Oxfam International, the dilemmas it has posed for Oxfam America, and the benefits it has produced. It concludes with a discussion of Oxfam America’s use of ideas and innovations for systemic change in an interdependent world that is increasingly a knowledge-based society. Introduction

Since 1996 Oxfam America has been a member of Oxfam International, a global confederation of members of the Oxfam family that has become an increasingly important actor in both the strategies and activities of its members and as a force in the global development arena. This chapter looks at the involvement of Oxfam America in Oxfam International in its first decade. It explores the experience of Oxfam America and Oxfam International as an illustration of how international-development non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been affected by globalization and how NGOs may generate and wield more influence in an increasingly interdependent world.

I write this chapter from a fairly long history of contact with Oxfam America. I have worked on the challenges facing development organizations since the mid-1970s. I acted as a consultant to Oxfam America leaders on organization strategy and development in the early

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1 This chapter has benefited from comments from David Breyer, Jeremy Hobbs, Ray Offenheiser, and Laura Roper. The author of course remains responsible for its contents and any errors of fact and interpretation. It was written in 2007. For more recent discussion of Oxfam America’s advocacy work, see Ray Offenheiser’s paper.
1980s, the late 1980s, and the late 1990s. I have been on the Oxfam America board since 2002. I have also worked with Oxfam International on issues of international NGO governance and accountability since 2003. So I have had opportunities to observe the evolution of Oxfam America and Oxfam International for some time. I have also had a chance to look at some of the reflections of Oxfam leaders grappling with the complexities of its evolution.\footnote{See, for example, Offenheiser, R., Holcombe, S., & Hopkins, N. (1999). Grappling with Globalization, Partnership and Learning: A Look inside Oxfam America. \textit{Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly}, 28(4, Supplement), 121–139.}

In this paper I shall examine the evolution of Oxfam America and Oxfam International as an organizational story that is relevant to many other transnational civil society organizations. The chapter begins with a brief overview of the emergence of Oxfam International as a global confederation and then examines its evolution as an influence on the work of Oxfam family members. It discusses some of the dilemmas and the possibilities that have emerged from that evolution. Finally, it reflects briefly on the implications of Oxfam America’s experience in OI for the future of creating public goods amid globalization.

\section*{WHY OXFAM INTERNATIONAL?}

The Oxfam family for many years was a loosely knit network of organizations that shared the Oxfam name. Some, like Oxfam America, were launched with support from Oxfam Great Britain, the original agency. Others, like Novib (Netherlands) and Community Aid Abroad (Australia), had little prior association with Oxfam Great Britain.\footnote{Novib has since changed its name to Oxfam Novib and Community Aid Abroad is now Oxfam Australia.} That network shared information and organized occasional leadership meetings but seldom took on projects together. While there had been sporadic interest in more coordination among family members for years, most members were reluctant to surrender part of their autonomy to a larger network organization. Some of the smaller Oxfams were concerned that larger members would dominate such a network; others saw the ideological differences among the different members as blocks to joint action. Many of the Oxfams were fiercely independent, from each other as well as from government or corporate influence.

By the early 1990s, however, interest in a stronger international organization began to build. Several factors contributed to this interest. While many family members were involved in humanitarian assistance in emergencies and disasters, they sometimes operated at cross purposes in the same countries. More coordination in emergencies offered the possibility of wider and deeper impacts, particularly given the specialized capacities that different Oxfams had developed. Many members were also concerned about the impacts of globalization on poverty and increasing concentrations of wealth. They believed that lasting impacts on poverty might require coordination on geopolitical issues, such as responses to the genocide in Rwanda or debt policies at the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

There was another reason, too: In the same period, Oxfam family members were reminded that troubles within one family member could potentially damage the Oxfam identity and reputation in toto. In the existing loosely knit network, they might never know about possible problems until after the damage was done, let alone have a chance to prevent or influence them.

The decisions that led to Oxfam International’s creation were largely completed by 1995, when Oxfam America was led by John Hammock. In 1995 in Melbourne the Oxfam family
members approved the constitution of Oxfam International, albeit with considerable reservations among many staff members. In doing so, the family members created a transnational organization at the initiation of existing national organizations—a pattern quite different from the creation of national organizations by a transnational parent. This history has contributed to an allocation of power among national and transnational agencies in which the national members rather than the transnational organization have final authority. Oxfam International was conceived as a confederation, in which members preserved considerable autonomy and power, and the secretariat headquarters remained relatively weak.4

At about the same time, Oxfam America entered a leadership transition. The new president, Ray Offenheiser, launched an assessment of Oxfam America’s programs and impacts that raised questions about its future role and how it might build on its reputation for program innovations and local partnerships to reduce poverty. At the time, it was a relatively small development agency whose innovations had been imitated by many competitors and whose name recognition could not easily compete with larger and more marketing-intensive agencies.

Several options for future strategies emerged from this process. One possibility was to continue the existing focus on humanitarian assistance and local development projects while emphasizing organizational renewal to enhance impacts. A second option was to focus on work as a learning organization to develop and disseminate innovative programs in cooperation with local partners. A third possibility was to emphasize advocacy for equity to influence policy formulation and implementation that affected poor and marginalized groups. Oxfam America was, in short, open to new opportunities.

THE EVOLUTION OF OXFAM INTERNATIONAL

Over the ensuing decade, Oxfam International became more accepted by family members as an important asset in their efforts to reduce and alleviate poverty. Members became increasingly willing to articulate their own strategies within the context of Oxfam International strategic priorities.

Indeed, the Oxfam International board includes board chairs and executive directors of each of the thirteen members, with one vote per member. Board members are expected to wear two hats: one for their own organization and one for Oxfam International. Its committees and task forces, populated with representatives from Oxfam affiliates, coordinate advocacy campaigns across national boundaries and humanitarian assistance across regions affected by disasters. In 2007, the members agreed to support Oxfam International with a flat tax on members that substantially increases its resources.

In its first decade Oxfam International has been most visible as a global campaigning organization that advocates policy reforms that reduce poverty in the developing world. The Make Trade Fair Campaign produced a white paper, *Rigged Rules and Double Standards*, which generated considerable controversy and strong reactions, including criticism from many allies who disputed the possibility of leveling the global trading field to benefit poor constituencies. Under the Make Trade Fair banner, Oxfam America became highly involved in the several

advocacy campaigns. The coffee campaign produced high-visibility initiatives to influence Nestlé and Starbucks, and contributions to expanding fair trade coffee markets; the cotton campaign, which evolved into the Farm Bill campaign, challenged Northern agricultural subsidies that undermine Southern farmers and helped to empower Southern governments to challenge World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations that ignored those subsidies.

While the Make Trade Fair Campaign has been Oxfam International’s flagship policy initiative, network members have taken on policy campaigns on several other issues, as well. Oxfam America, for example, has launched a series of extractive industry campaigns that support local initiatives to reduce costs and share benefits of mining in developing countries. These initiatives have shaped national and international policies and built cooperative initiatives with mining corporations. The visibility and success of Oxfam International’s campaigns over the decade have strengthened support among initially skeptical Oxfam America staff for policy advocacy as a central national and international strategy.

While the addition of policy campaigns has been the most visible change in Oxfam development initiatives, the evolution of Oxfam International has also affected how members have provided humanitarian assistance to populations affected by emergencies and disasters. Prior to the creation of Oxfam International, each family member had a stake in mounting humanitarian assistance wherever disaster struck. Disasters are a major critical source of funding and often a primary engine for growth for many members, including Oxfam America. But not all Oxfams are equally capable of delivering humanitarian assistance, and few have relationships with local partners who are able to be effective conduits for such assistance in all the countries that may be subject to disasters. As Oxfam International became more widely accepted, its members have agreed to coordinate more closely across their strengths in delivering assistance. It is now generally accepted that members with existing programs and partners in particular countries will become the lead Oxfam in emergencies, and that the activities of all Oxfams will be coordinated by the lead. This makes it possible for all Oxfams to raise funding for Darfur, for example, but for Oxfam GB—which has ongoing programs in the region—to coordinate relief activities. Similarly, all Oxfams can draw on Oxfam America’s expertise in helping groups prepare for future emergencies. This consolidation of responsibilities on the Oxfam International scale, rather than at the level of individual members, allows for large economies in resource allocation and use.

The third area of Oxfam activities, local development projects, has been less immediately susceptible to integration across family members. Local programs are necessarily responsive to specific political, economic, social, and cultural conditions that shape development possibilities—so, they tend to become very diverse even within a single organization.

The different Oxfams also brought quite different styles for accomplishing local projects. Oxfam GB has historically created local offices that carry out operations with lots of field staff, while Oxfam Novib supports local partner NGOs to carry out programs and does not have field staff of its own. Other Oxfams have operated within those two poles, although they all emphasize local control of field operations to avoid neocolonial centralization. Some countries had multiple Oxfam offices, sometimes on the same street.

For Oxfam America, many strategic decisions about development programs took place at the country level rather than in Boston, so ceding local program decisions to Oxfam International was not an initial priority for anyone.
On the other hand, Oxfam International’s credibility in transnational policy campaigns is in part due to its ability to provide ground truth for its claims through work with poor people in the field; arguments in the Coffee Campaign are rendered credible by support from local associations of coffee farmers. So, as Oxfam International takes on policy campaigns, it also encourages members to work on relevant local projects. Oxfam International’s participation in discussions about the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative is strengthened by its work with many local extractive industry campaigns. In addition, Oxfam America and other Oxfams have increasingly focused on rights-based development approaches that emphasize political participation and advocacy by local partners with their own governments. When Oxfam America supports the women’s alliance to reform laws that curtail women’s rights in Mozambique, coordination with other Oxfams in the country can strengthen the advocacy campaign—and failure to coordinate can undercut it. So for many reasons coordinating local projects across the Oxfams has been slower and more difficult but it appears to be gradually taking place. A dramatic indication of that change is the recent decision for all the Oxfams operating in India to combine their resources in a new organization—Oxfam India—which will integrate those programs for maximum impact.

In short, the evolution of Oxfam International in its first ten years was quite dramatic. At the same time it has emerged as a transnational campaigning organization. It has encouraged and helped coordinate family members’ humanitarian assistance and rights-based local development initiatives. One might have asked at the beginning of this initiative whether the donors that support the various Oxfams would approve their association with Oxfam International. In fact, the donor verdict seems quite positive for some members: Oxfam America roughly tripled its annual income in this period, while playing a central role in the evolution and implementation of OI strategy and programs.

**OXFAM AMERICA DILEMMAS IN OXFAM INTERNATIONAL**

What have been the challenges facing Oxfam America as Oxfam International has evolved and become an increasingly important factor in Oxfam America’s day-to-day life? Some challenges have emerged from relations with the other Oxfams; others have reflected the impact of Oxfam International on internal dynamics of Oxfam America. The challenges have pressed Oxfam America to become a very different organization from what it was.

As Oxfam International has evolved its strategic priorities, dilemmas of inter-organizational relations for the family as a whole have become increasingly important. By 2007, Oxfam America staff and board were investing significant time and energy in influencing Oxfam International strategic thinking. Oxfam International priorities, after all, had become parameters that shape many of Oxfam America’s campaigns, humanitarian assistance, and even local project programming. Early fears about losing autonomy to Oxfam International were not entirely misplaced—though many, perhaps most, Oxfam America staff see the gains of added capacity and impact as worth that sacrifice.

As membership in Oxfam International has grown in importance, so have relations with other family members. While decision making in Oxfam International is largely by consensus and each organization has one vote, it is still true that some Oxfams are bigger than others. On

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some issues size counts. Oxfam Great Britain and Oxfam Novib, for example, are significantly larger than other family members. While formally all members have the same voting power in Oxfam International decisions, in fact, the larger members have capacities to mount programs or carry out research in ways that the smaller members cannot. So, Oxfam GB can dream up and support a wide range of policy campaigns. This can create problems for smaller family members who cannot keep track of all the brewing initiatives but still may be pressed to participate in campaigns that are well underway before their reservations can be heard.

A particularly troublesome aspect of relations with other members for Oxfam America has been what might be labeled identity risk. While there is now a tradition of consensus decision making within the confederation, it contains a range of views on many issues. Some European members, for example, criticize Israel’s policies in the Occupied Territories in ways that would be controversial in the United States. Some initiatives by European members have generated such strong reactions from Israel’s supporters that Oxfam America has seen them as threats to its relations with the American Jewish community — long a substantial supporter of Oxfam America programs. Actions by some Oxfams can create serious damage to others and to the credibility of Oxfam International, as well.

On the other hand, many family members see Oxfam America as unwilling to challenge the US government as directly and forcefully as they have challenged the EU or their own governments. They question whether Oxfam America’s inside-the-Beltway strategy for lobbying the US government is as effective as a more confrontational approach. These tensions have been exacerbated as the US government is increasingly seen to foster increasing concentrations of wealth, to erode the rule of law, to violate human rights and in other ways violate core Oxfam values. One result of these debates has been an Oxfam International policy that requires information-sharing on planned activities that might create identity risks for family members in their home territories, so that members are not blindsided by controversial initiatives. If members see those identity risks as substantial, they can veto the initiative. But tension over differences over campaign values, strategies, and tactics persist in relations between Oxfam America and Oxfam International.

Another family relations dilemma is the risk of too much demand. The expanding emphasis on policy influence and advocacy has encouraged Oxfam America to create a Washington office that is one of the larger advocacy offices among American development NGOs. But on global policy matters, the US government is often the nine-hundred-pound-gorilla whose assent is critical to transnational reforms. Oxfam International is sometimes eager to launch a wider range of transnational campaigns (trade, women’s rights, small arms control, extractive industries, essential services, climate change) than Oxfam America believes it can handle. The Oxfam America capacity to take on advocacy campaigns has been significantly enhanced by support from other family members, particularly Oxfam GB. But Oxfam America has still felt compelled to temper or reject some Oxfam International requests for advocacy initiatives with the US government.

The evolution of Oxfam International has also generated a variety of internal organizational dilemmas. Within Oxfam America the increasing importance of global advocacy and Oxfam International membership has pressed for reshaping aspects of both the board and the organization. For example, Oxfam America for many years recruited board members with expertise on grassroots development and humanitarian assistance. Board members were key resources to national and regional program committees and provided hands-on supervision and
support to program staff. But as program initiatives have become increasingly linked to trans-
national campaigns and coordination across Oxfam International, the board has expanded its
membership to include members with more expertise on the international context, US politi-
cal dynamics, media and corporate perspectives on global policies, and intergovernmental
development agencies. At the same time, the proliferation of interdependent programs and
activities has overwhelmed the board’s structure of standing committees to supervise
programs and campaigns. The board is now grappling with how to reorganize itself to
oversee Oxfam America’s work more effectively.

Within the organization the emphasis on policy campaigning, humanitarian assistance,
and local development projects has entailed major changes in priorities and architecture.
For many years, Oxfam America focused its development work on creating mutual relation-
ships with local partners and on building programs responsive to challenges on the ground.
This approach deferred considerable decision-making power to local offices, enabling country
directors to shape the development of national programs directly without a lot of interference
from headquarters.

The increased emphasis on global campaigning has created a priority to identify local projects
that provide an accurate foundation, or ground truth, for global campaigns and to mobilize local
partners and populations to advocate national policy reforms that complement global reforms.

Local projects that support global campaigns, such as work with associations of coffee farmers
or mining communities, gained more attention and resources. Questions from Boston about
how local projects fit with OI strategic priorities were seen by some country directors as
unwanted impositions on their discretion to define country strategies. The addition of global
campaigning implied a shift in power from country directors to transnational and regional
campaign task forces.

Another organizational dilemma posed by the strategy shift has been the need to coordinate
across many departments and countries for effective campaigning. The Coffee Campaign
required involvement from advocacy staff and media experts as well as communications
and constituency-building departments. It demanded that staff develop new knowledge of
policy issues, new skills in relationships with diverse constituencies, and the capacity to think
strategically about policy issues. It also required close ties to field offices working with coffee
farmers and to other Oxfam family members active in the campaign. The coordination demands
required new multi-department task forces within Oxfam America and across Oxfam
International to carry campaigns to successful conclusions. Since these demands often
amounted to more work for the same staff, many country and regional staff found them
to be burdensome and distracting from their real work—which was not policymaking.

Active membership in an increasingly demanding Oxfam International and the addition
of global campaigning to a plate already full of humanitarian assistance and local develop-
ment projects has not created a bed of roses for Oxfam America staff. But responses to many
of those challenges have been developed, in part because most staff would agree that the
new strategy has contributed to achieving goals of the Oxfam mission to which they are
strongly committed.
BENEFITS OF OXFAM INTERNATIONAL

Probably the most obvious benefit to Oxfam America of membership in Oxfam International is increased leverage in advocacy and influence in global policymaking. Joint analysis, planning, and action on global issues has allowed Oxfam International members to punch above their weight on the global policymaking stage. Oxfam America and Oxfam International together have altered the behavior of transnational corporations in the Coffee Campaign, strengthened the positions of Southern government negotiators at the WTO negotiations, and helped build the base for the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative and innovative cooperation between mining companies, government agencies, and grassroots movements. The combined capacities of the Oxfam family can construct transnational strategies, mobilize resources and implement campaigns well beyond the capacity of a single family member.

While the combination of family members has sometimes dissipated resources in arguments and misunderstandings, it has also sometimes achieved substantial synergies in the service of policy reforms. Those synergies that have encouraged investing more resources for Oxfam International initiatives.

A second benefit has been the emergence of closer cooperation and coordination in the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian assistance that can draw on the resources of OI can make better use of particular capacities, such as Oxfam America’s expertise in strengthening disaster preparedness, and more systematic use of the relationships of Oxfam International members in different countries. The emergence of lead Oxfams to coordinate assistance in countries in which they have well-established programs enhances the ability of the family to make use of local partners. So, Oxfam GB can take the lead in assisting refugees in Darfur, drawing on Oxfam America expertise or finances as appropriate. While it has taken some time to develop appropriate OI organization for humanitarian assistance, the emerging approach appears to many to make better use of both financial and technical resources across the family.

A third benefit has been the gradual evolution of local development programs. In some cases the change has been dramatic, as in the creation of Oxfam India to take over the resources and programs of the many Oxfams operating there. This new Oxfam can raise funds in India as well as consolidate many programs to use the best approaches evolved by its predecessors. In other cases, the evolution of local program improvements has been more incremental.

Many Oxfams, for example, have been exploring a rights-based development approach that emphasizes political empowerment of local partner organizations and networks. Sharing ideas about that approach can quicken the diffusion of effective innovations. Since political empowerment and policy advocacy are central to that approach, country offices of different Oxfams are becoming more sensitive to ways in which their programs support or contradict one other. It becomes an issue for Oxfam International, for example, when one Oxfam provides humanitarian assistance to (and implicitly supports) a government when other Oxfams boycott the same government for violating human rights. Experience with global policy advocacy may also provide resources that support national advocacy programs, such as Oxfam America’s support for the Mozambican women’s movement for reforms that grant new legal rights to women. Local development programs have been slower to feel the effects of the rise of Oxfam International— but they are also increasingly aware of its impacts, dilemmas, and possibilities.
More generally, membership in Oxfam International and its global campaigns has increased the visibility of all the Oxfams, not least of which, Oxfam America. The success of the Cotton and Coffee Campaigns and the visibility of the Make Trade Fair Campaign have generated a lot of media visibility. When the US trade representative publicly blamed Oxfam for the breakdown of WTO negotiations at Cancun in 2003, he provided Oxfam America with a national audience for explanations of how the US wanted to stack the trade deck in favor of rich countries and against the interests of developing countries. When Oxfam America works as part of Oxfam International, it is a key element of an agency that is at least an order of magnitude larger. So, the evolution of Oxfam International has enhanced the visibility and identity of all its members, just as its integration subjects all its members to increasing identity risk. The fact that Oxfam America has grown roughly threefold over Oxfam International’s first decade suggests that the visibility afforded by Oxfam International has not substantially harmed its US fundraising capacity.

The alliance has also increased the fundraising capacities of many of its members. In some cases, as in the support for policy campaigns, Oxfam America has been able to draw on resources from other family members to develop its capacities and support campaigns. Humanitarian assistance initiatives have also benefited from Oxfam International coordination of organizational capacities and financial resources. For example, Oxfam America can channel humanitarian assistance through other family members when it has no existing presence in a country struck by disaster, and it can benefit from resources from other members when it does have ongoing programs in the affected region.

Another important but less expected benefit has been the opportunity for Oxfam America and other family members to learn from their participation in Oxfam International. Some of this learning has emerged from associations with other Oxfams that have enabled participants to see and understand innovations from different experiences and cultures. Oxfam International task forces and committees have drawn on the resources of many family members and generated strategies and tactics grounded in many perspectives and experiences.

In other cases the combination of local projects and global policy initiatives has catalyzed recognition of critical factors that might otherwise have remained unnoticed. In Mali, for example, local work with farmer associations and efforts to improve global coffee prices combined to demonstrate that global price improvements would not improve Malian farmer incomes unless the intermediary institution of the Mali Coffee Board, which purchases farmers’ coffee, chose to pass on increased receipts to the farmers. That analysis enabled Oxfam America to better understand that Malian coffee farmers may not benefit from global price changes unless they can influence the Coffee Board and that, more generally, national institutional arrangements may also have to change if benefits from fairer transnational trade are to reach poor populations. This experience has encouraged Oxfam America to develop a multi-leveled theory of change that includes national institutions, as well as global prices and local farmer organizations.

Finally, participation in Oxfam International has helped to expand Oxfam America’s horizons about systemic change and possible partners. Oxfam America has a history of fiercely preserved independence: It has historically refused to take government funding and been very suspicious of possible corporate support, as well. While there has been good reason for much
of this skepticism, many other Oxfams have utilized government and corporate support to carry out programs that would otherwise have been impossible. The growing roles of civil-society organizations and the shifting concerns of the government and business sectors has created potential for new partnerships that combine the development values and social linkages of civil society with the resources of business and the authority of governments.

The possibility of new partnerships has sometimes emerged from unlikely antecedents: In Oxfam America’s Extractive Industry Campaigns, intense conflict among grassroots groups, mining companies and national governments has sometimes evolved into cooperative agreements that enable wider sharing of the benefits of sustainable economic development. These initiatives usually depend on grassroots groups gaining enough power to sit at the bargaining table, but in doing so they have set precedents that may have wide repercussions, as corporate and government leaders think about future strategic priorities. Oxfam America is now much more ready to explore partnerships with business and government agencies than the Oxfam America of 1995 was.

SYSTEMIC CHANGE IN A KNOWLEDGE-BASED WORLD

Oxfam America has always been interested in ideas. Its founders talked about creating a “thinking [person’s] development organization,” and Oxfam America has prided itself on creating innovative approaches that empowered poor and marginalized groups. Oxfam America’s interest in rights-based development, its decision to engage in global advocacy as well as humanitarian assistance and local projects, and its explorations of new alliances and partnerships for development all reflect its enduring commitment to consider new ideas.

Many of the globe’s citizens live in an increasingly globalized, interdependent, and knowledge-based world, where ideas and innovations are critical to daily life and to enhancing people’s choices and opportunities. Many more citizens live in a world that is localized, dependent on many external forces, and based on scarcities, traditions, and centralized power. In this second world, staying alive can be a constant challenge and the choices and options are severely limited. Oxfam America and Oxfam International are fundamentally concerned with building bridges that enable citizens of that second world to cross into the first.

For both Oxfam America and Oxfam International, evaluation, accountability, and learning are increasingly important as they look to improve their legitimacy and working capacity to facilitate the generation of local, national, and global innovation with a wide variety of partners. Oxfam America’s most recent strategy is to equip other actors, large and small, with ideas and knowledge to foster sustainable development. For example, Oxfam America’s Savings for Change program has enabled village women to teach their neighbors how to create successful savings-led microcredit organizations. In another case, Starbucks—responding to a global Oxfam campaign—negotiated a fair-trade agreement with Ethiopia that preserves national rights to use Ethiopian province names for their coffees.

In both instances, the ideas grew from of the special combination of grassroots knowledge and initiatives, understanding of national institutions and systems, and the engagement in global advocacy and policy making that has emerged from the combination of Oxfam America and other Oxfams in Oxfam International.
Oxfam America has been a major contributor to Oxfam International’s creation and evolution. It has also sometimes been a challenge and an irritant to OI and other family members. Oxfam International has sometimes constrained, challenged, or irritated Oxfam America, as well. But Oxfam International and the evolving cooperation with other family members has been pivotal to expanding Oxfam America’s access to new ideas, its capacity to create innovations, its ability to disseminate them and its leverage for reducing global poverty.
CHAPTER 20

The Campaign for Oxfam America: Ten Years in the Making

Stephanie Kurzina

Oxfam America grew from $12 million in annual contributions to over $70 million within little more than a decade by strengthening both its direct mail program and major gifts programs. Fundraising was given a significant boost with the implementation of a multi-year fundraising Campaign for Oxfam America that was successfully concluded in 2008, exceeding its $50 million goal by raising $63 million for current and future programs. Its success required Oxfam to develop the infrastructure to support the campaign’s volunteer leadership, develop staff capacity, and fine-tune compelling messaging about complex and evolving programs. Key success factors are CEO time, strong volunteer leaders, clarity on program direction and full-time professional fundraising counsel supporting Oxfam’s committed resource development staff.

INTRODUCTION

I was recruited to Oxfam as director of development in 1996. At that time, the department was responsible for fundraising, constituency building, and communications, and was referred to as RCD (resource and constituency development). I was given a mandate to double contributed revenues from $12 million to $25 million within five years. The board wanted to build the major-gifts program and launch a major capital campaign to drive that growth, rather than relying exclusively on the more expensive direct-mail revenues. We did reach $25 million—in four years rather than five—but launching a campaign proved to be a larger challenge. It took eight years of capacity building and planning to put the pieces in place. But launch we did in 2004, when we started the feasibility and planning study for the campaign. As late as the summer of 2007, the Campaign for Oxfam America was still in the quiet phase, having reached $38 million of a $50 million goal. We officially launched in November 2007 and, one year later, closed the campaign, after exceeding our goal with $63 million in donations and pledges. These commitments were over and above the $40 million in annual giving we receive from our supporters. This is the story of how our campaign was born.
BACKGROUND

In 1996, about 85 percent of the $12 million of annual contributions was unrestricted and from direct mail. Online giving was a thing of the future. At the time, people were even afraid to use credit cards for donations. Oxfam had one of the more successful monthly giving programs, in which donors gave a fixed amount each month. We had a very high lifetime value of donors and a direct-mail program that was the envy of many organizations because of the loyal donors and the relatively low cost. Most of Oxfam’s major donors were people who had originally been acquired through the mail and who had upgraded their support as their interest and capacity to give grew. But the organization had only ever received two $1 million commitments from individual donors, and there were only two donors who gave $100,000 or more annually.

The board wanted to invest more in donor acquisition to continue building the unrestricted donor base. But to do so required significant growth in revenues from large major gifts—from foundations and individuals—to counterbalance the direct-mail program costs and keep overall fundraising ratios at an acceptable level. This is because, for organizations with the right mix of prospects, programs, and capacity to manage restricted major gifts, the cost of raising such major gifts is less expensive than expanding direct-mail operations.

So, in addition to ensuring that annual giving continued to grow, my larger focus became enhancing major gifts and preparing for a campaign. Fortunately, my predecessors had already launched a planned-gifts program and former CEOs and major gift officers had built relationships with a number of major donors. We were receiving reasonably regular support from more than 200 donors who were giving over $5,000 each year. We had prospects—in fact, good ones. Oxfam donors are exceptional, committed individuals who care passionately about social justice, empowering people, and creating economic opportunity.

The new CEO, Ray Offenheiser, was a tremendous asset. His in-depth background and connections in the foundation world helped us build partnerships with several top foundations. Formerly, Oxfam had raised about $750,000 a year from a handful of family foundations. It was a challenge to maintain this level of support. Many smaller foundations that had previously funded us moved away from funding grant-making organizations like Oxfam America, preferring to directly support smaller grassroots organizations or southern partners, thereby eliminating the intermediary. We needed to identify larger foundations that appreciated the value Oxfam added through its unique approach to international development.

Ray jumpstarted a few program initiatives that earned us high six-figure commitments from Ford and MacArthur Foundations for the Cuba Program, a joint initiative with the Advocacy Institute on advocacy training, and programs dealing with indigenous peoples’ rights in South America. Building on these early successes, Oxfam is now able to compete effectively for seven figure grants from many prominent foundations. The infusion of such foundations monies has required us to learn to manage “restricted” funding, report on it, plan around it, and make provisions for if and how to sustain work once the funding expired. This still remains a challenge.

These early, large foundation grants were a key step toward building the major-gifts program because they helped us keep our fundraising costs at acceptable levels while we added capacity. But the board and senior management had a vision beyond that: We wanted to launch a
serious multi-year fundraising campaign that encouraged major individual donors to make significant investments in Oxfam’s most critical poverty-reducing initiatives and become major partners in reducing poverty. We needed multi-year commitments that would enable us to plan on more than a year-by-year basis.

BUILDING A CAMPAIGN FOR GROWTH IN THREE ACTS WITH MAJOR INTERVENING EVENTS

The first campaign feasibility study

To successfully launch an effective capital campaign, an organization needs:

• A compelling case for support;

• Campaign leadership (both volunteer and staff);

• Strong leadership gifts prospect pool;

• A good plan and resources to follow through; and

• A mature development program with infrastructure to support the annual campaign.

In December 1996, we engaged a local fundraising consulting firm that specialized in working with cause-related organizations to assess our readiness for a major campaign and write a case for support. That study identified Oxfam had enormous potential, but concluded that we needed to:

• Add major-gift officers (we only had one at the time), increase our prospecting capacity, and boost our travel budget to allow us to build face-to-face relationships;

• Convert to a new donor database that would allow us to manage the major-gifts function. (This turned out to be a much bigger challenge than we had anticipated).¹

• Build a major-gifts volunteer structure and develop leaders for it;²

• Add philanthropists as part of the leadership mix on the board. The board did have 100 percent participation in the annual campaign, but there were no six-figure donors; and

• Develop a clear message about our strategic plans and a communications strategy to bring this message to donors and prospects around the country.

We also knew we needed a mental and cultural shift about fundraising. We needed to move from a direct-mail and staff-solicitation culture to a model where fundraising volunteers and their networks become an important part of the outreach process. We also needed to involve program leaders in fundraising, helping them understand the issues around, and implications of, attracting and accepting significant restricted gifts.

¹ We finally completed the conversion in 2001. Major humanitarian emergencies, staff turnover and hardware problems that required interim fixes each caused delays. We had also not initially anticipated the resources the conversion would require.

² At the time, we only had a board committee that set policy and approved fundraising plans. There was little experience on the board in solicitation of major gifts, and no experience with fundraising campaigns.
The consultants helped us draft a case for support. This proved to be a huge asset to both direct-marketing and major-gifts communications. Our complex programs had always been (and continue to be) a challenge to communicate with clarity, and NGO jargon was prevalent in our fundraising communications. They brought a fresh approach and helped us think more clearly about how to articulate our program impact and how people could make a difference through their philanthropy.

We also launched a series of events, asking major donor hosts to invite their networks in addition to our local prospects and donors in their area. This strategy had mixed results, largely because of the challenges of getting attendance and recruiting regional volunteers on a one-off basis. We decided it would be more productive to organize a national network of volunteer ambassadors. This group could come together annually to connect in a significant way with the programs and leadership of the organization. We would ask them to make a commitment to help broaden our base of support as part of the obligation of membership.

Thus was born the idea of an Oxfam Leadership Council, a sort of adjunct board without governance responsibilities. This would be an advisory network of outstanding business, academic, philanthropic, and public leaders who help guide and promote Oxfam America. By serving as advisors to the president on strategic issues and communications, they would come to understand the organization’s challenges and opportunities. By serving as ambassadors, they would carry the Oxfam message to new and diverse audiences and contribute their talents to enhancing our profile, resources, and effectiveness. After resolving issues of funding, staffing, and roles, the board agreed to the formation of the leadership council.

At the same time, the Board Development Committee recognized the need to recruit to the board a few philanthropists who cared deeply about Oxfam issues. This did not happen overnight, but the committee recognized that both donors and international development experts are essential to an organization’s ability to execute programs with significant impact and return on investment.

We also restructured the Major Giving Unit within the department. We moved the west coast major gift officer to Boston so we would have two major-gift officers in Boston. We hired a research officer. Major-gift staff were encouraged to focus their time on building relationships with prospects who had capacity to make the largest gifts, and we allocated more funds for travel to support this. We also reduced the size of major-gift officers’ portfolio by transferring many of the $2,500-to-$5,000 annual donors to a new high-end, direct-mail special gifts program, housed in the direct-marketing unit. We didn’t allocate a staff member to this, but used our direct marketing firm to manage the communications. This allowed the major gift officers to dedicate more time to the $5,000-and-up donors and networked prospects that appeared to have higher gift potential.

The Major Gifts Unit tested a strategy of promoting “mini-campaigns” for special initiatives for which we would request multi-year pledges for a specific program from a select group of prospects. This was not successful. The donors kept telling us their annual gifts were all they were able to do for Oxfam. Based on this, our major-gifts team felt we needed to build even longer and stronger relationships with the donors and to have a “bigger, comprehensive” campaign that would really stand out to the donors as something different than normal programs.
While the major gift program was getting its legs, our revenues were growing dramatically. This was due in part to the dot-com boom. Hurricane Mitch and the Kosovo refugee crisis also brought in huge numbers of new donors, many of whom became ongoing donors. We began to see significant growth in realized bequests, from $300,000 in 1996 to about $1 million in 2001 (plus occasional extraordinary bequests of $1 million or more).

Still, we kept building our capacity. Growing foundation funding allowed us to invest heavily in direct-marketing acquisition, so as to continue broadening the base of support. We built Internet capacity, as online giving was beginning to become accepted. These investments proved to be wise. Although Web giving primarily brings in lower-dollar donors, Web information and fundraising is also important to providing information to potential major donors. Furthermore, online gifts are slightly higher than mail gifts, and the fundraising costs are less.

One practice that was important in the fundraising department’s development was our commitment to trying out new ideas, evaluating them, and either building new practices into our routines or moving on if something didn’t work. We had to make judgments about which new ideas to pursue because of time and resources. But we were always trying to improve our systems, trying to use best practices or move beyond them, and sometimes trying to be the industry leader on a methodology. Each year, each RCD department manager would prioritize some practice change in our work plans, with evaluation always being part of that process. This wasn’t directly related to the fundraising campaign per se, but this helped us to keep focusing on building blocks that eventually got us to the level of expertise needed to support a campaign.

The second campaign feasibility study

Although revenues were growing, the organization’s program vision required even more resources. A major campaign was the only answer. We hired another consulting firm with more experience in running large capital campaigns to do a second feasibility study in 2000.

Despite our interim accomplishments, this study determined that although we still had enormous potential, we needed further investment in staff resources, we needed to further restructure, and we had to finish our database conversion before launching a campaign. We would also need to have a clearly articulated case for support with specific dollar goals for the programs, endowment, and capital investments the organization would require to achieve its objectives.

Communications challenge of the Oxfam International alliance: Telling donors we are a campaigning and rights-based development organization

We added the requisite staff, including adding a planned-giving assistant and another gift officer to ensure we also had capacity to develop a Leadership Council and events. We separated Institutional Giving into its own department and added management capacity for that function. We finished conversion of the database, and recruited philanthropists to the board. We also added a special-gifts officer in the Direct Marketing Unit to support the high-end mail program, and extended that program to cover annual donors up to $10,000 per year.

The biggest hurdle by far was getting clarity and agreement on our case for support. We knew the programs needed more funding, but there was confusion about our program priorities. Everything was important and it was challenging to get agreement on what would be highlighted as a priority for fundraising purposes.
This problem of agreeing on priority programs was exacerbated by our involvement in and commitment to the Oxfam International confederation and the need to align our programs with the global network vision. There was growing emphasis within the Oxfam family on conducting global advocacy campaigns on issues related to poverty reduction, integrating these campaigns with on the ground programs, building popular mobilization efforts in the US and in regions to involve citizens in the advocacy campaigns, and framing our work in terms of social and economic rights.

This was new communications territory for our fundraising and communications staff, and very new territory for donors. We needed to understand it before we could communicate it. Oxfam was still organized into silos—Advocacy Department, Regional and Humanitarian Programs, and Outreach and Communications—and they often found it challenging to integrate their efforts. We were starting to get involved in Oxfam International Global Campaigns, but the terms “popular mobilization” and “campaigning” and “becoming a global social movement that involved US citizens with others around the world to create change” were new ideas to us.

This increasing emphasis on advocacy and campaigning in a visible way created anxiety for fundraising staff who knew the donors they spoke with generally expressed interest in supporting farmers and poor people directly and who were nervous about Oxfam getting involved in advocacy. Our fundraising messages had always been light on advocacy. Learning to write and talk in compelling ways about advocacy and campaigning tested our communication skills. We used donor research and focus groups to better understand how to articulate this in ways that would inspire donors.

We also needed to learn how to frame the “rights-based approach to development” in ways that are compelling and acceptable to a wide range of donors. Our message needed to recognize that the rights-based approach is about ensuring access to “opportunity” and not about “entitlement.” We needed to be clear that advocacy and human rights approaches are about empowering people to help themselves and the need for advocacy grows out of the needs of poor people to live independent lives with dignity. They sometimes need help in connecting with governments and other institutions at various levels—local, national, and even global—when their opportunity for success is limited by unjust policies.

During this period we hired our first consulting firm to help us craft the case for support and to articulate these new concepts effectively. We recruited a committee of major gift leaders from the Board to develop this case with the staff and consultants, knowing that it would ultimately need to be used by volunteers if we were to have a successful campaign.

Working together, we made improvements in communicating our message on rights-based development. But it was extremely challenging to articulate a succinct program vision. This was exacerbated by the way the programming was decentralized to regions, various regions prioritized different themes, regions worked with different population types, and we still thought about advocacy campaigns as separate from the regions because we were structured that way, even though we knew they were connected to the “issues on the ground.” Eventually this group campaign case committee agreed on a few themes to be prioritized for the case and we got support to use the best examples to illustrate a concept instead of “something from every office.”
We also struggled to get the kind of specific facts about the populations our programs were seeking to help, the anticipated outcomes of the initiative, or even hard measurable data about past successes that Board members sought. This was information that had not been collected. Thus, we documented a need to invest more in program planning and measurement in a way that could ensure that information needed to write compelling proposals, cases, and success stories would be collected in the future.

Another challenge was to show specifically which “new” programs would be funded with new funds raised and to put appropriate price tags on those initiatives. The program staff were not accustomed to planning ambitiously or in multi-year cycles because they were used to living within the annual funds raised and with incremental growth. They didn’t want to raise expectations of partners and staff until they knew the funds would be forthcoming. Another reason this was a challenge is that because of the nature of Oxfam work, new programs are often more about expansion and evolution of current programs than about something totally new.

SEPTEMBER 11 AND THE RESTRUCTURING AT OXFAM AMERICA

While we were developing the case for support, the September 11 attacks and the subsequent bombing in Afghanistan intervened, and we were forced to regroup and deal with the overwhelming events. This period represented a milestone in the evolution of our fundraising communications and our organizational development. The prominence of international relations in the media post-9/11 and Oxfam’s positioning on the bombing in Afghanistan brought great visibility and significant support to the organization.3 This experience also gave us confidence to speak more openly with donors about our advocacy work.

In the year following 9/11, the organization also underwent a management restructuring in which four departments—communications and outreach, policy and advocacy, regional programs, and humanitarian—were combined under the vice president for programs. This was designed to further move the organizational culture toward cross functional collaboration and planning, especially around the global advocacy campaigns we were committed to implementing with Oxfam International. With communications and constituency building functions no longer part of RCD, we became known as the resource development division.

At that time senior management articulated three top priorities:

1. Become a campaigning organization
2. Launch a Leadership Council
3. Lay groundwork for a major fundraising campaign for growth

The launching of the Leadership Council, an idea that had first arisen in 1996, galvanized support from regional and other program units who allocated time and resources to support content for the annual meeting of the Leadership Council. They also supported Leadership Council visits to regional programs. We had the first council meeting in New York City in April 2003, followed by two Leadership Council field visits to Ethiopia and South America within nine months of the meeting.

3 Oxfam America was the only international group in the US to prominently call for a pause in the US bombing in Afghanistan in order to ensure food deliveries could be made to people in the highlands before winter set in.
The Leadership Council was an immediate success. The members were true advisors to the President and the organization and were truly committed to the cause. The vast majority of Leadership Council members were major donors to start with, which is helpful in advising on framing communications to potential donors. All were committed to Oxfam and the mission, well connected in networks that would be beneficial and willing to use their influence to introduce Oxfam to potential donors and other people of influence.

They became even more committed with continued involvement in the issues and exposure to the work. They hosted events, went on visits, helped to craft communications messages, and became advisors on organizational strategies. In effect they joined with the board in helping the organization think more clearly about how to measure and communicate impact of our complex programs. Leadership Council members have also demonstrated incredible fundraising leadership. Annual giving from Leadership Council members doubled in the first year after its formation and has continued to grow ever since.

Around the time of the launch of the Leadership Council, Oxfam International began the Make Trade Fair campaign, initially with a focus on Fair Trade coffee. This foray into global campaigning was a major hurdle for the whole organization. The regional offices didn’t have partners or staff with any experience with or knowledge about trade. The fundraisers were afraid to talk with donors about this, in part because they didn’t understand it completely and because it was about advocacy. But we dove off the high board and went for it. The program staff learned about trade, the campaigners made a case, and the fundraisers read up, learned about it, and went out and tested it with the donors. To our surprise, the donors got it immediately. They understood the problems of the poor coffee farmers’ livelihoods and the need to help them get a better deal in the marketplace. They believed in fair trade products. So long as we led our message with the problems of the people being helped instead of talking about advocacy for advocacy sake, it was a compelling program. Donors didn’t question their involvement in Oxfam, and a few even wanted to support the trade campaign directly.

We also learned that donors could challenge us about parts of our advocacy campaign goals, such as when we suggested regulating coffee supply. But we were able to have conversations around those issues and the donors were open to discussion. We learned that if we could show how advocacy was actually part of the program strategy to help poor people, our donors would support this as important added leverage. Our donors are perceptive and knowledgeable about human rights and world issues. They were as much leaders in our evolution as was the Leadership Council.

The third campaign feasibility study

By 2004, we were buoyed by the success of the Leadership Council and the realization that our donors would embrace our program strategy that links field work with campaigns. With a clearer vision of viable, new program initiatives on the horizon, we felt ready to articulate what we do and where we want to go in a compelling way. After a thorough search, we selected a national firm to help us with the long-anticipated fundraising campaign. Supported by their Boston office, they conducted a formal feasibility study to test a comprehensive campaign for $250 million over five years (combining annual giving for five years plus new support.
of $100 million over a five year period). Our needs were for expanded programs, rather than for capital improvements or for growing an endowment. We wanted to grow from a $30 million per year organization to a $50 million per year organization. We wanted visible funding for a multi-year period that would allow us to plan specific major new or expanded initiatives with confidence.

The consultants helped us draft a vision statement that was tested through more than 75 confidential interviews and with input from the Leadership Council and board. We recruited a Feasibility Study Committee, made up of fundraising leaders from the board, Leadership Council and select major donors, to advise us throughout the process. The study showed strong support for a campaign for growth and provided insights about how to present the case to prospects. Campaign leadership was identified, both for volunteers and for lead donors to the campaign. However, we learned that the concept of a comprehensive campaign that combined annual and campaign funds was confusing to our donors. We were advised that we should shoot for $50 million in new money in addition to annual support in order to ensure a first successful campaign.

The Leadership Council as a group was especially supportive of the idea of a campaign. They wanted us to think big and they were ready to help however they could. Three of the eight feasibility study committee members were from the council. More leadership from this group became evident during the feasibility study and when the Campaign Executive Committee was formed, six of the members responsible for executing the campaign strategy and soliciting the gifts were members of the Leadership Council. See next page for diagram of the Campaign Executive Committee structure (Figure 1).

**LAUNCH OF THE CAMPAIGN FOR OXFAM AMERICA**

Following the study, we recruited a Campaign Planning Committee to help refine the case for support, identify the top prospects and strategize on the best campaign leadership structure to reach those prospects and bring in new donors. This time around, the case for support was easier to write, since we had gone through earlier versions and had gained confidence in our messaging. Still, the involvement of the Campaign Planning Committee was invaluable, for they were able to react as potential donors. They had insights about what elements would be most likely to lead to significant philanthropic investments. Through this process we also learned about the kind of communications support materials that were needed to enable campaign volunteers to have confidence when they talk with others. For example, this committee advised us to develop success stories, fact sheets, videos, and other collateral material that has since been invaluable in the campaign.

