



OXFAM
America

Not your Grandad's NGO: Oxfam in the 21st Century
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Many thanks Will for that kind introduction. It's great to have this opportunity to join you all here at Tufts University. We have had lots of Tufts grads at Oxfam over the years as staff and interns and there has been an Oxfam Café on campus for quite some time.

You are all looking a bit tired. That can't something to do with an election, could it? According to the pollsters, half of you should be very happy and the other half very unhappy. How many of you are unhappy with yesterday's results, raise your hands. See pollsters blew it again!

After watching this electoral campaign for the last ten years (God, it seemed that long), I was reminded of two quotes.

I was fortunate to discover the journalist HL Mencken at an early age. Mencken was a curmudgeonly journalist from Baltimore in the early 20th century. He was my John Stewart before there was John Stewart. He has one quote that sums up the quality of the discourse during much of these last two years of campaigning.

If a politician found he had cannibals among his constituents, he would promise them missionaries for dinner.

H. L. Mencken

And Mark Twain was fond of saying:

We have the best government that money can buy.

Mark Twain

Well, despite perhaps the most expensive election in American history--- reportedly \$1b spent by each presidential campaign and another \$1.5 billion spent by PACs and all other non-party affiliated groups, there is much good news this morning about the quality of our democracy and the wisdom of our citizenry who in the end can see through all the rhetoric and posturing and vote for character and integrity in their choice of leaders. There is lots of good news for those of us who care about the

poor, about social justice, about social safety nets, about rights for women and gays, about sane economic policy and about moderation in our foreign and defense policy.

Will, wisely reminded me that this is a post election moment and I would be facing an audience in the afterglow of last night's election outcomes. With that in mind, I have prepared some remarks that speak to Oxfam's bipartisan work and how we see the challenges of the world in which we work across the aisle but I have slanted them towards the kinds of big picture policy questions that I think may be on your mind in the aftermath of the election.

So I propose to open with those general remarks about Oxfam as an NGO struggling to accommodate to the challenges of a 21st century world and then transition to a conversation with you all about the implications of the election for US foreign aid and development policy and any other issue that you want to throw at me.

So what's the premise of my talk today? Real simple, the Oxfam you think you know, is probably not the Oxfam that exists today. And that's probably true of other international NGOs you are familiar with as well.

So what I'd like to do is:

- Introduce you to the Oxfam of today.
- Give you some exposure to the challenges we face in the 21st century as an INGO
- Share some of the decisions we are making how we should address those challenges
- And invite you into a dialogue on this broad set of topics and what it might mean for you as young professionals.

So what's different? What are you missing?

Let's start with some baseline data. When asked about Oxfam, the most common response is: "They are that hunger organization." Or "They feed people." Or "They respond to those big emergencies"; or my favorite, " I am not sure what they do, but I really like their values."

Are these folks wrong? No, not at the most basic level. We do worry about food security but we really don't feed people. We do respond to emergencies but that is not all we do.

What are we doing that most folks would know little about?

Did you know that Oxfam recently wrote an amendment to the Dodd Frank Wall Street Reform act requiring all extractive industries to disclose all financial dealings in countries where they have operations?

Did you know that Oxfam is currently partnering with farmworker organizations and Costco in an effort to improve wages and living standards for farmworkers in the US?

Did you know that Oxfam has lobbied and campaigned for the first global arms treaty at the UN that came within minutes of passage this past July?

Did you know that Oxfam despite accepting no US government funding was a founder of the Modernizing Foreign Assistance network and is one of leading voice in DC pushing for major changes to the US foreign aid system?

Did you know that Oxfam founded a coalition with major corporations called the Partnership for Resilience and Environmental Protection to lobby Congress for greater attention to financing for adaptation funding in response to climate change?

Did you know that Oxfam is in a partnership with Swiss Re to develop a weather-indexed insurance market and products for poor African farmers?

Did you know that Oxfam challenged Starbucks in an intellectual property case in support of the Ethiopian government's claims over their national coffee varieties and won?

Did you know that Oxfam has the largest policy and campaigning office in DC of any US or other international INGO with a staff of 70?

So what do these examples tell you about who we were and who we are today. What's different and why are we considering even more change?

In our earliest years we were all about local and grassroots? Over many decades, we funded and nurtured into existence thousands of indigenous non-profits in the Global South. We believed the poor could drive social change within their own communities and context.

Over time, we discovered that there are very few major challenges that the poor face that can be addressed exclusively at the national or local level?

We also discovered that even the best solutions at the local level seldom advance beyond the community where they originate? Most good projects did not reach scale without a favorable political environment and enabling policies.

So while working at a very local level might be personally gratifying in the short run, it was not yielding sustainable solutions. And we were after sustainable solutions.

So we began to evaluate some of our core assumptions.

We agreed that we wanted to address root causes of poverty and injustice and not just symptoms and we were indeed after sustainable solutions.

We observed that even in the poorest communities, everyone was working to survive and earn a little extra cash. The issue was not laziness or indifference to opportunity, the common cultural critique.

The real problem is access to opportunity, credit, education, health services etc, etc.....It was about access, access, access....

We began to see that the core premise of most development work was to provide public goods where the state was failing to provide them. Bilaterals and NGOs had willy nilly become gap fillers for an ineffective state or a non-functioning market. Poverty for them was defined by default as the absence of public goods.

We further realized that we were all kidding ourselves to believe that with a little foreign aid fairy dust, we could meet the monumental health, education and food needs of desperately poor populations on a mass scale. We needed an entirely different approach.

We realized that development investments were most effective when they were owned by both governments and citizens and when they led to structural and systemic change that was solidly institutionalized.

Too much development practice was about the proliferation of projects without concern for indigenous ownership, institutionalized capacity and long term sustainability.

On the flip side, we observed that we could access real power and truly influence events and policy

- when we linked our local to our global work that challenged global norms with local