During this campaign the organizational culture has shifted further regarding the fundraising process. Some of the most significant changes to practice were:

1. Recruited strong, committed volunteer leaders and gave them responsibility.
2. Prioritized the CEO’s time for the campaign leadership visits over other activities.
3. Hired a full-time consultant and campaign assistant to focus exclusively on campaign activity.
These choices are major factors in our success along with our earlier investments in staff, infrastructure, and communications.

Our first step, starting with the campaign planning phase, was to gain the commitment of the CEO to dedicate 20 percent of his time to the campaign, especially in the early stages during recruitment of campaign leadership, development of the case, and solicitation of the lead gifts. As vice president for resource development, the campaign also became my top priority, working closely with the campaign director. The vice presidents of programs and other key staff also have had to prioritize requests for help on campaign relationships, whether joining a visit with a donor, providing information on programs, strategizing on program and proposal development, or hosting visits to the field.

While developing the case for support, we needed to educate the major-gifts staff about how the campaign integrated with their ongoing activities to raise annual funds and how it would require different ways of working. The priorities were not always evident, and everyone had to adapt to working with a campaign director. We had to clarify for the programs staff how campaign funds might be used, what support or information was needed from their units to support proposals or answer donor requests. We also had to manage expectations about revenues given that until campaign funds are raised we would not know exactly how they could be spent. This is because we need to know the gift restrictions and payment schedules before we can plan the expenditure.

Initially, the campaign prospect visits were done by the president and vice president for resource development. But once the Campaign Executive Committee was recruited and began meeting, those volunteers began to make campaign visits in teams with a staff member. The major-gifts staff learned to prepare volunteers for visits, to jointly develop strategies, to plan and manage communications during the team visits, and to share in the outcomes and reports from the visits. The power of the team approach was obvious. Staff felt kinship and respect for the volunteers, who helped them share the burden and who played incredibly important roles on the campaign visits. Only a volunteer can explain why he or she decided to make a significant personal investment in Oxfam—a powerful message. Campaign volunteers tell us they are equally inspired by the donors who reinforce their own commitment to the work of Oxfam and the people we are all helping together and they have continued to learn about Oxfam and fundraising from the staff members they have worked with.

Having a full-time campaign director and campaign assistant was absolutely essential to the success of the campaign. Our major-gifts staff members have full-time jobs just managing annual giving and building long-term relationships with donors. They have been able to incorporate campaign solicitation activity into this work, but keeping track of the prospects, timetables, and managing the priorities for allocation of research resources, preparing briefings, strategies, proposals, reports, and whatever needs to be done, is more than a full-time job during a campaign. This was the campaign director’s role, along with preparing for the Campaign Executive Committee meetings and keeping the volunteers informed and supported. The major-gifts staff has also benefited from the long-term presence of the consultant, who has also shared methodology with us and provided coaching for everyone involved. This has been a major investment in building capacity of the major-gifts team who will need to continue to manage relationships as they steward campaign donors following the campaign.

I should also mention the importance of building the size and capacity of the major-gifts staff.
Between 1997 and 2007, our staff grew from 15 fundraisers for a $15 million organization to 31 fundraisers supporting a $60 million organization. As the number of major prospects grew, we needed more staff to build relationships, support events, involve the Leadership Council and other volunteers, and prepare compelling proposals. We eventually added special gifts officers in the direct marketing and individual giving departments as we realized there needed to be more resources dedicated to building relationships with $1,000 to $10,000 donors, as well as the higher-level major donors.

The campaign was publicly launched in November 2007. During the quiet phase, we had surpassed $40 million in commitments toward a $50 million goal. Of this, about 40 percent was from major foundations support, and the balance was from individuals. The campaign has 100 percent participation from the board of directors: Board and Leadership Council members together have contributed more than $15 million. We spent a lot of time building relationships with prospects at six- and seven-figure levels, and the CEO spent his time primarily on the seven-figure prospects. By May of 2008 we had reached $48.3 million and reached $63 million by the end of the campaign in October, surpassing our original goal by $13 million.

Already, as a result of the campaign, our programs have been infused with new funding, we have revolutionized the way our major-gifts programs work by incorporating volunteers in important requests, and we are more skilled at communicating our work to major donors.

It may have taken 10 years to get to this point, but these steps will pay dividends for years to come.

**CONCLUSION**

After reflecting on Oxfam America’s experience of growing from $12 million in contributions to more than $70 million in 10 years, I would offer some advice for any fundraising director who is considering embarking on a campaign for growth or a capital campaign:

- Investment in major gifts is important, but don’t stop investing in direct marketing and the annual fund. Those unrestricted gifts and the continually growing base of support will always be needed;

- Build the infrastructure for developing campaign volunteer leadership, possibly through the board or through advisory groups or adjunct boards;

- Be sure you have the staff and consulting support you need, and commitment from the CEO and top program leaders for their time. Conduct a feasibility study first;

- Be sure the moment is right. You need to have clarity on your program direction and how to articulate it before launching a campaign. Involve campaign leadership and prospective donors in the process. In Oxfam’s case, this took longer than we had hoped because of the significant cultural shifts with Oxfam International and to accommodate other changes that came with doubling our growth to $25 million in four years. But it was important to keep the idea and potential of the campaign alive, even as we were evolving at such a rate that the launch of the campaign was a moving target.

Finally, I would note that a major fundraising campaign is an incredibly labor intensive and relationship-intensive process. While time from the CEO and campaign volunteers is essential,
a successful campaign also requires contribution and cooperation of staff throughout the system. It affects program people, the accounting staff, the gift processors, and the marketing and communications people. The campaign touches, depends on, and will require some changes from, everyone. It is important to keep them all informed, to let them know their understanding and efforts are appreciated, and to give them a chance to celebrate the campaign progress and success with you.
Chapter 21

Communicating about Oxfam America: “It’s Complicated”

Myrna Greenfield

Oxfam, with its great variety of programming in more than 120 countries, operating in a highly complex world, dealing with problems as ingrained as global poverty and injustice, faces an ongoing challenge—how best to get its message out in such a clear and compelling way that it motivates donors, activists, and policy-makers to commit to change. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the communication revolution in shaping Oxfam’s evolution in the first decade of the 21st century. It has fueled Oxfam’s effectiveness as a global campaigning organization, allowing it to influence key policy debates. Because of instantaneous communication and the immediacy of the message, it also led to the outpouring of donor support in response to the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami and Hurricane Katrina. Faced with so many communication options in a highly competitive marketplace of ideas, Oxfam continuously thinks strategically about the delivery of authentic, open, and honest communication, focused on the essential dignity of all the people it serves and the capacity of individuals to bring about change.

The Communications Paradox

Ask an Oxfam America staffer to explain the root causes of a conflict situation or why a particular community is experiencing poverty and injustice, and the first thing she or he is likely to say is, “It’s complicated.” Ask them what can be done to end that conflict, poverty, or injustice, and they will similarly begin, “Well, it’s complicated.” Ask why poverty still exists when so much money and effort has already been invested to overcome it, and you will hear, “It’s complicated.”

Yes, there are answers for why poverty exists and how it can be overcome, but the explanations are neither short nor simple. It takes time, effort, and often pre-existing knowledge—of history, geography, economics, politics, etc.—to fully understand the root causes of poverty and injustice in a particular context. Even those of us who think we are well-informed seldom see the full picture.
As Communications and Campaigns director at Oxfam America from 2002–2007, I had access to more information than the average US State Department employee, but having information is one thing, knowing how to interpret it is another. For example, I visited Oxfam America’s Horn of Africa office in Addis Ababa and had the opportunity to get tutored by our Sudanese staff on the crisis in Darfur. My understanding—based on what I’d read in the media rather than Oxfam materials—had been that the conflict in Darfur was primarily a clash between the government-backed Arab militias, the janjaweed, and African rebel factions. Our staff spent hours trying to explain the complex factors—such as lack of access to increasingly scarce resources like land and water, disruption of traditional means of conflict resolution, and the geopolitical context—that have fueled and sustained the conflict. How can organizations like Oxfam capture such complexity in the few moments we have public attention?

American culture is not tolerant of complexity. Communications professionals train our spokespeople to repeat a few top-line messages, use short and catchy phrases, and tell stories to get across our concepts. Politicians, corporations, and NGOs all understand that the side that succeeds in framing how an issue is perceived usually wins public support. One of Oxfam International’s greatest successes was that it helped to frame how many people viewed international trade. The popular view of globalization and international trade among many progressive people used to be that globalization and international trade were inherently bad. Through Oxfam’s “Make Trade Fair” campaign, Oxfam managed to persuade millions of people that globalization and trade can be good for poor people, if the rules are fair. By boiling down the essential message into three words—“Make Trade Fair”—Oxfam was able to reframe how many people view the issue.

New technology has made it faster, cheaper, and easier to create and transmit images around the world. Amateurs as well as professionals share their firsthand videos and photographs with the public. The language of communications has become much more visual. Increasingly, the public is fed information through images that are accompanied by the fewest number of words possible. While images can convey emotions, details, and nuances that a thousand words cannot capture, without the anchoring context that words supply, images can easily be manipulated or misinterpreted, evoking misguided or even dangerous sentiments and responses. Words can do the same thing, of course, but when they are carefully presented in a specific order, they typically guide the reader to the author’s intended conclusion. While Oxfam America frequently tells stories through images, we always try to give people the context to interpret what they are seeing.

The stereotypical image of a starving, fly-covered child with a bloated belly that has been used to guilt trip people to donate is now considered exploitative and unacceptable by most NGOs. Oxfam has eschewed such images ever since we were founded. We try to find images that make a connection with the viewer, images that capture real people in real situations, images that tell a story. We treat the people that we photograph with dignity and try not to intrude into private grief.

Fifty-eight percent of Oxfam America donors have post-graduate degrees, compared to the 26 percent of the general public with bachelor’s or post-graduate degrees. Our supporters are worldly, skeptical, and independent-minded, yet, paradoxically, they don’t want to hear a lot of complicated stuff about how Oxfam goes about doing development work. Based on the number and type of web hits we get and our market research, we know that only a small number of Oxfam supporters actually read the articles, reports, and materials that Oxfam
produces about our work. Most people don’t have the time or interest to plow through
detailed analysis. Although many people scorn what is sometimes referred to as the People
magazine approach to depicting social change—short articles about heroic individuals
taking single-handed action, as opposed to the long-term, collective, day-to-day work
that really leads to change—ultimately, what really moves everyone, regardless of education
level, is hearing compelling stories about how Oxfam helps people change their lives.

But—also paradoxically—when people do want the details, you must provide them. In this
age of accountability, both corporations and NGOs are subject to increased scrutiny. The pub-
lic expects information to be publicly available and easily accessible. Some audiences—such
as students, activists, expatriates, and the intellectually curious—do want to know everything
they can learn about specific issues or regions. New Oxfam supporters often come to Oxfam
because they want to support Oxfam’s response to a specific emergency or issue, but then
take the time to steep themselves in Oxfam’s deep resources, eager to learn about everything
we do; paradoxically, long-time supporters trust Oxfam to do the right thing and pay less
attention to the information we make available.

So what do we do? Provide no information or provide all the information? Simplify every-
th ing into stories and sound bites, or refuse to “dumb down” the information? The solution,
like everything else, is complicated. The information must be packaged in a compelling way
in order to capture attention. It must be simple enough not to be off-putting, personal enough
to be engaging. Yet, it must be layered (with the layers just visible enough to be easily accessed)
so that those who want to go deeper, who embrace complexity, can find it. It should never be
too complicated—but it should not deny the complexity.

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

Communicating about Oxfam America is complicated on many levels, starting with the name
itself. Unlike organizations with descriptive names like “Save the Children” or “Doctors
without Borders,” or even CARE—which is an acronym that at least suggests what it does—
Oxfam could be a name for anything, from a biotech company to some new kind of exercise
machine. People inevitably try to guess what it means: Something to do with oxen? Oxygen?
Oxymorons? In fact, the name “Oxfam” comes from the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief,

Communicating about Oxfam is also complicated because Oxfam’s approach is different—and
more complex—than that of many other international relief and development organizations.
Oxfam believes that poverty does not simply stem from the lack of money, or even lack of
skills and capacities, but is the result of people being denied their basic human rights. We
partner with organizations that are working with communities to help them overcome pov-
erty and achieve their rights. When problems can’t be solved at the local level, we work with
partners, allies, and supporters to try to change the policies, practices, ideas, and beliefs that
trap people in poverty. This can occur at the national level, but often requires us to engage in
advocacy and campaigning on complicated issues such as farm subsidies, intellectual property
rights, and human rights with the US government and in international settings, such as the
World Bank and the World Trade Organization.

In addition, Oxfam doesn’t have, nor has ever had, a child sponsorship program—which is
the type of international development with which Americans are most familiar—although our
work does support families, particularly women. Our primary focus is not delivering health care, building shelter, or delivering food—all tangible forms of assistance that other organizations specialize in. Rather we support communities in their efforts to create these services for themselves or advocate that they be delivered by responsible authorities. We do provide direct assistance in some humanitarian emergencies, but our preference is to work through local partner organizations to build their capacity to respond.

Oxfam America is also different from most of its peer organizations because we do not accept funding from the US government or other sources that might limit the independence of our programs or policy decisions. Not taking US government funding gives Oxfam America the freedom to speak out more critically than the international aid organizations that do take it. For example, most development professionals will privately admit that the US government policy of buying and shipping US crops to countries that are experiencing famine or food insecurity—rather than sending them money so they can buy food locally—depresses local food prices and is environmentally unsound, but since most of the large aid organizations not only accept US government funding, but serve as brokers for the food aid and make money providing the service, most of them won’t say anything publicly about it.1 While not accepting US government money has constrained Oxfam America’s growth and has made our program/expense ratios less attractive than some of our peers, being able to communicate openly about this type of issue in order to try to reform US policy is important to Oxfam and our partners.

Although we have more freedom to speak out than some of our peer organizations, Oxfam must always be careful about what we communicate. As an international relief and development organization with field operations in over 120 countries, we must have permission from the national governments to operate in their country. If we are running a relief operation, we are more effective when we can work alongside the local and national governments. Many of the governments of the countries where we work are repressive, violent, and/or violate human rights. If we publicly criticize them, we risk losing our license to operate there. Global media and the Internet have made it possible for governments to monitor everything that NGOs like Oxfam do or say, so even in the US, we must be careful about what we say. It is painful to sometimes choose not to communicate about the suffering and injustices that we observe, but if we can do more good for people in need by being there than we can by withdrawing so that we can speak out about the situation, we almost always choose to continue our work inside.

Perhaps no situation requires greater delicacy than work in the Middle East, where every word and action is observed, politicized, and often used as fodder to justify violence. Oxfam affiliates work with partners in Israel and Palestine, and we try to provide firsthand information about the humanitarian impact of the conflict whenever possible. Oxfam America once posted a comment in a blog on our website that a staffer in the West Bank had emailed to us about the situation. We got an urgent message from our colleagues in the Middle East, asking us to take it down immediately, as we could be endangering the life of the staffer who made the comment. We apologized and deleted the information.

1 Recently CARE broke with decades of past practice and announced it would significantly alter and limit its participation in US government’s food aid programs, seeking to buy foodstuffs locally if possible, among other significant changes. See CARE USA, “White Paper on Food Policy,” June 6, 2006 (found at www.care.org/newsroom/ publications/whitepapers/food_aid_whitepaper.pdf).
We’ve learned to get around these situations by giving leads to trusted journalists who will not blow our cover, providing background information that cannot be attributed to us, and letting other organizations, such as Refugees International, that do not have staff who are working on the ground in that country make public statements about these vulnerable situations. As a trusted source of information for US policymakers, government agencies, and their staff, we are also able to get the word out to people who have more influence with national governments than we do.

COMMUNICATIONS 2.0

When Ethiopian coffee farmers and the Ethiopian government asked Oxfam to help it achieve the right to trademark the names of its world-renowned coffee brands—Sidamo, Harrar, and Yirgacheffe—Oxfam agreed. Ethiopia applied for the trademark registrations of its specialty coffee brands in the United States, Canada, and other countries and—at the same time—began negotiating with coffee roasters to sign agreements acknowledging the right of Ethiopians to control these brands. Starbucks Corporation, the market leader in specialty coffee, refused to recognize Ethiopia’s rights, so Oxfam launched a campaign to pressure them to change their position.

Although we used a variety of communications and campaigning tactics over the course of the 2006–2007 campaign, including strategic use of traditional news media, shareholder pressure, behind the scenes meetings, and getting over 90,000 people to fax letters to Starbucks corporate headquarters, one of our most effective tactics was the creation of a campaign video that we posted on YouTube. Our lively, streetwise video quickly attracted over 45,000 hits; Starbucks retaliated by creating and posting a response video on YouTube, which in the end only made their stubborn refusal to support the Ethiopian farmers look foolish. Fortunately, Starbucks eventually did the right thing and agreed to support the Ethiopian farmer’s rights. While we might have won the campaign without the video, I’m convinced that it played a critical role in helping us engage supporters and attract more media attention to the issue.

Communicating about Oxfam America has grown more complicated because the field of communications is undergoing such rapid change. The new technology—commonly referred to as Web 2.0—should more accurately be called Communications 2.0, because the shift has affected more than the Web. From social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook to video and photo sharing sites like YouTube and Flickr to the growing importance of podcasts and blogging, the communications toolkit continues to expand. A plain vanilla Web site just won’t capture the Web traffic and maintain interest the way that a multi-media site with lots of interactivity can. Organizations that don’t solicit and accept donations online will miss out on significant revenue. The world of Communications 1.0 no longer exists.

Even as many forms of “new media” have been added to the communications landscape, the “old media” outlets, such as newspapers, broadcast television, and radio stations, have had to adapt to the times. Newspapers have added multimedia capacity and created blogs and online forums. Print reporters are now expected to carry video and audio equipment with them when they cover stories. At the same time, newspapers have lost ad revenue and circulation to online outlets and have been forced to downsize. The “news hole” for international stories has shrunk, and many newspapers have closed foreign bureaus and laid off staff. Consequently, it’s harder to persuade a newspaper to send a reporter overseas to cover a story.
No NGO can afford to ignore the exciting opportunity to attract new supporters to international issues through creative use of new media and Web 2.0 features. At the same time, no NGO can afford to abandon traditional communications tactics, such as creating attractive publications, sending direct mail, and pitching story ideas to newspapers. The result: twice as many opportunities and twice as much work. Although Oxfam doubled the number of communications-related staffers from 10 to 20 over the five years I was there (2002–2007), the organization also increased in size and complexity, and there are always more communications needs and opportunities than there are people to execute them. The new opportunities also pose other dilemmas. As more and more people create their own MySpace pages, blogs, and videos, they are using them to share their interest in celebrities, political candidates, organizations, and issues with their friends and the public. It’s wonderful to have someone offer unsolicited praise for Oxfam on his or her blog, but what if they are not exactly “on message” when they are communicating about Oxfam? Neither corporations nor organizations can completely control their brands any more. No matter how much care Oxfam staffers take to craft a finely nuanced message, we face the risk that our words will be repeated and distorted in dangerous ways. We can monitor the blogosphere and try to curb the most egregious abuses, but the genie is out of the bottle. Communicating about Oxfam will only get more complicated—and more exciting—over time.

TOGETHER, CAN WE END POVERTY?

When I arrived at Oxfam America in 2002, I was frustrated that we didn’t have a slogan. Since our name was not descriptive, we needed a catchy phrase that would give people some idea of what we did. Besides, how could we create fabulous t-shirts, mugs, and other giveaways, a marketing strategy we were exploring, without a slogan?

Years ago, Oxfam America used the slogan, “Change, not charity,” but other organizations started using it (we didn’t trademark it) and we eventually abandoned it. For a few years after I came to Oxfam, we used an abbreviated version of our mission statement—“Creating lasting solutions to global poverty, hunger, and social injustice”—as a default slogan. It was long, and not very slogan-like, but was descriptive and had a positive tone. Some people liked it, others did not. We needed to make a decision to adopt it officially or to choose another slogan.

Before we were able to make an official decision, however, we started using a second slogan as part of our ambitious Campaign for Oxfam $50 million fundraising campaign. This slogan—“Together, we can end poverty,” was suggested by our Strategic Communications director, Adrienne Smith. The slogan was popular with many Oxfam staffers, who wanted to adopt it as our general slogan. It was short, clear, and invited people to get involved. But it didn’t mention hunger or injustice, and could easily apply to many other international relief and development organizations.

The best slogan, of course, is not what the staff and board like, but is one that resonates with your target audience. The only way to find that out is to test it. So we did. The process involved extensive market research with our existing donors and activists, as well with the general public and likely supporters to determine what words would create the desired response.

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2 In 2002, Oxfam America had nearly $27 million in revenues; in 2007 the figure was $68 million.
We tested five variations on “Lasting solutions” and “Together, we can end poverty.” The results surprised us. While nobody loved either slogan, they were about evenly tied between them. People generally agreed that the “lasting solutions” phrase was too long and difficult to understand at first, but they liked the words “create,” “lasting” and “solutions.” Oxfam’s long-time supporters tended to like it the most, because it grows on you over time. People liked the word “together” a lot, but there were mixed reactions to the phrase “we can end poverty.” They agreed that it was a nice sentiment, but wondered, “Is it really possible to end poverty?” To some, it seemed hopelessly naïve, even off-putting, to state that we could end poverty, while others found it inspiring.

In the end, we came up with a new variation: “Working with others to end poverty and injustice.” While not as short and simple as “Together, we can end poverty,” the concept of “working to end” had sounded realistic and positive to the people we tested it with. And the words “poverty and injustice” reflected Oxfam’s underlying belief that people cannot overcome poverty unless they have achieved their basic human rights. Although “Working with others to end poverty and injustice” is not as catchy as Nike’s “Just do it,” it’s clear, descriptive, and relatively uncomplicated.

When it was time to roll out the new slogan to the Oxfam staff, I wanted to do something that would reinforce the concept that our slogan and all of our communications—whether in conversation or in writing—should strive to be clear, compelling, and “uncomplicated.” So I asked one of our graphic designers, Jessica Meehan, to come up with an idea for some type of giveaway item for our staff on which we could print a slogan. She found a clear pen with a bright green puzzle inside—bright green being the Oxfam “color”—that was a perfect vehicle for the slogan.

At the staff meeting, I announced that, after years of research and discussion, we’d finally come up with an Oxfam slogan. I said, “We asked you to describe Oxfam America, and everyone always said the same thing: ‘Well, it’s complicated.’” Everyone laughed. I continued, “So that’s our new slogan.” People looked at me, some believing, some skeptical. I said, “And just to help you remember it, our hardworking design staff created this new pen” and I passed the puzzle pens out with the “It’s complicated” slogan printed on it. By this point there was a ripple of consternation in the room. Then I said, “Just kidding,” and told them the new slogan and why we’d chosen it. The pens were a big hit and, hopefully, the message that we need to keep our message as “uncomplicated” as possible will outlive the pens.

**IT’S ALL IN THE “OXFAM-ILY”**

Being an affiliate of Oxfam International is, to put it delicately, both an opportunity and a challenge. The combined resources, expertise, and creative talents of the Oxfam International confederation have enabled Oxfam International to become a global communications powerhouse. Our combined mailing lists enable us to directly communicate with hundreds of thousands of people around the globe. We can make our communications resources go further because creative staffers at each affiliate share concepts, copy, and artwork. Our campaigners have developed an amazing toolkit—from stunts to petitions to social networking to celebrities—to attract attention to key issues and inspire people to get involved.
Media officers and communications staff from each of the larger Oxfam affiliates contribute time and resources to all major OI efforts, and all Oxfam affiliates are responsible for media and communications, at least in their own countries. Specific affiliates are assigned to lead and coordinate the joint work of the confederation when a humanitarian emergency strikes in specific countries where Oxfam has a presence. The “lead” affiliate is responsible for coordinating the program work, operations, communications, etc. Where possible, Oxfam also assigns a specific affiliate to take the lead on communications for non-humanitarian work, such as international meetings, a corporate action, publication of reports, etc., but such activities can’t always be predicted in advance. Because a natural disaster, conflict, international meeting, or government action can take place anywhere, anytime, and the global media works around the clock, Oxfam must be prepared to react to and comment 24/7. Consequently, communications leads and managers are tethered to their BlackBerrys at all times, and, in most cases, Oxfam is one of the first organizations to be on the scene and informing the media and public.

Although each Oxfam International affiliate is an independent nonprofit organization, we all share the same name and the same brand. That means that any action or position that one affiliate takes can be attributed to us all. This would be fine if the political situation and cultural contexts were the same in Hong Kong, Great Britain, Spain, and the United States, but obviously, they are not. Something that is important, or even simply acceptable, for an Oxfam in one country to say may be completely unacceptable for another. Affiliates do not always agree on whether we should take a position, much less on what key messages should be, or the language and tone of voice to use. If the wrong word appears in a press release, it could damage an affiliate’s relationships with key allies. In the US, for example, it’s important that Oxfam America’s position calls for reforming farm subsidies, as opposed to ending them (as articulated in Rigged Rules and Double Standards), since some types of subsidies help US farmers, particularly low resources farmers in the southern “black belt,” without harming other farmers. Thus, Oxfam America must review all OI communications that adopt a new position or new language to ensure that we are all on the same page.

When Oxfam International is working as a team and everything clicks, the results can be astounding and powerful. For example, when the World Trade Organization met in Cancun, Mexico in 2003, eight Oxfam staffers each donned swimming trunks and an enormous fiberglass head depicting one of the G8 World leaders plugging his ears, a graphic symbol of how rich countries were turning a deaf ear to poor countries’ demands to stop subsidizing their farmers to overproduce certain commodities. The stunt delighted the hundreds of bored journalists who were covering the event and attracted massive coverage. In addition to the stunt, of course, Oxfam International was hard at work behind the scenes, supporting the poor country governments’ efforts to resist rich country pressure to enter into a bad deal. While Oxfam’s work at Cancun did not succeed in persuading rich countries to immediately end the damaging farm subsidies, it helped to raise awareness of the issue and inspired more people to get involved.

3 The “black belt” refers to both the nature of the soil and the population of African American small holders that continue to farm in the deep South despite a history of slavery and discrimination.
Communicating about Oxfam America: “It’s Complicated”

Being part of a global brand and having to agree on what we will communicate and how was always challenging. Images that are considered acceptable in one country are not always acceptable in another, a problem that has come up again and again for Oxfam America. For example, Oxfam International launched a new campaign with Amnesty International and International Action Network on Small Arms in 2003 to try to pass an international Arms Trade Treaty which will stop arms being sold to those likely to misuse them. As usual, most of the design and copywriting work was generated by Oxfam Great Britain’s in-house creative shop in Oxford. The images they proposed to use were bloody and bullet-ridden. The intent was to shock viewers to attention, get them to agree that the violence generated by small arms is unacceptable, and get involved in the campaign.

This presented a problem for Oxfam America. Britain, Europe, and other countries routinely show intense graphic images of war and violence in print and on TV, so Oxfam Great Britain’s proposed images would be upsetting but not be considered inappropriate for the purpose in a European context. Americans—while accustomed to seeing intense violence and gore in films—are not used to mainstream US print and broadcast outlets using bloody or extremely upsetting images in newspapers and on television. Using these graphic images would have not been considered acceptable discourse in the US and would have subjected Oxfam America to intense criticism for sensationalizing and exploiting violent images. Explaining these cultural differences to the campaigners and creative staff in Oxford—and convincing them that we were not just being a bunch of pollyannas—was challenging. After intense negotiation, we were able to get them to tone down the images, and the end result, at least to my American eyes, was sufficiently shocking and upsetting to create an emotional response.

Another difficulty that arose due to choice of images came about during the OI Make Trade Fair campaign. Acclaimed photographer Greg Williams created a series of striking photographs of celebrities getting cotton or rice or chicken feathers literally “dumped” on them, just as the subsidies that rich countries pay their farmers leads to surplus commodities being “dumped” on the world market, making it impossible for farmers in poor countries to compete. A great idea that generated a lot of media and popular buzz for Oxfam. Unfortunately, some of the images couldn’t be widely used in the US, because the commodities being dumped were too politically sensitive. For example, Greg shot a great image of the rock band R.E.M.’s lead singer, Michael Stipe, getting milk poured over him. Milk subsidies are a big issue in Europe, but Oxfam America was not opposed to the subsidies for US milk producers and didn’t want to risk alienating them or their supporters by implying that we were opposed to them. So we tried to minimize the use of that image in the US, although, of course, it’s impossible to completely control access to global images.

WORKING WITH OXFAM AMERICA’S LOCAL OFFICES

Oxfam America has regional offices in Addis Ababa, Boston, Dakar, Lima, Phnom Penh, Pretoria, and San Salvador. Each of the regional offices outside the US has distinct communications needs and, over time, has hired its own communication staff. But just as Oxfam America and the other Oxfam International affiliates share one global brand and must speak with a consistent voice, Oxfam America’s US office and our regional offices share one brand and must speak consistently.
As mentioned earlier, Oxfam works in other countries with the permission of their
governments, and maintaining relationships with those governments is crucial. Yet, in
many cases, those governments are responsible for perpetuating, or at least overlooking,
human rights abuses, corruption, and mismanagement. In some countries, government
critics are harassed, arrested, tortured, or even killed. But governments are not monolithic,
and even repressive governments do many things that benefit the population.

Oxfam America’s regional office staffers and their partner organizations must find the right
balance between criticism and cooperation, testing how they can maximize their impact while
minimizing the risk. I learned in my trips to Oxfam’s regional offices that communications
tactics that I take for granted as a US citizen working in my own country—such as holding a
press conference, criticizing a public official, or organizing a stunt—could be too risky in other
places. Forms of communications that are commonplace in the US are not always appropriate
or possible elsewhere. Although all of the countries where we work have Internet access in the
capital cities, it is often slower than in the US and subject to frequent electricity outages. Rural
areas in many of the countries where we work do not have access to the Internet and even
phone connections can be unreliable.

In some settings and for some audiences, the same tactics that work in the US are used.
Brochures, posters, reports, and work with newspapers, radio, and television are often the best
way to communicate to mass audiences. But in other cases, personal and informal communica-
tions—such as meetings with government ministers, a local gathering, obtaining the support
of the village chiefs or elders—are the safest and most effective ways to get the message out.

Often, artistic vehicles—such as film festivals, street theatre, and posters—are used to spread
a message and build momentum for an issue. For example, during the “Control Arms”
campaign in Senegal, Oxfam America staff recruited Senegalese celebrities and a well-known
photographer to pose for a dramatic poster campaign and plastered the posters all over. The
images—along with an intensive organizing campaign—helped to mobilize popular sup-
port for a petition campaign to pressure the Economic Community of West Africa States
(ECOWAS) to permanently ban illegal arms trade in West Africa, which ECOWAS eventually
approved in June 2006.

Even though Oxfam America staffers all work for the same organization, it is challenging for
US-based communications staffers to be aware of and sensitive to how our messages will be
interpreted in the countries where we work. Messages that are effective and appropriate for
a US audience can be risky, even harmful, in other contexts. For example, we have learned to
be extremely careful about anything that we say about extractive industries. Oxfam is not op-
posed to oil, gas, and mining so long as the communities that will be affected have a say as to
whether and how the extraction will take place. Extractive industries is a volatile issue almost
everywhere that Oxfam works, but it is perhaps most controversial in Peru, where Oxfam and
its partners have taken a leading role in protecting communities’ rights. Communities and
individuals who have opposed specific mining projects have been murdered and harassed, so
Oxfam’s Peruvian-based staff watch every word they say about extractive industries to ensure
that they are not endangering others. Peruvian media outlets do not always observe the same
standards for fairness and objectivity that US media strive to achieve, and have tended to
take the extractive industries’ side in reporting on any conflicts. They have sought to prove
that Oxfam America is actually anti-mining as a means of discrediting our legitimacy. When Oxfam America’s South American regional director at the time, Martin Scurrah, appeared on Peruvian television to defend Oxfam’s position, the interviewer repeated language he had found on Oxfam America’s Web site to bolster the claim that Oxfam was out to get the mining companies. Upon close examination, we realized that the content on our Web site could be interpreted to mean that we were opposed to mining, and we quickly corrected it.

2005: THE YEAR OF DISASTERS

The US public is most likely to pay attention to their neighbors across the world when a natural disaster occurs. Hurricanes, floods, and mudslides evoke a powerful mix of compassion and curiosity. These disasters, as well as wars and conflict situations, usually result in tragic and massive loss of lives. When such humanitarian emergencies take place, Oxfam seeks to use them as entry points to educate people and galvanize them to take action. Though we take care not to exploit people’s suffering, we try to use such emergencies as “teachable moments” to explain the fundamental problems that make poor people more vulnerable to disasters, and talk about how we can work together to rebuild more resilient communities.

People lose their lives or suffer due to war, conflict, and disaster every single day, but the average American never hears about the vast majority of these humanitarian emergencies. These “forgotten emergencies” are seldom deemed “newsworthy” by major news outlets unless they involve Americans, kill or harm an exceptional number of people, are captured on b-roll footage, offer dramatic rescue opportunities, or occur on a slow news day.

An exceptional number of such newsworthy emergencies occurred in the year 2005. In fact, as Oxfam America’s Humanitarian Response Director Mike Delaney pointed out at an Oxfam board meeting, there were major emergencies in each of the seven regions where Oxfam America worked that year, an unprecedented occurrence. While it is important not to minimize the suffering and deaths experienced in other parts of the world during that momentous year, it is truly the tsunami and Gulf Coast hurricanes that will make 2005 stand out in Oxfam America history and in our communications.

When an earthquake measuring 8.0 on the Richter scale struck on December 26, 2004, triggering a devastating tsunami that killed hundreds of thousands of people in Asia and East Africa, the disaster was on such an enormous scale that no one at Oxfam America could even begin to imagine the destruction, the response, and the consequences that would ensue. Because Oxfam already had partners in the region, and had even conducted preparedness drills with them, we were able to begin responding right away. Oxfam was one of the first organizations to get information out to the media and to provide fresh information, reports, and analysis, thus ensuring that we were seen as one of the key organizations responding to the disaster. Our website was flooded with over 200,000 hits in January, 2005, three times greater than a normal month. Moveon.org, who had already encouraged their supporters to donate to Oxfam during a previous humanitarian emergency, sent a message to their 2 million supporters encouraging them to support us, and we raised over a million dollars online in just 24 hours.

In addition to Oxfam and all the larger NGOs that typically respond to humanitarian emergencies, there were many other actors working in the tsunami-affected areas, some with little experience in this type of situation, including governments, local NGOs, and international
NGOs. Oxfam’s response had to be coordinated with others, which takes time; we had to persuade our supporters to trust us in the interim without knowing exactly what we would be able to do over time. For once, our communications challenge was not getting people to care about a humanitarian crisis, or to donate, but to figure out how to publicly acknowledge that we didn’t know the exact nature of what our response would be or how much money we would ultimately need, without discouraging people from donating.

The situation was even more challenging because this was the first truly joint, large-scale humanitarian response effort of the entire Oxfam International confederation. We had been moving in that direction for years, but our preparation and structures were challenged by the scale of the situation. Each affiliate had its own operational, fundraising, and communications needs, yet we needed to communicate jointly as one Oxfam. Even just answering the media’s question of how much money we raised was not a simple job.

For a short time, virtually all Oxfam America’s US-based staff got involved in some aspect of communications, whether it was talking to the public, taking donations, or filling in on the switchboard. The US public’s response to the tsunami was utterly astounding. In addition to donating, people desperately wanted to do something—send blankets, hop on a plane, raise funds, anything. Everyone from schoolchildren to belly dancers to storytellers wanted to hold a fundraising event. Companies without any previous relationship with Oxfam made donations and offered to start co-brand fundraising campaigns. We tried to respond to every request as quickly as possible, which endeared us to many people, who said they had called other organizations and never gotten a call back.

Oxfam’s staffers were exhausted, but exhilarated. We hoped that the public’s interest in helping their neighbors halfway across the world could be sustained. We wanted people to understand that people needed not just immediate relief, but to be empowered to work their way out of poverty so they’d be less vulnerable to the impact of the next disaster. We had limited resources, but we developed an image with the headline, “More than Relief,” that ran in airports, on bus shelters, and billboards in about a dozen cities. We also placed public service announcements and stories, and ran a brief ad on United Airlines. These communications helped us to reach millions of people for the first time, especially people who travel internationally.

Having awakened America’s compassion, we needed to guard against the inevitable wave of disillusion and skepticism. Since the average person does not understand how challenging it is to mount a humanitarian response and the scale and complexity of this disaster was unprecedented, it was important that we keep people informed about what we were doing, how many people we were helping, and the obstacles we faced. Yet, the internal politics in each of the country where we were working were, of course, complicated, and, in many cases, if we talked about them, we’d get kicked out of the country. Even something as seemingly simple as reporting the number of people we helped was complicated, as we did not want to “double-count” the people who had received both clean water and shelter with Oxfam’s assistance, but keeping track of everyone we’d helped was difficult.

Oxfam America was still adjusting to the organizational changes, additional workload, and

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4 This was particularly true in Banda Aceh and Sri Lanka where the governments had been engaged in long term armed struggle with separatist movements.
new opportunities that the tsunami had created when Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast of the US in August 2005. We had anxiously watched the weather reports in the days preceding the event, worried about our partners in Mexico and Central America as well as the organizations we worked with in Florida, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Like everyone else, we were stunned by the ferocious impact of the storm and the shocking lack of preparedness and response by the federal, state, and local governments in the days following the storm. This being the United States, we did not think it would be necessary for Oxfam America to respond to a humanitarian emergency in our own country, so we had made no plans to provide emergency assistance in the Gulf Coast.

We started receiving phone calls and emails from our donors, the media, and the public right away. We had many loyal donors who contributed every time they heard about a humanitarian emergency, and they wanted to direct their funds through Oxfam, as usual. People expected Oxfam America to be involved, or at least to be able to suggest another organization they should support. “What should we do?” I asked Mike Delaney, our director of Humanitarian Response. “I need to get something on our website fast. We need to be able to advise our donors.” Mike could not answer right away. There simply wasn’t another organization that we felt completely comfortable referring people to at that time.

In the meantime, Minor Sinclair, the director of our US regional office, and his staff were getting impassioned phone calls from our partner organizations in Mississippi and Louisiana. Both their offices and their homes were damaged, and staffers were overwhelmed with the need in their own communities. But they were lawyers, farmers, and community organizers—they had no experience with emergency response. Couldn’t Oxfam send down staff and money to help out?

Oxfam America had consciously decided not to respond to the hurricane because we didn’t think that it met our criteria. We only responded to emergencies when there was a need and request for outside assistance, and neither government nor civil society had the resources or expertise to respond. We never dreamed that our own country, our own government, would do such a terrible job in preparing for a predictable and predicted emergency, and such a shameful job in responding. But the need was clear, and we swiftly made the decision to launch our first significant US-based humanitarian response.

We geared up quickly, sending staff, supplies, and money to the region, including to East Biloxi, Mississippi, an area that had been ignored by the government and other humanitarian response agencies. Unlike our work in other countries, where our advocacy messages had to be couched in careful language, we were free to speak out about the needs and neglect that we witnessed firsthand. Oxfam staffers knew from our work in other emergencies that poor people are more vulnerable to disaster, but many Americans were watching their TVs and learning that lesson for the first time. Poverty is not just about lack of money, but about people’s basic human rights being respected. And unfortunately, the rights of the people in the Gulf Coast were trampled on.

It was another teachable moment, and we took full advantage of it. We reported on the physical needs as well as the advocacy issues throughout the year after the storms. On the first anniversary of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, in August and September of 2006, we held a Town Hall Meeting in Biloxi, Mississippi with the NAACP and actor Danny Glover for people...
to testify about how their lives had been devastated and how little had been done. We worked with prize-winning photojournalist Steve Bliss to release a video and publication called, “Forgotten Communities, Unmet Promises,” that starkly depicted the grim reality. The work attracted major media coverage and supported our advocacy efforts.

Like the tsunami, Oxfam America’s first significant humanitarian response in the US made us feel proud of our work, yet humbled by the depth of the need and the enormity of the challenge. But unlike the tsunami, our Gulf Coast response communicated a new message to the US public, that Oxfam America is a US-based organization that addresses poverty and injustice in both the US and other countries. Although Oxfam America has had a US-based program since the early ‘90s, even our donors primarily know us for our work on global poverty and international emergencies. While Oxfam America will always direct the vast amount of our resources to people in developing countries, I believe that we will increasingly be able to link the needs and issues of people in our own country to the needs and issues of people living in poverty in other parts of the world. While family farmers in the US and in developing countries are affected by US government subsidies for cotton and other commodities in different ways, for example, both would benefit if US farm subsidies are reformed. The US government’s abysmal response to the Gulf Coast hurricanes is an excellent lead-in to being able to talk about similar failures of government in other countries. Climate change has already had adverse affect on the US as well as the poor countries where we work. This is opening the door to new ways to communicate about Oxfam and its work.

FASTER, “REALER,” BETTER

The communications challenges facing Oxfam—and all international NGOs—go far beyond figuring out how to adapt to the new communications technologies discussed earlier. The 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, the war in Iraq, globalization, immigration, the tsunami, and Hurricane Katrina have forced all Americans to recognize our global interdependence, but few Americans know what to make of this fact. We feel threatened, fearful, and confused.

Yet, there is growing interest in taking positive action on global issues. The ONE Campaign, rock star Bono’s effort to get more Americans involved in global issues, has used Bono and other celebrities’ star power, support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the leading international NGOs, and smart marketing, to successfully mobilize over 2 million people. Al Gore’s documentary, An Inconvenient Truth, and the July 2007 Live Earth concerts rallied millions more to take action on climate change. The organizations that make up the Save Darfur Coalition represents over 130 million people. The difficulty, of course, is to keep them motivated and activated.

To successfully communicate in this environment, Oxfam America needs to learn to communicate faster, “realer,” and better. The need to be faster is obvious. News organizations are now competing with “citizen journalists” to see who can get information out faster. The first organization to communicate about an issue has the greatest opportunity to frame the issue. Being prepared with statements for every scenario is the best way to be able to move quickly.

Being “realer” is about being authentic, about giving people who are working to create lasting solutions the opportunity to tell their own story. It’s taking advantage of the new technology to transmit real voices in real time. But it’s also being real about the failures and challenges.
Despite valiant efforts, Oxfam and its partners were not able to shape the Doha round of trade talks to give poor countries fairer terms of trade. The conflict in Darfur continues to drag on, as many hundreds of thousands of people suffer. Despite a lot of talking, no clear solution to global warming has appeared. Organizations like Oxfam need to be honest about the challenges ahead.

Being better is about continuing to challenge yourself to deliver the most powerful, honest messages you can give your audiences. It’s taking the lessons Oxfam has learned about communications to heart. Oxfam must continue to find simple ways to convey key messages, but not ignore the complexities or fail to think through how the message will resonate in all parts of the globe. Oxfam must make careful strategic decisions about when to go public about an injustice and when to try to work with a government to respect human rights. And Oxfam needs to learn how to more frequently give the microphone to people who are eager to share Oxfam’s messages with their friends and neighbors.

Looking back on my five years as a communicator at Oxfam, I feel proud of what we were able to accomplish. Despite the challenges, restrictions, and sheer complicatedness, communicating about Oxfam and its work was exhilarating and empowering. The most inspiring people I met were not the celebrities and CEOs, but the people who were doing the work of creating change in their communities. Being around so many smart, creative, caring people inspires you to want to do more, do it better, and do it faster. What you do and say, and how fast and well you do it, can help save or transform lives. There can be no better reward for a communicator than to know that your words can make a difference.
CHAPTER 22

CHANGE: Oxfam America’s Vision Promoting Internationalism as a Civic Value

Nancy Delaney

Nancy Delaney reflects on why the CHANGE program, a youth leadership program for college students, has been so successful in mobilizing and motivating hundreds of student activists to work for social justice.

INTRODUCTION

Central to Oxfam America’s mission to reduce poverty is a dedication to inform and mobilize US citizens to support low and medium income countries in their efforts to participate on an equal footing in a globalized world. For almost 40 years, Oxfam America has been carefully building constituencies committed to internationalist values. Beginning in 1974 the Fast for a World Harvest campaign marked Oxfam’s first foray into the large scale organizing, eventually attracting tens of thousands of students and community members to support Oxfam’s work. In an attempt to build on our successful engagement with students, the National Outreach unit in the 1990s experimented with several new initiatives including National Student Organizer Awards, and an annual essay contest. By far the most ambitious initiative was our Alternative Spring Break program. Over three consecutive years Oxfam organized six student delegations to visit partner organizations. While these trips were certainly life changing for the small groups of students who participated, ultimately the resource implications, strain on partners and regional staff, as well as the difficulty of following up with the students upon their return, made the program unsustainable.

Each of these initiatives, while imperfect, helped increase our understanding, appreciation, and ultimately our commitment to youth. In 2000, in response to the increasing globalization of our economy, the rapid growth of communications, and the growing understanding of the linkages between the local and the global, Oxfam developed the CHANGE Initiative. The CHANGE Initiative was initially funded through a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and was a new strategic initiative aimed at young people to prepare youth to be more socially
conscious and effective participants in the global marketplace, by focusing their attention on the growing poverty around the world and how all people are connected.

CHANGE was developed to show the average university students what he or she can do to positively affect change in the lives of the poor—here at home and around the world—through lifestyle and consumer choices, voting habits and charitable support for aid agencies. CHANGE proposed to:

- allow youth to think and behave like global citizens;
- position university students to enter the global workplace better informed and prepared;
- introduce global realities, including issues of poverty and injustice, to young people;
- provide university students with the context to understand the needs, interests and potential of people in developing countries;
- encourage local community service demonstrating concern for justice and economic inequity and reflecting common problems facing developing countries; and
- influence voters to place foreign policy as more central to our national political agenda

**ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND EVOLUTION**

Through this ambitious initiative Oxfam has seen university students develop their passion for becoming the stewards of a peaceful and prosperous 21st century. Like the young people a generation ago who embraced environmental concerns, today’s youth should be challenged to protect and advance virtues that support a common global community. Greater global interdependence demands that we broaden our civic values beyond our local community and country to embrace the interconnections and commitments we have to people around the world. CHANGE was designed to harness the creativity, optimism, and open minds of young people, creating a foundation for the new century based on a set of universal principles that promote the potential of all people and supports equal access to opportunity.

Since its launch in 2000, CHANGE has evolved into a highly competitive and much emulated student leadership and advocacy program. To date, CHANGE has trained more than 500 students from over 230 US campuses at Oxfam’s summer training. The first class of CHANGE leaders was made up of 16 students from 13 campuses. These students were chosen from campuses that had strong links to Oxfam through the Fast for a World Harvest campaign. The pilot year of CHANGE involved working closely with these 16 students to collaboratively develop the next iteration of the program. To meet the goal of creating a unique and cutting edge student leadership training program required that Oxfam develop its own curriculum and other resources, as well as the internal capacity to plan, train, and execute a multi-day training.

In its first three years the CHANGE Initiative went through many changes, achieving a great deal of progress, while also making a number of significant course corrections. One noteworthy change involved the size of the program. While an early vision for the program included training some 100 students per year, we soon realized that this was not possible. Starting with 16 students we rapidly increased to 76 and 94 in 2001 and 2002, respectively. Evaluations of the program showed that while the training itself was highly effective, the CHANGE leaders’ efforts once they returned to their campuses varied greatly. National Outreach staff’s capacity...
to follow up with and support CHANGE leaders throughout the year emerged as a key factor in their success; this led to the determination to cap the annual training at 50 students.

The other major shift in the program related directly to the content of the training and the expectations Oxfam had for the CHANGE leaders. Initially, the assumption had been to train and equip students to take action on a wide variety of social justice issues—whether or not these issues were directly linked to Oxfam’s work or campaigns. Our assessment of the CHANGE leaders’ success on their campuses indicated that those students who elected to work directly on Oxfam issues, using Oxfam resources and staff for support, were far more successful than those students who chose to work on non-Oxfam issues. This led to the decision to require that CHANGE leaders commit to at least one Oxfam specific campaign. Since 2003 these campaigns have included Fair Trade Coffee, Extractive Industries, Make Trade Fair, and Farm Bill reform.

**ELEMENTS CONTRIBUTING TO SUCCESS**

There are a number of elements that have contributed significantly to the success of CHANGE:

**CHANGE training**

CHANGE strives to build leadership skills, networks, and linkages to other student activists, and encourages students to share their knowledge and passion. The first step in achieving this occurs through an annual week-long training. Selected students are brought together at a campus in the Boston area each summer. At the training students hear from a number of Oxfam staff on issues ranging from Oxfam’s grant making programs to our humanitarian response to our lobbying and advocacy work. They are also given extensive training in building networks, fundraising, campaign organizing, and leadership. The result is that CHANGE leaders act as catalysts on their campuses, reaching out to other students and campus organizations to involve them in global social justice issues. CHANGE is designed to go far beyond any individual CHANGE leader and to leverage their training and passion to create a multiplier effect that reaches the campus at-large and beyond.

**Peer facilitators**

Each year six to eight past CHANGE leaders are invited back as peer facilitators. It is hard to overstate the power of peer to peer learning in this context. Incoming CHANGE leaders have the opportunity to learn from students who very recently had been in the exact same position.

**Recruitment**

The make up of each class of CHANGE leaders is determined by a carefully crafted recruitment strategy. This includes ensuring a mix of students from diverse backgrounds, school size, and geographic location, as well as a mix of public, private, urban, and rural campuses. Other concerns include year-to-year campaign targets, e.g., the importance of legislators from Kansas to Oxfam’s Farm Bill reform campaign.
Application process
Each candidate is required to fill out an online application that includes numerous essay questions and a supporting recommendation from an on-campus advisor. Applications are reviewed by at least two staff members, and the most promising candidates are given phone interviews before final selections are made. Over the past several years some 700 to 800 students have begun an application, with 200 to 250 final candidates submitting a completed application.

Reports
A key element of the program is the requirement that CHANGE leaders report back to us regularly. This includes an action plan, required in early September and activity reports due in October, December, and March.

Staff
CHANGE is supported by a full-time program coordinator and a training specialist. In addition, various campaign organizers and a student organizer help to provide specific help to students as they undertake their Oxfam America campaigns. After the training, Oxfam America staff continues to work closely with student activists and leaders to expand their vistas to better understand global issues, to look at the root causes of problems, and explore potential solutions.

Materials
Access to Oxfam America materials and publications has been critical to the success of CHANGE leaders as they help increase Oxfam America’s brand awareness throughout the country and bring new constituents to the agency.

Surveys and evaluation
Accepted students are required to fill out both a pre- and post survey to help gauge the impact of the program on individual students. Additionally, participants and staff undertake comprehensive evaluations of the training. Despite these evaluation tools the ability to definitively assess the impact of CHANGE is an ongoing challenge. The best assessment requires a combination of objective data and anecdotes such as the following from the CHANGE leaders themselves:

“After CHANGE I can’t imagine having a life that did not involve working for social justice.”
—Jennifer Wallin, CHANGE 2006, Univ. of Louisville

“I always knew that I wanted to make a change in the world. I knew I wanted to do something positive but there wasn’t any direction to it and so with CHANGE it gave my life’s goal an objective, that direction that I had lacked before.”
—Gyude Moore, CHANGE 2003, Berea College

“There are hundreds of us, CHANGE Leaders, around the country and there are thousands and millions more people who want to see a better world and we have to find the commonalities and the things that we can work together on and the ways to do it and the CHANGE Program has been a big part of helping me figure out how to do that.”
—Martin Williams, CHANGE 2004, Williams College
“Even though I was a girl from a poor urban community, I had hopes and dreams and unrealized potential. ... I know there’s another girl just like me a half-a-world away—and now I can help her achieve her dreams.”
—Alicia Wilson, CHANGE 2001, Univ. of MD

CHANGE leaders have attended the World Trade Organization meeting in Hong Kong in 2006, spoken at the UN Youth Assembly, and served as keynotes at Idealist and other national conferences. CHANGE leaders can be found working as a journalist in Khartoum, on presidential campaigns, and on the staff of the ONE campaign. They are designing prosthetic limbs for landmine victims, working for Fair Trade companies, and are staff members at Oxfam. Among the most noteworthy accomplishments of Oxfam CHANGE leaders has been their role in the formation of two important, independent national student organizations: United Students for Fair Trade and the Student Trade Justice Campaign. In each instance, a CHANGE leader identified the need for a national level organization to bring together and support the work of students on these specific social justice issues. Oxfam America has supported both these organizations with grants, staff participation, office space, and other resources. We have also learned important lessons about the sustainability of student organizations, which, by their very nature, are in constant transition and must represent the interest of their far-flung membership.

CHANGE leaders’ involvement has gone on well past the one year commitment to the program. Their commitment to Fair Trade is illustrative. Sarah Romorini, CHANGE 2002 from College of Wooster, launched a Fair Trade campaign shortly after returning from the training. She recalls:

I was lucky to be a part of a wonderful and active student organization, Pueblo de Esperanza, which was excited about putting these new ideas into action. We chose a few programs to add to our scope. In addition to selling Fair Trade coffee [FTC] directly to students twice a year, we also started actively campaigning that Fair Trade coffee be served at the campus dining halls and that the student coffee house, Common Grounds, serve exclusively Fair Trade coffee.

While we definitely ran into a few challenges, we were able to have FTC served twice a week and full-time at the coffee house. The quick-stop shop now sells FTC regularly, and it is also served all the time at the campus café. Pueblo was active in joining different student groups for common causes on campus and encouraging collaboration and networking.

Chris Lamar, CHANGE 2003 from Villanova University, took his Fair Trade organizing work beyond campus to Central America:

No matter where I was in the following years of working and studying abroad, Oxfam America supported me in my efforts, all of which followed my initial objectives of trade reform. While interning with Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in Nicaragua, I was in charge of developing a fair trade coffee and cocoa initiative, an overwhelming feat in such a chaotic, impoverished country. The responsibility was overwhelming. I was expected to do the ground research that would eventually result in a full-scale agricultural project, complete with hundreds of beneficiaries. Knowing nothing of the Nicaraguan coffee or cocoa industry, I contacted my CHANGE supervisors and fellow leaders, and I was immediately put in touch with those in the know. From there on my network of contacts grew and I was eventually led to the major players in the agriculture export industry. The initiative is still alive and being developed today.
Today, Oxfam America’s CHANGE initiative is considered one of the most effective student training models in the US. Organizations such as Amnesty, Free the Planet, NetAid, and Idealist.org have used portions of the training in the development of their own programs. To date, within the Oxfam family, Canada, Quebec, Spain, Australia, and Great Britain have all launched their own CHANGE initiatives. CHANGE also inspires new initiatives within Oxfam America. The Oxfam University Clubs and the newly initiated Action Corps have all drawn from the success of CHANGE. Oxfam looks ahead eagerly to increasing the reach of CHANGE throughout the US and into our regional offices.

The ongoing challenge for Oxfam is, ironically, to continually adapt the CHANGE initiative in order to stay abreast of the rapidly changing world of student organizing. The arrival of social network sites, such as Myspace and Facebook, has required that we redesign our now out-moded CHANGE electronic community. The influence of sites such as YouTube, the capacity of anyone to be an online authority through blogs, and the speed with which a group of people can be rallied to take action continue to change the landscape of youth organizing. Oxfam’s faith in, and commitment to, youth continues to bear fruit. CHANGE leaders are proving to be precisely those internationalists who will guide the course of future social justice movements, influence political decisions, lead ethical businesses, and campaign for an end to poverty.
CHAPTER 23

Structuring a Global NGO for a Rights-Based Change Agenda

Susan H. Holcombe

In the late 1990s, Oxfam America faced challenges and opportunities. A new strategic plan, Partnerships for Impact, called for focusing grant-making and partnerships in thematic areas in order to maximize impact and intensify advocacy for policy change. Changes in the Global Program Department (GPD) were necessary to align its capacity with the plan. Restructuring the department and devolving program leadership to the regional offices was a key change that drove other changes in systems and processes. This chapter reviews the evolution and implementation of the changes and assesses process and results. Devolution delivered benefits in program creativity. Lags in implementing supporting systems created stress during transition.

INTRODUCTION

Successful global organizations constantly balance central direction of the mission and grand strategy with devolving operational authority to the point of action. Oxfam America is no different. Since its inception in 1970, it has combined a global vision and voice with locally driven responses to poverty and injustice. As Oxfam America approached the 21st century, managing this balance between central control and field autonomy became even more important. OA’s strategic plan for 1997–2001, *Partnerships for Impact*, represented a deepening of its commitment to advocacy for policy change and a renewed focus on leveraging OA’s modest resources for real impacts. At the same time, other forces were at work. The late 1990s saw a fundamental restructuring in the relationships among the (then) nine other Oxfams. Moreover, the enterprise of development assistance was being challenged on many grounds by governments, private donors and aid recipients, including a demand that NGOs show results.

I had seen first- and secondhand the ways in which international development organizations, from the global giants like the World Bank to small NGOs, struggle with the tension between
central control and devolved authority. Central control is important to organizational management to insure accountability to key stakeholders—usually especially donors—and to facilitate fundraising. Sometimes control is very tight, while in others it is quite loose, trusting in field staff to make sound decisions, guided by a strategic plan, but shaped by local realities. I had been particularly influenced by observing the autonomy of country offices and programs in the UN system. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), for example, operated with five-year country programs, approved by their governing bodies and the specific government. Within these strategic plans that defined the general focus of funding, country representatives had authority (in UNDP up to US$1 million) to approve specific projects. The intention was to hold country offices responsible for producing results against a strategic plan, but to allow them the flexibility to design, with local counterparts, the specific projects that would achieve country program goals. This approach to devolution was not without flaws. In practice, tracking and measuring results was difficult and accountability mechanisms were weak. However, it was generally agreed that, wherever country offices had strong leadership and management capacity, innovative programs emerged. Good recruiting and staff management were important. Whatever the flaws involved in devolving authority to country offices, the practice of development organizations in the late 1990s seem to reflect the conviction that empowering a local office to develop and manage programs within a strategic framework was the way to go. Even the World Bank was beginning to test the devolution of authority to country offices.

Devolution of program authority goes beyond program units and affects the whole organization. The motivation to devolve program authority to regional offices may arise from a conviction that this will lead to more effective and timely interventions and relationships with partner organizations. Moving the focus of work and program decision-making authority from headquarters to field offices affects power and information relationships among all departments of the organization, and with the board. Driving change from a program department is difficult. Devolution is a leadership function that needs to be supported from the top and must be ongoing and persistent. Devolution involves attitude and behavior changes that are sometimes difficult. Thus, it may be more useful to talk about devolution as the action of structuring an organization, rather than as a series of changes in organizational structure.

This paper will talk about one chapter in the structuring of Oxfam America, and particularly about structuring the Global Program Department (GPD), the department responsible for allocating funds and providing other support to partner organizations in the Americas, Africa, and Asia. The re-structuring and devolution was intended to support the Partnerships for Impact strategy, the evolving program and policy articulation with Oxfam International, and the changing global environment for development work. This article is written from my perspective, as Global Director of GPD from 1997 to December of 2000. My tenure ended just short of a year after the restructuring was formalized.

BACKGROUND

In the mid-1990s, senior leadership changes at Oxfam America coincided with the opportunity for the organization to make yet another jump in size and impact. Oxfam America had grown financially in the 1980s, but by the mid-1990s, program funding was stagnating at $12 million
to $13 million annually. Oxfam America’s program had individual jewels, but lacked a framework to maximize the impact of these innovations. By the mid-1990s, Oxfam had expanded to seven field-based programs plus a US Program based in Boston, responding to opportunities in those regions. The expansion to multiple regions in a period of static (or declining in real terms) revenue meant that OA incurred high program support costs for relatively low grant levels in any one field office. At this time, OA regional representatives in the eight programs had energy and ideas but they lacked authority for rapid program decisions and for a common strategy. Decisions on grant making were highly centralized: Board approval was required for all commitments over $50,000; regional office authority for projects under $50,000 was limited. While there was an organizational mission to reduce poverty and hunger, there was no strategy unifying program investments, or advocacy, at the local and global levels. Regional offices had considerable autonomy in developing long-term relationships and strategies with partner organizations in program countries, but they did not participate in a coordinated organizational strategy. Regional programs innovated and demonstrated new approaches to livelihoods, political influence, indigenous rights and gender equity, for example, but the innovations were not scaled up. Advocacy was sometimes extremely effective in local, specific contexts, and in targeting US government policy on a specific issue. The new president, Ray Offenheiser, and others saw opportunities for greater impact on policy change and on attacking structural inequities. Oxfam needed a global strategy to focus its limited resources, and to pool efforts with allied organizations.

OA’s program structure in 1996 was curiously redundant. It had, for example, dual managers for regional programs, based both in Boston and in the regional offices, both of whom were limited in their ability to play strategic program leadership roles. In some ways this dual management reflected schizophrenia in OA thinking. On the one hand, OA founders and staff had deeply held convictions that development needed to be led by actors in the South. For this reason, OA programs focused on long-term collaborations with partner organizations in the regions. There was a reluctance to create field offices, and, when created, the field offices were expected to be lean. Field offices were there primarily to support the work of partner organizations. In fact, the field offices did grow, but usually in response to the need for OA capacity on the ground, and not as part of a strategic plan. On the other hand, a growing OA had increasing needs for central control. There was a growing need for information from the field to meet donor accountability requirements and to generate new funds. The board held on to values about development leadership residing in the South, but was reluctant to give authority to field staff working closest to OA partners—or to look for accountability for program results as opposed to project inputs. OA’s success in its first 25 years led it to a place where it needed to rethink how it structured its program work.

In theory, the Boston-based regional managers could provide strategic vision for program design. The Boston regional manager was to be the voice of the regional program to the agency and the outside. However, the considerable physical distance of the regional manager from the regions limited the legitimacy of their strategic role. Field-based regional representatives, often quite experienced, might also have played that strategic role, but they lacked the authority, and were hampered by their distance from senior management and the board in Boston. Keep in

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1 There were field based regional representatives for the eight programs, but for the seven field offices there were three headquarters regional managers plus the US Program Manager, who managed the grant making process and the presentation of grant proposals to the full OA Board on a biannual basis. Regional managers visited the field offices at least annually. Regional staff visits to Boston were less common.
mind that, in 1996, Internet connections were nascent and unreliable, as much in the
headquarters as in the regions. Boston staff travel to field offices was limited largely
to the regional managers.

Working with the regional managers in Boston were regional coordinators, who fulfilled
multiple functions. On the one hand they played the key role in managing the administration
of grants. On the other hand they were the information link between the field office and key
stakeholders in OA Boston, particularly the fundraisers (Resource Development—RD) and
Communication & Education (C&E) staff. In other words, they managed the flow of program
information to the inside of Oxfam. Program coordinators were called upon to respond to on-
goings and sometimes unscheduled demands for information, data, and stories about the field
programs. In practice, some regional coordinators worked rather independently from
the regional manager, and the benefits of a team approach were not achieved.

Fundraising and Communications/Education (C&E) staff contact with the global programs
was funneled through the Regional Program Coordinators and occasional headquarters visits
by field personnel or through post field trip reports by regional program staff. Many of the RD
and C&E staff had training and/or experience in development overseas, but they had limited
direct field contact with the programs.

Though Oxfam had long been a global organization, its human resource and financial man-
agement was that of a domestic organization. OA in Boston had highly developed human
resource standards and systems for Boston staff, and an active union that generated staff input
into HR practice; but there were no standards for field HR practice. Strikingly there was little
organizational consciousness of the need to formalize the rights and responsibilities of field
staff. Finance and human resource staff in Boston had extremely limited opportunities to visit
the field offices and understand the challenges of managing a complex, multi-site, interna-
tional organization. At the field level, HR practices and benefits varied widely. Concern about
organizational standards for field staff was increasingly being pushed by professional field
staff, who wanted to see consistency between Oxfam’s stated values and the ways in which it
treated field staff. The emergence of HIV/AIDS intensified the concern of field offices for an
organizational policy for field staff. Oxfam’s neglect of field staff was by no means intentional,
though it may not have appeared so benign to field staff. Neglect may also have been the
unintended consequence of deeply held Oxfam values about working through local
organizations and not creating an Oxfam bureaucracy.

In 1995 and 1996, with changes in board leadership, with Ray Offenheiser entering as the
new president and with a new senior management team, OA staff, with Board participation,
embarked on a strategic planning process. Facilitated by two professional strategic planning
consultants, the strategic planning process was strongly informed by Offenheiser’s perspec-
tives. Although Oxfam America was a small organization with limited financing compared to
leading US-based international NGOs, it was distinguished from its peer organizations by its
commitment to and capacity for influencing policy change. Oxfam America saw development
as more than delivery of services. Reducing poverty and injustice would require attention to
root causes and a policy framework for change. From a program perspective, Oxfam America
had the capacity to learn from local partners’ innovations, successes, and problems to influ-
ence decision-makers in global development agencies as well as in civil society. Another
distinguishing characteristic of Oxfam America was its continuing decision not to take fund-
ing from USAID. The major American international development NGOs owed much
of their size to their reliance on successive USAID grants. Oxfam America continued to rely on individual donations and foundation grants in order to keep its independence and ability to advocate with the US government and other powerful institutions about the structural inequities that contribute to continuing poverty. The challenge to Oxfam, which had decided not to pursue the big bilateral money, was how to leverage its unique advantages to have the biggest input to change.

Oxfam’s Strategic Plan, *Partnerships for Impact*, charted the beginnings of that strategy. It reaffirmed Oxfam America’s theory that development—change and real poverty reduction—occur when the change is made by the people themselves. But *Partnerships for Impact* went further. With respect to grant-making, it said that OA needed to focus its programs and advocacy efforts around three categories of actions: community-based resource management; participation for equity; and development finance. It gave greater priority to expanding Oxfam’s advocacy work, using its own voice in Washington and the North, and supporting partner organizations as they sought to expand their own voices.

The ways in which *Partnerships for Impact* evolved was heavily influenced by the parallel development of Oxfam International. In 1995, the ten Oxfams had set in motion a process that would culminate in a common, rights-based strategy to coordinate programs; and a commitment to campaigning for global and national policy changes, starting with a focus on livelihoods and trade. *Partnerships for Impact* influenced the development of the Oxfam International (OI) Strategy (2000), but the development of the OI strategy and the slow forging of inter-Oxfam structures, systems, and organizational culture iteratively influenced the OA approach.2 One of the key impacts of the emergence of a viable OI was the importance of staff at the regional level. Regional teams—comprised of all the Oxfams working in a region—invested huge efforts to harmonize programs and structures within the umbrella of the OI strategy. If the process of developing an Oxfam International program approach has succeeded, it is because of the cumulative convergence of the efforts of individual Oxfam field staff.

**RATIONALE FOR DEVOLUTION AND RESTRUCTURING; REQUIREMENTS FOR SUCCESS**

Management gurus started making the case for devolution of authority and responsibility in organizations some 30 to 40 years ago. Devolution of corporate authority was driven by the operational requirements of global organizations. The oil crisis of the 1970s drove home the advantages of local capacity to act quickly, using local knowledge not available at the center. Tom Peters, Peter Drucker and other management consultants wrote extensively about moving decision capacity to the point of action. They argued for “loose-tight” relationships between central control over mission and accountability and the authority of those charged with operationalizing the mission of the corporation. The devolution of OA program work was influenced by these corporate gurus, but also, as we shall see later, by the work of the Goree Institute in Senegal and the thinking of its founder, Andre Zaaiman.

Oxfam America was always a global organization, but it had never been forced to resolve

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2 For further discussion of the relationship of Oxfam America and Oxfam International, see the papers by David Brown, Martin Scurrah, and Ray Offenheiser in this volume.
questions about the location of authority and responsibility for program work. The new strategic plan, *Partnerships for Impact*, forced the issue and linked partnerships in the field to integrated change strategies at the regional and global levels. *Partnerships for Impact* was an agency statement of what Oxfam should do, which also made clear what it should not do. It specified central control of mission and values in order to maximize the impact of a small agency, and it left space for regional offices and other program departments to define implementation within the mission, values, and thematic pillars of the strategic plan. It left to be worked out how the regional offices would combine the agency focus on limited program areas and on impact with the longstanding commitment to being partner-driven.

Regionalization of the programs and devolution of decision-making drove the change in the GPD. Key objectives were:

- To decentralize leadership of the regional program teams to the region. This recognized that program creativity, innovation, and impact would be led by the regions where OA interfaces with partners and with the challenges of poverty reduction, and social and economic change.

- To incorporate the regional offices seamlessly into Oxfam America. This recognized that the regional offices not only took responsibility for grant-making and partnerships; they were also the starting point for building the alignment between program work on the ground and OA donors, public, and advocacy targets.

These objectives implied substantial changes in several areas. They implied new roles and authority for the regional offices’ leadership. They implied changes in the relationships among the different departments at Oxfam, which were often described as “silos” or “smokestacks.” They implied a matrix form of relationships between the GPD, particularly the regional offices, and the Policy, fundraising (RD) C&E, Administration and Finance, and Human Resource Departments. Regional offices would be able to communicate directly with appropriate departments in headquarters. GPD in Boston would no longer filter every communication with other departments. Efficiencies in communication would lead to greater ability to focus on program and impact.

System thinking tells us that any human endeavor is underpinned by a large number of interrelated actions. Change in anyone part of the system requires adjustment in other parts of the system. This was the case with the devolution in the GPD. Moving the focus of program work from headquarters to the regional offices was going to require changes in authority structure, but also data systems, technology, human resource systems, relationships across the agency and in agency and department ways of doing things.

It would be inaccurate to say that there was one proposal for re-structuring and for devolution of authority and responsibility to field offices. Devolution is an incomplete description of the changes that took place in the GPD in the late 1990s. These changes went beyond devolution of authority to structural changes that cut across the agency. Change was incremental and emerged from a process of consultation within the GPD, across OA departments and with the board. Change started with strategic planning and an examination of the field office management model and moved on to aligning structure, staffing, culture, and systems to the evolving grand strategy of OA and OI.
DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING DEVOLUTION AND CHANGE

The seeds of change were planted five months into my tenure as new GPD director at OA. Regional representatives from seven field offices and the US program convened in April 1997 (simultaneously with a three-foot spring snowstorm on the first of April). Over a week the Global Program staff with field participation engaged in strategic planning exercises internally and with other departments. By engaging in joint strategic planning with the Boston office, the regional offices contributed to Partnerships for Impact and were oriented to the changes it implied. Intra-department discussion also looked at field office programs and the ratio of program staff costs to grant making. This led to an eventual board decision to close the offices in India and in the Horn of Africa, but also a demonstration of the principle that we need to be accountable to donors and partners for efficient use of limited resources. This meant looking for the right balance between the costs of managing programs and the actual program money disbursed.

A key meeting propelling devolution took place at Goree Island in Senegal in October 1998, and provided the intellectual catalyst for taking the change in the GPD to the whole agency. Andre Zaaiman, president of the Goree Institute, worked with program staff, the president, and the senior managers from Resource Development, Communications and Education, Policy, Finance, and Human Resources to think about operationalizing Partnerships for Impact strategies. Ostensibly the meeting was focused on the one theme of Partnerships for Impact. In practice, Andre Zaaiman got the senior management to think together about expected outcomes the organization wanted to achieve, the multiple accountabilities of OA to partners, and people on one side, and to donors on the other side. Within that framework, Andre got the senior management, including the regional leadership, to think concretely about what an organization with OA’s strengths and weaknesses could do to leverage change. One outcome of the meeting was an organizational understanding of the importance of expanded contacts between Boston and the regional offices, and across departmental boundaries within the agency.

DESIGNING DEVOLUTION

The first steps toward operationalizing devolution were taken at a GPD retreat in Essex in May 1998. There was dissatisfaction among most, if not all, Global Programs staff. While there was an emerging agreement that authority should be devolved to regional offices, the concerns expressed went beyond devolution:

Regional Offices were centrally involved in programming but in some ways isolated from the US-based fund raising, advocacy, and education functions of Oxfam. OA was not organized to take advantage of field office potential for contribution. Additionally, field offices were not in a position to understand headquarters’ needs for information to support fundraising, education, and advocacy.

• There was overlap, duplication, and lack of clarity among many program staff positions.

The Boston regional manager functions overlapped with regional representatives and the Boston-based program coordinators. Boston regional managers managed the approval of grant proposals – most of which had to be presented to and shepherded through the OA

3 Innovative project activities in Ethiopia were incorporated into Special Projects managed by Mike Delaney who became the Director of Humanitarian Affairs and Special Projects.
board at twice annual meetings, but the regional representatives were more knowledgeable about the grants. The division of labor between the Boston-based regional managers and the program coordinators was not clear and there was tension in some regional units.

- Program coordinators carried the burden of supplying information to RD and to C&E as well as of managing the grant management paperwork. They felt overworked and undervalued. This was exacerbated by the fact that relationships with other departments on corporate tasks such as fund raising and foundation proposal writing were fraught with frustrations on all sides.

- There was a feeling of insufficient administrative support for program work and that higher cost professionals were performing administrative work that could be delegated.

GPD staff engaged generously and openly in this discussion, despite the recognition that changes might affect their own posts.

In the fall of 1998, the GPD Director engaged a consultant, Sue Bumagin, who worked with the Department to develop a re-structuring plan. A critical joint exercise was to map out the work done by GPD, to specify who was responsible for key tasks, as well as to assess the intensity and timing of tasks. This provided critical raw material for developing a structure that would assure that basic functions would be covered. Also key in the process was consultation with the President of OA, the Board, as well as with other senior management.

**RESTRUCTURING PLAN**

The plan that emerged was the result not only of consultation, but also of testing of models before the final design was implemented across the Department. An initial plan for restructuring was tested in the South American Region in the fall of 1998. Our consultant, fascinated by the challenges of the process, volunteered a week of her time to work with the Lima office on the changes. Learning from this process fed into plans for re-structuring of the GPD that were announced in January of 1999.

An organizational chart and draft job descriptions were distributed. With changes made as a result of consultations, the restructuring plan started full implementation in March. Detail below on the key elements of the plan is important for understanding how the changes played out in reality. Specifically the plan included the following:

- Elimination of the Boston-based regional manager. Transfer of those functions to the regional representatives, renamed regional directors.

- Conversion of the Boston-based program coordinator to be a Boston-based program officer (BBPO), reporting to the field-based Regional Director. The proposal was that the BBPO, like any other program officer, would take responsibility for a portfolio of partner relationships and grants and a share of other regional team responsibilities. The prior information responsibilities of the program coordinator were to be shared by all the program officers for the grants for which they were responsible. This implied greater field travel for the BBPO and more direct communication responsibilities for the regionally based program officers.
• While we eliminated regional management positions, management posts in Boston were either added or reconfigured. The post of Humanitarian Assistance and Special Programs director was created to manage a unit that would handled the increasing OA involvement in humanitarian assistance and manage special programs (Cuba and Ethiopia). The post of Learning and Technical Support Unit was converted to the Program Planning and Learning Unit, the director of which would also serve as the deputy director of the department. A new post of Technical Support Unit (TSU) manager was created, with responsibility for supervising the administrative assistants. Key functions of the TSU manager would be the development of GPD systems, especially a grants database, and interface with other departments to assure administrative, human resources and finance support to the regional offices.

• The Global Program director would remain responsible for overall strategic direction of the program, interface with other departments and with the Board, and had a stronger focus on OI relations.

• The new Boston managers and the regional directors would be the Global Program Team.

• Related to this actual proposal was a recommendation for funding of posts from RD and C&E that would be based in the field and be part of the Regional team but report to their Boston department. This post was intended to serve as the primary link for information needs.

This is the structure that was implemented across the regions, including the US program. Most of it worked, but some of it did not, as we shall see below in the section on “What Worked, What Lagged or Stumbled, and Why.” Important to the successes of the restructuring were a number of other changes, capacity building efforts and outside variables discussed below.

RELATED FACTORS THAT INFLUENCED IMPLEMENTATION

In developing the restructuring and devolution plan it was clear that a number of systems, process, and cultural changes were necessary to support substantial changes in the ways the Global Department would work. There also needed to be changes in OA’s engagement with OI, so that the program and policy harmonization taking place at the OI level would seen as and become added-value for the regional programs, not just a burden to be resented. Some of these factors include:

• A sustainable grants data and grants management system that provided a reliable, standardized information source for most information needs across the agency. Such a system would have the ability to aggregate data across programs on specific issues (e.g., gender projects). If operating properly it would reduce demands placed on program staff for program information.

• Standardization across regions for field office personnel and human resource benefits.

• Ability to manage personnel changes required by the restructuring plan.

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4 Administrative Assistants had as a primary function processing requests for grant disbursements and tracking grant expenditure. Their functions would remain unchanged. Each Regional Team would continue to be served by one 0.5 FTE Administrative Assistant, who would be a part of the Regional Team.
• Board approved program strategies for each regional program. These would each have change objectives supporting the agency’s strategic plan *Partnerships for Impact*. The change objectives or expected outcomes would have to be clear and measurable to assure accountability for program and finances.

• Board approval of devolution of increased grant decision-making, within approved program strategies, to regional directors. This would ease the amount of time spent in preparing additional documentation, and reduce the delays in approval. It would lay the basis for holding regional offices responsible for outcomes, not just inputs.

• Buy-in from other departments in OA to assure their willingness to adopt new ways of relating to regional offices and Boston-based program staff.

• Integration of regional office Administration and Finance officers into the Boston office to build a shared understanding of issues and new ways of communication.

• Development of new processes of aligning regional office advocacy work with Policy Department global policy priorities.

• Clarity from the OA Board and OA senior management on OA policy and approaches to engagement with Oxfam International.

These issues and others will be discussed in the section below.

**WHAT WORKED, WHAT LAGGED OR STUMBELED, AND WHY.**

Overall, it can be argued that the re-structuring and devolution of the GPD succeeded in achieving primary objectives, but that there were also persisting problems that reflect weaknesses in the design and in implementation of supporting changes.

**Survey of GPD restructuring—May 2000**

The GPD director organized a survey in May 2000 to assess the results of the GPD restructuring. The survey was implemented by the deputy director for Strategic Planning and Operations and analyzed by a consultant to assure anonymity of respondents. Results were analyzed by three groups (GPD staff in Boston and regional offices; regional directors; and staff from fundraising, communication, and finance/administration). Response rates were disappointing and had a number of possible causes: staff changes and a lack of knowledge of the previous structure, great frustration around the restructuring, and/or a lack of conviction that the survey would serve a useful purpose. The greatest value of the survey may have come from comments that most respondents wrote in. Given those caveats, the results suggested some successes, some continuing problems and some suggestions:

• There was substantial agreement that decentralization of the regional program leadership to the regional offices was a good thing and that it had potential for alignment and synergy in agency work, but that substantial steps needed to be taken to realize that potential.

• Regional directors felt that devolution made their work more demanding, but more rewarding. It had increased the space for making decisions and given greater freedom to define program and more opportunities to be creative. Regional offices carried a wider range of responsibilities and activities.
• There was closer contact between Boston staff and the regional offices.

• The increase in regional office responsibilities coincided with the intensification of Oxfam International work demands. The regional offices remained understaffed.

• There was a strong demand for devolving greater control over grant approval and budget management. Simplifying the grant approval process, it was felt, would result in improving effectiveness.

• All were concerned about the impact of grant making and how to measure it.

Other factors influencing restructuring

If re-structuring and devolution overall were a good thing, not all problems were solved and the new structure created new problems.

Boston program officer: Implementation of this change met with mixed success. In theory, it should be possible in a globalized organization to create a global team, with the program officer in Boston reporting to a field-based Regional Director. In practice, this change worked well in some offices—Southeast Asia, Central America and West Africa, in particular—and met with mixed results in other places. Where there was success, it was often because the regional office set specific functions, sometimes different than those anticipated in the plan and in job descriptions, that engaged the Boston program officer as a full member of the team. What may have remained problematic, with the abolition of regional managers in Boston, was the absence of a senior spokesperson for the regional program in the Boston Office, capable of speaking at a senior level to the press. This is a classic dilemma of a devolution strategy. Ray Offenheiser and I recognized the implications of losing vigorous regional voices based in Boston and concluded that OA would eventually have to address this problem. And indeed, regional offices did appear to slip off the radar screen in the early 2000s because there were not senior regional voices in place in Boston.

Systems: The creation of a grants database that served the information needs of all Boston departments as well as of streamlining grant documentation failed, at least in the intermediate term, in part due to the selection of the wrong software. The Technical Support Unit, intended to facilitate communications with Finance, Administration, and Human Resources, did not achieve intended objectives. This was a consequence of recruiting difficulties and perhaps of a reluctance of headquarter staff to give up communication through the GPD. As a result, the easing of administrative and information burdens for program staff did not rapidly materialize. At the same time the work of regional offices and Boston staff was increasing, with growth of grants budgets and intensified engagement with OI.

Personnel changes: Fortunately, the restructuring plan required limited loss of jobs. Though the Boston-based regional manager post was abolished, one individual moved into a newly created post as Humanitarian Assistance and Special Projects director, meaning we were limited to two layoffs. Still, these changes were painful. With the support of the Human Resource director, efforts were made to ease the transition of two individuals for whom posts were not available.

Devolution of increased grant making authority: There was delay in gaining agency and board approval of a mechanism to expand regional directors’ authority to approve grants
within a previously approved program framework. Board member trust in program staff had been frayed by an incident in the mid-1990s when mid-level staff in one region had withheld information from the board. Additionally, the board was accustomed to direct involvement in grant making decisions and perhaps was reluctant to give up this function. It took a long time and effort to begin rebuilding board trust in staff. The delay in devolving grant approval authority was discouraging to the regional directors, but it reflects the importance of winning the confidence of the board and president in the devolution of decision-making power. In part this was done by a trial in the Peru office, where a local grant approval committee was set up to review grants for approval. Approval was finally devolved where grants could be made within the context of a board-approved program framework.

**Program accountability through program strategies:** One of the underlying premises of devolution of decision making to regional offices was that regional programs would be accountable for progress against the strategic objectives set out in Regional Program Strategies approved at the center. Guidelines for Program Strategies were developed in the spring of 1999 and work on Regional Program Strategies advanced thereafter. The most difficult challenge for these strategies was the setting of strategic change objectives that could be measured and tracked. Partly this was a capacity issue. Partly it is a technical challenge; measuring some outcomes in participation for equity or in capacity building is intrinsically difficult.

**Relationships with other departments:** Progress was achieved in integrating regional offices in the agency and deepening the relationships between regional offices and Boston departments. The April 1997 meeting of regional representatives, mentioned earlier, not only launched program participation in strategic planning and in devolution planning, it also initiated a pattern of increasing communication between Boston staff and field offices. There were increasingly routine Boston visits of regional representatives (later directors), cross regional workshops for program and finance staff, and meetings or missions that brought RD, C&E, finance, and human resources staff to the field. The consequences were several. Non-program staff from Boston saw firsthand the nature and conditions of work in field offices and gradually developed a new framework for addressing regional office needs. All staff was gradually being oriented to new and evolving OA strategies that included a focus on impact and voice. Finally an organizational approach to engaging with Oxfam International evolved. However, from a regional office perspective, there were frustrating delays in dealing with key human resource and other systems issues, as the rest of the agency was trying to catch up to the full range of implications from them in changes within GPD. For some regional offices the most difficult challenge came with establishing alignment with the advocacy work of the Policy Department. Regional offices had long supported advocacy agendas of their partner organizations. However, regional advocacy objectives, while important in that region, might not be on the global advocacy agenda. For some, the move of Partnerships for Impact toward global advocacy programs, which was amplified by our engagement with Oxfam International and its advocacy agenda, ran counter to the regional office values on supporting local advocacy priorities, even if they were not on the global agenda.

**Oxfam International:** As the discussion of restructuring began, Oxfam America did not have a clear strategy for engagement with OI. Events in OI seemed to be pushing OA faster than it was ready to move. The way this uncertainty was communicated to regional offices was interpreted as a message that they did not have to take OI harmonization of programs seriously. As restructuring planning accelerated, OA’s engagement with OI took on a more positive and
proactive character, with greater policy clarity from senior management and active engagement of the board. Thus, as devolution occurred, there was clarity that OA would engage with OI. Several OA regional directors came to play leadership roles in the OI regional programs, starting with the Southeast Asia regional office.

**Leadership change:** It was a significant investment of my time to move the idea of GPD restructuring through the agency. It was occurring at a time of organizational growth, increased ambition, and expanded engagement with Oxfam International. We were only a year into operationalizing the restructuring when I left Oxfam, leaving the department in the hands of an interim director. By my successor’s own account, while she was able to maintain momentum in some areas and address many issues that arose, there was inevitably some drift, particularly when the interim experience extended to nine months, after which she handed the department over to the new director on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001.

**CONCLUSION AND LESSONS LEARNED**

There was never any doubt in Global Department leadership or in the president’s office that it was a good idea to restructure GDP to enable regional leadership to use creativity and initiative to support overall agency goals. This had been my experience at the UN and Ray Offenheiser’s experience at the Ford Foundation, as head of their country offices in Peru and Bangladesh. The idea of restructuring and devolution was not in question. The challenge would be implementation.

Any change can be disquieting, particularly changes that threaten or appear to threaten jobs or job content, or the nature of relationships amongst colleagues and partners. Change in an NGO is more complicated than that in the corporate world. Corporations are usually endowed with greater resources to manage the process of change; in the end they are often ready to exercise real power to push through difficult restructuring. NGO staff is paid less than counterparts in the corporate world. Part of their payment is the reward of the kind of work they are doing. This often means that they have a more intense ownership of the mission of the agency and want to be involved in determining the process of change. This creates challenges. NGOs are often under-resourced for organizational development, yet they engage in participatory planning of change, which requires scarce time and able facilitation. When not done well, participation can become paralysis.

In the time I engaged in the process, OA and staff seem to have struck a satisfactory balance between participation and a rush to action. Leading up to the restructuring, there was substantial participation across the agency in strategic planning and in developing the GPD restructuring plan. Thus, when implementation came, staff was generally prepared to support implementation, despite natural anxieties over the restructuring.
Key lessons to take away from this experience include:

- Well-managed participation can ease some of the pain and resistance of the change of restructuring and foster broad buy-in.

- Restructuring may aim at rationalizing and streamlining work, but in the short run the work load will increase.

- Systems need to be changed to support the new structure. Building new systems can take longer than planned in agencies with limited resources. The absence of new systems exacerbates the burden of work on staff making the changes.

- Those initiating change efforts need to manage the number of changes staff face. Constant change has negative effects on morale. Still, organizations must change to adjust to the demands of internal and external environments.

### Key steps in implementing devolution to regional offices

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of change</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April 1997</td>
<td>Regional representatives meeting in Boston with GPD and Agency staff.</td>
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<td>May 1997</td>
<td>OA Board Approval of Partnerships for Impact.</td>
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<td>September 1997</td>
<td>OA Board Decision to phase out regional offices in India and Ethiopia.</td>
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<td>January 1998</td>
<td>Southeast Asia Regional Office moves from the Philippines to Cambodia; program focus switches to the Mekong River.</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 1998</td>
<td>GPD staff retreat, including Regional representatives, meets in Essex. Outlines of a devolution strategy emerge from participatory exercises.</td>
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<td>October 1998</td>
<td>GPD initiated inter-departmental meeting with Regional representatives in Dakar, Senegal. The meeting objective was to explore ways to operationalize the Participation for Equity pillar of Partnerships for Impact. It went beyond program to discuss how OA should align its structure and systems to the new strategic plan.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fall 1998</td>
<td>Pilot Devolution starts in Lima Regional Office with support from consultant Sue Bumagin. Phnom Penh Office rapidly becomes a second pilot.</td>
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<tr>
<td>February 1999</td>
<td>Facilitated meeting with GPD and senior representatives of other OA departments to discuss the interdepartmental implications of devolution and proposals for ways in which other departments could work more efficiently and productively with regional offices.</td>
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<tr>
<td>March–July 1999</td>
<td>• Humanitarian Assistance and Special Projects Director appointed in March.</td>
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<td>• Learning and Technical Support Unit reconstituted as Program Planning and Learning Unit. Director took on the responsibilities of Deputy Director of the GPD.</td>
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Hurricane Mitch: Turning a Disaster into an Opportunity for Development in Central America

Carolina Castrillo

The widespread devastation that confronted Central America as the result of Hurricane Mitch, which struck in October 1998, required a fundamental rethinking of Oxfam America’s Central America regional program strategy. Combining research, immediate response, and policy work linking the extent of the devastation to vulnerabilities due to poverty, Oxfam America developed a rights-based approach to emergency response, which focused on building on and building up the capacities of local non-governmental and community-based organizations. The formative experience of Hurricane Mitch also made Oxfam America realize that it had to integrate disaster mitigation and risk reduction into its development planning.

INTRODUCTION

Hurricane Mitch struck Central America in October 1998, causing over 9,000 deaths, directly affecting the livelihoods of 3.5 million people, and resulting in considerable losses for the economies of the Central American countries. In Honduras, the country most severely affected, Hurricane Mitch resulted in losses of 80% of GDP and represented a 20-year setback for development. Nicaragua was also seriously affected, followed by El Salvador, Guatemala, and Costa Rica.

While disasters are often triggered by natural events, their adverse impacts are human made since poverty, environmental degradation, and inadequate public investment, especially in rural areas, increase the risks of personal and material damage. When Hurricane Mitch struck at the end of the rainy season, landslides and flash floods destroyed houses, schools, clinics, crops, and infrastructure. Because poverty and exclusion makes over half of the Central American population vulnerable to disasters, most of the deaths were counted among families living in poverty.
The Oxfam America Central America program evolved from an emphasis on humanitarian aid and civil society empowerment to alternative sustained development in the early 1990s. By 1997, under the new Oxfam America strategic plan, it had decided to focus almost exclusively on development rather than humanitarian response. However, the devastation caused by Hurricane Mitch obliged Oxfam to design an integrated emergency response and reconstruction process, and rethink sustainable development to incorporate risk management and advocacy strategies throughout the process.

OXFAM AMERICA’S PROGRAMMING

Central America was transitioning from conflict to democracy during the 1990s. Peace accords in El Salvador and Guatemala opened paths to building democratic institutions, elections, political freedom, and overcoming repression and military rule. As regional director of the Central America program, I managed a program aimed at fostering sustainable development for the rural poor and strengthening civil society participation in public policy. The program goal, as stated in the Central America Program Paper (1997–2000), was to “foster a process of sustainable development in cooperation with local accountable organizations with whom it is possible to develop partnership based on shared analysis and vision.” Grant and non-grant support was directed toward the strategic objectives of Participation for Equity and Democracy, Alternative Sustained Development, and Rehabilitation and Socio-economic Subsistence.

By the end of 1998, the program had already phased out from the relief and rehabilitation components associated with refugee and internal displaced resettlements in Guatemala and El Salvador. Emergency aid was considered only if headquarters made emergency funds available above the annual grants budget, as the program was concerned more with strengthening civil society participation, women’s and indigenous people’s rights, development finance, and developing agri-businesses for the rural poor.

The three selected countries for Oxfam America’s programming in the region were Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, where the program focused on projects of regional impact or those that would serve as learning experiences for the region. Programming was guided by the strategic objectives and specific strategies outlined in the program paper, in addition to the cross-cutting issues of gender, ethnicity, and human rights.

THE CHALLENGES OF EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Suddenly, Hurricane Mitch struck and Oxfam America’s regional office was faced with a number of challenges over a range of decisions that needed to be made and identifying and sequencing quick action that had to be taken. We had to drastically alter program priorities in order to respond to the humanitarian imperative in the region. This decision had several implications:

• We had to reallocate and gradually hire additional human resources to work with partners in the most affected countries;

• The grants budget for relief and rehabilitation grew exponentially and significantly outweiged the budget for development activities. Because of Central America’s proximity to the US, the US’s historic geopolitical interest in the region and large immigrant
population from the region, the US media provided extensive coverage of the impact of Mitch. The so-called CNN effect contributed to generous donor giving to relief and reconstruction in Central America. The challenge then was not to raise additional funds but maximize the impact of newly available resources.

We needed to open a program in Honduras, where the needs were greatest and where Oxfam America did not have previous experience. In Honduras, we started identifying new organizations consistent with Oxfam’s perspective in the relief phase (the local parish in Tocoa, among others), combining our efforts later with other Oxfams working in the region to form the first integrated Oxfam International program in Central America. Oxfam America’s emergency response was not limited to meeting the immediate needs of the affected, but combined multiple strategies on different fronts for greater impact, all in an innovative, integrated manner.

The severity of the disaster in the region was such that it required a response with a long-term vision. This included working with new reliable partners and Oxfam International to amplify the program scope, conducting research and analysis, and strengthening local and international advocacy for long-term reconstruction.

I was faced with the enormous challenge of simultaneously making a rapid damage and needs assessment, while at the same time providing desperately needed food, water, and shelter through local NGOs. Much of the time, in cooperation with the Latin America director in Boston, I had to identify new partners that were capable of abiding by the humanitarian principles Oxfam subscribed to, and at the same time, implement programs with a long-term vision of transformation in Nicaragua, and especially in Honduras, where we struggled to develop a new program.

Additionally, in coordination with our main office in Boston and within the first few months after the disaster, we conducted country- and region-based research on the impact of Mitch. There were a number of assessments being conducted by governments, the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), UNDP, and others. However, Oxfam decided that we needed to critically examine the hurricane’s damages, the responses of public agencies and other social actors, explore the opportunities and proposals for institutional and policy reforms, and suggest priorities to donors attempting to support long-term reconstruction and minimize the vulnerability to future disasters.

Research teams, some of them from academic and policy institutions, were hired to prepare an assessment for each of the countries, which would be consolidated in a regional report. A group of Oxfam staff that included our advocacy coordinator in Washington, DC, the Latin America director in Boston, and myself in El Salvador, made up the review team for the research. The study findings, the analysis of the factors that made people vulnerable, and the recommendations were broadly disseminated in each Central American country and among decision-makers in Washington, DC, such as staff in the US Congress, the State Department, the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and a number of NGOs working on Central America.

The report called upon the development community to be self-critical in light of Mitch, stating that the ongoing misery of the poor in Central America begged for bold corrections.1 Key recommendations, among others, included the need to improve the region’s disaster warning

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and response systems, to implement popularly based development strategies, to secure an equitable access to land, to create effective state support programs and services for the rural poor, and to remove obstacles to popular participation.

**NORTH-SOUTH ADVOCACY**

An Oxfam strategy that deserves highlighting is the integrated North-South advocacy strategy Oxfam developed for Mitch reconstruction, something that was a pioneering experience for the regional program. The donor countries, coordinated by the Inter-American Development Bank, formed a Consultative Group for the Reconstruction of Central America. As mentioned before, the scope of the damage was such that donors identified the need for a regional, coordinated response. The Consultative Group set a series of principles for reconstruction that would serve as guidelines for national reconstruction plans: improving transparency and good governance, decentralization, reducing social and ecological vulnerabilities, and the participation of civil society to strengthen democracy.

Oxfam America worked with civil society networks in Central America to design a joint advocacy strategy to influence donors and governments’ reconstruction plans. To this end, we created an advocacy position based in Honduras, established jointly with the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA). The underlying assumption, that informed all civil society’s and Oxfam’s proposals and statements, was that Mitch reconstruction should transform the causes of vulnerability. This is how the concept of *transformative reconstruction* was present in all the different proposals developed and submitted to governments, international financial institutions, and donors.

Oxfam America staff, based at the Oxfam International office in Washington, DC, dedicated themselves to advocacy work on Mitch reconstruction. In addition, civil society networks and Oxfam International conducted integrated advocacy work for the Stockholm Consultative Group meeting and subsequent meetings in the region. Coordination between our Washington office and our partners in the region was not always easy due to the fast pace of events and the nature of advocacy work. While deadlines and quick responses were needed to be effective in the North, Central America partners usually needed more time to consult and prepare statements, talking points, and proposals for dissemination.

Hurricane Mitch triggered an impressive strengthening of new social organizations and networks of civil society. In Nicaragua, the National Coordinator for Emergency and Reconstruction grouped over 300 NGOs, grassroots and producer organizations, sectoral and territorial networks. In Honduras, Inter-Foros was formed with a variety of civil society networks such as NGO forums, organizations working on debt relief and migration, the Caritas network, and reconstruction forums. The Civil Society Forum for Reconstruction and Transformation in El Salvador, and the Network to Follow Up the Consultative Group in Guatemala also embraced the agenda of Mitch reconstruction.

These organizations played a key role in social monitoring of Mitch reconstruction, conducting public opinion surveys on government performance during the emergency, denouncing corruption cases, and demanding information and transparency. In addition, they developed South-South advocacy around preparing participatory reconstruction proposals for submission to the Stockholm Consultative Group and subsequent donors meetings.
In 1999, just a few months after Mitch, Nicaragua and Honduras were officially included in the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative, a debt relief program created by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to address unmanageable debt burdens in selected poor countries. Debt relief was linked to the design and implementation of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) that, according to the World Bank, ought to be participatory. Civil society networks in Nicaragua and Honduras were faced with the challenge of participating in the design of such plans. The networks’ experience and strength acquired through the Mitch reconstruction process were fundamental in preparing them as legitimate civil society representatives in round table dialogues with governments. Oxfam America and Oxfam International followed up the Mitch North-South advocacy experience with advocacy around the HIPC initiative as well.

**EMERGENCY AND REHABILITATION PROGRAMMING**

In collaboration with local partners, Oxfam America designed a relief and rehabilitation program that not only addressed immediate relief needs, but also the long-term vulnerabilities of the people affected by Mitch in the region. Local partners implemented programs that went well beyond providing food and shelter. They promoted empowerment and community organizing, recovered community productive and income generation capacities, gradually incorporating disaster mitigation strategies, and in many cases, taking the opportunity to educate and promote gender equity. Relief was combined with raising awareness on the rights and entitlements of the affected and addressing policy issues. Reconstruction strategies incorporated risk management, livelihoods recovery, strengthening capacities to influence the national reconstruction plans, and poverty reduction interventions.

**RISK MANAGEMENT VS. “NATURAL” DISASTERS**

The risk management concept emerged as an innovative approach to reconstruction as the widespread belief that disasters are “natural” was challenged by the analysis of the causes of vulnerability. Risk is a function of the probability of a threatening event (drought, hurricane, earthquake, etc.) enhanced by community vulnerability, reduced by the community resilience and capacity to cope. Reconstruction, then, must incorporate disaster prevention and mitigation, strengthening both governmental and community capacities for establishing early warning systems, risk mapping, emergency response plans, and organizing and training at the community level for rescuing and evacuating the population at risk.

Case studies in El Salvador and Honduras demonstrated that the first responders to a disaster are the neighbors, the community members themselves, and that community organization was key in saving lives when Mitch struck. This was highlighted in the case of communities along the Rio Lempa, in El Salvador, where pre-existing community organization facilitated by the Foundation for Cooperation and Rural Development (CORDES) avoided any fatalities from the hurricane by rapidly moving the community to higher ground and quickly forming three community groups assigned to deal with medical attention, shelter, or food and water. Subsequently, Oxfam America supported a number of programs in the region that have implemented disaster mitigation strategies at the community and municipal levels, and advocated
for policy changes at the national level as well, striving to influence governments to get away from the emergency mode to embrace prevention and mitigation.

The OA commissioned program evaluation 1997–2001 confirmed the relevance and effectiveness of Oxfam’s emergency and rehabilitation strategies. In addition, the evaluation states that, “Oxfam America’s intervention facilitated strengthening the social capital in targeted communities. The projects supported by Oxfam America generated positive effects, creating new capacities to overcome the crisis and preventing future disasters as well.” One such example is Oxfam’s support of the Salvadoran Foundation for Reconstruction and Development (REDES) which has purchased global positioning system (GPS) equipment that can track weather systems and detect potential threats up to two weeks in advance. Combined with radio equipment that can transmit to even the most remote radio towers, rural communities now get substantial warning before bad weather hits.

CONCLUSIONS

Mitch reconstruction demonstrated that disasters represent an opportunity for transformation and development. Disasters underscore the failure of current development models in addressing the vulnerability of impoverished communities. Reconstruction then has the potential to transform previous conditions if governments, donor countries, and civil society join efforts to address determinants of vulnerability. Political will of those in power is the essential element for making this possible. Empowerment and advocacy capacity is fundamental for enabling civil society to influence decision makers. North-South advocacy becomes an effective strategy for advancing the social justice and development agenda.

There is a need both in the NGO and the governmental sectors to properly integrate relief and development in a way that humanitarian assistance strategies contribute to long-term development. A rights-focused approach to humanitarian assistance makes a dramatic difference between charity and developmental relief. Relief should be done in a way that empowers those in need, opening opportunities for participation, and considers the affected not as victims but as subjects of rights and entitlements. In addition, relief strategies should provide a bridge to development through livelihood recovery and community organization. On the other hand, to be effective, development planning must incorporate disaster mitigation and risk-reduction strategies. Along these lines, the experience with Mitch reconstruction reshaped Oxfam America’s thinking on development, preparing the program better to respond to future emergencies, such as the twin earthquakes in El Salvador in 2001. In this case Oxfam America was designated the lead agency for the Oxfam International reconstruction program.

The people saving lives in the first crucial hours after a disaster strikes are the affected peoples themselves, and they are more effective if properly organized. Therefore, disaster preparedness at the community level is a key component in disaster mitigation strategies. In addition, Mitch demonstrated that strong community organization and municipal governments are the ones capable of enforcing coordination among uncoordinated aid providers, both governmental and non-governmental.

Finally, disasters pose an enormous challenge for humanitarian and development organizations. Organizations should be prepared to quickly analyze the situation, make
rapid organizational changes, increase staff, and work with strategies that will contribute to long-term sustainable development. Under these conditions, applying the lessons learned from previous experiences becomes fundamental for being effective and ensuring the quality of the intervention.
Promoting Social Change through the Gender and Law Reform Agenda

Margaret Samuriwo

The Southern Africa Regional Program developed a strategy on gender legal reform and policy change in 1998 that supported partner organizations as they sought to significantly improve the status and well-being of women through major legal reform efforts in Zimbabwe and Mozambique. This paper discusses the respective strategies and outcomes—a new Family Law in Mozambique and a domestic violence law in Zimbabwe—and the factors that shaped partners’ strategies in each country. The article highlights the long-term nature of such undertakings and, while the policy victories were significant, the work continues as partners monitor implementation of the laws in their countries.

THE SOUTHERN AFRICA REGIONAL PROGRAM’S GENDER PERSPECTIVE

Oxfam America’s work on gender legal reform and policy change in southern Africa, which began in 1998, is informed by the agency’s belief that both genders have inherent dignity that entitles them to a core set of rights that cannot be given or taken away. This work is an integral part of Oxfam International’s rights-based strategic plan Towards Global Equity, particularly the section that states the following: “Women will enjoy equal rights and status with men.” A number of human rights mechanisms, including the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights and the International Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), elaborate the nature of women’s civil and political rights and the steps required to promote greater equality between men and women in this area. Problems that women face within the family and society may be mirrored in the way the state recognizes and implements (or doesn’t do so) its international human rights obligations through enabling legislation that promotes women’s rights at the national level.

In the 2000–2005 regional strategy paper, the Southern Africa Regional Office (SARO) established the regional social change goal of “promoting greater political participation
of all citizens, especially women, for accountable and transparent government; policy changes that promote development, equity, and human rights and willingness of institutions and capacity of civil society to ensure that policy changes are implemented.” To this end, gender legal reform and policy change in southern Africa is the primary focus for the SARO program for achieving long-term positive transformation in society through creating conditions where women become drivers of their change agenda through social movements and through legal reform where necessary. The change strategy is premised on the understanding that the struggle for the attainment of rights through legal reform forms part of a larger struggle for creating political space to claim and exercise those rights to bring about sustainable change in all aspects of their lives. Law reform strategies implemented in two SARO program countries, Zimbabwe and Mozambique, reflect the contextual underpinnings defining lived realities of women in the countries.

As in all sub-Saharan countries, profound levels of gender inequality, poverty, and exclusion are experienced by the majority of women in Zimbabwe and Mozambique, where almost 70 percent of the female population lives in rural areas. Women are excluded from participation in decision making and their issues are relegated mainly to private domains under family structures regulated by patriarchal tendencies and attitudes. It is acknowledged that most oppression and violence against females takes place in spheres defined as being private. The vulnerability of women, particularly in rural areas, is compounded by the power vested in males over the ownership and control of land and other assets that sustain livelihoods and their dependence on males for economic survival. Patriarchal situations pertaining at the local level transverse all levels of society setting in place exclusionary gender stereotypes where the attainment of rights by women, including their quest to participate in decision making, is contested, provoking stiff resistance from males, including at times violent reactions. Women’s status and all their issues have remained on the periphery, raising the question of how the state regards women and its role state in stipulating the way women should be treated at the public sphere, and how this should inform and guide what needs to happen in the private sphere. The regional strategy identified women’s human rights as stipulated in national constitutions as the entry point for the gender and legal reform program inasmuch as constitutions provide a formal framework for rights and obligations, defines rights of citizens, and the relationship the state has with individuals. The extent to which the state recognizes an individual as a citizen has a direct bearing to the extent to which legal protection is accorded to that person.

The agenda for social transformation introduced through the program includes moving women’s issues from the private sphere, regulated mainly by family, into the public sphere where the state is obligated to take measures to protect women. It seeks to create opportunity for pushing women’s issues from the periphery to the center of national dialogue. It also seeks to change the perception of females from a social group who are viewed and/or view themselves as victims of social systems to change agents who define and drive their own change agenda to gain rights and entitlements and respect at the family, community, and societal level.

Despite the subordinate state of women, the strategy has benefited from gains achieved by females in pushing boundaries in many spheres of life as well as their clear conceptualization of their issues. The quest for economic independence has driven thousands of women to engage in informal economic activities. Networking and participating in social activities outside the family network has enabled women to keep abreast of the larger development agenda.
Social innovators have emerged particularly in rural areas to fight the exclusion of women through establishing networks with urban counterparts, bridging the rural-urban area gender divide and contributing to dispelling the notion that the issue of gender rights is a western phenomenon driven by middle class females who are social misfits. A critical mass of females have entered academic fields that have equipped them with skills needed to assume leadership in gender related social transformation processes.

In both countries, Oxfam America has played a funding and a co-strategist role. It has facilitated partner networking with broader constituencies, has supported capacity strengthening in a variety of ways, has been sensitive and responsive to opportunity for adding value to partner initiatives, as well as anticipating and meeting program needs of partners. Most of the partners supported under the legal reform program had evolved from a service provision role to embrace advocacy roles in their programs. Oxfam America supported development of partner programs, facilitating and encouraging strategic planning to achieve greater integration between advocacy and service provision roles. As this paper will illustrate, partners managed to achieve significant advocacy victories in both Mozambique and Zimbabwe, yet in both cases it was a very long road. Oxfam itself was on a learning curve and did not fully anticipate the very different experiences it would have in the two countries or how complicated and long-term the initiatives would be.

There were a couple of major differences between the Zimbabwean and Mozambican legal reform processes. These started with the differing constitutional starting point. The Mozambican constitution included gender sensitive provisions and the principle of equality between sexes were fully enshrined. That said, there was a holdover from the colonial era when the civil law excluded the majority of the populations, leaving them to regulate their lives under prevailing traditional culture, which remained the de facto reality of many rural women. The Zimbabwean constitution contained a clause that deliberately discriminates against black women and continued the colonial era practice in which customary law became codified and applied side by side with civil law. The dual legal system introduced as part of colonial administration had been largely retained with respect to the application of the customary law. Secondly, the strategy for advancing women’s rights in Zimbabwe was initially tied up with the constitutional reform process, which ended up challenging Mugabe’s hold on power. This greatly complicated the process of moving a women’s rights agenda forward in the country as political space became more and more restricted after the reformed constitution was defeated, to the dismay of Mugabe. While the Mozambican campaign faced many challenges, there was reasonably open political space within which to pursue its agenda. The outcomes in each case reflect this reality. In Mozambique women’s organizations achieved a much broader reform of family law, while in Zimbabwe efforts ended up being focused more narrowly on domestic violence, although women’s organizations managed to achieve important breakthroughs in the definition and remedies for domestic violence and began to chip away at some widely accepted customary practices.

ZIMBABWE LEGAL REFORM

The current constitution, negotiated in 1979 between freedom fighters and Britain at Lancaster House, was adopted as part of a peace agreement following a protracted 16-year independence struggle. The agreement’s goals were: a negotiated constitution, administrative arrangements
until elections and ceasefire. The constitution was drafted and negotiated under a process that excluded females and their interests despite their involvement as freedom fighters and as providers of food, shelter, and other forms of support during the long drawn liberation war. Where specific reference was made regarding the status accorded to black women in the post-independence Zimbabwe, the state retained provisions introduced during the colonial rule as part of dual legal system. Section 23(2) of the constitution allows for black women to be dealt with according to customary law when it comes to family, marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other customary issues, in effect entrenching the disempowerment of women. By allowing women to be discriminated under customary law, the state not only infringed upon the rights of women as enshrined in Section 11 of the Bill of Rights, but also perpetuated a situation where women continued being denied a number of rights they had been excluded from enjoying during the colonial era, particularly the right to inherit property, including land.

The Legal Age of Majority Act (LAMA) adopted in 1982 established that all Zimbabweans become majors for all purposes, including under customary law, at the age of 18, thus addressing the issue of women’s disadvantage as subordinates under customary law. Under LAMA women’s capacity to act as legally recognized adults was established, allowing them to enter into contractual arrangements for the ownership of property and making legally enforceable decisions without male endorsement. During subsequent years, major challenges were experienced in the implementation of provisions under the law. For example, members of the security force in 1984 swooped upon women traveling alone at night arresting and detaining them for supposed offences linked to prostitution deemed to bring disrepute to the country, in what was clearly an act of harassment. More seriously, in 1999 the Supreme Court ruling in the case Magaya v. Magaya was a major setback in the fight for gender equality in Zimbabwe. Two siblings from a polygamous family unit were in conflict over inheritance of a family home where a deceased parent had not left a will. While the community court had granted the right to inherit the home to the female sibling who had lived in the home throughout her life, the Supreme Court overruled the decision citing customary law where women cannot inherit land under conditions where a male heir exists. In this case male rights trumped female rights and customary law was used as the justification. For women’s organizations this development prompted the need for the review of the Zimbabwean constitution and domestic legislation to ensure that Zimbabwean legislation did not contravene international human rights treaties the country has ratified such as CEDAW.

Oxfam America had established an office in Zimbabwe in 1987, and much of its programming supported activities promoted by women’s organizations and gender activists. In the initial phase, Oxfam America focused on programs in two major areas, namely rural women’s income generating activities and intervention in the area of domestic and gender-based violence (GBV). Oxfam supported service type interventions, such as provision of shelter, counseling, and legal aid to address GBV and skills training, seeds, tools, and other relevant inputs for income generating projects. The gender and legal reform program was a natural outgrowth of the GBV work, introduced in Zimbabwe in 1998, following the agency’s adoption of the rights-based approach as a framework guiding program work.

At this time state capacity had been severely weakened by the wholesale adoption of structural adjustment policies in the early 1990s, and civil society was gaining in strength and beginning to challenge the authority of a weakening state, filling a gap that existed due to the absence of an opposition party in parliament. To ward off threats to presidential powers
the government proposed a constitutional reform that would entrench more powers to the presidency. As the economy continued to decline because of government’s failure to regulate macroeconomic distortions and to address the worsening poverty among vulnerable communities, civil society activism initially demanded that the state be accountable in terms of economic governance, followed by the call for constitutional reform to instill principles of accountability and transparency in all state operations.

The formation of the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), a loose coalition of community-based organizations, churches, student and labor movements, women’s organizations and gender- and human-rights organizations, advocating for the reform of the Zimbabwean constitution, attracted the support of many international organizations concerned about the declining conditions in Zimbabwe. The Oxfam Group, operating in Zimbabwe and comprising Oxfam Canada, Australia, Great Britain, America, and Novib, contributed to the initiative through joint support. When government responded by setting up a Constitutional Commission (CC) tasked with the role of consulting and drawing up a draft constitution, Oxfam America identified this development as the opportunity for supporting the gender activists’ agenda for the reform of sections 23 (2) and 111b of the constitution. The former allows for the discrimination of African women under customary law, while the latter prohibited the adoption of provisions under international conventions, such as CEDAW, unless such instruments are debated and passed as law by parliament.

The agenda for constitutional reform required Oxfam to identify an additional set of partners with competencies that included legal expertise, organizing and negotiating skills, media advocacy skills, and grassroots level mobilization. Oxfam support facilitated the formation of a Women’s Coalition that brought together 27 organizations and a number of individual professional activists. The Women’s Coalition mounted a nationwide education and consultation process to inform the drafting of the Women’s Charter, which provided women the opportunity to understand the implications of the constitutional reform. This effort culminated in the holding of a National Women’s Convention, organized to adopt the draft Women’s Charter. This event was a watershed and served to create solidarity and commonality among urban and rural leadership of the women’s movement. Learning about rights and entitlements as enshrined in the constitution was an empowering new experience for the majority of women, as was being consulted for the first time in their lives on fundamental issues impacting their lives, which in turn served as an impetus for greater participation in the constitutional reform process. The Charter outlined women’s demands for constitutional reform, including specific language to be included in the draft constitution, and was used to influence CC and NCA.

As a result of advocacy efforts, the NCA fully incorporated women’s issues in its draft constitution. In contrast, the CC retained sections 23(2) and 111b in the draft put forward for the referendum, thereby rejecting women’s claims to equal rights. The fact that women participated in the rejection of a draft constitution that failed to meet their expectations came as no surprise. There were other provisions in the proposed constitution that generated concern, including the retention of the excessive powers of the presidency; a narrow bill of rights which did not protect some fundamental rights and freedoms such as freedom of the press, the right to education, the right for workers to strike; inadequate provisions for free and fair elections; and the absence of devolution of governmental powers at the appropriate levels particularly at local government level. While women played an important role in mobilizing
against the constitution, there was broad-based civil society rejection of measures widely seen as meant to strengthen Mugabe’s hold on power.

The failed constitutional reform process signaled a turning point in the Zimbabwean political landscape in many respects. Having successfully challenged government and won, civil society nurtured the formation of the opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), drawing party membership from its ranks. Threatened by the outcome of the referendum and the emergence of strong opposition to its authority, the ruling party adopted a more militant stance aimed at preventing the opposition party from making inroads in rural areas, considered ruling party strongholds. Further, shaken by the outcome of the general election results in 2000 where the ruling party won by a narrow margin against a newly formed party, increased violence and various forms of repression were introduced to curb the rise in the numbers of dissenting voices. While the existence of two political parties could have provided an opportunity for more women to enter the decision making parliamentary level, violence targeting females as voters and as parliamentary candidates limited their effective participation. As a result the number of female parliamentarians has remained low (11 percent following the 2000 elections and 16.6 percent following the 2005 elections).

The change in the political context impacted on the types of programs partners could implement and donors could support. The government placed restrictions on the implementation of human rights and civic education programs, as well as any programs deemed to be “political.” This included programs aimed at educating women on their civic rights as defined in the constitution. Oxfam America’s support to partners shifted in response to the changed context, based on how partners were attempting to address it. In response to the 2000-01 drought, Oxfam supported partners trying to ensure that communities, excluded from food aid for political reasons by the government, were able to get relief supplies. As a result of politically motivated violence, again targeting individuals and communities that were associated with the opposition, Oxfam America supported partner programs for protecting female victims of violence.

The Women’s Coalition, having been constituted specifically to drive the agenda for constitutional reform, had to rethink its strategy and priorities. It decided to focus on the passage of the Domestic Violence Law. Its agenda began with developing common ground issues to diffuse tension that potentially existed among women affiliated with different political parties and gender activists subscribing to different ideologies. It also had to determine how to work with the system to get the legislation passed. In an effort to build the capacity of female parliamentarians to champion the course of women in parliament, the Women’s Coalition pushed for the formation of Women in Politics Support Unit (WIPSU) which worked to develop mechanisms to diffuse partisan tension among female parliamentarians so they could collaborate on the domestic violence law and to create avenues for interface between gender activists and the parliamentarians.

In 2000, advocacy for enactment of the Domestic Violence Law was initiated. Partners drafted the law and initiated discussions at a multiple level to influence support for law. They targeted a wide range of stakeholders, among them traditional leaders, traditional healers, police, church, judiciary, females at all levels of society, and government line ministries such as education, social services, health, women’s affairs and justice. Female parliamentarians were equipped with sufficient knowledge to be able to lobby their fellow parliamentarians across party lines.
The Domestic Violence Law was enacted in 2007, following almost seven years of protracted advocacy by the Women’s Coalition. The new law creates an offense called domestic violence (which hadn’t legally existed before). Beyond that, the law has widened the scope of domestic violence to include physical abuse, sexual abuse, economic abuse, intimidation, harassment, stalking, damage to property, and entry into the complainant’s abode without consent where the parties do not share the same residence. It also includes depriving or hindering the complainant access to their place of residence and depriving the complainant of a reasonable share of the use of facilities associated with their place residence. The law makes it mandatory for every police station to have a section that deals with domestic violence matters, staffed by officers trained to handle domestic violence cases, who must meet their legal duty as law enforcement officers to assist victims in obtaining shelter, medical treatment, and other forms of assistance requested. It obliges every police station to have a domestic violence section manned by officers trained to handle cases of domestic violence.

Beyond this, the law makes inroads into customary law and practices by extending protection for women from harmful traditional practices such as pledging of women or girl children for purposes of appeasing avenging spirits, forced marriage or child marriage, forced wife inheritance, sexual relations between fathers-in-law and newly married daughters-in law. Included in this category are degrading traditional practices such as virginity testing and female genital mutilation. Extension of the jurisdiction to chiefs are included in the implementation of the law due to the role they play in mediating in family disputes where women in remote rural areas have no recourse to justice through law courts found mainly in urban areas. Jurisdiction of the chiefs is extended to deal with matters of a civil nature, ensuring access to justice and equal legal protection of all women.

LAW REFORM IN MOZAMBIQUE

Mozambique incorporated gender equality into the 1975 Constitution, that was adopted at independence due to the alignment of the country with Marxist ideology. The government subsequently upheld gender equality as the cornerstone of the government’s development goals. Lacking were measures to implement these aspirations, particularly in rural communities. Influenced by what it was learning of the constitutional reform process in exchanges with Zimbabwean partners, Mozambican partners wanted to ensure that the formal gains embodied in the constitution were enjoyed by majority constituencies at the community level and selected reform of the Family Law as the entry point for moving this agenda. Unlike Zimbabwe, the coalition did not directly get involved in the constitutional reform process that was going on at the time, but rather, decided to focus on what was, in effect, enabling legislation to ensure that longstanding rights were implemented.

What prompted this focus was the fact that the accessibility to the formal legal system on family issues was limited to a minority whose marriages were contracted under civil law, a holdover from colonial legislation. The majority of the population, particularly in rural Mozambique, married under traditional customary law and therefore these marriages were unregistered and informal. Due to diversity of Mozambican traditional society, cultural practice applied in different parts of the country reflected local conditions and lived realities. Religious diversity also affected the regulation of family life, particularly since Mozambique has a substantial Muslim community. Consequently, reform of the Family Law involved issues
of cultural, religious, and social diversity, including clarifying definition of “family.” Under traditional customary law the extended family is recognized as the primary unit where decision making is vested, including decisions about access to land and other resources by women in rural areas.

Partners in Mozambique formed a coalition to drive the advocacy agenda and to facilitate a multi-stakeholder consultation and research on issues for the reform of the Family Law. Partners brought in skills and competencies that facilitated engagement at all levels—the community level; among patriarchal and matriarchal cultural settings; among different religious affiliations, including Islam; and professional organizations and the private sector. The coalition developed diversified communication strategies that helped it deal with communities characterized by high illiteracy levels and with limited communication infrastructure. The success of the law reform process in Mozambique was facilitated also by effective networking among civil society actors and government officials. In some cases, government employees played dual roles, as they were active participants in civil society activities as members of civil society organizations. In that respect, the dual roles they played promoted speedy processing of information. Following the drafting of the constitution, the Law Development Committee drafted laws that were intended to align laws and the constitution. Among the laws that were drafted was the Family Law.

In December 2003, the National Assembly of Mozambique passed a new Family Law that secured a broad range of rights previously denied to Mozambican women. Provisions under the Family Law included:

- Increase of the age of marriage from 14 to 18, which supporters argued would have multiple benefits, including more years of schooling (and consequently greater economic opportunities); delayed child-bearing and consequent improvements in maternal and child health; and enhanced family well-being;

- Recognition of joint administration of household property; head of household can be either a man or a woman; and women can enter into contractual arrangements and seek employment independent of husband’s permission; and

- Recognition of unregistered unions and application of provisions for protection of women under formal unions apply to unregistered unions. Women enjoy joint custodial rights of their minor children and equal decision making authority at the household level.

These provisions and others were an important step in establishing national standards that mitigated the fragmented and unequal treatment of women, resulting from the cultural diversity that exists in Mozambique in terms of religion and ethnicity, particularly under conditions where local customary practices and rules. The new law provides a framework that allows women to define their struggles and equips them to fight for their rights. Furthermore, protected by the law, women are able to participate in decision making, particularly on issues that affect them directly.

The passing of the Family Law sets the stage in which the new law becomes a tool for social transformation. Many opportunities and challenges exist in terms of ensuring that women achieve positive benefits through accessing justice based on the new law. Constituencies in urban and rural areas are being educated on the law to create demand for application of the law. In turn, the momentum created by demand for implementation has pressured government
to develop policy guidelines and provide adequate resources to facilitate the implementation process. Test cases have been developed to challenge the adequacy of protective provisions contained in the law. Further challenges exist in terms of the alignment of the family law in the statute books and the customary practices applied in most parts of rural Mozambique.

In short, getting legislation passed is in some respects, a first step—getting actual implementation, and beyond that a genuine cultural shift, is the next phase of the effort. Oxfam is now supporting participatory evaluative research of the Family Law that is designed to examine the law-making process, contents of the Family Law enacted in 2004, and actual implementation of the new law in terms of potential benefits, constraints, and challenges that need to be overcome.

CHANGING GENDER RELATIONS: RISKS, OPPORTUNITIES AND EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

Legal reform forms part of a larger development agenda to ensure that women, particularly poor rural women, are included in the national policy making mainstream. While the economic and social status of most women remains low, poor countries rely heavily on women’s social and economic contribution to families, communities, and the nation. In the era of HIV/AIDS in southern Africa, the care of the sick, the aged and millions of orphans lies heavily on women through their informal activities. The burden rural women have to bear has increased as a result of deteriorating economic and social conditions, as well as increased food insecurity resulting from erratic weather patterns, a likely result of global climate change.

The Gender and Law Reform Program served as an entry point for women to position themselves and their issues in formal decision-making structures. The concept of citizenry rights that forms the basis for legal reform creates space for women to demand equal rights and treatment from governments, requiring governments to enshrine the principle of equal rights for women in all laws, policies, and practices applied in the country and practiced at the societal level. With these two cases we see that women must use available political space to achieve and sustain the push for the transformation goals at the family and all levels of society.

Women’s issues are usually not a priority for policy makers. Just getting women’s issues on the national agenda is a long process, without even considering the investment in time and resources it takes to achieve policy victories. Furthermore, women in rural areas may not wish to access benefits from new laws for fear of alienating themselves from male dominated social structures that sustain their lives. Generally, as women seek to empower themselves to challenge male dominance in society, various forms of backlash are experienced, eroding gains that may have been achieved.

At the outset, reformers in both countries faced tremendous odds. Oxfam America identified its role as supporting both individual partners and the networks they formed both nationally and between the two countries. The idea of working in two countries was calculated to generate a momentum for strengthening regional level networks with organizations working on similar issues in the SADC countries. Oxfam America continues its support for gender legal reform by facilitating partner networking at the levels of SADC and the African Union. At the international level, Oxfam supports partners’ participation at the UN Commission on the Status of Women, so they are able to become part of global movements.
Implementation of the gender legal reform program should ideally include a strategy aimed at strengthening the capacity of the female leadership for pushing the agenda at all levels. One such effort has been proposed as part of the SADC Gender Protocol, which originally proposed a 30 percent quota system for female parliamentarians, and now is seeking commitments for equal representation for women in parliaments—a goal that is currently a long way out of reach. A successful strategy that has been used in both Zimbabwe and Mozambique has been the creation of supportive networks of lawyers in the judicial systems to push the reform agenda from within. Advocates for law reform also need to mobilize and create core groups of champions for the course among male constituencies in parliament, government line ministries, traditional leadership, and other pertinent levels. A narrowly defined law reform strategy alienates constituencies capable of adding value to the discourse, and in both cases, partners reached out to a range of stakeholders and sought to incorporate a range of opinions, while remaining focused on the core issues of women’s rights. Finally, advocates have to push legislators to include an operational plan to insure that new policies are actually implemented. Moving forward, the next goal is to ensure that for any policy process women’s rights and empowerment is a core concern and legislative goal.
This paper describes how Oxfam America’s East Asia Regional Office took a geographic, river basin approach to programming rather than adopting the more usual country-specific program delineation. It emphasizes the challenges and advantages of implementing a harmonized program with affiliate Oxfams, particularly around advocacy on river basin development under the Oxfam Mekong Initiative, and draws lessons on an Oxfam approach to integrated river basin management.

BACKGROUND

In the course of my work as director of development with the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust in the UK, I undertook a number of international engagements advising on wetland and waterbird conservation. I became increasingly conscious of the shallowness of any advice I might give, since I had almost no contextual understanding of the cultures and constraints in which I was promoting a wildlife conservation message. To try to address these inadequacies, I was fortunate to take up a position as program manager with the Asian Wetlands Bureau in Indonesia in 1993 and later, as that organization grew in strength, I became the director of Asia-Pacific programs for Wetlands International. My conservation eyes were opened; water birds would never be protected through the enforced designation of protected areas, in large part because, those birds, fish, and water plants provided the livelihoods and maintained the well-being of millions of people living in the countries in which I was working. Just at this time, more than a hundred and fifty Heads of State attended the Earth Summit in Rio (1992) and agreed that development and development aid should operate within the principle of Sustainable Development and in a more detailed treaty, the governments present also signed up to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The CBD establishes the practice of an “ecosystem approach” to development, with the clarification that human beings and human needs should be central to the ecological integrity of the ecosystem. People come first.

Excited by the prospect of becoming more deeply involved in implementing these new concepts, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to move from conservation to a
development organization and in 1998 I was appointed the Southeast Asia regional representative to Oxfam America. OA had identified community-based resource management as one of its three programmatic priorities. What I found, upon arriving in the regional office in the Philippines was a regional program operating in three countries—the Philippines, Cambodia, and Vietnam—characterized by a mix of projects in each country dealing with agriculture, microcredit, and human rights. My background gave me a different perspective, which coincided with the direction in which both OA and OI were moving. My responsibility would be to develop the nascent OA and OI interests in a Mekong advocacy initiative, which demanded a basin-wide approach.

**A RIVER BASIN APPROACH**

Development planning is seldom seen from the perspective of a whole river basin, and economists rarely value and take into account the economic and social services that nature provides. Yet it is the physical characteristics of a river basin that determine the limits and opportunities for all development and are critical to those communities who rely on access to water and aquatic resources for their livelihoods and well-being.

Sixty-five million people, many of whom are subsistence fishers and farmers, live in the Mekong Basin. The rice and fishery harvests that form the basic diets of both rich and poor Mekong people rely on the natural rise and fall of the river. The flood brings essential nutrients and water to the paddy fields and temporarily immerses the lowland forests in which fish breed, making this the fourth most productive inland fishery in the world. Fish are caught mostly in the receding floodwaters in which seasonal rice is planted, such rich conditions sometimes producing as many as three rice crops a year. Most transport in the Lower Mekong Basin, and usually the only access to markets is by boat, so a navigable water level in the river is essential.

The Mekong people are of six nationalities, Chinese, Burmese, Thai, Laotian, Vietnamese, and Cambodian, but they also comprise very many minority groups. In Yunnan Province, in Southern China, where the Mekong (or Lancang, to give it its Chinese name) is under the development spotlight, there are 27 minority groups each with its own language. Such groups are usually economically and socially excluded peoples; they are often nomadic and seldom have land or water rights. Outside their own peer grouping, their ethnicity fosters disenfranchisement from political and economic decisions at all levels.

As relative peace has succeeded years of war and ideological conflict, the people of the Mekong are now facing a new battle against the degradation of their environment. The natural droughts and floods which were intrinsic to their way of life are now unnaturally extreme, causing loss of livelihoods and food insecurity. These extremes are the consequence of human intervention—of deforestation and uncontrolled irrigation, hydropower, and transport developments. The threats to the Mekong from this kind of intervention have intensified

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**Oxfam America’s vision for the Mekong**

The 65 million people whose lives are governed by the bounty of the Mekong River do not need to live in poverty. It is only because of political struggles and the inequitable distribution of the Mekong’s wealth, both in times of war and of peace, that the people in parts of Southern China, Myanmar, Thailand, Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Vietnam are amongst the poorest people in the world. With equitable and just development, these “Mekong people” do not need to remain poor.
as the economies of Thailand and particularly China require more water resources for energy and irrigation. Climate change, too, is affecting the snowmelt pattern on the Tibetan plateau, which feeds the Mekong and the other great rivers of Asia.

By the mid-1990s, the Mekong countries were waking up to the fact that water was a critical commodity for agricultural development, transport, hydro power and political power. With increasing urbanization, the provision of water and sanitation headed the development-aid agenda and as the countries of the Lower Mekong Basin drafted their first water laws, controversy over proposed water privatization became an overriding issue. A similar water debate was occurring simultaneously in many parts of the world, but for the Mekong countries there was one difference—the river and its tributaries dominated the physical landscape and the river held abundant supplies of water.

Yet in general terms, there was a disregard for the value of water as a commonly owned natural resource. This makes it hard enough to make agreements for water sharing between neighbors let alone between villages, districts or provinces, and very few trans-boundary river systems benefit from international agreements on equitable water utilization. Upstream users have first call on the precious water resource, meaning that downstream users have no say in the quantity and quality of water they receive, and they often have to live with the polluted and diminished flow left by upstream beneficiaries. Furthermore, although most national water laws are prefaced with the assertion that water is the property of the state, it is hard to understand that this can really be so when rivers flow from one state to another.

The ideal of planning through a river basin lens offers the potential for taking proper account of the needs of vulnerable subsistence fishers and farmers. The river basin approach challenges the argument that economic growth is in the interests of the majority—whatever its cost to the environment—and that in time minorities will also benefit. Unfortunately, minorities do not have that time.

**AN INFLUENCING OPPORTUNITY FOR OXFAM**

When I joined Oxfam, the 12 members of Oxfam International were going through a process of “harmonization,” where affiliates were trying to align their programs to increase impact, avoid duplication, and project a stronger image of Oxfam as a global player. This proved to be much easier said than done. When I arrived, I found that the seven Oxfams operating in the Mekong countries ran individual country programs, and little attention was paid to Oxfam International’s calls for joint programming. For example, an instruction from Oxfam International in 1997 to the Oxfams in Cambodia to develop a single harmonized program had met with strong resistance. So jealously protective of their own programs were the Oxfam affiliates that the One-Cambodia Program (known as “Oink” — Oxfams in Kampuchea) never got off the ground.

One area where there seemed to be a stronger possibility for collaboration was in the area of advocacy. For a number of reasons, Oxfam International felt that an advocacy program focused on the Mekong River had a high chance of achieving meaningful improvements to the rights and realities of Mekong-dwelling people. There was a growing recognition that only policy and practice change would bring lasting relief from poverty and Oxfams were becoming emboldened to take on advocacy at a development tool. A Mekong River
Commission had been formed, which largely supported by Western donors, provided a tangible advocacy target and the plethora of Oxfams working in the region seemed to provide the perfect opportunity for inter-Oxfam cooperation under the new Oxfam International harmonization program. It was also felt that the recent, relative peace that had come to the six riparian countries of the Mekong River provided a unique opportunity to influence development options that inevitably would soon be imposed on this, the longest and the most pristine river in South East Asia. That said, the idea of a river basin approach was not really a consideration or point of entry at that time. Rather it was a pragmatic analysis of an influencing opportunity, which fortuitously coincided with the eco-systems approach I was interested in pursuing.

**THE MEKONG AGREEMENT AND THE OXFAM MEKONG INITIATIVE**

The opening up of the Mekong River provided much needed opportunities for economic development; hence it was also necessary to protect the basic needs and rights of the Mekong people during this period. However, the deciding factor for initiating an Oxfam International Mekong Advocacy Strategy was the signing, in 1995, of an agreement between the four countries of the Lower Mekong Basin—Thailand, Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Vietnam—to cooperate to develop the Mekong River Basin in a sustainable manner. The Mekong Agreement pledged, "To cooperate in a constructive and mutually beneficial manner for sustainable development, utilization, conservation, and management of the Mekong River Basin water and related resources."¹

Notably, Burma and China, the upstream Mekong countries, were not—and today are still not—party to this agreement. But Oxfam believed that the Mekong Agreement and its governing Mekong River Commission provided a clear enough target for a joint Oxfam advocacy program, though the word “advocacy” was quickly dropped from the program title as it became clear that advocacy was unacceptable in the communist countries of Vietnam and Lao. Thus in 1997 the Oxfam Mekong Initiative (OMI) was established. Led by Oxfam America as an OI initiative, the program was owned jointly by Oxfam Solidarity Belgium, Oxfam Great Britain, Oxfam Québec, Oxfam Australia, Oxfam Novib, and Oxfam Hong Kong, and later joined by Oxfam New Zealand. In keeping with its new strategic framework, Oxfam America had to make the difficult decision closing out its program in the Philippines and relocating the East Asia Regional Office (EARO) to Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Moreover, rather than just developing a strategy for OA funding, it had to set about developing a joint strategic plan for its own and the combined Oxfam work in the Mekong. While other Oxfams had country-specific programs, EARO committed the whole of its program to a regional Mekong river basin program—the OMI. From this stance, EARO was better able to lead the joint Oxfam initiative

¹ Mekong River Commission (April 5, 1995). “Agreement on the cooperation for the sustainable development of the Mekong River Basin.”
and work with the individual Oxfam offices in each of the Mekong countries. Thus OMI and the EARO program became one and the same.

**INTEGRATED WATER RESOURCE MANAGEMENT**

Although integrated river basin management, or integrated water resource management (IWRM), is now widely practiced in western countries, at the time the Mekong Agreement was signed even the concept of IWRM was foreign to the governments of most developing countries. Much of the reason for this is that young governments often lack the capacity to think and work cross sectorally. River basin development is dominated by quick-fix constructions that are packaged conveniently into time-bound projects with big contracts for international construction companies and personal payments that ease construction processes. The various government ministries involved have different priorities and limited funds with which to state their case, and there is a lack of experience in the scientific intuitions on which to draw for support for science-based political judgments. These dysfunctions are reinforced by the nature of development aid which tends to focus on infrastructure rather than governance and scientific training, as was the case in the Mekong countries.

In addition, the IWRM practices of the western countries, which had been promoted in less developed countries as quick economic fixes for economic growth, proved to be poor examples to follow. The programs of the Tennessee Valley Authority in the United States and the Murray-Darling Basin Commission in Australia, for example, were presented to Mekong countries as models to be emulated. In promoting the TVA model in a master plan for the region in the 1960s, the United States government argued that “no Mekong water should reach the sea or it would be wasted.” Developing countries tended to seize on these western models for river development on the basis that infrastructure development and engineering solutions would result in economic development and that environmental losses could be ameliorated at a later date. This type of planning is counterproductive, and the direct users of rivers and wetlands, particularly downstream, are the greatest losers in a process that does not respect the ecosystem approach. In the case of the Mekong, adoption of such a model would have wiped out the agricultural and fishery economy of Cambodia which is dependent on the seasonal flows of the Mekong.

While the governments of the Mekong countries were finding IWRM a hard concept to implement, so, too, were the Oxfams operating across the Mekong basin. Each Oxfam had its own national program targeting policy and practice change according to Oxfam’s global strategic change objectives. At that time, nearly all Oxfam staff had been trained in the social sciences and few had experience of natural resource processes or the need to take an ecosystem approach. Yet there was increasing recognition of the fact that environment and poverty were somehow linked. Most Oxfams undertook WatSan (water and sanitation) programs, but few understood the complex physical and chemical water processes that these involve. The widely promoted biodiversity conservation priorities of the nature protection lobby were generally seen by development agencies as a desire by conservationists to preserve globally threatened species in protected areas. There was little understanding of the broader importance of biodiversity for the health and well-being of all humankind, and specifically of the subsistence fishers and farmers whom Oxfam sought to help through more conventional development mechanisms, such as micro-credit programs.
STRENGTHENING THE OXFAM MEKONG INITIATIVE

Very early in my tenure I had become aware of the resistance to change regional staff felt regarding what many perceived as a headquarter-driven harmonization process, even though there was genuine interest in OMI. So, rather than trying to persuade peer Oxfams to develop new projects within a strategy to which they were not necessarily fully committed, EARO drew up a database of all the then-current partnerships and grants made by all the Oxfams in all the Mekong countries. This was an attempt to ascertain whether the objectives of these existing grants and partnerships could in anyway contribute to a broader Mekong strategy.

The database showed that nearly all the 200 projects already under way had some relevance to the Mekong River and the OMI, which demonstrated for everyone how tightly the welfare of the river and its people are intertwined. These Oxfam-supported projects usually provided grants to partners for education and micro-credit programs and empowerment, food security and rights issues. Through the OMI, Oxfam America was able to demonstrate how each of these projects linked in one way or another to the development of the Mekong River. By drawing on this linkage, each of these individual projects could gain strength by being part of a network of shared concerns. The OMI also drew attention to the critical role of the river in pro-poor development beyond national boundaries. With hindsight this is not surprising, but initially it was hard to achieve this one-program alignment.

CHINA

Listing all the projects undertaken by Oxfams throughout the Mekong Basin clearly showed that the most significant gap in the emerging OMI was its lack of engagement with China. Only a decade earlier, the West had failed to recognize that China was emerging as the dominant influence in all spheres of economic and political activity, not only in Indo-China but in Southeast Asia as a whole. That influence was now spreading across the world. At that time, Japan was the only serious financial aid donor in the region, but Japan was not acting in line with its economic size and the regional responsibility expected of it. At the same time, the United States was not perceived to have done enough for countries such as Thailand, had been slow in making trade agreements with Vietnam and Lao, and was still holding back government-to-government aid to Cambodia. A large power vacuum was building up, and, by default, China was poised to fill the space.

Half the length of the Mekong is in China, and the snowmelt from the Tibetan Plateau regulates the flow of the river. What is more, China had undisclosed plans to construct up to 17 mainstream dams across the river, mainly for hydro-power. The first of these, the Manwan Dam, was commissioned in 2002. Formal and informal trade links were rapidly developing along the Mekong corridor, with China increasing “no ties” development aid to the poorer downstream countries. By 2006 China had become the largest single donor to Cambodia, its loans and grant aid equaling the US$600 million pledged by the 12 Consultative Group donors combined. And yet the Mekong Agreement did not include China.

The OMI was determined to have a geographically inclusive program covering all six Mekong countries but the Oxfams’ engagement in China had always been a sensitive issue. The Oxfam institutional convention had always been that Oxfam Hong Kong would lead and implement an agreed joint China program. Working on a livelihoods program in the southwest of the
country was not seen by Oxfam Hong Kong as an acceptable priority; it did not, on first consideration, seem to fit into the Oxfams in China Program. What was more, working on environmental issues in a region targeted for major development was also highly politically charged, and an insensitive move here might impact on the government’s perception of Oxfam Hong Kong’s work in the country as a whole.

Serendipitous timing helped the OMI. With its growing awareness of the potential for unrest in more-distant provinces, the Chinese Central Government set out on a process of controlled devolution that encouraged greater participatory processes at local and provincial levels. In this new context, it was agreed by Oxfam Hong Kong that Oxfam America should develop a participatory-watershed-planning pilot. This first pilot project, the Lashi Watershed Management Project, sought to address the livelihood impacts of government policies that had banned highland logging and limited fishing in the protected Lashi Lake. The program wanted to get beyond ameliorative economic measures to ones in which impacted highland and lowland communities understood the value of protecting the watershed and jointly came up with strategies that dealt with both environmental and economic issues, including the establishment of a local watershed committee.2

The Lashi program proved to be one of the most significant strategic projects undertaken within the OMI. The inclusion of the Lashi project (and later other projects in China) in the OMI portfolio meant that the OMI could speak in terms of the whole river basin. The MRC and agencies constrained by political boundaries, however, had to negotiate within a framework that did not account for the geophysical realities of the Mekong River Basin, which are the overriding feature influencing the region’s economic development. Engagement through this first small program enabled the Oxfams to start to gain an early insight into China as the most powerful influence on the future of Asia and enabled Oxfam America to be better informed about China once Oxfam took up issues of international trade in later years.

ADVOCACY ACROSS BORDERS

Advocacy usually targets political decision making, which was complicated because of the great variance in political space in the six Mekong countries. China, Vietnam, and Lao PDR are communist countries and are generally sensitive to criticism from within, and certainly from external actors. In the early 1990s these countries did not permit the establishment of formal non-governmental organizations, although the prohibition has been relaxed in recent years. Similarly, Burma’s military regime did not sanction the existence of NGOs. In contrast, despite its history of political upheavals, Thailand had a plethora of community-based organizations (CBOs), strong people’s movements, campaigning organizations and NGOs. In Cambodia, where half the national income derived from foreign donors, NGOs and international NGOs in particular were widespread and there was comparative freedom of speech. The comparatively open political space afforded by Cambodia and the fact that the MRC Secretariat was based in Phnom Penh meant that there was the best location to base EARO

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office and the OMI program. We nonetheless had to be cognizant of political sensitivities. In the case of Cambodia, where we were located, generally, the issues raised by the OMI did not target the Cambodian government but the stronger neighboring countries and the donors and development banks outside the country. For the region as a whole, we chose to focus on ecological issues, rather than political, which could be framed as being of general concern to citizens and government.

Instead of challenging governments directly, OMI preferred to work with the newly established governments of Lao, Cambodia, and Vietnam, where the opportunities for capacity building and helping develop national policies on water, water privatization, fishery and navigation laws, and trade could be more effective than an advocacy approach. OMI did support partners to make more critical interventions with their governments, but felt it inappropriate to make direct representation itself.

Even within the context of the MRC, the OMI did not point directly at the member governments, but rather identified its Secretariat (MRCS) as a prime target. The MRCS had recently appointed a forward-looking chief executive officer who was treading carefully between the demands of the MRC member governments, which were by and large in favor of infrastructure development at any environmental cost, and the international donor community which funded MRC and wanted to implement an IWRM approach. Despite their rhetoric, the MRC donors played a limited role when it came to Consultative Group meetings; they wanted to uphold the Mekong Agreement as a model of cooperation at any cost—even when it was actually proving itself to be ineffectual. In an attempt to waken donor interest, OMI screened the Mekong Agreement from a human rights perspective in the hope that, if environmental integrity was not a priority, perhaps concern for human rights would be. We hoped that this might persuade donors to put pressure on the MRC to adopt more humanitarian approaches which balanced the desire for macro-level development with respect for individuals’ and communities’ right to sustainable livelihoods.

The OMI’s overall approach was to engage with MRCS, sometimes supporting initiatives and sometimes publicly contradicting MRC policy or, more often, commenting on its lack of action. While both IUCN—also known as the World Conservation Union—and WWF signed Memoranda of Understanding with the MRC on the “if you can’t beat them, join them” principle, Oxfam took the view that such agreements had little meaning and led to a complacent, passive relationship rather than to positive action. The OMI tried to keep the MRC on its toes, and the CEO, with whom the OMI had a good dialogue relationship, once commented that he never knew where he stood with Oxfam—that was the OMI strategy.

Even more energy was devoted to an advocacy strategy targeting the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The ADB was the major investor in the region and generally found favor with the governments in whom it invested or to which it provided loans. But, although it paid lip service to it, the ADB development plan did not take an IWRM approach, working instead within the framework of the economic zoning of a “Greater Mekong Sub-region,” which was broader than the physical area of the Mekong River Basin. There were major flaws in the ADB programs, and, despite the Bank’s developing internal best practice guidelines, many community groups sought help to protect their interests from ADB-supported infrastructure projects. Because of the ADB’s investment in specific infrastructure developments along the Mekong, including dams, irrigation, commercial fisheries, transport, and agriculture, OMI developed a specific program intended to hold the ADB to account—to meet its own, stated development
standards and guidelines. This campaign was led with great zeal by Oxfam Australia, which simultaneously ran campaigns both in the region and in Australia. This in-region—home-country way of working is one form of advocacy approach. The knowledge gained by working with partners and with local people on the ground gave Oxfam Australia the legitimacy to explain to Australian taxpayers the flaws in the Australian government’s investment in the ADB. A key publication was *Breaking the Banks*, with a title that speaks for itself.  

As dam construction became an unavoidable, hot issue worldwide, the World Bank and IUCN agreed to set up a commission, the World Commission on Dams (WCD), to review the impacts of dam construction, especially in relation to economic development and environmental integrity. The WCD was an independent, international, multi-stakeholder process which addressed the controversial issues associated with large dams. It provided a unique opportunity to bring into focus the many assumptions and paradigms that are at the center of the search to reconcile economic growth, social equity, environmental conservation and political participation in the changing global context. The commissioning partners agreed to prepare best practice guidelines as the framework for their own working practices and for other agencies to follow as they wished. Dam construction usually involves the compulsory relocation of people, which would obviously be an OA concern. But in its final report, the WCD introduced the concept of “livelihood displacement,” i.e., the notion that people living as far as a thousand kilometers away from a newly constructed dam might lose their livelihoods or see them reduced. The issue of livelihood displacement is highly significant in the Mekong and integral to the OMI and we felt that the work of the WCD and its far reaching recommendations should be supported. *Dams and Development* detailed a number of case studies including the construction of the Pak Mun Dam in Thailand to illustrate its findings, and it held public hearings around the world, including one in Hanoi, Vietnam. The report produced some far-reaching recommendations, and the OMI engaged with the commission and carefully analyzed its recommendations. In the light of its own experience, the OMI requested that Oxfam International endorse and adopt the WCD guidelines as Oxfam practice. Oxfam International accepted this recommendation, and this was the first time that it had publicly and formally supported a code of practice for pro-poor environmental management that had been developed outside Oxfam itself—let alone by the World Bank. While the report still holds good, the World Bank has since gone against its own WCD recommendations by granting and loaning finance to the Lao government for the largest and most controversial dam construction in the Mekong Basin, at Nam Theoun.

Sadly, it is so often the case that it is human tragedy that is the most powerful advocacy tool. When a dam was constructed across the Se San River at Yali Falls in upstream Vietnam, the OMI responded rapidly to the needs of the downstream communities living in remote eastern provinces of Cambodia. We supported the development of a coalition of local minority groups to form the Se San Protection Network, we helped build the capacity and confidence of local leaders to articulate their concerns and tell their stories. We helped find platforms from which to broadcast the injustices experienced by these remote ethnic people who, prior to this intervention, had had no knowledge of the reason their river had sometimes run dry and at other

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times was flooded by manmade tsunamis as water was released from the newly constructed dam in another country. But it was the stories told directly by the people of Ratanakiri that persuaded ADB to rethink its plans for a second dam on the Se San, and cajoled the MRCS to broker a dialogue between Cambodia and Vietnam. It was firsthand reporting of children drowned and the loss of cattle, fishing gear, and submerged crops grown on the river banks that awakened international interest to the consequences of dam construction, not just in the Mekong but throughout the world.

PARTNERSHIPS AND MOVEMENT BUILDING IN A DYNAMIC CONTEXT

OA’s strategic approach in the Mekong grew out of and closely followed the principles set out in OA’s global strategic plan *Partnerships for Impact*. Not only in the way EARO tried to develop equitable and understanding relationships with its grantees, but also through a deliberate effort to encourage partnerships between our partners themselves. This involved a substantial investment of time and money but perhaps resulted in the greatest impact the program had in influencing decision making across the river basin. The program brought together fishing communities with no common language other than their fishery knowledge. It facilitated meetings between academics and those with no education. It introduced a Chinese dam construction engineer, who had never seen the downstream flood in Cambodia, to Cambodian farmers and fishermen, who depended on the cyclical flooding. It took government officials, who had never been in the field (yet who made policy recommendations) to meet their constituents in their homes. Bringing together these partners or should-be partners was rarely confrontational and always enriched the understanding of all parties; it was critical in guiding OA’s understanding of the effectiveness of its grant making.

Aside from a new programmatic strategy, EARO faced a changing institutional context. In the course of five years, OA moved from being a more traditional grant making organization to declaring itself a learning organization, a campaigning organization, and a rights-based organization. All of these had implications for how regional offices were expected to do programming.

This period of change in both OA and OI produced an energy and dynamism in the EARO office, which may have been crucial to its modest successes. Operational changes in the relationship between the regional and head office fostered empowerment of both and strengthened influence of OA as a key player in OI. We discovered that the cooperation between HQ and the region and a harmonized regional program meant that the relatively small OA was big!

As a practical manifestation of this cooperation, the OMI was launched in a combined program with the Boston office—the Advocacy Learning Initiative—in which representatives of all the Mekong Oxfams and their partners designed the OMI strategic plan in a three day workshop, *Influencing Decision-Making in the Mekong*.

Later in the program, when many of us grappled to understand what a rights-based approach meant in practice, the Regional Office hosted an organization-wide meeting for 60 Oxfam America staff to learn about rights-based approach from the practical example of the OA Mekong program.

OMI gained from being a new program rather than an existing program that had changed direction. This meant that EARO, the OMI lead, had to appoint new staff with skills in and understanding of environmental and livelihoods issues. It also required the formation of new
partnerships with different organizations, changing existing partnership arrangements and distributing new kinds of grants. In particular, it meant identifying a mix of partners with greater potential for advocacy. One result was that traditional community-based partners became a proportionally smaller part of the grants portfolio.

One new partnership choice was to work with universities from both within and outside the region. Universities and their associated institutions in all the Mekong countries are able to provide responsible and semi-independent voices to mediate between governments and citizens. Universities tended to be the acceptable reservoir of both social and biological knowledge, and students and professors were able to speak out in a way that was sometimes harder for non-affiliated individuals. The Mekong Learning Initiative, another EARO/OMI program, supported a process for linking Mekong communities with a national university or similar institution, which in turn could access expertise from international institutions such as the Australian Mekong Resource Centre.

The OMI program recognized that popular movements need movers, and movers were not always housed in formal organization structures. Moreover, movers, particularly in the political context of some of the Mekong countries, tended to push boundaries in ways that Oxfam America was willing to support. For example, EARO recognized that in the complex culture of a country such as China it would be better to invest in or support the right person rather than try to set up new structures such as quasi-NGOs. So another choice EARO made was to provide support to individuals or informal community groups rather than to government-registered NGOs. This allowed Oxfam to work below the radar and reduce potential risk to Oxfam Hong Kong, which was concerned about any advocacy role in the country.

A third choice was to support a number of emerging regional organizations that were willing to take on advocacy roles, as a new generation of young people became more confident and emboldened to respond to the widening political space. EARO’s role was to provide seed funds for these groups and to help develop their strategic and organizational capacities. The groups included the Fisheries Action Coalition Team (FACT) and the Se San Protection Network (SPN) in Cambodia, Green Watershed in China, and the South East Asia Rivers Network (SEARIN), based in Thailand.5

These choices had several implications. One was to change the grant development process. Traditionally, partners submitted a proposal which, after some exchange, would be approved by EARO and in some cases headquarters (depending on the size of the grant). EARO took the view that the process of awarding grants when the OMI was starting up was not conducive to developing an open partnership between Oxfam America, as the donor, and the partner and end beneficiary. Consequently, under the OMI, EARO decided to help develop the grant application with the partner or potential partner—to explain the OMI program and be explicit about the criteria against which EARO could make awards. Writing a grant together with the partner and, where practical, with wider participation was frequently undertaken in workshops. Working like this helped develop a far deeper understanding of both the grant giver’s and grantee’s position, capacity, and goals. It also overcame language barriers that had otherwise often excluded potential but non-English-speaking partners. Above all, it meant that all the grants distributed under the OMI were targeted at common goals and that OMI partners spoke with a common voice.

5 All these groups are now well-established environmental actors in the region. SPN is now 3SPN Rivers Protection Network, covering the Sesan, Srepok, and Sekong Rivers in Northeastern Cambodia.
This approach was reinforced when the Oxfam America headquarters introduced the Flexible Funding Framework in 2000 that devolved greater the responsibility for grant making to the regional office within an approved programmatic framework. Developing that framework was also a participatory activity which brought unity of purpose to the regional office, the Oxfam coalition and the OMI partners. It was a stakeholder process that was a microcosm of the participatory stakeholder processes essential for watershed planning.

Another implication was that EARO had extended negotiations with headquarters around administrative and accountability checks, particularly when funding more informal or newer organizations. Newly formed NGOs might have neither acceptable organizational structures nor banking procedures, and individuals supported by the program were certainly not registered by their governments. The decentralized, generous, flexible, albeit risk-taking remit given to EARO by Oxfam America’s Boston office was crucial to the successes it achieved. It turned out that the commitment and joint ownership between Oxfam and its new partners in the OMI program did not result in any serious financial problems.

**WHAT WAS ACHIEVED?**

OMI was fundamentally an advocacy program, but not one where the eight Oxfams involved and OA as the leader, were the primary actors. We considered ourselves to be the supporters of local communities, organizations, sympathetic government officials and individual movers, each of whom recognized the injustices being forced or about to be forced on minority fishers and farmers. Yet, all these actors believed that the Mekong River has bounteous resources and if the river and its resources were equitably managed it was possible to maintain and raise the living standards of the Mekong people—both those who live by the river’s provision of simple, natural livelihoods and those who would benefit from the higher levels of national development that the river could foster.

My first roundtable gathering of the combined Oxfams consisted of 12 EDs, and senior representatives and advisors. In an intense two days, we developed the first Oxfam Mekong Advocacy Plan, with targeted objectives and outcomes. Not one of those 12 people came from the region. We rapidly learned that this externally driven approach would never achieve regional or local policy change and our eventual successes only grew from within the region where Oxfam’s role was to help build capacity and sometimes to open doors. It was often said that policy was not enough unless it is enforced. We learned that even in authoritarian states, regulations that try to enforce changes in people’s lifestyles find no response from people living by subsistence. It was an achievement that Oxfam was responsive to this lesson and changed its own working methodology, not only for this program but also in its future campaigning practices.

The turn of the century was a period that saw the opening of huge new opportunities for development throughout East Asia that was paralleled, in most of the Mekong countries by a new openness of public voice. The OA and OMI rode the wave of this opportunity and in doing so were able to strengthen the peoples’ voice. OMI helped to bring an alternative development paradigm to the Mekong in which the views of civil society were heard—even if not necessarily acted upon. What is more, the Mekong civic voice transcends political boundaries and is heard internationally. Prior to 1995, most of the international attention to the Mekong countries was directed at emergency aid, not long-term planning and certainly not planning the use of the river’s resources in a basin-wide framework. Without the OMI, and of course
a range of interventions by other actors, there would have been very little debate about the
unscrupulous exploitation of the Mekong and the way this would impact negatively on the
region’s vulnerable and already impoverished people.

Though IWRM concepts remain hard to implement in practice, especially between countries
with unequal economies, an understanding that action in one state or watershed impacts
severely on another is certainly now imbedded in the thinking of the Mekong governments
and indeed in Oxfam itself. EARO helped produce evidence to demonstrate how a dam in one
country destroyed communities in another; how people were obliged to leave their homes to
make way for a reservoir; how livelihoods are lost to people living far downstream when a
river is modified; how logging causes erosion and siltation; how many people have less water
when an irrigation reservoir is constructed; how crops cannot be grown in soil polluted by
saline intrusion caused by irrigation schemes that were intended to nurture them; how subsis-
tence fishers lose out when their fishery resource is exploited for commercial purposes, with
the commercial benefits accruing only to a foreign investor; and how land-use policies that
ignore the natural flow of a river can demand production of inappropriate crops on unsuitable
soils. Only when such issues are taken into account in development planning in a catchment
can it be said that a river basin approach is being used.

Ten years on, groups such as FACT, SEARIN, Green Watershed, and SPN remain strong,
active, and influential. EARO’s support for individual campaigners and for the founders of
these organizations has proved to be justified. In 2006, for example, Dr Yu Xiaogang, who
founded Green Watershed, was awarded the prestigious Goldman Prize for the Environment
for his work on participatory watershed management. But Dr Yu and all those engaged on the
OMI would agree that being part of a process to address the injustices of development in the
Mekong has its own rewards.

The OMI has now evolved into the Oxfam Mekong River Basin Management as new and
unforeseen events, such as the discovery of oil under the Tonle Sap or the development of new,
less environmentally harmful energy-generating technologies, turn old concepts of economic
development planning upside down. The people of the relatively undemocratic Mekong
countries are now in a much stronger position to influence the decisions that affect their lives.

**LESSONS FOR A RIVER BASIN APPROACH**

Even on a small scale, taking a water-catchment or river basin approach is difficult and time
consuming; it requires goodwill, patience, equal voices making equitable choices, and compro-
mise. Where there is a dictatorship and weak citizenship a balance is unlikely to be achievable.
But if development is not planned in the context of the river basin the divide between winners
and losers will be perpetuated, and the gulf between rich and poor will widen. Although many
countries (and all the Mekong countries) embrace the concept of sustainable development and
the win–win concept of integrated environmental and development goals, there are relatively
few unambiguously successful cases where local people’s development needs and aspirations
have been reconciled effectively with environmental considerations. The OMI succeeded in
seeding a number of successful pilot programs where water management and livelihood con-
siderations were addressed, planned, and managed at the local level. Yet even these flagship
cases were continually under threat of being usurped by large-scale, provincial, national,
and regional economic development policy and its concomitant infrastructure. So-called
globalization, which in the late 1990s became the target of many NGOs, including Oxfam, and new international trade agreements, with the opening up of Vietnam and China in particular, also put into perspective the relative impact of tackling issues only at the local level.

The economists’ ongoing argument that the solution to poverty is growth and that as economies grow governments can invest in cleaner technologies and less resource-depleting processes is a misconception. What these economists fail to recognize is the value of the environmental services that nature provides, not only to the world at large but, critically, to poorer and more vulnerable rural people.

The OMI did not, and does not in its new form, seek to promote environmental and livelihood issues alone but tries to work by identifying other people’s priorities and demonstrating how those priorities could be tackled more successfully by taking a river basin approach. The EARO team learned much while implementing the OMI that may be helpful to others: Development practitioners have to think both systemically and strategically. What was innovative about our approach was that it was based on the Mekong River System and an understanding of the complex ecology (environmental, social, economic, and political) of that system. It is important to find key leverage points (such as the MRC or the opportunities created by China’s decentralization policy), and a complete waste of time to find “projects” that are not understood as part of a broader strategy.

For development and anti-poverty organizations, fostering participation so that communities have the capacity to influence decisions is the central aspect of a river-basin approach, particularly as they are often a less powerful stakeholder in multi-stakeholder settings.

Anticipate both intended and unintended consequences, such as Vietnam acquiring alternative funding for Se San II.

In designing a regional (transnational) advocacy program that addresses livelihood concerns, focus on the issues that people have in common rather than their differences so that there is an immediate rapport between people who in practice are divided by politics and ideology.

Both technical knowledge and mastery of varying political contexts is essential for effective advocacy in regions characterized by a diversity of political systems.

Especially in countries where freedom of speech is limited, Oxfam must speak with its own voice. It should not speak for its partners but give its own opinion informed by expert knowledge gained from the field and from careful analysis of influential actors inside and outside the region.
Becoming Oxfam: A Regional Office Perspective on the Transformations in Oxfam America through Its Association with Oxfam International

Martin Scurrah

In the late 1990s Oxfam America began a period of rapid growth both in its size and in the complexity of its work. The agency reorganized in order to grant greater autonomy to, and place greater responsibilities on, regional offices. The range of activities expected of regional offices expanded to include advocacy and humanitarian relief, in addition to the traditional support for development work. The number and variety of regional office stakeholders increased within the region, within Oxfam America and internationally. In the regions “Oxfam America” gradually became simply “Oxfam.” This chapter focuses on the relationships with Oxfam International and the other Oxfams in South America and their role as drivers of the changes in the South America region as it became a regional and global actor.

INTRODUCTION

When I took up my appointment as regional director for Oxfam America in Lima in August, 1997, there were six staff members, including the messenger. The program had carved out a strategic niche working on community-based resource management and participation with equity with indigenous peoples in the three central Andean countries; yet the agency was almost totally unknown except by its partners and close allies. Its relations with the other
Oxfams\textsuperscript{1} were limited. A decade later, staff numbers had tripled; the program had expanded to include advocacy and humanitarian relief; Oxfam had become a frequent and often notorious name in the media, especially in Peru; and Oxfam America was playing a creative and active role within the Oxfam International alliance in the region. In the process, the South America Regional Office (SAMRO) had also become one of the drivers of change within the agency and even, to a more modest degree, within Oxfam International as a whole.

This chapter will focus on the role of the relations with Oxfam International and the other Oxfams as one of the key drivers of the dramatic changes that occurred in the Oxfam America regional office over the period, including the evolution of the Oxfam International architecture structuring the relations between the Oxfams in the region and its consequences for the Oxfam America regional office; the relations between SAMRO and the other Oxfams as they implemented Oxfam International’s global and regional advocacy programs; the incorporation of humanitarian relief as a new responsibility totally within the Oxfam International framework; and the role of traditional development activities within Oxfam International in the region. Finally, I will share the conclusions and lessons learned from these experiences.

BACKGROUND: AN UNPROMISING BEGINNING

In my first two years in SAMRO Oxfam International was little more than a shadowy presence. After my arrival in August 1997, I became aware that there had been an Oxfam International “harmonization” meeting in Bolivia at which the attending Oxfams had assumed a series of responsibilities to share information, hold joint partner visits and organize another meeting, but there seemed to be little genuine interest or motivation to collaborate. I was in Lima for three months before I took the initiative to ask for a meeting with the Oxfam Great Britain (OGB) representative, whose office was only a few blocks away, and he did not introduce me to any other members of his staff. It was only after being there seven months that I discovered that Intermón (IO) also had an office in Lima and asked for an appointment with the country representative.

During 1998–1999, we in SAMRO received two visits from OGB staff based in Oxford who urged us to harmonize with the other Oxfams. On one of the visits the OGB regional representative left his Oxford colleague at the wrong address because he did not know that the SAMRO office had moved two years before! Oxfam America had a focused “niche” program and did not share even one partner or project with any other Oxfam in the region. I learned that SAMRO staff considered OGB to be supporting a left wing political party in Peru and that OGB staff considered Oxfam America to be supporting reactionary indigenous organizations. Would the world be transformed by ethnicity or class? In summary, far from harmony, the relations between the Oxfams reflected distrust, suspicion, and rivalry and the lack of a shared identity.

\textsuperscript{1}At the time there were 11 Oxfam members of Oxfam International, seven of which had programs in South America. Now there are 13 Oxfams, six of them with programs in South America.
FROM THE BUREAUCRATIC TO THE STRATEGIC: THE EVOLUTION OF THE OXFAM INTERNATIONAL ARCHITECTURE IN SOUTH AMERICA

A structured and continuous relationship between the Oxfams in South America began with a meeting, called by Oxfam International and organized by OGB, in November 1999, to begin the process of creating the first Oxfam International regional strategic plan (called a Strategic Program Business Plan). The methodology and requirements for this process had been designed in Oxford, and the staff from the Oxfams present at the meeting, who knew little of each other or their institutions and programs, struggled, even with a facilitator provided by Oxfam International, to understand what was required of them in terms of developing a joint plan. It was an arduous, frustrating, and uninspiring process characterized by the search for easy ways out rather than for strategic decisions.

This planning process was not helped by the fact that OGB, which, as the senior Oxfam with the largest presence in the region, was charged with its leadership, had an interim regional director seconded from Oxfam Australia and was in the process of replacing almost its entire country and regional office staff. In fact, after organizing the first meeting in Lima under the newly appointed regional program manager and the second in Recife, Brazil, under an Oxford-based manager, OGB ceded the responsibility for regional leadership to Intermón Oxfam (IO) from the third meeting onward in Lima in November 2000.

The second meeting of the Oxfam International South America group, held in Recife, defined the Oxfam International regional advocacy programs (support of the make trade fair campaign, labor rights, agrarian policies, and extractive industries); designated Oxfam country leads (with Oxfam America assuming the leadership in Peru); and humanitarian response country leads (with Oxfam America also assuming the leadership in Peru). Finally, in the third meeting in Lima, the last touches to the strategic plan were made; the composition of the Regional Strategic Team (RST) defined; and the IO regional director installed as the lead regional manager (LRM).

By the beginning of 2001 the structures envisaged for Oxfam International in the region had been created in a process that was perceived as vertically driven from headquarters in order to achieve compliance and overcome resistance. This set a pattern of behavior in the RST of responding to initiatives from Oxfam International at the global level. Rather than defining its own agenda as a group and seeking the least disruptive ways to comply with these external demands, members complied, but without enthusiasm and creativity. We struggled with lack of information about and resistance to Oxfam International from regional staff, as well as competing demands and priorities from each affiliate head office. As far as Oxfam International as a whole was concerned, the message we got was that all the programs of the Oxfams in the region would be coordinated and perhaps eventually integrated by the RST under the leadership of the LRM, with the advocacy and humanitarian response programs providing the leading wedge in this process.

By the middle of 2003 it was becoming increasingly clear that, while the RST was functioning in a formal sense by holding its meetings, discussing the agenda and sending the required information to the Oxfam International Global Coordination Team, the degree of integration at the country and program level was uneven. There was little evidence of a shared overall strategic vision, and regional staff did not feel a sense of identification with the other Oxfams or with Oxfam International as a whole. Thus, at the November meeting in Lima the RST was
restructured to have a functional, rather than a representational, membership and a decision was made to promote the creation of cross-affiliate Oxfam International country teams under the designated Oxfam leads in order to include more staff members in discussions with other Oxfams and stimulate greater coordination and integration between the Oxfams’ programs and projects. On the other hand, it was recognized that the regional trade and extractive industries campaigns were proving to be creative and strategic.

2004 was a year of crisis for Oxfam International in South America, especially in Peru. With the creation of Oxfam International country teams in the three countries where Oxfam America had programs (Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia), staff members with little previous contact with the other Oxfams were required to attend Oxfam International meetings, interact with colleagues and attempt to coordinate or integrate Oxfam America’s programs with those of the other Oxfams. This challenged their sense of identity; obliged them to look more critically at Oxfam America’s own regional and country programs; required them to seek synergies with the programs of other Oxfams; and added to the complexity of their tasks. In many cases, the costs of these transactions seemed to outweigh the benefits as staff sought tactical or strategic advantages for their own Oxfam America programs, rather than the definition and implementation of a strategic vision that encompassed all the programs and built upon strengths of each affiliate in the region. As regional director I delegated the leadership of the Oxfam International Peru country team to the senior program officer and was joined on the RST by the coordinator of the extractive industries program, who was also from SAMRO.

As is described in greater detail in the following section, the media campaign against Oxfam by the Peruvian government and the mining industry, in which the actions and identities of the different Oxfams were not distinguished and often confused, created tensions between the Oxfams in the region and between them and their head offices. This controversy demonstrated the limited understanding that the other Oxfams had of the rationale of the extractive industries campaign delegated to Oxfam America, the inadequate efforts of SAMRO to inform other Oxfams of its activities and those of its partners and the limited capacity of Oxfam International in the region to influence the media and public opinion generally. However, while this situation of perceived risk and threat generated conflicts and stress between the Oxfams in the region and their staff, it also obliged them to recognize the strategic importance of the program and to become involved in its defense. The crisis also demonstrated to Oxfam International that truly global advocacy involves conflict and change in the South as well as in the Global North and that this means that Oxfam International must have the willingness and capacity to promote its campaigns anywhere, including in the regions. Finally, the crisis made regional office staff aware that they all shared the Oxfam name, that the attacks against one were attacks against all, and consequently that the risks assumed by any particular Oxfam were borne by all. Nevertheless, while the media attacks against Oxfam generated an extraordinary number of meetings to work together to develop the capacities to defend the Oxfam brand, progress was slow and uneven without a common, shared vision for the region and the overall Oxfam International program, as was shown in the mid-term evaluation of the Oxfam International strategic plan.

In 2005 the RST began a process aimed at dealing with these pending issues. It combined its first meeting in Colombia with a meeting with the Colombian national team to begin to counteract an emerging situation where some of the country teams were proposing to develop policies and programs inconsistent with those at the regional level. The possibility of a conflict
between the regional and the country Oxfam International teams was perceived to be a risk in Peru, where Oxfam America was asked to change the leadership of the Oxfam International country team to avoid this problem and to resolve persistent tensions within the team. After the country-level business was taken care of, the RST also began work on the preparation of the new Oxfam International regional strategic plan by undertaking a SWOT analysis in a genuine attempt to learn from the experience with the first strategic plan and develop a common strategic vision as the starting point for the process. The Team also decided to contract the services of Ricardo Wilson-Grau as facilitator, not only for the development of a regional strategic plan, but also to work with each of the country teams so that they could develop their own country strategic plans in coordination with the RST and employing the same methodology.

This signaled a new approach by the Oxfams in the region. Through trial and tribulation they had begun to develop a sense of common purpose and danger which prompted them to seize the opportunity presented by the strategic planning process to develop a common strategic vision which would encompass the country level programs as well as those at the regional level, thus widening and deepening the involvement of regional staff in the planning process; beginning the incorporation of the traditional development programs, in which each Oxfam had so much invested both financially and symbolically, into the Oxfam International planning process; and identifying strategic linkages and synergies both between the different Oxfams working in the region and between the activities and programs at the national, regional, and global levels. Though the degree to which this was achieved varied from country to country, the leadership of SAMRO at the country level in Peru, where many of the challenges and learnings had been generated, and within the RST was an important factor, together with renewed leadership of the RST, in moving Oxfam International in the region towards a more strategic vision and program of action.

**CREATIVITY AND RISK IN REGIONAL ADVOCACY**

**Background**

Traditionally, SAMRO advocacy in the region had been limited to providing financial support for campaigns or other efforts by regional partners to influence governments or other powerful actors, but without any direct involvement by SAMRO staff. In addition, under my predecessor, Richard Smith, SAMRO staff had helped connect regional partners with powerful actors in the US, such as the World Bank, with the cooperation of Boston-based advocacy staff and accompanied them on their visit to Washington, DC. In both cases, Oxfam America played a facilitative role.

In the late 1990s, however, and especially after the anti-globalization protests in Seattle, the idea of Oxfam as a potential global campaigning force emerged, leading to a first attempt with Oxfam International’s Education Now campaign, in which SAMRO had a very minor involvement. However, these changes at the global level coincided with an increasing number of requests from indigenous leaders in the Amazon basin for support in dealing with the incursion of multinational oil and gas companies on their territories and from indigenous leaders in the Andean highlands for support in dealing with the expansion of mining concessions into their communities. Realizing that these local problems, affecting a wide range of partners, were manifestations of global forces, SAMRO staff began developing the rationale for a possible
region-based advocacy program in extractive industries, concentrating on the impacts of oil and gas companies in the Amazon and mining companies in the Andean highlands.

These initial explorations were coordinated with OGB colleagues, since at that time Sophie Tickle from Oxford was engaged in a dialogue in the UK with British Petroleum about the impacts of its activities on the human rights situation in Colombia, raising the possibility of using this as the starting point for an international advocacy campaign. Furthermore, although they have never had a regional program in South America, Jeff Atkinson was proposing the creation of a Mining Ombudsman in Oxfam Australia to monitor the impacts of Australia-based mining companies on the rights of local communities, mainly in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. Initial joint activities in South America included an advocacy workshop for Oxfam International regional staff, offered by John Ruthrauff from Oxfam America’s Washington, DC office and joint Oxfam America-OGB funding of a study of the legal framework for extractive industries in Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia by the Peruvian Environmental Law Society (known as SPDA for its Spanish-language initials).

Despite these promising beginnings for a possible regional Oxfam International advocacy campaign in extractive industries, as the design of such a program took shape within Oxfam America during the second half of 1999 the interest expressed by OGB began to wane and definitely ended, as Oxfam GB geared up for the Oxfam International Trade Campaign that would be launched in 2001. Thus, by the time of the second regional Oxfam International planning meeting in Recife in May, 2000, Oxfam America had advanced on its own with an extractive industries advocacy program defined and in implementation with an initial focus on the impacts of mining companies in the Andes in Peru on the rights of local communities.

At the Recife meeting regional Oxfam International staff was informed that the global trade campaign would need to be included in the regional strategic plan, but that each region could also include other advocacy programs, ideally linked in some way to the trade campaign. Furthermore, they were told that advocacy initiatives should be given priority in Oxfam International collaboration. In the discussions in the meeting there was considerable confusion about the distinction between traditional development or “program” work, with which all were familiar, and campaigns and advocacy, to which most had not had any previous exposure. There was also some confusion concerning to what degree traditional programs had to be harmonized across the Oxfams and linked to or subordinated to the new advocacy programs. In any event, four advocacy programs were prioritized: trade, lead by OGB; extractives, lead by Oxfam America; labor rights, jointly lead by Novib and Oxfam Canada; and agrarian policies, lead by Intermón Oxfam. Whereas all Oxfams were expected to be involved in the trade campaign, participation in the other advocacy initiatives was voluntary, with OGB, Novib, and Oxfam Solidarité accompanying Intermón Oxfam in agrarian policies and OGB accompanying Oxfam Canada and Oxfam Novib in labor rights. In the case of extractives, only Oxfam America expressed interest, but in view of its relevance and the clarity of its objectives and strategies it was approved as an Oxfam International regional advocacy program executed by Oxfam America “by delegation.” For several years this situation created confusion amongst SAMRO staff as to whether the extractives program was “really” an Oxfam International or an Oxfam America program and staff from the other Oxfams tended to regard it as Oxfam America’s program and responsibility and one in which they had little interest.
Trade campaign

The dilemma faced by SAMRO with its involvement in the trade campaign was that no existing staff member felt qualified by training or experience to contribute to such a campaign. Furthermore, none of SAMRO’s existing partners seemed to have any interest in or competency to offer to such a campaign. Nevertheless, both the Oxfam America head office and the regional director felt that it was important that SAMRO be involved and to seek ways to make strategic contributions to the campaign with its limited personnel resources and in ways that would link it to key partner and program concerns.

Fortunately, Oxfam America was able to find the resources to hire a half-time consultant to work exclusively on the trade campaign and become a member of the Oxfam International regional trade campaign team and, again fortunately, SAMRO was able to hire an agricultural economist with a master’s degree in environmental studies who was fluent in Spanish, English, and German. This person not only became a member of the regional trade campaign team but also an advocate and liaison for Oxfam International within the SAMRO office, constantly reminding us of the opportunities and obligations associated with Oxfam America’s membership in Oxfam International.

In its initial months, the regional trade campaign team faced the dual challenge of developing its strategic plan within the overall global trade campaign and clarifying its role within Oxfam International in the region. On the first challenge, SAMRO contributed towards the process by which the regional team focused its efforts on the proposed Free Trade Area for the Americas (FTAA) and formed both a South America trade campaign team and a hemispheric trade campaign team. The hemispheric team, led by Simon Ticehurst of OGB, included the CAMEXCA region and Oxfam America Boston and DC-based trade campaign teams—an effective innovation that went beyond the Oxfam International architecture as originally conceived and required fluid relations between OGB, which was campaign lead in South America, and Oxfam America, as campaign lead in CAMEXCA and as the advocate on the Free Trade Area for the Americas, in DC. On the second challenge, as already mentioned, there was confusion in the South America RST concerning the scope of what was called the agrarian and commercial policies program and the trade campaign, with some arguing that the latter, lead by OGB, should be subservient to the former, led by Intermón Oxfam. Fortunately, SAMRO was able to play a mediating role in proposing a structure that would distinguish between these activities and provide the trade campaign team with the autonomy it needed to be effective and in obtaining the RST’s approval. This liberated the regional trade campaign from the threat of paralysis and confusion.

These early contributions established SAMRO’s credentials as a disinterested member of the trade campaign team and enabled it to make modest but strategic contributions to the campaign that were not seen as self-serving. At the beginning of the campaign, SAMRO’s principal partners, the indigenous peoples of Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia and those who were working with them, had a very limited understanding of international trade issues. They did not see how the international trading system could have any impact on their lives, even though they were concerned about issues such as intellectual property rights and bio-piracy. Rather than dismissing indigenous peoples as a “lost cause” for the campaign, SAMRO commissioned research in Bolivia and Peru to demonstrate the probable impacts of the proposed FTAA and bi-lateral (national) and regional (Andean) free trade agreements (FTAs) on indigenous peoples.
SAMRO also worked with partners to organize a series of workshops, seminars, and forums that served to inform and sensitize indigenous peoples and their leaders about the implications of the proposed trade agreements. SAMRO also worked hard to ensure that indigenous organizations were represented at national and regional meetings related to the trade campaign and at international and regional meetings of the World Social Forum. As a result, the regional indigenous movement became one of the most influential and involved social actors in the trade campaign in the region. This was a unique contribution, since no other Oxfam in the region had Oxfam America’s capacity to mobilize and involve this constituency. Primarily as a result of pressures from the indigenous organizations, both the Ecuadorian and Bolivian governments decided to withdraw from the negotiations.

A second unique and strategic contribution of Oxfam America to the trade campaign in the region was a byproduct of the extractives campaign. One of the key concerns of those campaigning around both the FTAA and the FTA was that of the proposed rules favoring foreign investment. SAMRO was able to make key contributions to the research report of the Peruvian economist Alan Fairlie commissioned by the trade campaign team. SAMRO also prepared a report with its local partner, CooperAcción, on the implications of the proposed investment rules. The report was based on its knowledge of the mining, oil, and gas industries, and contributed to the preparation of the Oxfam International position paper on the proposed FTA with Peru.

SAMRO benefited from its participation in the trade campaign by becoming more informed of trade issues, by getting to know popular organizations and NGOs beyond the rather narrow range of its traditional partners and allies, and by engaging in lobbying efforts at regional and national trade negotiations meetings. SAMRO’s representative on the trade campaign team played a crucial role in linking partners to the campaign and encouraging staff to become more involved. Overall, despite rather inauspicious beginnings, Oxfam America’s engagement in Oxfam International benefited both parties.

**Agrarian and commercial policies**

The May 2000 meeting of the South America RST, at which agrarian and commercial policies were approved as one of the region’s program priorities, was marked by divisiveness and confusion. One issue was the fact that the first team leader was a member of Intermón Oxfam’s advocacy unit in Barcelona and saw the program as part of the global OI trade campaign, while the other members of the team were involved in traditional program work with small rural producers and found it difficult to conceptualize and contribute effectively to advocacy objectives that seemed remote from their program experience and concerns. At the same time, as the OI team responsible for this program began to develop an advocacy agenda with a focus on trade and market issues, it was hard to discern what distinguished it from the trade campaign.

At the beginning SAMRO decided not to participate in this program, in part, because of fear of overextending staff and, in part, because it felt that the program, as conceived, was fundamentally market oriented, working with a class-defined small farmers organization. In contrast, SAMRO’s work with indigenous people supported their priority, as an ethnically defined group, of achieving secure control over their lands and territories and the natural resources associated. Concerns about gaining improved access to the market were secondary at best.
However, beginning in 2003, the agrarian and commercial policies program began to develop country-level teams. These emerged as a means of involving traditional program staff in the harmonization process, and pressure began to mount to include representatives from all the Oxfams with rural development programs in the teams at both the country and regional levels. Thus, SAMRO staff found themselves attending Oxfam International meetings with agendas that they felt were irrelevant to their program concerns. The initial reaction to this situation was to emphasize rivalries and differences rather than commonalities and coincidences.

At this point, because of the way the first RST plan was developed, participants lacked a shared strategic vision and, as a result, program staff tried to use their participation in the agrarian and commercial policies program to strengthen their own affiliate’s program rather than to contribute to the creation and consolidation of a common OI program. Despite these difficulties, by 2005, under new Oxfam International leadership, the program began to distinguish its strategies and objectives more clearly from those of the regional trade campaign. It also became more inclusive in its scope, considering the issues not only of small holders, but also indigenous peoples. This was reflected in the inclusion of advocacy objectives related to land and territorial security and the defense and sustainable management of water and other natural resources. This reflected the persistence of SAMRO staff in advocating within the teams for the concerns of their partners and the gradually more inclusive approach of the teams and their leadership. These changes also coincided with and were reinforced by the process for developing the new Oxfam International regional strategic plan which included strategic planning at the country level and the development of a common inclusive vision, rather than one that conceived Oxfam International as over and above and separate from the programs of each Oxfam.

**Extractive industries program**

While Oxfam America was able to make modest but strategic contributions to the Oxfam International trade campaign, its major interactions with the other Oxfams over the period involved the extractives program, even though for a time this was carried out in relative isolation.

Four phases in the relationship around extractives between Oxfam America and Oxfam International in the region can be distinguished: (1) uneven collaboration between Oxfam America and OGB around the Tambogrande case; (2) collaboration between Oxfam America and Oxfam Australia in the Tintaya case; (3) the Cerro Quilish and Las Bambas crises; and (4) the creation and consolidation of the Oxfam International extractives team.

**(1) THE TAMBOGRANDE CASE**

After the creation of the National Coordinator of Communities in Peru Affected by Mining (CONACAMI for its initials in Spanish) in October 1999, one of the cases given priority attention was the proposal of a “junior” Canadian mining exploration company, Manhattan Minerals, to develop a large, open-cut polymetalic mine near the town of Tambogrande on the north coast of Peru. This would involve moving about one-third of the town’s population, since the mine would be located right next to the town, and diverting the course of the Piura river. Local people had several concerns:
possible contamination of the water, which was especially serious in the arid coastal environment;

possible pollution from dust blown up by the strong afternoon winds from the coast;

possible flooding in El Niño years since this was a region strongly impacted by this climate phenomenon which might become more severe due to global climate change;

the possible impacts on the future export prospects of the fruit growers in the nearby San Lorenzo irrigation project established in the 1950s and 1960s with World Bank funding; and

the limited opportunities to influence the project-approval process.

In order to make their voices heard, they created the Tambogrande Defense Front (FDT), a coalition of local urban and rural organizations.

The extractive industries program funded CONACAMI, one of whose bases was the FDT, and some of the national NGOs that, together with their local counterparts, comprised an advisory group. This advisory group had been created at the urging of the local Catholic bishop, in order to provide professional and technical advice and support. However, while Oxfam America did not have any previous or current partners in the Piura region, OGB had a long history of active support to development organizations and activities there. This created a potential for both conflict and cooperation between the two Oxfams.

SAMRO did not have information about OGB’s programs and partners in the Tambogrande area and there was no mechanism within Oxfam International at the time for sharing such information. Likewise, OGB did not have information about Oxfam America’s support from Lima for the Oxfam International extractives program in the area. This meant that OGB supported the FDT and the advisory group through its local partners, while Oxfam America supported both primarily through its Lima-based partners. There was a feeling in OGB that Oxfam America was intervening in a part of the country where OGB had a long-established presence, and there was a feeling in Oxfam America that OGB was becoming involved in extractives issues without recognizing Oxfam America’s leadership. However, some coordination and information-sharing occurred around the traditional grant making activities when the two Oxfams found that they were both funding the visit of an expert on water from the US and the holding of a local referendum on the proposed mining project.

The dangers posed by such a lack of coordination were revealed by two episodes. The mining company was inexperienced in dealing with community concerns, and the project approval mechanisms designed by the Peruvian government were far short of an adequate consultation process. Thus, there were moments of severe conflict and failed dialogue between the company and the community. The national ombudsman’s office and a local Catholic bishop attempted to mediate the conflicts without success. A consultant hired by the company explored the possibility that a committee comprising the Church, the ombudsman and Oxfam might be able to oversee a negotiation process. However, in these discussions “Oxfam” was speaking with two voices that were not always well coordinated or even apparent to their interlocutors. Thus, at one stage the Minister of Energy and Mines publicly announced, on the basis of private conversations with OGB in Piura, in which no formal commitment was made, that Oxfam had agreed to sponsor negotiations; Oxfam America, which was responsible for the extractives
program, was uninformed. This spurred a coordination meeting between the two Oxfams, followed by meetings with the FDT and advisory group in order to agree on a common position and meetings with the Minister to clarify Oxfam’s position and role.

The second episode, which hinged on the translation of the small word “porque” involved an announcement published by OGB in the local newspaper in Piura on the day of the Tambogrande referendum (April 14, 2002). In an attempt to be transparent and reaffirm its support for a democratic process the advertisement was titled “The Tambogrande Referendum: Why Oxfam Supports It.” However, in Spanish the title could also be read as, “The Tambogrande Referendum: Because Oxfam Supports It,” suggesting that the referendum was being held basically due to Oxfam’s support. The results of the referendum, indicating overwhelming community support for a future based on agriculture rather than mining, rocked the mining industry and within days they began a media campaign to question the results and legitimacy of the referendum, claiming that the community had been manipulated by “environmental” organizations, such as Oxfam, and questioning Oxfam’s role, motives, and presence in the country.

Oxfam International and the Oxfams in the region were not prepared for such an aggressively negative campaign. The affiliates had very limited experience or capacity to deal with the media, nor had Oxfam ever been put in the position of having to defend its reputation and brand. Traditionally it had maintained a low profile, appearing in the media only in support of its partners and allies, whom Oxfam saw as actors who could legitimately play an active and public role. SAMRO had hired a communications officer at the beginning of the year, but her role was defined as generating information for the communication and education department in Boston. Thus, she was not familiar with the local media and none of the members of the Oxfams had received media training. The majority sentiment was that Oxfam should not make public statements in its defense, in the hope that things would die down. Instead staff from OGB and Oxfam America visited privately with public influentials to explain what Oxfam was and its position on extractives and related issues. This had some limited effectiveness in the immediate term. Unfortunately, little was done to strengthen Oxfam’s capacity in the region to deal with the media, despite the fact that its name continued to appear from time to time in the media in Peru as an environmental organization promoting violence and unrest, opposed to foreign investment in general and the mining industry in particular and distributing huge amounts of money for which there was little accountability.

(2) THE TINTAYA CASE

Another of the cases given priority by CONACAMI was the situation of five indigenous communities affected by the Tintaya open-cut copper mine in the mountains outside of Cusco, owned by the Anglo-Australian company BHP Billiton. The communities had formed a regional affiliate of CONACAMI, called CORECAMI. Among its concerns were unfair compensation for the land acquired by the company from the communities, human rights abuses by company workers, air and water pollution, and revenue sharing. A Peruvian NGO, CooperAcción, prepared detailed reports on the land and contamination issues but mine management was refusing to take any notice of their complaints.

2 Porque can mean “why” or “because.”
SAMRO arranged to have the reports translated into English and sent to Oxfam Australia’s mining ombudsman\(^3\) in Melbourne, where BHP Billiton had its corporate headquarters. After discussions with corporate management, they asked her to travel to Peru to investigate the complaint, assuring her of cooperation from their people in Peru. She carried out the investigation and, in December 2001, the ombudsman persuaded all parties to begin a negotiation process.

In February 2002 a negotiation process got underway with participation from the company, CONACAMI, CORECAMI, the five affected communities, CooperAcción, and Oxfam America. The negotiations lasted three years until a final agreement, which is still being implemented, was signed in December 2004. Each year the Oxfam Australia ombudsman made inspection visits to the mine where she interviewed all parties and included her assessments and recommendations in annual reports published in Melbourne. Her annual visits were eagerly awaited by the communities who felt she had a real influence over mine management and her reports were a matter of concern for the company. SAMRO participated in the negotiations as advisor to the communities and facilitator of the general meetings on behalf of Oxfam Australia.

The negotiation process involved high risk for both the company, which was heavily criticized by other mining companies in Peru for agreeing to sit down and negotiate with CONACAMI, and for CONACAMI, many of whose members and allies criticized the leadership for participating in the dialogue. All participants agreed that the participation of Oxfam both as advisor, in the form of Oxfam America, and external monitor, in the form of Oxfam Australia, was a key factor in keeping the negotiations on track and bringing them to a successful conclusion. This was the only case in Peru where a multinational mining company had agreed to negotiate with local community representatives and their advisors and been able to reach a mutually satisfactory agreement. The mine was subsequently sold to the Xstrata mining company, which assumed BHP Billiton’s commitments to the communities and continues to implement the agreement. It demonstrated that where there was imagination and a willingness to collaborate two Oxfams could leverage their complementary strengths. In this case by combining the field presence and local trust of one with the headquarters advocacy capacity of the other in a truly global response to the local impacts of two of the world’s largest mining companies.

**(3) THE CERRO QUILISH AND LAS BAMBAS CRISES**

By 2004, CONACAMI and its affiliates had managed to place the impacts of mining on local, mainly peasant, communities on the national political agenda in Peru. At the beginning of the year Oxfam America and Earth/Works, a DC-based advocacy organization, had launched the No Dirty Gold campaign whose organizers expected Oxfam America’s partners in Peru to be actively involved.

The list of campaign demands had been heavily influenced by the outcomes of a project carried out by SAMRO, the Peruvian Environmental Law Society and the Washington, DC-based Environmental Law Institute (ELI), with support from the Ford Foundation. This study explored the feasibility of establishing a certification system for mining with representatives of communities affected by mining in Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Chile. Although SAMRO

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\(^3\) This was an adaptation of the original Swedish idea of an independent public official who would defend citizens from abuses by government by preparing reports based on impartial investigations and using these to apply moral pressure. Oxfam Australia’s variant on this was to hire and fund a person who would undertake impartial and independent investigations of alleged abuses of Australian-based mining companies.
staff and partners were critical of some aspects of the campaign and campaign document, they agreed to become involved in the situation in Cajamarca. There, tense relations existed between the local community and the Yanacocha gold mine, the second largest in the world owned by the Denver-based Newmont Mining Company, the Buenaventura Mining Company, Peru’s largest mining company, and the World Bank’s International Finance Corporation (IFC). This situation was further complicated by the fact that, after receiving financial support from the company, CONACAMI’s affiliate there had passed from being a vocal critic to a public defender of the mine, and by the fact that civil society in the region was fragmented. In other words, the conditions did not seem particularly propitious for creating a solid alliance between local representative organizations and a coalition of support NGOs.

The company was seeking to expand its mining operations to Cerro Quilish, a peak less than 20 kilometers from the City of Cajamarca and the source of its water supply. This area had been declared a reserve by the municipality, a decision which the company had appealed to the Constitutional Tribunal, the highest court in the country. The tribunal had ruled that while the reserve was legal, so, too, was the company’s mining concession, which could be exploited if the Ministry of Mines approved the environmental impact assessment (EIA).

Despite clear signs of opposition from the local community, early in 2004 the company presented its draft EIA, drawing a large number of negative observations—including some from the government’s own natural resource institute (INRENA). Other objections came from civil society organizations, especially Oxfam America’s partners, the Ecumenical Foundation for Development and Peace (FEDEPAZ for its initials in Spanish) and the Group for Formation and Intervention for Sustainable Development (GRUFIDES for its initials in Spanish). Nevertheless, in July the Minister quietly approved the EIA, and the company took advantage of the Independence Day holidays at the end of the month to move its machinery onto the mountain.

This set off a series of increasingly massive and at times violent demonstrations, including road blockages and occupation of the town’s water treatment plant. The protests lasted some six weeks and generated a heated debate in the local and national media, which included numerous denunciations of Oxfam for its supposed role in fomenting the conflict. The normally divided and distrustful Cajamarca community united in a fragile coalition of rural and urban interests which included both the municipality and the regional government, which maintained the momentum of the protests until a solution was finally reached through the key intervention and mediation of Fr. Marco Arana, Director of GRUFIDES, and OA’s key partner in the region. The permission to exploit Cerro Quilish was rescinded, and the company issued an official public apology to the community.

Early in the year Oxfam America board members had visited the mine and at the end of their visit had warned the company of the high level of distrust in the community towards it and had recommended that the best way to begin creating trust would be to publicly and voluntarily renounce its claim to exploit the gold of Cerro Quilish. This was something the company was later obliged to do, but only as the result of strong public pressure.

In the following months Oxfam America participated as advisor to a group of ethical investors in the US who were in dialogue with Newmont’s management about the company’s activities, including those in Peru. This had involved SAMRO staff in brokering the relationship between civil society organizations in Cajamarca, the leadership of the No Dirty Gold campaign, the ethical investors and company management in Denver.
At the height of this complex and conflictive situation, the media were loudly demanding to know Oxfam’s position and role. This was occurring on the eve of a major evaluation workshop with partners when the extractives coordinator was on a trip outside the country. So as regional director, I was persuaded to participate in an interview in a late-night television news program—an interview that turned out to be extremely aggressive and hostile, and for which I was inadequately prepared. This generated danger signals for the staff of all Oxfams in the country and converted a lunchtime meeting of the Oxfam International Peru country team, previously scheduled for the following day, into a crisis meeting where SAMRO’s institutional leadership was questioned and criticized. The sense of alarm felt by staff from the other Oxfams was due in large part to their lack of information and understanding of the role and actions of Oxfam America and its partners, leading them to give credence to some of the versions presented in the media. For their part, SAMRO staff had become overwhelmed by the pressure of events and the multiple demands made on them and had not developed effective mechanisms for keeping their colleagues informed. Despite the fact that Oxfam had been the target of a waxing and waning media campaign for over two years and that both Oxfam America and OGB now had information officers in Lima, there were still no media plans or strategies.

In the following days the Oxfam International Peru country team worked to organize a press conference (which was finally decided against) and to agree on the text of an advertisement presenting Oxfam’s position and to be published in the main national newspapers. This task turned out to be complex and conflictive because of tensions within SAMRO staff; the limited understanding by staff from the other Oxfams of the extractives program and strategies; the opposition to or at least ambivalence of some staff towards making any public statement at all; the competition for leadership and influence between the Oxfams; and the interventions of head office staff from various Oxfams, who had a limited understanding of the fast-moving local context (as there were daily mobilizations in Cajamarca), and were for the first time grappling with the need to position Oxfam and defend the brand around regional advocacy.

Despite the advertisement and the resolution of the Cerro Quilish conflict in the following days, the campaign in the media against Oxfam continued. This time it focused on the supposed role of CONACAMI, with Oxfam’s support, in stirring up opposition among extremely impoverished peasant communities in Apurímac to the granting of a major copper mining concession. This was a region that had not yet been visited by SAMRO staff so that they could not independently verify the accusations made by the president of the regional government (who was later forced to resign to serve a jail sentence resulting from a criminal conviction), repeated in the media and echoed by the national president.

To convey some idea of the nature of the rumor mongering that occurred, a rumor was conveyed to Oxfam GB by a government official that an Oxfam America staff person or staff from a partner organization was being investigated for murder, something that was patently untrue. We felt obliged to raise this with CONACAMI to fully put to rest OGB’s misgivings. But this did illustrate that while other Oxfams might be willing to trust Oxfam America, they did not necessarily trust Oxfam America’s partners, especially CONACAMI, and they were doubtful as to the degree to which Oxfam America was exercising effective monitoring.

The continued media campaign against Oxfam and its strategic partner and the continued distrust of the other Oxfams made it clear that the Oxfam International public declaration had not been sufficient. With support from Oxfam America’s Communication and
Education Department in Boston, a short-term media consultant was hired and with his support a second public statement was prepared to be published in the name of OA with two objectives. The first was to assure the general public that Oxfam America did not foment or engage in violence. The second was to be clear that partners were fully responsible for their own statements and actions. Since this was directed as much at the other Oxfams as at the general public, it was published under Oxfam America’s name, though the text was shared with OGB beforehand.

Although this declaration seemed to turn the corner as far as the media campaigns against Oxfam were concerned, some staff in the other Oxfams were annoyed that it had been published only in the name of Oxfam America and not in that of Oxfam International. However, I felt that if the text had been subject to the microediting of the other Oxfams and their home offices, the delay would have been excessive and the clarity of the text compromised. Thus, I felt that temporarily hurt feelings were worth the risk. Although considerable thought and discussion had gone into the wording of the text in SAMRO in order to distinguish Oxfam America from its partners, without exacerbating tensions, some read the text as attempting to disown the relationship. In an ex post analysis, staff acknowledged that it would have been appropriate to have shared the text with CONACAMI before publication and there was indeed an initial negative reaction from their leadership, requiring SAMRO staff to invest considerable time and effort in re-establishing trust. It is interesting to note that the media consultant subsequently was hired as communications officer by the National Mining Society!

These events began to change the paradigm of Oxfam thinking about advocacy and the media in the region. Staff realized that all shared the same brand name of Oxfam and that, although the differences between the Oxfams seemed obvious and important to them, they were irrelevant and incomprehensible to outsiders and that the successes or failures of any one Oxfam would be attributed to all. Staff also reluctantly accepted that it was not only impossible to hide behind partners, seek anonymity or ignore the media when Oxfam was being targeted, but also that it was appropriate and legitimate to be proactive in using the media to protect Oxfam and its partners. Furthermore, advocacy on a global scale meant that it was no longer possible to separate and compartmentalize the actions and presence of Oxfam in the media in the North from its work in the South. As a result, Oxfam needed to be ready and able to promote and defend its work and brand in the regions as well as in its countries of origin and this would require investments in planning, staffing, and capacity building.

(4) CREATING AND CONSOLIDATING THE OXFAM INTERNATIONAL REGIONAL EXTRACTIVES TEAM

Subsequent to the September events the SAMRO extractives leader arranged a series of meetings and visits with mining company executives, government officials, the US, UK, and Canadian ambassadors, representatives of the media and partners and allies to explain and reaffirm Oxfam’s values, policies, and positions. Other members of the Oxfam International Peru country team participated in some of these meetings in order to better understand the program and its partners. At the same time the Oxfam America and OGB information officers commissioned a study to lay the groundwork for an Oxfam International media and communications strategy. In December 2004 the British embassy sponsored a forum in Lima on mining at which Dr. Rosemary Thorpe, president of the OGB board and a well-known Peru scholar, was a keynote speaker and defended Oxfam’s extractives program.
At the beginning of 2005 it looked like Oxfam International was on the way towards more effective coordination in Peru. However, in the following months several clouds appeared on the horizon. There were delays in the preparation and presentation of the consultants’ report on media strategies and the proposals prepared by the information officers were ignored by the Oxfam International Peru country team. In April, Dr. Thorpe visited Peru again when she met with the OGB country manager and the Oxfam America regional director to talk about the extractives program. As a result, OGB decided to become involved in the extractives program to strengthen it and help manage the risks.

At the meeting of the South America RST held in Bogotá in June, Oxfam America was asked to replace the team’s leader, and the regional director agreed to re-assume this responsibility. The information officers were requested to develop media strategies and position papers for the three Oxfam International advocacy programs in Peru (extractives, trade, and agrarian policies) and train local Oxfam International staff in media relations. Finally, it was agreed that an Oxfam International extractives team would be established under Oxfam America leadership but with participation by OGB and Novib, both of whom promised to commit grant funds to the program.

This timely demonstration of leadership by the RST stimulated a number of responses. The Oxfam International Peru country team was restructured to include representatives of humanitarian, trade, extractives, and information staff in its meetings so that they would be fully informed on the issues. With the support and encouragement of the Communication and Education Department in Boston, the information officers organized a series of meetings to develop media strategies and a series of training workshops for staff. The Oxfam International extractives team held frequent formal and informal meetings to obtain understanding and consensus on the program’s objectives and strategies and prepare a position paper on extractives in Peru. (To illustrate the difficulties, the position paper went through 17 drafts before it was finally approved.) Three public events were organized to bring together industry and government representatives and Oxfam’s partners and allies to discuss the rights of indigenous peoples under ILO Convention 169, the situation of Las Bambas mining project and the problems with the distribution and use of mining company tax payments to regional governments and municipalities. Regular meetings were held between CONACAMI and the Oxfam International extractives team and between these two and Ibis and 11-11-11, CONACAMI’s other (European) funders, to ensure the exchange of information and the coordination of public messaging. In the year 2000 Oxfam America had helped fund and create a mining dialogue involving people from companies; national, regional, and local governments; NGOs; and municipalities and communities. This process was co-chaired by a top manager from Peru’s largest mining company and an Oxfam America partner and was co-funded by Oxfam America. It had proved to be a useful forum for airing differences, discussing conflicts and, in some cases, agreeing on legislative initiatives. During 2005 the Mining and Sustainable Development Dialogue Group, as it came to be called, had worked to develop a public statement on the role of mining in Peru and this was finally agreed and signed in February 2006, representing a reasonably progressive statement which was formally endorsed by the major mining companies operating in the country, NGOs, and municipalities, but few government representatives.

While progress was being achieved in resolving the differences between the Oxfams and achieving a basic consensus between the mining industry and other parts of Peru’s civil society, relations with the national government appeared to be deteriorating. In July, the OGB
and Oxfam America representatives were called to a meeting with the Director of the Peruvian International Cooperation Agency (APCI for its initials in Spanish), the official government agency charged with coordinating private and governmental aid, and were informed that the President of Peru had asked him to close down Oxfam’s operations, but that he had not been able to find any legal grounds for doing so. Instead, he proposed that the Oxfams voluntarily invite a government inspection to demonstrate the transparency with which they managed their funds and operations. Since the Oxfams believed that they were already transparent, presenting APCI with detailed annual reports on their activities about which they had never received any observations, the suggestion was declined.

Consultations with lawyers indicated that there was no legal basis for the request and the Director of APCI did not insist. However, in a series of coordination meetings between APCI and COEECI, the organization representing international NGOs on whose board Oxfam America participated, the APCI director reiterated the President’s concern that Oxfam was fomenting opposition to government policies on extractives and trade. At the same time, there were attacks in Congress against national and international NGOs and against APCI for its supposed failure to supervise them and keep them under control. These issues were discussed at a special meeting of COEECI’s membership which provided Oxfam with an opportunity to explain its position, which received overwhelming support. Oxfam International coordinated a meeting of concerned international NGOs before COEECI’s annual general meeting with the result that a new leadership, including OGB, more fully committed to defending the autonomy of both national and international NGOs was elected and during 2006 played an important role in fighting proposed legislation to impose draconian controls on NGOs in Peru. Key sections of this legislation were subsequently declared unconstitutional by the country’s Constitutional Tribunal.

HUMANITARIAN RELIEF: FROM OUTCAST TO ACCEPTANCE

Before May 2000, when, in a meeting in Quebec, Oxfam International decided that all responses to humanitarian disasters would be in the name of Oxfam International and that all Oxfams would be involved, the doctrine in SAMRO was that only OGB had the experience, expertise, and resources to be involved in humanitarian relief. SAMRO had given some financial support to partners on an occasional basis in response to natural disasters, such as a drought in Puno and the Bolivian altiplano associated with the El Niño phenomenon of 1998–1999. However, this minimum involvement was considered to be exceptional and something of a deviation from what was considered to be more important development work. Development program staff considered humanitarian relief to be paternalistic and assistentialist and an aberration from Oxfam’s true mission of long-term poverty reduction and structural change, especially when such relief was carried out directly by Oxfam and not through partners. In general, hands-on humanitarian response was viewed with suspicion and Oxfam America’s noninvolvement was seen as a virtue.

Thus, the directions given to the RST in its meeting in Recife shortly after the Quebec decision came as something of a shock. Within hours of SAMRO assuming the responsibility for Peru, OGB called me about a flooding emergency in Puno and informed Oxfam America that OGB was sending in an assessment team and that Oxfam America should nominate somebody to accompany the team and assume the leadership of Oxfam International’s response.
Fortunately, the senior program officer was able to participate in the visit but this first experience of humanitarian response under Oxfam America’s leadership was primarily an exercise in delegation to OGB. However, it did begin to make some SAMRO staff aware of the existence of a whole new area of work with its own logic and methodologies about which staff had no knowledge or experience.

A year later, in June 2001, I received a phone call from the incoming OGB regional director, who informed me that there had been an earthquake in the south of Peru and that OGB was sending an emergency assessment team. Once again, as Oxfam International emergency lead in Peru we were requested to accompany the assessment team. In the face of contradictory advice as to whether to give priority to the regional planning process or the earthquake emergency, we decided not to accompany the team to the field but to take charge of the coordination in Lima and between Peru and Oxfam International globally and ask the SAMRO information officer, who had been hired at the beginning of the year and who had worked with Red Cross International, to send regular situation reports to Oxfam head offices and to the global humanitarian team.

This style of response evolved into a successful hybrid whereby Oxfam America employed its leadership of the Oxfam International Peru country team to oversee and coordinate the emergency response, including the preparation of a funding request to the EU (formally presented by OGB), the solicitation and channeling of funding from other Oxfams and the coordination with local partners. This was an intense learning experience requiring coordination between the Oxfams, both in the region and globally, coordination with partners and supervision of the direct OGB on-the-ground response. While there was encouragement from Oxfam America’s newly created humanitarian director, Oxfam America’s capacity to handle emergency responses was almost nonexistent; SAMRO staff not directly involved regarded this as an unnecessary and undesirable distraction of the agency’s resources; and other Oxfam regional colleagues saw this as a troubling precedent for their possible involvement in the future.

SAMRO’s ad hoc response and leadership in Oxfam International’s earthquake emergency relief effort was seen as effective but not sustainable. Staff had no training in emergency relief, Oxfam America lacked emergency response procedures, and there was no regional staff assigned to this responsibility. However, the CAMEXCA office had gained valuable experience in responding to Hurricane Mitch and now had a full-time emergency response officer, so at the end of April 2002, two years after having assumed the responsibility for leading Oxfam International’s response to emergencies in Peru, SAMRO staff received a training and orientation workshop from Oxfam America’s humanitarian director and the CAMEXCA humanitarian relief coordinator, who later also accompanied me on one of my several field monitoring visits, and commissioned a local NGO to begin the preliminary work for an Oxfam International emergency contingency plan for Peru. Once SAMRO got greater clarity on the implications of this responsibility, we requested funds for a regional humanitarian relief coordinator in the FY03 budget, and consequently were able to hire a part-time humanitarian coordination officer with training in emergency medicine and experience working with Peru’s civil defense agency.

Some SAMRO staff members considered the hiring of a humanitarian officer to be unnecessary or of low priority and had difficulty understanding his role, responsibilities, and ways of working and resented the support given by the humanitarian relief department (HRD) in Boston and the regional director. For his part, the humanitarian officer did not have a grants
budget to administer, as the program officers did, and had to rely on the resources provided by HRD in Boston at a time when it was still caught in the "prevention-cure" dilemma, whereby funds were only available for responding to emergencies despite the fact that the professional consensus was that it was much more cost-effective to invest in preparation and mitigation in anticipation of disasters than in recovery afterwards. Furthermore, the regional office and Oxfam America as a whole had very little previous experience or technical expertise to offer the new employee as he began to define his role. Finally, during most of the period there was little leadership or guidance from OGB as there was a rapid turnover in regional humanitarian coordinators, periods when coordination was exercised from outside the region and periods when there was no coordinator at all.

At the beginning of 2003 SAMRO led yet another Oxfam International response to a flood emergency in Puno in the south of Peru and this provided the new humanitarian officer with an opportunity to implement and manage an emergency project with funding from other Oxfams and become aware of the complexities involved in maintaining the many relationships. In reflecting on this experience, he concluded that risk management might be a useful concept for linking humanitarian work to traditional program work. During 2003 he also enjoyed the contributions (the incorporation of a gender focus) and the frustrations (delays in the Oxfam International country team meetings) in working with Oxfam International in developing the contingency plan for Peru.

Building on these experiences, SAMRO contributed to the conceptualization and framing of risk management in humanitarian work in the agency and in the region. This approach not only emphasized the importance of humanitarian work in advance of possible emergencies but also demonstrated the need to include risk management as a crosscutting activity in all program work. When SAMRO’s humanitarian officer was asked by Oxfam International to assume responsibilities at the regional level he encountered a limited understanding of and sympathy for humanitarian work in the RST, but also the opportunity to contribute to the development of Oxfam International architecture through the creation of the regional humanitarian team in 2004 and to help develop the first Oxfam International regional risk management and humanitarian response plan in South America, which was approved in November 2005.

By broadening the concept of humanitarian response to include risk management, the SAMRO humanitarian staff achieved a number of key objectives. First, this demonstrated the strategic importance of investing in Oxfam itself and its partners and allies to build capacities and preparedness in advance of emergencies and not only in reconstruction once they had occurred. Second, this demonstrated that risk management needed to be incorporated into regular program work in order to reduce vulnerabilities and ensure sustainability. Third, this provided a justification for budgeting and investing in advance of disasters rather than the previous financial model that relied on disasters to provide the money flow for humanitarian work. Fourth, it served to legitimate humanitarian response work in the eyes of other program staff (both in Oxfam America and the other Oxfams) by demonstrating the linkages and continuity between capacity building and preparedness, emergency response and post-emergency reconstruction and development. Finally, it secured acceptance for humanitarian work as a core element in strategic planning and implementation within Oxfam America and within Oxfam International at the country and regional levels.
CONCLUSIONS, REFLECTIONS, AND POSSIBLE LESSONS

During the years that the first Oxfam International strategic plan was being implemented the South America RST on a number of occasions was compared unfavorably with that in CAMEXCA because the latter had achieved much greater integration of its development programs. However, these comparisons overlooked the tremendous differences in the geographical size and dispersion of the two regions and the fact that the Oxfams’ programs in South America tended to be complementary, with few common partners, whereas those in Central America especially tended to overlap with many similar programs and common partners. Integration meant one thing in CAMEXCA and another in SAM, a difference that was not always appreciated. However, a key decision made by Oxfam International when the plan was approved was that, in the light of the heavy investments and long-term commitments of the Oxfams in their development programs, in all regions priority would be given to harmonization of the advocacy and humanitarian programs. Development projects and programs also tended to be conceived and implemented at the country level and it was only in the course of the plan’s implementation that Oxfam International harmonization structures and processes began to be developed in the form of Oxfam International country teams. Progress was slower and more difficult because of the heavy investment (emotional as well as financial) in pre-existing differentiated programs by each Oxfam.

Over the decade from 1997 to 2007 the Oxfam America program in South America changed from one that was strategically focused but relatively invisible to one that, while it endeavored to maintain its strategic focus, was much more visible and engaged in a more complex and varied web of relationships. In addition to its focus on working with indigenous peoples, the most excluded population in the three central Andean countries and the core of their national identities and thus the central social problem facing these countries, it was tackling the role of the extractive industries which were the motor of the national economies and key factors in determining the nature of each country’s development model. A key element both stimulating and complicating this process was the ever more intensive relationship between Oxfam America and Oxfam International in the region.

From an unpromising beginning, when the staff of the respective Oxfams saw each other as rivals rather than allies and which was characterized by mutual ignorance and distrust, the relationship evolved towards one of cooperation in the implementation of an increasingly more shared vision. However, as we have seen, the process was not an easy one, especially for Oxfam America. As a program evaluator observed at one point, Oxfam America was perceived by the other Oxfams as the one most isolated and with the program most different from the rest, and thus as the Oxfam with the most distance to cover in integrating its activities with those of the other Oxfams in the region. In addition, this period of definition and creation of a role and identity for Oxfam International in the region coincided with a period of growth, development, creation, and assertion of Oxfam America’s own role and identity as a key agency within the Oxfam family. Finally, this process not only involved the ever closer integration and coordination of the existing Oxfam programs in the region but also the assumption of new programs and responsibilities, such as humanitarian response and advocacy, by the smaller Oxfams and especially by Oxfam America which during this period grew from a “small” to a “medium-sized” Oxfam with the stresses and strains associated with all organizational growth processes. Regional office staff was asked to assume new tasks and responsibilities and acquire new knowledge and skills and this posed personal challenges.
Finally, the agency as a whole was passing through a process of professionalization, reorganization, and growth that limited its capacity to provide the institutional structures, systems, and support that the regional offices needed to assist them during this period.

For much of the period staff in the Oxfams perceived Oxfam International as yet another Oxfam with its set of demands and requirements and with a program with its associated objectives, strategies, and activities separate and distinct from those of each Oxfam. These perceptions were reinforced by the existence of an Oxfam America global strategic plan, an Oxfam America South America strategic plan, an Oxfam International global strategic plan and an Oxfam International South America strategic plan. While there was a considerable degree of coherence and compatibility between these plans they had been developed at different moments and by different teams and the only plan in whose preparation SAMRO staff had fully participated was the SAMRO regional strategic plan. Thus, they tended to adopt this plan as their point of reference and assume it as “theirs” while the other plans were of “others” with whom they were required to collaborate and which generated demands on their time and resources. It is thus not surprising that staff found it difficult to assume these other plans as their own and see how their programs and activities, defined with the SAMRO strategic plan, were related to those of Oxfam International. In the absence of a clear and common Oxfam International regional strategic vision and detailed information about the program logics and activities of other Oxfams the natural tendency was to resent the demand to become involved with and contribute to the Oxfam International regional plan; to perceive Oxfam International as another Oxfam rather than as the sum of the existing Oxfams, including Oxfam America; and to attempt to use the relationship with Oxfam International and the other Oxfams to strengthen SAMRO’s programs rather than to contribute to the strengthening of Oxfam International in the region. To a greater or lesser extent all regional staff in all the Oxfams struggled with these issues which were not necessarily evidence of resistance to change but rather the result of a flawed harmonization process which, ironically, given Oxfam’s philosophy and values, was centrally driven and underestimated the importance of involving all staff, but especially program staff, from the beginning.

This process was complicated by the fact that the Oxfams were required to cooperate more closely at the same time that they assumed new responsibilities and in South America the activity that generated most stress, at the same time that it could be argued to have generated greatest impact, was advocacy, especially around trade and extractives. While these were strategic choices, as they were central to defining the development path for the region, for this same reason they were extremely sensitive and controversial. Certainly in Oxfam America’s case, regional office staff were not adequately trained and prepared for the challenges posed and did not anticipate the strong reaction of the mining industry, in the case of extractives, and government, in the case of trade. This required considerable “learning by doing” not only by the Oxfams’ regional staff but also by those in head offices. While Oxfam had decided to become a “global campaigning force” the mental model was that the Oxfams would undertake advocacy in the North and their partners would undertake advocacy in the South and that these two sets of activities could be maintained in separate compartments. However, when sectors of business and the government in Peru decided to “blow Oxfam’s cover” by focusing on its role as supporter of its partners the real dimension of “global” was discovered and the Oxfams were not prepared. The difficult and slow response of the Oxfams to the anti-Oxfam campaigns in Peru reflected not only the lack of investment in the region in staff and partner training and capacity building but also the difficulty in understanding that truly
global campaigns involved Southern as well as Northern targets and public opinion and that Oxfam messaging directed to Northern audiences and constituencies rebounded and reached Southern audiences and constituencies, generating counter campaigns, demands for transparency and accountability and expectations from partners and allies that required new roles and capacities, most notably in dealing with the media and influencing public opinion. The shared Oxfam brand, another result of the globalization process, meant that even those Oxfams only marginally involved in specific advocacy campaigns were affected and thus became interested stakeholders who needed to be consulted and informed.

The net result of these processes has been to dramatically increase the potential benefits and opportunities as well as the complexities and transaction costs. The challenge for the Oxfams in the regions will be to maximize the former and minimize the latter which may involve ever closer integration while at the same time in their home countries the Oxfams seek to maintain their distinct identities for fund raising and constituency building purposes.
The Advocacy Learning Initiative: Shifting from Development Funder to Ally for Social Change

Gabrielle Watson

The Advocacy Learning Initiative was a three-year collaboration with the Advocacy Institute that produced a practitioner-oriented book on advocacy and a series of action-learning workshops with Oxfam America’s regional office staff and partners. Using the example of the workshop held in Peru, that brought together partners, Oxfam policy and regional program staff, and support NGOs, the author details how an integrated strategy on extractive industries emerged and the implications it had for Oxfam America’s development practice. She illustrates how the workshops helped Oxfam America transition to a more strategic approach to development, based on alliances with partner organizations around shared social justice goals.

THE ADVOCACY LEARNING INITIATIVE

The Advocacy Learning Initiative, which ran from 1998 to 2001, was a collaboration between Oxfam America and the Advocacy Institute to create tools and build capacity for advocacy. The Advocacy Institute brought years of advocacy capacity-building experience and Oxfam America brought long-term, high-trust relationships with partner organizations that were working on issues of social and economic justice all over the world. Oxfam and the Advocacy Institute worked with colleagues and partner organizations to capture advocacy lessons that reflected a range of political and cultural experiences. The initiative resulted in the publication of a book and a series of capacity building workshops with Oxfam partners and allies in the regions.

The book, *Advocacy for Social Justice, a Global Action and Reflection Guide*, co-authored by David Cohen, Rosa de la Vega and Gabrielle Watson (Kumarian Press, 2001 and Editoriales Abya Yala, 2003), presents conceptual frameworks, a skill-building guide, six comparative case studies based on Oxfam America partner experiences, and a directory of advocacy support organizations. The main audiences were grassroots and intermediary NGOs in developing countries and their counterparts in the global north. While not exclusively focused on transnational advocacy, globalization and its impacts was a strong theme. The book has ended up reaching the intended audience of development NGOs and practitioners around the world, and is also widely used in university courses.

Within Oxfam America, the Advocacy Learning Initiative was a first purposeful initiative to formalize advocacy as a key approach to development practice. Ray Offenheiser, Oxfam America’s president, saw it as a vehicle for transforming the way Oxfam works, shifting the organization from being primarily a grant-making organization towards being a strategic ally in policy change initiatives at the national and global levels. He saw and wanted to assist Oxfam America staff to see the implications for how Oxfam worked with partners, selected and framed campaign issues in the US, and the need for mutual accountability between Oxfam and its partners and allies.

When the Advocacy Learning Initiative started in 1998, Oxfam America had already been moving towards a more active advocacy and campaigning role for over a decade. In the mid-1990’s, Oxfam America set up a small advocacy office in Washington, DC. At the same time, many Oxfam America partner organizations had begun to confront the structural and policy dimensions of the issues they work on. They began to make the connection between their work on local issues and national and international policies and dynamics. Oxfam partners began asking for different kinds of support. Advocacy skills and resources were at the top of the list.

The confluence of Oxfam America’s increasing emphasis on policy advocacy in the US and partners’ own changing priorities was in effect driving a profound shift in the nature of the relationship between Oxfam and its partners. Oxfam’s role was shifting from being mostly a funder to being an ally as well. This was a different paradigm. It moved Oxfam from an identity based on providing funds to partners (an “intervention” or “missing piece” model, where Oxfam helps fill a critical gap that enables partners to significantly increase their impact) to an identity that places advocacy and campaigning around a shared goal at the center of the relationship (an ally model). Both involve funding as one aspect of the relationship. The “ally” model combines both funding and joint advocacy. The following diagram presents the two frameworks visually.
In this context, the Advocacy Learning Initiative was an opportunity to explore new strategic advocacy collaborations with partners and allies to address the structural causes of exclusion, poverty, and social injustice, and the beginnings of a new way of working. Rather than a funding-centered or “intervention model,” or a northern-led campaigning model, Oxfam was looking to find ways to work with partners more fully as co-strategists. In one case especially—work on extractive industries in the Andean and Amazonian region of South America—this began to take root during the Advocacy Learning Initiative. This story will be brought out in more detail.

What did Oxfam learn from its experience with the Advocacy Learning Initiative? Are there useful lessons to be had for other international development organizations that are seeking to shift from a funder role to a relationship of strategic ally for long-term policy and structural change? This paper explores the way the initiative was structured and adapted to help
Oxfam staff and partners gain the skills and ways of working necessary to collaborate on global advocacy initiatives.

INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES

The Advocacy Learning Initiative was something of an institutional orphan. The project and I, as its coordinator, were located within the Policy Department’s research unit, based in Boston. But its main clients were Oxfam’s partners and other grassroots organizations and NGOs in Oxfam’s six regions, as well as Oxfam’s regionally-based program staff. What might have seemed an organizational mismatch at first, actually helped spark dialogue between two departments that had been at odds for some years before the learning initiative started.

Searching for a basis of collaboration between the two internal departments, the Advocacy Learning Initiative built on the fertile bits and pieces of bridging work that had come before around post-Hurricane Mitch reconstruction advocacy in Central America, the Texaco oil campaign in the Amazon, and work on Mekong watershed issues in Southeast Asia. Building on these experiences, advocacy learning workshops were designed as vehicles to foster concrete cross-departmental collaborations.

The workshops were initially conceived in the project plan as opportunities to test advocacy training materials to be published in Advocacy for Social Justice. But, after discussion with regional staff, we agreed to change their design to provide an opportunity for joint learning for both Oxfam America and partners. I worked with staff from the policy department (including DC office advocacy staff), the regional program department, and partners to define the focus and design of five regional workshops. The workshop themes were carefully selected to focus on existing or emerging partner-led advocacy work that had or could have a link to issues the Oxfam America policy department was working on. The workshops also provided some basic presentation of advocacy concepts and tools, to build partner and Oxfam regional office understandings of advocacy. The other workshops, held between August 1999 and July 2000, were:

1. Peru, mining and indigenous people
2. Phnom Penh Cambodia, on Mekong watershed livelihood issues
3. Tegucigalpa Honduras, on Central America policies on credit access
4. Dakar Senegal, on globalization and the informal sector in Africa
5. Knoxville Tennessee, on the impacts and organizing opportunities of globalization in the US.

At first glance, my focus on Oxfam America inter-departmental collaborations may not seem relevant beyond Oxfam, as too internally-focused. But it turned out that the distance between Oxfam’s regional program division and the policy division was a structural barrier to Oxfam America becoming an effective global campaigning organization with strong relationships with regional partners and allies. As such, it is an exceptional case study in organizational learning—how it can work, and how to foster it intentionally.

According to the “old” (admittedly caricatured) mental model at Oxfam, the policy department did policy advocacy on global issues, and the regional program department worked with partners on discrete service delivery and capacity-building projects at the local level.
On the one side, there were doubts about the efficacy of global campaigning to actually impact people’s lives in concrete ways; on the other, there was criticism about the limited number of people that projects actually reached. And on both sides, for the most part, there was a failure to appreciate the potential of working in new ways to create policy changes globally, nationally or at the local level that could help deliver more effective development for more people.

This problem is not unique to Oxfam America. It affects most organizations that work both on policy advocacy in their home countries and on day-to-day development efforts overseas. It’s true for faith-based development agencies, environmental activist groups and development organizations of all kinds.

At Oxfam America, the Advocacy Learning Initiative coincided with a set of internal and external pressures that provided space for staff to begin exploring new ways of working with partners.

First, partners were specifically asking for help in developing strategies to confront national and international policy issues. Many had never done advocacy before or even engaged directly with companies or government. They knew advocacy was important for influencing policies and practices, but they didn’t know where to begin or what skills and resources were needed. Partners also wanted issue-specific information, access to northern arenas and help with strategizing on how to deal with the global forces affecting them.

Second, Oxfam regional offices, working to create a coherent program framework for their work, were themselves exploring advocacy as a new or more central component of their programs. But they were struggling with the implications, in terms of Oxfam America’s role, how it would change the nature of engagement with partners, and what they themselves needed to know about key issues and policy arenas. Regional staff also worried what this would mean for Oxfam’s role as a Northern-based social justice organization operating in the South.

And, finally, the legitimacy and credibility of DC office advocacy work depended, in large part, on their real or perceived relationships with people and organizations on the ground that are affected by the policy issues Oxfam works on. However, Oxfam America’s DC advocacy work was not always completely in sync with or even relevant to the issues partners were working on. So, to some extent, there was a built-in pressure on DC office staff to find and establish links with our regional program work.

All these factors created a strong and mutually reinforcing “constituency” for the Advocacy Learning Initiative. It was significant that Oxfam’s policy department could offer valuable resources both in terms of policy advocacy collaborations and insider policy information, and in the form of advocacy concepts and tools. The learning initiative was seen as “free” expert services that could fill a missing program piece around advocacy capacity and know-how in the short term. The workshops’ focus on program-relevant development issues that had specific policy drivers provided an opportunity to explore collaborations between the regions and the DC office. Because Oxfam America had a policy advocacy office in Washington, it could provide access to and strategic information about multilateral development banks, transnational corporations, US policy processes, trade negotiations, and potential advocacy allies. All of the regional programs were dealing with issues affected by global forces and actors, such as extractive industries, agriculture, large-scale development projects and so on. This made DC office staff’s knowledge not only useful, but crucial to their work with partners.
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE ADVOCACY LEARNING INITIATIVE PROJECT

The Advocacy Learning Initiative began with a basic conceptual framework: seeing advocacy as a means to challenge the multi-dimensional nature of unequal power relations that underpin poverty and exclusion, building on the thinking of Valerie Miller, Jane Covey, John Gaventa and others. Within this framework, advocacy requires working at a range of levels—from the local to the national and global. And it requires working to change policies and practices that affect peoples’ lives in direct ways. But, more fundamentally, it requires changing governance structures and civil society as well. Advocacy to change governance structures is about creating mechanisms for increasing the transparency and accountability of both state and non-state actors. Citizen participation in decisions that affect them is a core element. Advocacy to build civil society focuses on increasing the awareness, analysis, voice, and power of people and their representative organizations. It also focuses on strengthening the internal accountability of organizations and their ability to articulate and assert their interests and hold external actors accountable. From Oxfam’s perspective, advocacy includes all three of these elements—good policies & practices, accountable governance and strong civil society. This was the working premise of the Advocacy Learning Initiative.

The transnational nature of much of Oxfam’s advocacy also called for a focus on internal campaign dynamics and the relationships among campaign partners in the Learning Initiative. This involved an explicit focus on information flows, the sharing (or not) of agenda-setting, representational and strategizing roles, and the degree of mutual accountability, and was grounded in the work of Jonathan Fox, David Brown, Peter van Tuijl, Lisa Jordan, and others.

From the start of the project, it was clear that in its structure, Oxfam America is a microcosm of a transnational network and potential campaigning alliance. Its partner relationships, support for intermediary NGOs, regional networks, Boston- and DC-based staff and membership in the Oxfam International confederation constitute a complete “value chain” of a transnational advocacy network. The major difference is that Oxfam also provided funding for partner activities, in addition to the value it added as a member of strategic alliances and collaborations. Thus, though it wasn’t an explicit focus of the Advocacy Learning Initiative, the hope was it could help Oxfam be more aware and intentional about its role within transnational advocacy efforts. Ideally, this learning process would help Oxfam and partners increase their effectiveness and also strengthen mutual accountability between and among Oxfam and its partners and allies.

One of the workshops organized as part of the Advocacy Learning Initiative was particularly successful in helping Oxfam move towards being an effective advocacy ally and in bridging local and international advocacy work. The next section presents the experience of the ALI workshop in Peru and discusses some of the subsequent developments the workshop contributed to. Some lessons on how to foster purposeful organizational learning are drawn out. At the end, I reflect on the larger question of moving from a funder model to an ally model in Oxfam’s development practice.
PERU ADVOCACY CAPACITY BUILDING WORKSHOP, JUNE 2000

Fourth in a series of five regional workshops, the Peru workshop focused on mining issues faced by communities throughout Peru. It included the participation of 32 regional leaders of the newly created National Coordinator of Peruvian Communities Affected by Mining (CONACAMI). The workshop was designed to include both advocacy capacity-building and a preliminary strategy session to plan a national campaign CONACAMI wanted to launch. Also participating as resource people were six Peruvian support NGOs working with CONACAMI, two representatives of other northern development funding organizations, and Oxfam America’s DC-based Policy Advisor for extractive industries.

The workshop was designed to introduce a very basic model of how policy change happens using advocacy campaign concepts and tools. Together, we would assess the relevance of the change model for partner organizations and for Oxfam America. By introducing a model of change to guide strategies and action, we also hoped that Oxfam America’s role as funder would be expanded to include partnership on policy change initiatives. The model was clearly different from the traditional approach of providing technical assistance and financial resources. Being the regional office’s first venture into the realm of advocacy, this was an important test case.

Drawing on various advocacy training materials, the Boston-based Regional Coordinator for South America and I collaborated to develop an advocacy campaign planning framework that was flexible, adaptable, and hopefully relevant and useable for CONACAMI members. The framework drew on the draft Advocacy for Social Justice advocacy skills section created by Rosa de la Vega and David Cohen of the Advocacy Institute, as well as materials from the Midwest Academy, the Washington Office on Latin America, and Oxfam America’s John Ruthrauff’s work on advocacy campaigning.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PERU WORKSHOP

The workshop was designed by a team made up of the Regional Coordinator, regional partner representatives, regional staff, myself, and a professional facilitator from Peru hired to run the workshop. We insisted on identifying simple and clear objectives, and anchored all “theoretical” presentations, such as the advocacy campaign planning framework, in the lived realities of participants.

The first day of the workshop started with CONACAMI members sharing their specific issues around mining and what they were trying to do about it. This provided the foundation for our introduction to advocacy campaigning which defined key concepts like targets, allies, and power analysis, and introduced the planning methodology drawing on examples from participants’ own experiences.

The second day included a presentation by Oxfam’s extractive industries Policy Advisor on potential allies and targets in the north. This presentation was the first personal exposure both CONACAMI and Oxfam regional staff had to the Policy Advisor and his work. It sparked many side conversations and requests for more specific information after the presentation. The second day also included small group work, using the advocacy methodology, to plan four regional campaigns the group had agreed to focus on based on the prior day’s short presentations. These were essentially planning exercises to gain familiarity and comfort with
the campaign planning tool. The intent was that regional leaders would return home and carry out deeper planning processes with their members.

The third day was devoted to the planning of a national campaign to be spearheaded by CONACAMI to block implementation of a recently passed law, which provided the legal basis for expropriating private land for use by mining companies. The campaign focus was selected before the workshop, but refined during this session. Again, participants used the advocacy campaign planning tool to clarify goals, analyze advocacy targets, and identify organizational strengths and weaknesses. We spent considerable time designing activities, setting specific objectives, timeframes, and clarifying who would do what.

During the workshop, we purposefully asked each participant what their role might be in supporting CONACAMI’s advocacy efforts. In this way, the workshop invited participants to see their role in relation to the needs of CONACAMI, which Oxfam and its NGO partners were committed to supporting. By joining the diverse actors (Oxfam America’s regional staff and DC Policy Advisor, NGO support organizations, other funding organizations, and CONACAMI leadership and regional members) in one place to focus together on strategy, targets, and activities, it became clear that each had a contribution to make and all needed the strengths of the others to move ahead. It pushed people to be clear about how their specific agendas meshed—or didn’t—with each other’s, and created a sense of mutual commitment when shared objectives were agreed.

**RESULTS OF THE ALI PERU WORKSHOP ON MINING**

After the Peru workshop, participants and Oxfam America staff held a number of evaluation sessions to assess the workshop effectiveness and discuss possible next steps. The full range of results of the workshop only became apparent as events unfolded and initiatives took shape in the months that followed. Four concrete results of the workshop merit highlighting. None of these was the result of the workshop alone, but rather of multiple influences and processes that came together on the heels of the workshop.

First, the national campaign planned by CONACAMI during the workshop took off. The first tangible “win” was to get a meeting with the president of Peru a few weeks later, to discuss the expropriation law. In December, CONACAMI organized a national protest march which converged on Lima and obtained access to the President through his wife. Discussions began about a possible tripartite dialogue between CONACAMI, the government and the mining industry. They could not all agree on the terms of the dialogue due to industry resistance. But CONACAMI had clearly asserted itself on the national stage.

Also, CONACAMI started using the advocacy concepts and methodology from the workshop to plan concrete campaigns at the local and national levels. Though not all plans turned into actual campaigns, some did.

The second result was enthusiastic interest by three participating support NGOs to adapt and build on the advocacy campaign planning framework presented at the workshop. After the workshop, I met with them to discuss refinements, and how they might begin using it in their organizing work with communities affected by mining. In the following months, they further refined the methodology based on their workshops with CONACAMI member groups. This resolved a concern Oxfam America had had going into the workshop, which was how
it would manage follow-up given the relative lack of advocacy capacity-building resources in the region. The positive response from participating NGOs pointed a way to foster and deepen this kind of resource, regionally. In turn, the South America regional staff deepened their own understanding of advocacy and saw that Oxfam could play an important role in helping partner organizations gain access to advocacy capacity building in the region.

A third concrete result was that Oxfam’s extractives Policy Advisor began to coordinate actively with the South America regional office and key partners. He visited mining-affected communities, and began developing campaign strategies together with the communities and CONACAMI. As a result, he became more integrally engaged with the South America regional office’s extractive industries advocacy work, already in development since 1997. This helped CONACAMI and their national NGOs allies gain a clearer sense of how Oxfam America might be a useful ally for the parts of their advocacy strategy that depended on changes in the US or World Bank or IMF policies.

Immediately after the Peru workshop, the Policy Advisor developed a detailed policy paper laying out Oxfam America’s strategy for campaigning on extractives. The paper included an advocacy strategy, goals, an analysis of allies (including Southern partners met at the workshop), targets and risks. The paper cites the Advocacy Learning Initiative workshop as the first important opportunity for Oxfam’s DC, Boston, and Lima-based staff to discuss a coordinated advocacy effort on extractive industries. The focus of the paper is on campaign strategies, and does not mention organizational capacity building for partners, but clearly delineates the conditions under which collaborative campaigning should occur.

The links established with the Policy Advisor multiplied, and in the Spring of 2001, the various Oxfam staff involved in extractive industries work proposed creating a cross-departmental working group on extractive industries, including staff from the policy, regional program, and communication departments. It was aimed at supporting partner initiatives, timing, and interests. This initiative represented the first semi-institutionalized programmatic linkage across multiple Oxfam departments and with Southern partners on an advocacy-focused initiative.

The working group was notable in that it explicitly posed the dual objectives of (1) “strengthening local communities’ abilities to defend their rights to their cultural identities and sustainable livelihoods vis-à-vis oil, gas, and mining companies,” and (2) “persuading US-based companies, financial institutions and government entities to respect these rights.” This was the first unified articulation of the previously bifurcated vision of Oxfam America’s and partners’ roles in extractive industries advocacy, where Oxfam does advocacy in the North, and partners do capacity building and provide “ground truthing” for Oxfam’s campaigns in the South. This vision asserted the idea that advocacy in the South and changes in values, policies, and practices should be an integral part of a global campaign. Advocacy in the North alone was not enough.

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5 Ibid.
As a final result worth noting, the Advocacy Learning Initiative workshop significantly increased the regional office’s advocacy focus and skill level. With staff and partners more knowledgeable and confident about advocacy, it became clear that there was a need for additional staff to support future advocacy activities. The South America regional office hired an Advocacy Officer in April, 2001. From the start, most of his work has focused on extractive industries.

Today, the South America regional office’s extractive industries program is held up as an example of a mature regional program that represents what Oxfam aspires to in developing rights-based, integrated programs with long-term change strategies. There are four regional offices working on extractive industries and seven staff in DC working on extractive policy issues. Oxfam’s extractives work is considered the one example of a fully “global program” that links global policy with regional programs addressing national policies as well as on-the-ground work with communities. Again, it is held up as a model for how Oxfam should work.

LESSONS TO DRAW FROM THE PERU ALI WORKSHOP

Before talking about the institutional change lessons from the Advocacy Learning Initiative, it’s worth reflecting on the more immediate and practical lessons to be had. Specifically, were there aspects of the workshop planning, execution, and follow-up that contributed to the outcomes?

1. The substantive issue addressed and the timing of the workshop were key, in terms of its value to partners. CONACAMI was a young federation, seeking tools to realize their ambitious organization-building and policy reform goals. The workshop came on the heels of a strategic planning exercise that helped define CONACAMI’s internal decision-making structures and process. Without this groundwork, deliberating on and reaching consensus on advocacy campaign goals and tactics would have been problematic, from a representational standpoint.

2. The timing for Oxfam America was also essential. After three years of developing its programmatic focus on extractive industries, the regional office was ready to actively explore advocacy initiatives, the least-developed piece of their strategy. By working with a partner that was primed to take action—but needed some guidance on strategy development—both Oxfam and the partner were able to apply the “theoretical” components of the workshop to concrete, ongoing initiatives.

3. The workshop demonstrated that collaborative advocacy planning around a specific issue, with the right mix of partners, allies, and Oxfam America staff, can spark creative and productive campaign work. The opportunity to jointly discuss, assess, and define agendas and strategies around shared interests, drawing on a diversity of institutional perspectives, can help forge more powerful campaign initiatives, and at the same time allow all parties involved to see their roles with more clarity.

4. As in the other Advocacy Learning Initiative workshops, the Peru workshop provided a much-needed opportunity for inter-departmental collaboration, setting off a process, embryonic as it was, of increasingly inter-linked initiatives. This was only possible because the focus and the design of the workshops was negotiated well in advance with multiple units across the agency with the goal of making the workshops relevant and useful to as many stakeholders as possible.
ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE PROCESSES
AT OXFAM

Shifting the role of a northern development organization from a funder to a strategic ally is a long-term proposition. The Oxfam experience with collaborative extractive industries advocacy illustrates the multiple strands and contested terrains the process passed through. The regional program work began in the early 1990s with essentially unplanned and ad-hoc regional office support for partners’ confrontation of oil, gas, and mining companies. This involvement grew out of the regional office’s commitment to indigenous groups and the NGOs supporting them. Over the next half decade, it evolved into a consolidated programmatic approach centered on building partners’ internal capacity to analyze and articulate their interests and rights in the face of extractive industries.

By 1999, CONACAMI, supporting NGOs, and the Oxfam regional office were ready to push for policy changes that could make a real difference for communities affected by mining. The Oxfam Policy Advisor, with his wide network of contacts in the DC policy world and with other Oxfam affiliates, was primed to link to this effort. The workshop helped bring these strands together.

The Advocacy Learning Initiative process, for its part, arrived at a critical moment and offered an approach to advocacy and advocacy capacity building to intentionally link work for good policy, with work for accountable governance and strong citizens organizations. In particular, it helped break through a barrier that had long hindered inter-departmental collaboration. The regional office work was very focused on supporting internal partner decision-making processes in preparation for articulating interests and rights-based demands and proposals based on solid facts, analysis, and consensus. Yet there was limited vision of how to direct these demands and proposals towards policy-specific objectives. In contrast, the policy office in Washington focused almost exclusively on articulating policy objectives and developing targeted strategies to reach those policy goals. But they were not yet developed in conjunction with partners, and thus lacked the grounding that only collaborative advocacy brings.

The Advocacy Learning Initiative was a body without a head. That is to say, it focused on advocacy as a tool, in a necessarily generalized way, in order to develop and disseminate tools that could be useful to as many people in as many contexts as possible. But there was no inherent grounding of the work in substantive issues or campaigns. The Advocacy Learning Initiative only became relevant to the extent that the lessons and resources could be adapted to the specific context of an advocacy campaign.

In the case of Peru, the workshop helped to bring all these pieces together in a purposeful way.

FUNDER MODEL? ALLY MODEL? LESSONS AND REFLECTIONS ON
DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

The Peruvian experience provides a hopeful example of how northern development organizations can shift their way of working with Southern partner organizations from a primarily funding-based relationship to a strategic ally relationship. Clearly, there are enormous questions to be answered that this story from the late 1990s only begins to explore. How to manage the balance of power in a relationship between allies where one continues to fund the other? How can they identify shared policy goals and shape strategies together?
A few observations from the Advocacy Learning Initiative experience may be useful for other Northern development organizations and for Southern actors seeking to work with them as strategic allies in advocacy campaigns.

First, Oxfam America was predisposed to move beyond the funder role and engage as an ally in advocacy work. Because of its mission to promote long-term structural change, this wasn’t a qualitative break from its past, but rather a natural progression as Oxfam gained more clarity about what it means to be a rights-based organization, and how it can contribute strategically to deep and lasting change.\(^6\)

Second, there were already multiple efforts in Oxfam regional offices, Boston headquarters and the DC policy office to explore advocacy as a vehicle for social change. These allowed for a certain degree of role ambiguity, entrepreneurialism, and experimentation with advocacy efforts. This permitted staff and partners to begin building skills, experience, and mutual trust. At some point, learning by doing would only get us so far, but there was no substitute for hands-on learning. Later, more structured support and agency guidance could come.

Third, Oxfam America made the explicit decision to invest in learning about advocacy in an open-ended way. The Advocacy Learning Initiative did not start with a predetermined outcome or conclusion about what advocacy is or should be, or how people should approach it. Rather, it was intentionally designed to learn from partner and staff experiences, understanding that multiple modes and approaches to advocacy would likely be required for different cultural, political, economic, and social contexts. The initiative was also given the institutional space to draw on and offer support to ongoing programmatic work and internal program-framing discussions. Without this direct interaction, there would have been no chance to influence internal Oxfam culture.

Fourth, the Advocacy Learning Initiative started as Oxfam America was launching an organizational change process that would ultimately crystallize in Oxfam seeing itself as a global campaigning organization. This internal learning and reflection process encouraged staff at all levels to reflect on their roles and programmatic approaches. This questioning, which produced both healthy discussions and a degree of uncertainty, opened up honest searching for approaches and ways of working with partner organizations that might better serve the organization’s long-term goals.

Lastly, Oxfam America had gone through a strategic planning process that led it to a new articulation of its mission based on a rights-based understanding of development. This coincides with the discourse of most if not all of its Southern partners. Focusing on social, economic, and cultural rights, the framework provides a broad yet powerful basis for finding common ground on issues that have different, though strongly linked, manifestations in the global North and the global South.

While some regional Oxfam America staff and their partners had been transforming their relationships over the 1990s, I argue here that there was still much to be done. It is not easy to build mutually accountable alliances based on a common vision for change and agreed

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strategies and tactics, across tremendous physical, cultural, and language differences. When money is involved, it is all the more daunting. The process of change involved incremental steps, based on open questioning and joint exploration of new ways of working. It was fostered within an environment that allowed for uncertainty, experimentation, and even role ambiguity. As I left Oxfam in 2001 to join the Centro de Derechos Económicos y Sociales in Quito Ecuador, I was hopeful that Oxfam America would continue to nurture these “enabling environments” of organizational learning. I saw the value in proceeding at a pace that would allow Oxfam and its partners to build trust and robust structures for mutual accountability as they progressed onto ever more ambitious global campaigns.

I returned to Oxfam in 2006 to join the Learning, Evaluation and Accountability Department and help build an integrated program model for Oxfam’s regional and campaign work. For me, the South America extractives program remained an exemplar to draw lessons from. In 2010, Oxfam moves towards a confederation-wide Single Management Structure for our regional programs, and begins to set the agenda for a new OI-wide campaign that all affiliates will contribute to. It’s an interesting moment to stop and reflect on how we understand our identity as a funder and as an ally, and what it means to be mutually accountable with partners and allies within transnational advocacy efforts and investments for deep and lasting changes in peoples’ daily lives. If we believe real change requires policy and practice change and also longer term changes in governance and civil society around the world and in each national context, the lessons from the Advocacy Learning Initiative have something to offer.
Organizations and Innovation: Oxfam America Goes to School on Development Finance and Learns Essential Lessons

Susan Clare

Microfinance is one of the most touted strategies for poverty reduction, yet Oxfam America’s experience of developing a strategy around development finances demonstrates that implementing new program areas is not as straightforward as it might appear. This paper provides a chronology and description of the major components of its evolving program. Oxfam America faced many organizational challenges in trying to develop a signature program and these are spelled out as lessons learned.

“Since we necessarily underestimate our creativity, it is desirable that we underestimate to a roughly similar extent the difficulties of the tasks we face so as to be tricked by the two offsetting underestimates to undertake tasks that we can, but we would not otherwise, dare to tackle.”
—Albert Hirschman, from Development Projects Observed (1967)

“Well, nobody’s perfect.”
—I.A.L. Diamond and Billy Wilder, Some Like It Hot

INTRODUCTION

This article presents a candid view of the often-messy process of innovation. In taking the reader part way behind the scene and revealing difficulties, we ask the reader to bear in mind the following points. Innovation, while very desirable in an organization, can also be quite challenging and it is not unusual to have false starts. In attempting to innovate in the development field, like many others, there are trends (fads), and innovators can get enthusiastic about new ideas without fully understanding all their requirements and implications. In the
case of development finance—one of the most popular trends in the development sector in the last decade—there are many poorly performing microfinance programs because people are attracted by the successes of the Grameen Bank and the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), yet are not strategic and disciplined enough to adapt models to their own contexts. Lastly, grant-giving organizations that move into development finance often run into problems because the program logic and financial discipline of the two types of programs are very different. This is challenging for staff and partners alike who find their relationship changing and their performance being judged in ways they may not have fully anticipated. This chapter presents a case in which Oxfam America developed an appropriate approach to development finance through an iterative process of environmental scanning and trial and error, by means of which it confronted many of these issues.

To place this discussion in context, the reader must also understand that Oxfam America was undergoing numerous significant changes at this time. This period was an era of greater involvement in Oxfam International; huge expansion of humanitarian work; deepening and broadening of an advocacy program with a rapidly growing office in Washington, DC; devolving authority to the regions, and substantial growth and turnover in the senior management team. In short, management, staff, and the board were managing a lot of change. So, the difficulties presented in this article should be considered in light of the many initiatives and changes occurring overall.

SCOPE, METHODOLOGY, AND A FEW DEFINITIONS

To tell the story, I present a narrative, with analysis, of events from the early 1990s through the present (with a brief note on work from the 1970s and 1980s). Following the chronology is a summary of lessons learned. Much of the material in this chapter comes from my direct involvement or recollection of events, during the period that I was on the Oxfam America Board from 1995–2003; from interviews with current and former board members and staff; as well as from published sources and Oxfam America publications. Invariably, in trying to convey the big sweep, I will have omitted someone’s important contribution or partner project; I apologize for such omissions.

Please note, that this is not an article about the effectiveness of Oxfam America’s development finance programs. There is considerable debate among practitioners on which programs have the greatest impact and even on whether one of the most popular techniques in the field, microfinance, creates lasting reductions in poverty. Readers looking for analysis on the long-term impact of development finance programs should look elsewhere!

Throughout, I use the term development finance to refer to a very broad spectrum of activities that involve financial tools to improve livelihoods. Microcredit and microfinance are small loans, usually to individuals or very small family businesses. Enterprise development is larger loans or guarantees to bigger business. Microfinance institutions (MFIs) refer to entities engaged in making small loans to individuals.

1 Grameen Bank started in 1976 in Bangladesh and now serves 6 million people and is the premier model for microfinance, and Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) was founded in 1972, with its first big donation coming from Oxfam UK, and is now the largest NGO in the world, see www.sic.conversationsnetwork.org/showsDetail3216.htm

CHRONOLOGY: A WIDE RANGE OF APPROACHES FROM MICROCREDEIT TO SUPPORT OF LARGER-SCALE AGRICULTURAL PRODUCERS

The chronology of Oxfam America’s work turns out to contain a surprisingly wide range of programs; the organization has not been tied down to government funding and has had the appetite and latitude to try different approaches. I’ve divided the chronology of development finance into four phases, with a precursor phase from Oxfam America’s founding to the 1980s, a first phase of more numerous uncoordinated microfinance and development finance initiatives to the mid-1990s; a second phase (which is the primary focus of this paper) where Oxfam America prioritized development finance; and a third phase, which I am only going to touch on, where Oxfam narrowed the strategic focus, although not necessarily the scale, of its development finance program. Table One, on the following page, contains an overview of four phases of work in this field.

PRECURSOR PHASE: OXFAM AMERICA MAKES EARLY GRANTS TO BRAC AND PROMOTES WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT

In laying out the progression of Oxfam America’s work, particularly in Asia, it is important to note a few highlights from the 1970s and 1980s. Grants from this early period reflect Oxfam’s involvement in economic empowerment and Oxfam America’s ability to identify and nurture new approaches that ultimately become major success stories.

In 1972 Oxfam UK provided BRAC with its first major donations, and Oxfam America, under the auspices of Joe Short, Oxfam America’s Executive Director from 1977–1984, was an early funder of BRAC as well. Further, Anuradha Desai, a major gifts officer from 1985 to 1995, notes that Oxfam America had a number of partners involved in microcredit during the 1980s before this approach became widely known. She cites the work of Marty Chen, Oxfam America field representative for India and Bangladesh, based in India from 1981–1987. Marty, who was involved in the founding of BRAC and then served on its staff from 1975–1980, developed a portfolio of grantees for Oxfam America in both countries that promoted the economic empowerment of working poor women.

Aside from BRAC, she identified a range of organizations, such as Annapurna Mahila Mandal, an association of women who provide meals to textile workers in Mumbai (then Bombay) and the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), a trade union of working poor women headquartered in Ahmedabad, India. All three of these organizations provided microfinance as one part of a whole set of services and other interventions, and all three have continued to prosper and grow. SEWA is now the largest trade union in India and the largest trade union of informal workers in the world. BRAC is now the world’s largest NGO and has international operations in several countries in South Asia and Africa. Chen states, “I developed a portfolio of grants and grantees around what I called ‘women’s economic empowerment.’ Microfinance played a part—but only a small part—in the strategies of these grantees. The primary intervention was organizing of working poor women around their major occupation.” Oxfam America also had an early history of funding savings associations in Africa, particularly in Burkina Faso. In any case, these efforts did not rise to the level of program strategies, but rather one of a repertoire of interventions.
PHASE ONE: WE FOCUS ON AGRICULTURAL COOPS IN CENTRAL AMERICA, BOOST THE GROWTH OF FAIR TRADE COFFEE, AND PROVIDE EARLY STAGE FUNDING FOR AN MFI IN EAST ASIA

I start this story with my own early involvement as a member of Oxfam America’s Advisory Board when the Central America program was focusing on support to coffee cooperative producers. Oxfam America got involved with something quite different than the microcredit programs that were becoming hugely popular at the time. In El Salvador in early 1992, the signing of the peace accords ended a 12-year civil war, and resulted in the government turning over 15 percent of the nation’s coffee land to small farmer coffee cooperatives. The cooperative sector was looking for a way to establish a system for exporting coffee without going through established the channels, which did not represent their interests, and approached Oxfam America for help. Oxfam America teamed up with Equal Exchange, in Massachusetts, and Neighbor to Neighbor, in San Francisco, to facilitate the import of coffee at a “fair trade” price. Equal Exchange paid the coffee coops the market price and Oxfam provided grant funds to bring the price up to $1.20 per pound, the “fair trade” price established by a number of alternative trade organizations in Europe. Equal Exchange used these initial purchases from El Salvador to launch Café Salvador, a line of coffee that Neighbor to Neighbor and Oxfam America would promote.³

³ Fair Trade coffee, first introduced by Equal Exchange into the U.S. in the late 1980’s and actively promoted by Oxfam America, has secured a notable share of the specialty coffee industry, with 65 million pounds of beans sold as Fair Trade certified in 2006 in the U.S. Equal Exchange alone reports sales of 3 million pounds in 2005.
Coffee was the wedge

Mike Delaney, at the time regional manager for Latin America and later, director of humanitarian response, notes:

This project led us to realize that these guys needed full credit to get product shipped and that’s what started us thinking about credit and credit organizations. There was a huge buzz for micro-credit but not for bigger cooperative based financing. Coffee was the wedge but we also knew that other agricultural products would be candidates for this type of program.

Oxfam America had a number of producer cooperatives in Central America that needed financing for processing commodities. For example, the Society of Agrarian Reform Cooperatives (SOCRA), a newly formed federation of coffee coops in El Salvador, requested funds to enable it to process its own beans in order to escape the low prices paid by middlemen (known by the pejorative name of “coyotes”) for unprocessed beans. They were looking for funds to acquire transport vehicles, warehousing and roasting facilities, and to provide working capital. Mike and I did a “concept study” to look at various models for how to provide financing and develop an overall an idea for how Oxfam America might proceed. After exploration with various sources, we looked to the Netherland’s Ecumenical Development Cooperative Society (EDCS), now known as Oikocredit, as a model. Founded in 1975, EDCS provided financing to small businesses and cooperatives in amounts similar to the range appropriate to Oxfam America’s partners. Given that it had also recently established an office in the US for fundraising purposes, had a much-needed product and an 18-year track record, Oikocredit looked like a very attractive model. Reading the notes to the financial statements however, revealed the great difficulty they were having with many of their borrowers. Based on my recollection, numerous borrowers were not making payment. This was a very sobering moment. This was a risky endeavor, which would require significant skills and financial strength.

Consequently, I proposed that if Oxfam America were to begin lending, it should establish a separate corporation with its own board and staff to separate lending from grant making. This could not be a simple add-on, but a separate entity entirely. Loan funds would have to come from an entirely separate source. At the time, Oxfam America did not have the resources to pursue a major new initiative and shortly thereafter went through a leadership transition, and the idea was not pursued.

Staff begins to make soft loans

The grant makers, resolute in their need to respond to partners, began making “loans” under the grant framework, with grants that partners would repay. Program staff hoped to be able to help partners establish credit ratings so that they could borrow larger amounts from traditional sources. In addition, the thinking was that grant funds would not help ensure sustainability, whereas loans would force the partner to develop the discipline to become sustainable. In the case of SOCRA, Oxfam America began to make soft loans out of its grant budget. While

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4 As reported in Oikocredit’s web site, nearly 10% of the total disbursed amount since their start in 1975 has been written-off. This is an average from 1975–2006, with the percentage of disbursements written off in the earlier years.
SOCRA was able to repay, over time it ran into difficulty and eventually closed operations. Carolina Castrillo, regional director in Central America from 1995 to 2001, found that, “Beyond the actual transaction we have to look at strengthening the managerial capacity of the partner.” With a sense of foreboding, an evaluation of Oxfam’s coffee program from 1994—midway into the lending program—states:

The SOCRA loan was successful by any criteria, but it does raise the larger issue of the nature of the … program. Efficiently managing credits to NGOs as borrowers presupposes the performance of a set of specialized tasks that are different from those that support Oxfam America’s traditional grant program. The Oxfam America representative was obviously able to perform those tasks in the case, and could probably do the same for a second SOCRA loan, but a serious commitment to extend credit to project partners demands institutional provisions that do not appear to have been made.5

Another partner from that period was Nitlapan and its Local Development Fund, a microfinance institution that provides both capital and financial services in Nicaragua. It targets micro-, small- and medium-sized rural businesses, but also works in urban areas to help businesses that have no access to credit from mainstream banks. In the early 1990s Oxfam America was providing grants for technical assistance. Nitlapan became a trusted partner and would play a role in the Phase Two, as Oxfam America tried to define its niche as a source of financing and expertise for partners ready to scale up.

MFI launches in East Asia

In the early 1990s, the East Asia office (at the time known as the Southeast Asia office) worked with partners in Cambodia and Vietnam. In 1992 the Vietnam Women’s Union began pilot testing a microfinance program and it launched officially in 1993 under the name TYM. This Grameen replication project closely followed the Grameen Bank philosophy and credit delivery system with some adjustments to reflect the local context. It was unique in that this would be the first replication in a socialist economy. Anuradha Desai visited the project in 1994 and came back very enthusiastic about the possibility of seeing the program enlarged. She worked with a major donor to develop a large grant to scale up the project and a major gift was announced in 1995. Oxfam engaged a consultant, Aris Alip, who had been a driving force behind the project to develop a business plan to lay out how the scale up would proceed. TYM plays an important role in Phase Two, as Oxfam America tries to develop its niche and manage a development finance portfolio.

PHASE TWO: DEVELOPMENT FINANCE AS A THEMATIC PRIORITY

Raymond Offenheiser, who became Oxfam America’s new president at the end of 1995, brought a vision of where the field should be going—this vision fueled the period from 1996 to 2003. However, this vision was out ahead of Oxfam America’s own development practice and experience, and Oxfam lacked a senior-level champion who had the wherewithal to go through the nuts and bolts of making that vision a reality. This included overcoming the

skepticism of regional staff, many of whom were aware of, and quite vocal about, the limits and pitfalls of microfinance programs from years of observing them in the field. In addition, Offenheiser was trying to move Oxfam America on numerous fronts, including being a more engaged and influential member of Oxfam International. So, for regional offices, the new emphasis on development finance was one change among many that required their attention.

Establishing new direction

When Ray Offenheiser came in as president, he wanted to re-energize and redirect Oxfam to be a higher profile, more strategic and more cutting edge organization. His thinking was based on his time with Ford Foundation and his analysis of the compelling issues in the development sector. Offenheiser explains, “I had been funding microcredit since 1979 and had seen several very significant programs from inception through large scale success. In fact, I chaired the donor consortium for BRAC and Grameen.”

In 1996 Oxfam America’s board and staff set about developing a five-year strategic plan. The underpinnings came from Offenheiser’s paper, New Directions, in which he proposed a focus on three major themes where Oxfam America had some credibility and funding history.

Offenheiser looks back and explains that when he arrived he saw tremendous energy and commitment to partners, but he saw a need for strategic focus. “This was a partner-obsessed culture. It didn’t matter whether the program had any coherence … there were a mix of partners and few strategic change objectives in the portfolio. It was a smattering of things in each office.” While two of the themes, community-based resource management and participation for equity, had a clear basis in Oxfam’s current work, the third theme, development finance, as a program focus had a much softer basis (primarily the work described above in Phase One). The board endorsed this thematic approach when it approved the strategic plan, Partnerships for Impact, in 1997 with the goal of transforming Oxfam America into a more focused and strategic organization with the aspiration of becoming leaders in the thematic areas.

In New Directions, Offenheiser posits that microlending has been shown to be viable and has attracted considerable donor interest, and that the next step is to “develop approaches that will move this lending away from support for low wage subsistence employment towards significant asset creation.”

Offenheiser continues:

It follows then that the next Phase will be in developing new organizational and financial tools that will enable the poor to manage larger volumes of funding in more creative ways and to forge new partnerships with government, the private sector, and major donors. Absent pressure to move the field in that direction, monies will flow inexorably into hundreds if not thousands of small microlending operations that will be unable to address the deeper needs of the rural and urban poor…While Oxfam currently lacks technical expertise, it can acquire needed know-how through innovative joint venturing with partner organizations in the north and the south, with the view of enhancing our own capacity.

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6 New Directions memo, Offenheiser, Raymond, September 15, 1996
Offenheiser’s overview of the benefits to Oxfam America makes major mention of the ability of this field to attract funding—major donors understand and want to fund the field. Thus, he wrote:

In the coming decade, the field of development finance may be one of the few areas in the development field where resources from multilateral and bilateral donors are increasing rather than shrinking. Oxfam America’s strategic presence in this field as both a funder and advocate will be key in assuring a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the role credit can play in the process of community development and avoid the occurrence of microcredit being written off by major donors after a brief period of faddish interest. Oxfam can help assure that funds are channeled properly and that partners have access to the kinds of high powered technical skills they will need to develop the organizational software to operate ever more complex poverty lending mechanisms.

Susan Holcombe, then director of global programs, summed up Ray’s thinking as follows:

Ray came in with the sense that microcredit had been done, it was nothing new. Ray wanted development finance—which was his term—to explore new ways, to promote livelihood through the private sector, going way beyond credit. Oxfam America was too small to become BRAC or Grameen. Remember, Ray had been in Bangladesh and knew Grameen, and had been in South America and knew Acción. He had no expectation that Oxfam America should get into that. He was thinking about other things like insurance or savings.

Staff looks for a new program

The thinking in the microcredit field had moved to see the need for “a whole range of financial services beyond credit, including savings, insurance, and money transfers.” The organization spent about a year and great effort looking for something new. Young, enthusiastic staff prepared materials and convened learning sessions, almost exclusively in Boston (rather than in regional offices) in which innovators such as Ecologic, Boston Community Capital, the Calvert, the Grameen Foundation, and Nitlapan came to present their programs. According to Susan Holcombe:

These sessions had value but didn’t produce the result we wanted. They educated the staff, but a major challenge was that many of staff believed that because we are working with poor people, if they can’t pay back, that’s all right. The process got people to think about the discipline needed for a credit or savings program. The discussions didn’t produce the niche [for Oxfam America], but they produced a sense of what credit is.”

Ray’s take on the blockage around development finance is that in addition to the “partner obsessed culture” there was an aversion to “markets and finance.” He felt that some of the staff was “anti-market on every score.”

With the other two themes beginning to gain traction and a sense of inaction in this third arena, Susan and Ray brought in external consultant Susan Davis (who recently served as board chair of the Grameen Foundation) to recommend a course of action. Davis had worked for Ray at the Ford Foundation and been instrumental in organizing the donor consortium that scaled up Grameen Bank and BRAC. She took a bird’s eye view of Oxfam America and

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made major recommendations in a presentation to the board, senior staff and regional directors. In sum, she advised Oxfam America to scale up the work substantially, be a major player with a small group of partners, be much more results-oriented in everything it did, undertake detailed impact analysis for all grants, and develop a more comprehensive approach to programming on a national scale. She made a prescient suggestion about using an e-giving strategy to create relationships between partners and funders (similar to what Kiva, the online not-for-profit, is doing now: matching individuals who want to lend with micro-entrepreneurs seeking loans).

With a powerful presentation and the compelling assertion that we had the infrastructure to make much bigger grants, the board embraced her recommendation to do two things: “Focus small grants on [lubricating] capacity-building for scaling up, and raise special funds to assist a portfolio of partners who can absorb greater amounts of capital to maximize impact.” The board authorized a budget for the purpose of staffing and starting the program.

**The launch entails hiring a staff specialist to run a multi-purpose fund**

In early 2001, Oxfam recruited a financial specialist who had a strong background in working with credit unions and different financial instruments in North America. The specialist headed up a one-person unit within Global Programs and had a mandate of developing a program based on the broad-brush consultant’s study. He faced the very difficult challenge of coming into a unique organizational culture that had two traditions that would present obstacles for him: One was that technical specialists, usually housed in the Program Planning and Learning Unit, were service providers, responsive to regional office requests, rather than experts making decisions about program interventions. The second was that partner organizations as a rule received not only a high degree of respect, but also a high degree of deference; Oxfam America did not impose the type of rigorous performance standards on partners as would be required in a development finance program. This generated a lot of resistance from many regional staff. To complicate matters, this occurred at the same time headquarters was delegating more decision-making authority to regional directors, and the directors were active in exercising their new prerogatives. They never accepted that a technical specialist, especially one with limited international experience, could drive a program element, including selecting partners in their region, and were only willing to accept the new hire as a technical support person.

During the course of 2001, the specialist developed a plan titled “Networks for Impact” to support development finance institutions in three ways. First, emerging financial institutions drawn primarily from Oxfam America’s partner base would get grant and technical assistant support. Second, mid-tier financial institutions—for example, Nitlapan in Nicaragua, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives in the US, and TYM in Vietnam—would get grants and loan guarantees. Third, mature entities such as BRAC would get loans and loan guarantees. The financing for mature institutions was seen as a way for Oxfam America to learn from large established entities. Shortly thereafter, the board passed a resolution to establish a Guarantee Loan Fund that would guarantee loans issued to our partners by third parties, as well as provide loans to community financial institutions. We were expecting to support agricultural and other cooperatives with sources of capital for growth.
As part of the work of supporting smaller institutions, the staff specialist spent time in the regions learning about our existing partners and considering who could be potential candidates for scale-up efforts. Two regions, Central America, now known as CAMEXCA, and East Asia appeared to have appropriate candidates for this approach.

**CAMEXCA partners have trouble scaling up**

Carolina Castrillo explained that there were two strategies in identifying partners for development finance funding. The first was to build up existing MFIs and other development finance institutions in order to get them to scale. The second was to create vertical integration for agricultural producers, as in the case of SOCRA, described earlier in this paper. Oxfam America provided both soft loans and technical assistance to carry out these strategies.

As an example of the challenges the scale-up approach faced, Castrillo cites Banco del Campo in Nicaragua, which was lending to small cattle ranchers and agricultural producers. This project did not work out as hoped because once the Banco reached a certain size, it had to comply with government-mandated reserve requirements. In order to raise capital to bring reserves in line with regulations, they had to merge with a larger bank and relinquish control. This forced them to move away from their initial target population: the small ranchers and farmers. Another example of the vertical integration model was Oxfam’s work with Opción (Aj Ticonal) in Guatemala, which set out to link thousands of small producers with more direct access to markets in the US and Europe. As partners faced increased complexities as they tried to reach scale or vertically integrate—particularly in a market context that was not favorable to small agricultural producers and wholesalers—both Oxfam’s Central America office and its partners reached the limits of their in-house capacity, even with additional specialist support from Oxfam headquarters.

Carolina’s perspective is that while we were experimenting, “the agency was not fully ready to go in that direction.” She feels that an important next step would have been advocacy around government regulation of small business, particularly around tax policies that were disadvantageous to small producers.

CAMEXCA ended up pulling back from enterprise development work, although that experience and relationships established at the time helped lay the groundwork for more fruitful support of coffee producers seeking to take advantage of the expanding Fair Trade market.

**TYM overcomes snags on its road to sustainability**

With the major grant under its belt, TYM grew from a pilot of 500 clients to 10,000 clients and total loans outstanding of $600,000 by 1999. Although not totally self-sufficient, this partner had achieved some measure of stability: Clients’ interest payments covered operating expenses, but not the cost of capital.

A program that grows at that rate faces many challenges in any event and, as it continued to grow, communication problems between Oxfam America and TYM remain unresolved, due in part to turnover in the people who were managing, consulting, and overseeing the partner. For example, Oxfam America’s new regional director who was hired in 1997, was a specialist in conservation and resource management and, while willing to support the program, did
not see it as integral to his broader program strategy. TYM’s original director, who had driven the growth, retired and was replaced with a less dynamic leader, who was further hampered by the fact that TYM could not find a chief financial officer who could manage a rapidly expanding program. The Oxfam America consultant who had been a driving force behind the start-up took a new position overseas and could not longer provide the kind of attention the program needed. Finally the Oxfam America staff specialist based in Boston came late into the difficulties and, lacking the experience in the subtleties of donor-partner relations in Vietnam, ultimately was not able to establish a productive relationship with the partner.

TYM deviated from the group model of lending and was slow to establish adequate internal systems and supervision as it began to make larger loans to successful individuals rather than to groups. In 2004 a consultant wrote that the regulatory environment did not promote best practice: “MFIs in Vietnam have no official legal status and are not supervised by any government entity.” With additional funding the partner pulled through this period, but Oxfam America decided to end its involvement, preferring to focus its resources on the broader Mekong strategy.

Speaking of this period, Michael Ounsted, the regional director says, “I was asked to develop the River Basin program—looking at environmental integrity and livelihoods. The strategy was approved by the board and subsequently microfinance was an add-on.” He tried to respond by inserting credit components into a number of its projects, under a program it named, “Banks of the Mekong,” and invested considerable time working with the Boston-based staff specialist. Despite this effort, development finance remained an add-on in an already extremely ambitious agenda, as Oxfam America was the lead agency, among eight Oxfams working in the region, in planning and implementing the Mekong river basin program across five countries. Like CAMEXCA, East Asia was not in a position to innovate on the scale envisaged by Offenheiser or even to overcome organizational and contextual (e.g., legal and market) constraints it encountered while helping the poor get access to credit.

That said, Oxfam America’s withdrawal from supporting TYM may have been a wake-up call. Ultimately TYM implemented more financial discipline, has grown to serve 35,000 clients in multiple locations (as of March 2009), and has become a non-bank entity with government recognition (the first Vietnamese MFI to become government licensed). Aris Alip describes TYM as Oxfam’s “goose that lays the golden egg,” noting that after Oxfam’s many early years of energy and financing, the program is now quite successful and a model for microfinance in Vietnam. He adds that one of the many things Oxfam did to lead TYM down the long road to sustainability was to require an annual external financial audit and, according to Alip, TYM remains the only Vietnamese MFI with an external audit.9

The Guarantee Loan Fund misses its mark

Meanwhile, Oxfam was not able to generate adequate financial support of the Guarantee Loan

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8 q.v. “Efficiency, financial performance and the role of public policy—a survey of the conditions for financial self-sufficiency of microfinance institutions (MFIs)” by Tran, Nhu (December 2004), available at (www.microfinance.org.vn/Survey%201-TYM.pdf)

Fund. Oxfam America had no experience in generating revenue for this type of activity, not to mention experience in managing this kind of fund, and had difficulty trying to identify the appropriate prospects for grants and donations to support it. According to Dennis Boyer, director of major gifts at the time, “We were trying to figure out what the market was, who would be interested?” This is a place where the board might have played a significant role. A few board members were actively involved in obtaining financial support for related initiatives, but the board was not able to open new doors, and the development staff had difficulty finding support from its established sources.

It was increasingly clear that Oxfam’s ambitions, even ones that were based on an astute analysis of the sector, had exceeded its grasp. This phase ends with a halt in the development of the Guarantee Loan Fund and a rollback of support for MFIs. As Oxfam America responded to lessons from these experiences, it rechristened its development finance program into community finance, connoting that we were working with communities rather than larger-scale financial institutions. This change in terminology was appropriate for the kind of program that materialized in Phase Three.

PHASE THREE: OXFAM AMERICA REPOSITIONS ITS DEVELOPMENT FINANCE, LAUNCHING SAVING FOR CHANGE AND INVESTS IN A MICROFINANCE FUND

In this phase, Oxfam America has moved away from pushing integration of development finance as a priority area in regional strategies to two unique microfinance programs directed at meeting very specific needs. The first, Saving for Change, operates with a few existing partners based on a simple model that is essentially portable and could be operated with partners anywhere. The other is an investment in a loan guarantee fund run by another entity, which operates completely independently.

A savings-led model prevails

With the difficulties described above, Oxfam America recognized that it needed to regroup and rethink its development finance interventions. In 2002, Constance Kane joined Oxfam America as director of regional programs; rebuilding the community finance effort fell to her. She had come from PACT where she had worked on a women’s empowerment program in Nepal that involved a savings-led, rather than credit-led, microfinance program. This influenced her thinking about community finance. She first worked to create a common framework and understanding of the community finance program, publishing an internal Community Finance Newsletter in April 2003 for Oxfam America staff. The newsletter contained information about what was happening in each region, highlighting the fact that regional efforts generally consisted of small scale, locally based programs. Kane then convened a community finance meeting in San Salvador in June 2003, bringing together Boston staff and regional officers who were working with community finance. “From that meeting, the staff agreed to focus on a savings-led bottom-up approach, and move away from the big MFI concept,” says Kane. At this stage senior and program staff had answered the “to be or not to be” question: Oxfam America would do microfinance but not the credit-based microfinance as practiced in the mainstream, but a savings-based model where communities mobilize their own resources.

10 Community Finance Newsletter, Pahwa,Tara, community finance program coordinator, April 2003
Kane provided senior management with background on the saving-led approach and identified Jeff Ashe as being an appropriate person with hands-on experience to launch the program. Ashe, who had been on staff at Acción and had founded Working Capital, a US domestic microfinance NGO, had conducted an evaluation of PACT’s program. At the time of his evaluation, PACT’s program was substantial in size, with 130,000 women participating in 6,500 groups.

Jeff Ashe arrived later in 2003 with the aim of establishing a savings-led program at Oxfam. Organizationally, he benefited from the fact that there had been turnover at the level of regional director and, therefore, less built-up frustration among regional managers about previous unsuccessful efforts. Also, the organization had begun to develop more discipline about headquarters setting regional priorities and, therefore, there was more receptivity to a staff specialist from Boston coming in with program ideas. Jeff also had extensive overseas experience, including working with community-based organizations, which led to him being able to communicate with and persuade regional staff.

He developed a plan to get to a very large scale quickly, envisioning a program that would serve one million women at a cost of $20 per person, or $20 million. The program would be much lower cost than traditional microcredit because there would be no lending institution. The lower cost structure would have the potential to make the program successful in sparsely populated areas of Africa and bring credit to the poorest of the poor.

Management took this to the board within a relatively short timeframe. The board, presented with a new large-scale initiative without advance warning, pushed back considerably. Moreover, several board members felt that savings-led programs had been tried before and ultimately did not have long lasting impact. The board asked that staff undertake a pilot project to test the concept.

The program then went through about 18 months of start-up, including a small pilot phase in two sites. Neither of these very small-scale attempts, in Zimbabwe and Senegal, proved successful. The one in Zimbabwe with the Zimbabwe Adult Learners Association (ZALA) revealed the difficulty of working in a “totally ‘unenabling’ environment,” according to board chair Janet McKinley. Beyond that, Ashe notes that he was surprised at how much infrastructure had to be built within Oxfam America to do such things as oversee the partners’ staff, ensure there was a systemized training program in place, be on top of who was training the trainers, closely monitor finances, and clarify roles between Oxfam America and partners. In other words, even this more simplified model required fairly substantial changes in the ways in which Oxfam America field staff engaged with partners. The pilots provided ample opportunity to understand what was lacking in terms of management-information systems, capacity, and procedures, leading to the development of clear plans for follow-up when problems arise. They also allowed Oxfam America to address not only the technical, but some of the cultural issues about how Oxfam relates to partners.

Oxfam America launches Saving for Change

After more program development work and considerable effort in designing trackable performance indicators, in February 2005 Oxfam America rolled out the official launch of Saving for Change in Mali with TONUS, a social service partner. A major component of the project with TONUS is training around use of bed netting to prevent malaria. Pilots are also underway in Cambodia, Senegal, and El Salvador. The program in Cambodia, run through the Center for Study of Development in Agriculture (CEDAC), a national NGO tied to education and training around an agricultural system for increasing rice yields. Oxfam America is using participation rate in the rice growing system among Saving for Change participants as one of its performance indicators; thus far 60 percent of the Saving for Change participants have adopted the improved rice growing techniques. At the end of 2007, Saving for Change reached a milestone of 100,000 members who had collectively saved $1.3 million, with 61,000 members in West Africa, followed by more than 35,000 in Cambodia. More impressively, by July 2009, Saving for Change was reaching a 250,000 clients in 6000 villages, in Mali, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, and El Salvador, far surpassing its goal of reaching 120,000 women by the year 2010.12

This type of program still has to demonstrate long-term impact because the savings component does not provide leverage, that is, there is no outside pool of funds to enable participants to borrow and develop businesses that will get them to the next level of income. (A good synopsis of the concerns about the savings-led approach can be found in the Microfinance Gateway, “Point Counterpoint,” a dialogue between Ashe and Elizabeth Rhyne of Acción International.13) The board has pushed hard and to get the evaluation work to a much more rigorous level, such that the program incorporates “control groups” that do not participate in Saving for Change, which enables Oxfam America to collect and compare data between participants and non-participants. This is why the donation, made in late 2008, of $11.7 million by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which includes funding for rigorous evaluation, provides Saving for Change an important opportunity to further expand while rigorously testing its change model.

Oxfam America uses cash reserves to participate in a guarantee fund

Oxfam America was approached in the fall of 2005 to act as a guarantor of a $1 million line of bank credit extended to MicroCredit Enterprises (MCE), a US-based entity dedicated to mobilizing private capital for microfinance. MCE, with available assets to pledge as collateral, is able to obtain lines of credit from banks to fund microfinance loan portfolios in a number of countries. Oxfam America is one of a group of “guarantors” who have pledged assets to serve as collateral against which MCE can borrow funds and use the proceeds to make loans to local MFIs. The guarantors share risk equally—in the event of a loss caused by a MFI loan default, the loss is allocated equally among the guarantors. Oxfam America invested at an early stage

13 Microfinance Gateway, Ask The Experts, “Point Counterpoint,” available at http://microfinancegateway.org/resource_centers/savings/experts/_asktheexpertsno8
when it was one of five guarantors; MCE now has 41 guarantors that have each pledged at least $1 million in assets. As of October 2009 these guarantors support an MCE portfolio consists of 31 MFIs in countries in Latin America, Asia, and Africa.

As an early participant, Oxfam America obtained a seat on MCE’s board, occupied by Roger Widmann, a senior financial executive and Oxfam America board member. He explains, “MCE is unique in how it gets its money. It is not asking for donation but rather unused assets.” Oxfam America had built up cash reserves to cover six months of operating expenses and was able to set aside a small portion of its reserves for this program. “This is not a for-profit venture, the thrust is not to make money,” says Widmann, referring to the current trend among some microfinance providers “toward the idea of building a fully commercial, profit-making sector.”14

Ironically, this program is similar to the type of guarantee fund Oxfam America hoped to launch in Phase Two. The existence of MCE, which has program staff with appropriate expertise and marketing capability to grow the pool of guarantors, offered Oxfam America a low cost way (in terms of human and other strategic resources) to pursue this idea. Widmann does not foresee the MCE participation resulting in a tie-in with Oxfam America’s work in the field (Oxfam America partners being slotted for funding, for example), but he could foresee Oxfam America’s involvement growing by way of Oxfam International or other Oxfam America constituents becoming guarantors.

LESSONS LEARNED: THINK BIG, START SMALL; DEVELOP EXPERTISE; FIND THE RIGHT FIT

Be clear about the firmness of your foundation

The New Directions paper had a big vision of where development finance needed to move and why Oxfam America was positioned to go the next step. One critical assumption—that “Oxfam has a partner base that has been active in the field of micro-credit...(and) are ready in many cases to expand” its activities—turned out to be overly optimistic. Oxfam America struggled to establish an initiative built on partner experience, given that it had too few partners involved in development finance with successful programs and only two or three ready to scale up.

On a more fundamental level, “There was not a shared vision or a common understanding of the potential functions of development finance,” according to Susan Holcombe, and Oxfam America leadership was not consistent enough in developing a shared vision and moving it through the system. Laura Roper, then director of program planning and learning, notes that even after extensive discussions and some training sessions, “People saw credit as a means to an end, and that end wasn’t necessarily financial self-sufficiency for the credit program… it might be to implement an integrated resource management program or penetrate new markets for produce, but Oxfam America staff saw no problem with subsidizing these efforts.”

Staff, intrigued by the potential of development finance, got caught up in the drive to make this a core programmatic area. Because of the emphasis on scale up and greater impacts, regional offices that participated ramped up funding for development finance projects. In the

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14 Bruck, Connie, “Millions for Millions,” The New Yorker, October 30, 2006
interest of reaching its big vision, Oxfam America offered substantial financing to partners who either weren’t able to absorb it or faced other management or contextual challenges, such as unfavorable regulatory or market environments. Accustomed to monitoring grant expenditures, rather than the overall financial viability of partners engaged in business enterprises, staff were not well equipped to be on top of this kind of investment.\footnote{In one case, while a particular loan that Oxfam was financing was performing well, a broader external audit of the partner indicated that other loans were in default and the agency was generally over-extended. In its routine grant making, Oxfam required detailed audits of where its funds were going, rather than the overall financial health of a partner (unless there were clear signs of problems).}

**Think big, start small**

Offenheiser, whose vision was informed by his own extensive experience and reinforced by the analysis of Susan Davis, proposed a truly new direction that involved more investment and organizational change than was initially evident. While the ideas were intriguing, we should have taken further steps to translate the vision into something more concrete with a fit at Oxfam America before going forward. I consider this my own personal key learning: Do not be tempted to plow ahead without making plans as concrete as possible early in the game. As eager as we were to stop talking about the new direction and start doing, the consultant’s report needed further development. For example, we might have refined the study by undertaking a feasibility assessment of specific parameters for size and scope. We should have sought in-depth market research to get more detail on questions such as: Who are the partners that have the capacity to scale up? Who are the growing MFIs who could utilize Oxfam America investment? How much could they use and over what timeframe. And who might be potential donors for this type of program? Had the board explored the avenue of gaining much-needed expertise through an acquisition or merger with an NGO with a development finance program, it would have forced us to consider operational issues in much more detail.

Moreover, in thinking and starting big we didn’t grasp the significance of the massive changes in culture inherent in the recommendations of Davis’s study. We were impressed by the presentation (rightfully so), but tried to launch without a strong underlying foundation. For example, one of her recommendations was to have the ability to present donors with impact analysis. We decided to take this on as one more initiative—to be carried out by regional offices—without adequate time, money, or common frame of reference about the need or usability of impact assessment. As one regional manager, looking back at the push for impact data says, “Big donors look for number crunching and matrixes as if the complex causes of poverty could be solved mathematically.” Offenheiser’s take on the study and the board’s reaction is that it was a missed opportunity. “The study was at too high a level, there was a pitch to sell the board to invest in the field without practical advice about how we should enter.”

Contrary to what might have been expected, even when Oxfam stepped back from its ambitions in phase 3, that did not mean it couldn’t still think big. The Saving for Change initiative was introduced to the board as a $20 million dollar idea, with Ashe presenting the concept of serving one million women at a cost of $20 per person.

By thinking big, he caught the board’s attention and gave a sense of huge potential for growth. On thinking big, Constance Kane quoted D.H. Burnham, designer of the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, “Make no little plans; they have no magic to stir men’s blood and
probably themselves will not be realized.” The two initial, small pilot programs (Zimbabwe and Senegal), while unsuccessful, gave Oxfam America the opportunity to study problems and address them while still at a small scale. Now, continuing in a pilot stage with four sites, the program continues to grow with ample opportunity for course correction.16

Get the right skill and depth in management

The biggest issue that Oxfam America faced in Phases One and Two was the lack of in-house experience in development finance. That includes management in headquarters and in the regions, as well as on the board. Susan Holcombe, the director of programs at the start of Phase Two—and author of Managing to Empower, a case study on the management of the Grameen Bank (Zed Books, 1995)—felt that it was assumed she had expertise in development finance that she did not have. Reflecting on this, Offenheiser says that Holcombe’s understanding of Grameen was exactly what was needed in that, “Yunus’s genius was not the microcredit scheme, he didn’t invent that. His genius was managing the scale-up of the whole operation, taking it to a scale that was unimaginable.” However, Holcombe’s knowledge had to be combined with in-house expertise in the mechanics of development finance, both of which had to be applied to changing a fairly rigid internal culture.

In hiring a staff specialist during that time period, Oxfam America was a bit fuzzy in its thinking about the appropriate skill set. Although the specialist was quite technically competent and very dedicated to the task, his international experience was limited. It was unrealistic of Oxfam America to think that it could find in one person the range of skills and breadth of knowledge Oxfam America really required, given the diversity and needs of its partners. In the end, even with the use of consultants and a strong effort by interested staff to get up to speed, Oxfam America had insufficient professional depth to ramp up an innovative program so quickly. In addition, there was no one on the board, given the lack of expertise in international credit and small business development, who could provide substantive advice.

In Phase Three by contrast, Oxfam America had a director of regional programs with specific knowledge of a savings-led program. She recruited a person with gravitas, whom Janet McKinley refers to as “the granddaddy of micro-finance.” He, in turn, recruited a staff person, Vinod Parmeshwar, from Catholic Relief Services with specific skills in training and assessment. For technical assistance in Mali, Ashe has been able to recruit from partners, ensuring good local knowledge.

16 Although outside the scope of this paper, the question of scale for this program is important. Janet McKinley asks, “Will Oxfam follow its normal path—generating the seeds for a successful program but moving on to another agenda, or will it continue to grow SfC to the next level, enabling it to become the platform to do something really large. The program could lead to the creation of an association of SfC partners, for example and attract significant funding.” In the same vein, Offenheiser notes that other actors are starting programs in this area and that there is the potential that “If we succeed in helping women build up savings, we could eventually help them hook up with financial institutions. Can we find donors who think this is an exiting way to go? This is a question going forward.”
Line up the board
For a long time, the board did not calibrate its level of engagement correctly. It was certainly involved and often very involved, but it had a steep learning curve. In trying to put together the Guarantee Fund, members of the Board became actively involved in establishing norms and policies. I became very hands-on in seeking to ensure that Oxfam America minimize its risks in this undertaking. Other board members were intensive in their scrutiny of the purpose and scope of what we were doing. Barbara Thomas-Slayter, board vice chair for Programs for example, made detailed critiques of everything from strategy to marketing materials. We were asking questions, but not asking them early enough or with enough followthrough. We may have been seduced by a big vision but not hard-nosed enough to gauge the enormity of the task relative. In shopping the Guarantee Fund to donors during Phase Two, Oxfam America had occasion to receive feedback on its governance skill set in a written analysis prepared for a major donor. The analyst comments: “Is Oxfam putting together the right team to do the necessary work? … Although some of the board people have experience in finance, none have experience in international small-business development; one works with small business development in the US.”17

At the opposite end of the spectrum (and perhaps in response to the board’s over-involvement earlier), the staff presented the plan for Saving for Change at a board meeting without pre-view or prior consultation. Caught unaware and sensing the possible pursuit of another big initiative without adequate foundation and impact assessment, this time the board was more prudent, agreeing to the start of the program on a very small pilot scale.

Don’t make a special initiative too special
Oxfam America signaled the importance of the new development finance position by creating a stand-alone unit. In theory, the unit would include a core team that would lead the development finance function and provide management of development finance partners in the regions. Given the relatively modest size of the development finance portfolio, this approach may have seemed viable initially, both in terms of the specialist’s time and also in terms of not being threatening to regional director prerogatives. This turned not to be the case on both counts, given the complexities of partner relations and regional office reaction. Because of his “stand alone” status, he didn’t have a natural set of colleagues who, being in the same unit, might have been able to provide support and guidance to him as he navigated the Oxfam America system. Things became particularly complex in 2001, when the Global Program Department was under an acting director, who had limited time and even less capacity than Holcombe to support the development finance program.

17 Waddell, Steve (2001), “Oxfam America’s Request—The Community Dividend (Guarantee) Fund,” (CDF), Boston, MA
In contrast, in Phase Three, central staff offered an approach more suited to Oxfam America’s style. Jeff Ashe, in revealing that he needed to convince the “regional guys to go for the savings model,” explained that he was able to gain support from regional directors to begin piloting the program because he was able to offer funding. As Kane describes it, “We had a tiny working budget of $150,000 and we were able to say to the field, ‘We have this seed money, if you are interested, let us know.’ ” As noted earlier, Ashe had the right expertise to overcome some of the problems inherent in trying to mesh the line and staff functions. But in addition, with Saving for Change there was no attempt to centralize all community finance programs or ask regional personnel to cede control of partner relationships.

**Establishing internal systems for new initiatives takes time**

In Phase Two management and board failed to think through the systems requirements for managing and evaluating this major initiative. Even in the much more modest, partner-based program designed in phase three, Jeff Ashe comments that the biggest surprise he faced was how much internal capacity needed to be built to provide the close accompaniment to launch a new program area. Further, he notes that they needed to develop a management-information system to oversee the organizations, and to build expertise in the regions to support the Saving for Change. The piloting phase, recommended and closely followed by the board, provided a necessary reality check for an organization that is still sometimes inclined to proceed without proper analysis.

**Sometimes the plate really is too full**

There is probably no original way to express the truism that an organization like Oxfam America has a huge appetite for ideas and new programs. Susan Holcombe says of the period after the adoption of Partnerships for Impact and the effort to develop programs around the three themes, “development finance was never at the top of the agenda.” While Offenheiser sought to introduce big new ideas and board and senior staff sought fundable program, there was a fundamental mismatch between the talents of the staff and the program idea with insufficient time to lay the groundwork for a strong development finance initiative. This was also a time when Oxfam America was becoming more integrated into Oxfam International; key issues, such as managing complex emergencies and dealing with global institutions, were demanding more strategizing and investment. With greater engagement with Oxfam International, Oxfam America faced a whole new set of opportunities and demands, which pushed development finance further down the list of priorities.

*Jim Down, a management consultant who joined the board in 2003 and has been a champion for the need to stay focused, states:*

One of Oxfam’s greatest strengths is its insatiable appetite to take on new initiatives to alleviate poverty around the world. However, this strength can also be a weakness because unchecked it results in a plethora of well-intended but fragmented and under-resourced efforts. This can also result in staff frustration because they feel they are overworked but just scratching the surface on a number of issues rather than having a major impact on any of them.
Another board member commented, “We have a history of doing something for a period of time and then moving on. Then we struggle to talk about impact with our new donors.” Despite these concerns, Oxfam frequently ends up punching above its weight, often in new areas of endeavor, such as trade. That said, Oxfam America’s leadership recognizes the strains this creates and is investing significantly in greater planning discipline. For example, Offenheiser notes that Oxfam America now has a planning framework for each regional office that limits the number of activities that can be tackled and that much more discipline has been added to the process by which new initiatives can be pursued.

**Identify the funding**

In its earliest efforts to begin a development finance program in Phase One, there was no dedicated funding, leaving staff improvised by making “soft loans” out of general grant funds. During Phase Two the expectation was that the development finance specialist would both plan the program and generate the funds. By phase three, Oxfam America had done much more foundational work in scaling up its funding base. It had articulated a five-year vision of the scale and scope of its work and it had included Saving for Change in that vision. While the staff specialist did have to convince major donors, he was working from a well-supported platform. By the time the MCE opportunity came along, Oxfam America had cash reserve to tap into, and funding was not an issue.

**Find the right fit**

Oxfam America, after much trial and error, found a program that fit with its partners, matched its skill set, and required funding but not major financial risk. Offenheiser, when asked how he might do it all again, noted that he was tackling a “deeply embedded institutional cultural question” and that at some point he realized he might have to compartmentalize the program. He suggests that one way to go would have been to acquire the capacity and expertise through a merger or acquisition of an existing development finance provider. Ultimately, the Saving for Change that came into being in Phase Three does not require full integration and makes good use of Oxfam America’s strengths. It does not involve a major costly finance lending operation; it is relatively portable and can be operated with partners on an individual basis. The MCE program is fully compartmentalized and fits because it gives Oxfam America a toehold in the field but is not integrated with Oxfam America’s program.

**CONCLUSION**

My hope in sharing this account is to get practitioners, board members, major donors, and organizational leadership to take a clear-eyed view of organizational innovation. Organizations are embedded in complex systems and are complex systems themselves; instituting significant change is not simply a technical or operational issue, but often a cultural and political one. In terms of establishing a guarantee fund, Offensheiser was far ahead of the organization, and maybe the field as well. He could make operational his idea only through MicroCredit Enterprise, which was founded in 2005. In terms of making development finance not only an organizational priority but also a locus of innovation, there was not the coordinated alignment between the board, senior management and regional staff that would support such a signifi-
cant organizational shift. Oxfam was able to recalibrate its engagement around development finance in Phase Three, with a fully engaged board and a more deliberate process of experimentation. Even with the difficulties in Phase Two, regional offices learned a lot about both the potential and barriers to developing financially sustainable enterprises, which led to more sophisticated analysis in general and may have actually helped position them to take advantage of opportunities, such as increased interest in Fair Trade products. Oxfam has always

Table 2: Lessons Learned

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lessons Learned</th>
<th>Steps to Take</th>
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| Introducing new ideas building on a solid foundation and common understanding | • Look carefully at assumptions  
• Keep educating and listening to the staff  
• Listen for the clash of ideas and approaches |
| Think big, start small                                                        | • Articulate a big vision and be clear on expected outcomes  
• Start with a pilot to test model and underlying assumptions |
| Get the right skill set and depth of management                               | • Hire-in expertise  
• Avoid fuzziness about the skill set you need |
| Line up the board                                                             | • Keep the board informed but not overly involved  
• Adequate board oversight of specialized initiatives requires the right skill sets among board members |
| Integrate special initiatives into the overall strategy                       | • Be clear about roles and responsibilities  
• Offer “line” personnel something they really want  
• Introduce a program in manageable chunks |
| Invest the time to get the internal systems in place                          | • Build appropriate management information systems, controls, and training manuals |
| Sometimes the plate really is too full                                        | • Change is energizing, but you need program plans in place to insure ideas are operationalized with adequate followthrough |
| Identify the funding                                                           | • Have an overall funding plan that includes an initial phase of sounding out potential funding sources for the new program |
| Find the right fit                                                             | Summing it up—a program that fits with the needs of partners or clients, the skills of staff, and interests of donors. |
been an organization willing to take risks and experiment with new ideas. This is always an asset, as long as an organization is willing to take a clear-eyed look at results.

Despite these trials by fire—and perhaps because of them—Oxfam is in a position to make an important contribution to the field of development finance, as long as it can go to scale. Janet McKinley asks, “Will Oxfam follow its normal path—generating the seeds for a successful program but moving on to another agenda, or will it continue to grow Saving for Change to the next level, enabling it to become the platform to do something really large.” In the same vein, Offenheiser notes that other actors are starting programs in this area and that there is the potential that, “If we succeed in helping women build up savings, we could eventually help them hook up with financial institutions. Can we find donors who think this is an exciting way to go? This is a question going forward.”
Introducing and Implementing a Comprehensive Monitoring and Evaluation System at Oxfam America

Sandra Ng

This paper is a reflection on four years of practice in developing and implementing monitoring and evaluation (M&E) at Oxfam America from 2000 to 2004. The Planning and Learning Department decided that it would provide a framework for M&E where ideas and knowledge of program and field staff of partner organizations could be integrated into a comprehensive M&E system. The experience of the US program showed that the fundamental ideas of the frameworks could work within OA, but that major organizational cultural changes were required to generate sustained collaboration in implementing the frameworks. In reflecting on why implementation was less prevalent in other regional programs, I discuss some of the challenges, such as the institutional environment, investment in and promotion of M&E skills, informal versus formal learning cultures, incentives and disincentives, and better use of technology.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a reflection on four years of practice in developing and implementing monitoring and evaluation (M&E) at Oxfam America from 2000 to 2004. As the planning and evaluation specialist, part of my role was to move the organization from fragmented and ad hoc M&E to a coordinated and systematic approach. The effort was effective in some ways, less successful in others. In this paper I shall analyze what happened and explore ways forward.
I begin by giving some historical background on the institutional setting for M&E, followed by a discussion of the approach taken and tools developed. The application of this approach and tools will be illustrated by an example in which they were applied to a regional program that had made a strong commitment to systematizing M&E within all aspects of grant making and program design. Finally, I shall conclude with a discussion about what I learned from the experience.

BACKGROUND

Institutionally, M&E functions were situated within the programs department of Oxfam America in which grants were also developed. From 2000 to 2004, there were three key milestones that show the evolving importance of M&E work at Oxfam America. First, the original planning and learning unit in the global programs department was upgraded to become its own department, the planning and learning department (PLD), indicating to the rest of the agency that M&E was to be a core activity at Oxfam. Second, Oxfam America added one staff to the department who specialized in organizational learning, clearly signaling that M&E was part of a cycle of program learning in which information gathered from M&E exercises provide knowledge to improve program planning and organizational development. Third, the Oxfam America board of directors and the president prioritized impact measurement and openly promoted the work of the department to the rest of the agency. For example, PLD’s director, Laura Roper, and evaluation specialist were invited to present the department’s work to the board members and to Oxfam America staff, respectively.

During this same period, several strategic conversations took place at the organizational level. The agency worked to more clearly define its partnership model of development and what it meant for grant making; at the same time Oxfam America and the rest of the Oxfam International family was making a strategic shift, position itself as a global campaigning organization. This coincided with Oxfam International’s adoption of a rights-based approach to development, and Oxfam America explored how to frame and implement the organization’s work within this new lens, something that required considerable human and financial capital. Coupled with a reorganization of the programs department and move towards a team-based approach of program development, the effort to systematize M&E work competed with these other initiatives for resources and staff attention.

THE APPROACH AND TOOLS

What type of M&E was Oxfam America trying to implement? The working philosophy of the department was that M&E should capture the best information with the least amount of cost and time required. PLD also believed that the information must be relevant and meaningful both to the people planning and implementing the development programs as well as to those funding the programs. Relying primarily on smaller, private donations, Oxfam America does not have a single major institutional donor, such as USAID, who demands traditional and labor-intensive types of evaluations. Therefore, Oxfam America had considerable room for creativity and innovation in what M&E system it decided to implement and so could design one that would yield information serving multiple purposes: program improvement; program accountability; and other reporting required by donors and the board of directors.
The PLD strategy relied on a small group of specialist staff to develop M&E tools and facilitate their implementation. When we were fully staffed the department consisted of a director (Laura Roper), an area specialist in community-based resource management (David Boyer), a planning and evaluation specialist (myself), an organizational learning specialist (Lotika Paintal), and an associate working a range of issues that included gender and the rights-based approach (Valerie Traore). In practice, PLD staff responded to needs and requests flowing from regional programs. Initially, the requests were for tools to help with gender analysis and M&E capacity building. In response PLD would consult with the regional program staff as the potential users of the tools to refine general best practices with local ideas and practices. We discovered that having tools in hand did not necessarily mean that they would be applied, in part because staff did not feel confident to even select which tool might be most appropriate in a given situation. As a result later requests were for more structured tools and frameworks for M&E. The diversity of programs in each of the regions created unique challenges for tool development: the M&E tools would be applied to programs that ranged from women and legal rights programs in Southern Africa to community-based resource management (CBRM) program in the Mekong River countries, to community finance programs in Central America and West Africa. Any tool developed had to be applicable across this diversity and yet yield sufficient comparable program information to show OA programs successes and identify needed improvements. To this end, much of my efforts were directed towards the development of the planning and evaluation frameworks (Frameworks).

THE PLANNING AND EVALUATION FRAMEWORKS

The aim was to create a tool that was flexible enough to describe and track the different regional situations and types of programs yet be consistent and generalizable enough to allow Oxfam America to monitor, compare, and aggregate progress on its global objectives. To achieve this objective, PLD decided that it would develop a framework for M&E where the ideas and knowledge of program officers and field staff of partner organizations could be integrated into the M&E system. Oxfam America believed that the people most directly involved in development programs are the best people to help select highly relevant indicators. The Frameworks’ M&E system design was based on the idea of strategic questioning, in which indicators would be developed through a carefully selected sequence of questions that would elicit and identify measures of the most significant changes or impacts the participants in the development programs hoped to achieve. In this way, the Frameworks differed drastically from traditional logical frameworks and similar methods widely used in development evaluation in which every program is tracked against a universal set of expected outcomes. For example, logical framework analysis is an analytical tool that derives its name from the logical linkages set out by planners to connect a project’s means (interventions) with its ends (expected outputs, outcomes, impacts). The Frameworks tried to accommodate the contingent and non-linear reality of development, while asking programs to be explicit about both objectives and key benchmarks.

In all, there were three Frameworks, one for each of the three core areas of work Oxfam America funded: community-based resource management; community finance; and participation for equity. Each Framework identified a series of change dimensions to drive the development of indicators. For example, what potential areas of impact can a well-designed community finance program achieve? The potential areas of change in community finance were in: asset
building and retention; reduction of vulnerability; development of formal and informal networks; organizational and outreach capacity of the finance provider; financial sustainability; environmental sustainability; decision making controls; and systemic and structural changes at the community level or beyond. Within each of these potential areas of impact, the Frameworks lead the users to ask themselves the strategic questions needed to assess effectiveness in the dimensions relevant to the specific project.

The Frameworks provides some sample questions for each dimension and users can employ these questions or develop their own. The strategic questions prepare the user to develop one or more qualitative or quantitative indicators that can help answer these questions. Again, some sample indicators are given based on the questions to stimulate creativity but it is the user’s choice whether to use them or identify different indicators that they will integrate into project documents and monitor on a regular basis. Most important, the Frameworks were designed to provide Oxfam America program staff a structure with which to initiate a conversation about M&E issues with staff of the local organization involved in the projects. By organizing information according to Oxfam America programs but leaving the particular choice of strategic questions and indicators to those most directly involved in the projects, it would be able to measure impacts in the three core areas of work without adopting a rigid approach to M&E.

Oxfam America believes that an organization’s knowledge is valuable and should constantly be evolving, therefore, M&E capacity building efforts for using the Frameworks occurred over two steps. The initial knowledge transfer was internal, from the M&E specialist staff to program staff. M&E staff instructed program staff on how to use the Frameworks and explained why using them can lead to better program development. The second level of transfer was from the OA program staff to field staff of partner organizations during program development meetings.

In implementing this two-step approach to capacity building, OA hoped to create a non-threatening environment in which staff and partners would develop a greater comfort with M&E and the new tools, and so that they would understand that Frameworks-driven evaluations were a valuable learning opportunity rather than an external and potentially punitive assessment. However, while there was public consensus by regional program staff that M&E activities provided critical and positive information needed to develop better development programs, private fears about the consequences of less-than-perfect assessments did not disappear. In a later section, I discuss the difficulties of implementing the Frameworks M&E system, including this issue of staff fears, in more depth but I mention it now because I believe the leadership of one regional office, the US program, truly embraced the positive aspects of M&E and made significant efforts to systematically integrate it into the grant making cycle between 2000 and 2003. I explore this example in the next section to illustrate the potential of the Frameworks M&E system and then describe some of the challenges its implementation faced overall.

THE US PROGRAM’S COMMITMENT TO SYSTEMIC M&E

In 2000, just as the Frameworks were being developed and disseminated, the US program, under the leadership of Pam Moore, was engaged in intensive program planning and strategy development to formulate a five-year strategic plan. Grants were being scrutinized for
attention to measuring impact, and hard questions were being asked of program staff by managers, communications, and fundraising staff who sought hard evidence that OA’s work was indeed making a difference.

The US team, as it proceeded with the program planning process, realized rather quickly that a corollary process would need to get underway to develop an evaluation plan. Team members were asking partners to plan their projects, articulate them in the form of grant applications, identify the expected outcomes and discuss their means of gauging the effectiveness of that work over the grant period. Program staff realized that they could not ask any less of themselves and so acknowledged the need to figure out exactly how their own efforts would be evaluated for impact.

From 2001 to 2003, the US program engaged in a dynamic process to develop a M&E plan that was customized to be used internally, based on full participation, and integrated into its planning efforts. This process resulted in a comprehensive yet relatively simple plan for M&E that embraced the idea of strategic questioning. The plan was owned to a large degree by both staff and program partners, a fact that largely reflects what was a well-conceived strategy to involve and achieve buy-in from the very constituencies whose work would be evaluated. I describe that process and its implementation next.

The program’s process of designing their M&E system started during a retreat attended by US program staff and partners in November 2001. Small working groups of partner organization representatives and US program staff created a list of key evaluation questions and a short-list of indicators for each of the program’s objectives through a series of brainstorming and ranking exercises. The group debated on using both indicators and evaluation questions; in the end decided that it would be most effective to come to consensus on the “right questions,” rather than a set of indicators.

Integration and systemization of program monitoring and evaluation into the grant making process: The next step to making M&E a reality in the US program was the integration of the agreed upon evaluation questions into the Oxfam America’s system of grant making, by directly incorporating a M&E strategy in each application. Using the formal grant application form as a starting point, the US program created its own template for grant applications that was shared with partners during proposal development. In addition, the program developed a standard grant reporting form with a set of questions to guide partners as they reported about project completion. During a follow-up team meeting, decisions were made to integrate the set of evaluative questions into three areas of grant making so that M&E was systematically integrated into the US program work.

Integration of evaluation questions into the grant application shared with partners. A separate grant application form was created for each strategic change objective. The evaluation questions were integrated into various sections of the grant application form that partners filled out to apply for grants from Oxfam America. In the background section, partners were asked to provide contemporary answers to the questions in their application—their answers would essentially create the baseline information needed for measuring future changes. In the monitoring and evaluation section, partners were informed that US program staff would discuss the standard set of evaluation questions with them during monitoring visits. By asking the same set of questions, answers could be compared over time to see if changes were happening during the grant period. In this way, the US program took a large step towards systematizing M&E.
Commitment by program staff to discuss the set of evaluation questions included in the grant application during monitoring visits: In the monitoring and evaluation section of the grant application form, it is made explicit that “[the evaluation questions] will be discussed during monitoring and other communications/dialogues with program officers” and that program officers will document the results of these discussions in their monitoring reports.

Integration of the evaluation questions in the Final Narrative Report to Oxfam America: The Final Narrative Report provided to the US program by each funded partner was revised to ask the same set of evaluation questions. The information from these final reports can then be systematically compared with monitoring reports from US program staff.

The commitment of the US program staff was crucial to the success of this design. The US program realized early on that M&E processes that focus on mutual accountability have higher degrees of ownership and potential for sustainability, hence generating commitment from Oxfam America staff and partners was essential. The US program prioritized M&E and sustained the momentum throughout the lengthy process and it accepted the assistance, ideas, and proposals of evaluation champions within OA. Finally, the program made a visible and binding commitment to build evaluation capacity in OA partner organizations in a Mott Foundation-funded grant; the program’s accountability to the Mott Foundation provided external pressure to keep M&E activities ongoing.

CHALLENGES AND REFLECTIONS

While other regional programs organized workshops and encouraged their staff and partners to embrace a more comprehensive approach to M&E, including learning how to use the Frameworks, no other region succeeded in generating the commitment and progress demonstrated by the US program. Below I discuss some of the challenges we faced in implementing the Frameworks and, with the benefit of hindsight, reflect on how things might have been done differently.

The institutional environment

Two aspects about OA’s institutional environment impacted the systemization of M&E in unexpected ways: OA’s partnership model and the culture of celebrating success. I address each in turn.

The details of the partnership model are can be found in the paper by Barbara Thomas-Slayter in this collection, so I will only address the issue of how it affected program staff in their M&E roles. In redefining the traditional grantor/grantee relationship, the partnership model encouraged program staff to build strong relationships with local organizations, which includes playing an accompaniment role in developing projects. For example, while an Oxfam America partner would still apply to Oxfam for a grant, grant development, including the writing of the document, was a joint collaboration of Oxfam staff and partner organizations. The partnership model resulted in long-term collaborations where individual Oxfam staff cultivated deep, and sometimes, personal relationships with the partners. While most of these relationships were beneficial to the work of Oxfam America, there were two concerns. One was that it would change what was largely a collegial relationship between partners and Oxfam staff to one that staff felt would be seen as being judgmental. Beyond that, in a few cases there was the
apprehension that systematic M&E would have shown that certain partnerships were no
longer strategic or effective in achieving the objectives of the regional programs. Oxfam
America’s partnership approach at that time did not explicitly address how and when part-
nership should end and the notion of severing relationships due to poor performance raised
strong emotions and discomfort among Oxfam America staff.

Second, Oxfam America, like many organizations in the NGO sector, suffered from the fear
of discussing failure. There was a tendency for conversations about M&E and impact assess-
ments to favor success stories—this stems from a deep tradition in philanthropy. Even within
the PLD, there were mixed messages about the how neutral of M&E should be, and this lack
of a consistent message made promoting the naturally evaluative M&E Frameworks difficult.
Put another way, the Frameworks approach did not assume that development interventions
are inherently successful. Upon reflection, because the M&E system being promoted had the
potential to challenge the prevalent success-focused culture it had limited chance for adapta-
tion without major organizational culture changes.

INVESTMENT IN AND PROMOTION OF M&E SKILLS

Successful M&E requires a set of specialist skills that are learned and improved with practice.
To develop such expertise required both an infusion of resources and the willingness of pro-
gram staff to learn, adapt, and apply new M&E skills where needed. Unfortunately, at the
time Oxfam America failed to invest adequately in capacity building and regional program
staff resisted applying M&E in a systematic way at the organizational level. The two issues
are interrelated in that strategic and targeted investments in M&E capacity building had
the potential to change the status quo of evaluation practice at Oxfam America, in which
program staff asked informal (but often probing), and non-comparable, evaluative questions
during project visits and rarely documented the findings of these conversations in any detail.
Ad hoc trainings provided by the PLD department could not by themselves change deeply
entrenched practices. The expectation that episodic training was sufficient was driven by
PLD’s belief that the M&E Frameworks were aligned with the learning organization model
and embraced as the right approach in the agency’s discourse. These assumptions led PLD
and senior management to misjudge the resources required to help staff internalize M&E’s
importance to the mission of OA, including the need to completely retrain field staff in
the new M&E approach.

When people have solid understanding of systematic M&E, they are more likely to let go of
their fears and begin changing their practice. It is a lengthy process that requires specific time
allocations, good trainers, close accompaniment, and “success stories” of its own in which
staff can see that the learning doesn’t produce punishment. When such investments are not
feasible, perhaps the better solution is for an organization to have a cadre of M&E specialist
staff working alongside program staff to implement the M&E efforts directly.

Informal versus formal learning

Established development organizations in general have moved towards documenting their
success and (less so) their failures in response to demands from donors for more accountabil-
ity. As I discuss above, Oxfam America program staff resisted routine M&E documentation,
which made it impossible for Oxfam to capture the rich knowledge base of its staff in building
social movements, in designing good community finance, and in managing resources sustainably. One of the key overarching questions Oxfam America tries to answer is: Does Oxfam’s theory of social change work? And while many program staff could rely on their tacit knowledge gained thorough field experience to answer the question in an anecdotal fashion, only a comprehensive M&E system that is actively being tracked could provide answers at the organizational level. Informal learning was rich at Oxfam America with program staff able to share truly remarkable stories about social change processes such as how coffee co-operatives in Central America were able to negotiate better prices and contract conditions for their farmers or how severely battered women in Zimbabwe regained their confidence after participation in Oxfam-supported gender empowerment projects.

The stories and lessons were sometimes documented (especially for the donor public), but were not systematically analyzed or presented either in writing or in other forms, so that staff could learn how to build upon or replicate them in other projects and regions. Eventually the knowledge leaves the organization when individual staff departs because the lessons of experience never enter the formal learning cycle of the organization. Formal learning is obviously necessary for Oxfam America (and other development organizations) to build on cumulative successes and failures to test the validity of its fundamental theories of social change and hence be accountable to the individuals and foundations funding its work. That said, it requires a degree of systematization and rigor that organizations, which are constantly balancing where to allocate scarce resources, often hesitate to commit.

**Carrots and sticks**

Incentives and disincentives are commonly used in the private sector to encourage certain employee behaviors. The non-profit sector, on the other hand, tends to lag in this arena and I will discuss both personal and organizational behaviors in response to M&E below.

During my time at Oxfam America, M&E duties were part of the job description of program officers but the organization did not link them to any professional performance benchmarks during employee evaluations. For example, it was commonly known that when a program staff visited a project, a written monitoring report documenting progress on project indicators was expected. Yet, looking through the project files revealed that very few such reports were submitted, and no actions were taken by the organization to rectify these omissions. It was more common to find an evaluation report written by the program partner or an external consultant, and these were often provided in a format that was not useful to OA. As a person working on M&E and trying to encourage the more systematic use of the Frameworks, I could only rely on the goodwill and interest of my colleagues to write a report, and with data that could support learning and measuring progress. Unless the size of a program officer’s portfolio is linked to M&E compliance and performance, staff will tend not to prioritize M&E activities.

At the organizational level, more funds allocated for M&E could be a major incentive. Earlier I highlighted that senior management and the board of OA prioritized impact measurement and openly promoted the work of the PLD department to the rest of the agency; unfortunately, this prioritization was not met with new monies. There were no new monies allocated for regional programs that excelled in M&E, nor for more M&E staff and travel. Hence, the PLD

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1 While there are many reasons for resistance, one of the most frequently mentioned was lack of time.
could not sustain continuous direct support to train and accompany staff in implementing the Frameworks in all the regional programs. Conversations about impacts occurred when they could and regional program directors invested spurts of energy and time in trying to get the Frameworks implemented in their regions but lacking any incentive for extra budget allocations, the efforts were sustained only where the leadership held strong beliefs about the value of M&E. To make systematic M&E work at OA, the organization needed to establish a realistic system of incentives and disincentives or adopt a mandatory approach.

TECHNOLOGY

Better use of technology could have made a difference. OA already had a fairly sophisticated computer network in place, so that staff around the world could access the Boston-based server. One of the weaknesses of the Frameworks was that it was not integrated into a database where information could be entered and analyzed easily. Ideally, the Frameworks should have been accompanied by a database tool with a simple and user-friendly interface that allowed program staff to enter their information quickly and easily after a project visit. For example, the database could be programmed with indicators selected during project development and program staff would be asked, or required, to provide data and observations on them briefly at regular intervals. No narrative reports would be required, and yet the relevant information could be collected in cumulative fashion and a database query could provide a report showing the changes in the indicator after each program visit.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the approach taken and tools developed achieved mixed results in implementing a comprehensive M&E system. The experience of the US program showed that the fundamental ideas of the Frameworks could work within Oxfam America but major organizational cultural changes were required to generate sustained collaboration in implementing the Frameworks. In reflecting on why implementation was less prevalent in other regional programs, I discuss some of the challenges and opportunities such as the institutional environment; investment in and promotion of M&E skills; informal versus formal learning cultures; incentives and disincentives; and better use of technology. I hope this sharing of Oxfam America’s experience from 2000 to 2004 contributes to improving M&E practice in the development sector.

Postscript: In 2004, Oxfam America recommitted to a stronger program planning and learning model. The Planning and Learning Department became the Learning, Evaluation, and Accountability Department (LEAD) and instituted an ambitious and mandatory process of program strategy papers and peer learning (the Annual Participatory Planning and Learning Exercise – APPLE), which led to much greater evaluative rigor, more consistent cross-fertilization amongst programs and departments, and higher quality documentation. This work continues to evolve and recently, Oxfam America began placing an M&E specialist in each program area, who will work in coordination with LEAD in accelerating the pace of institutionalizing strong and routinized M&E practice.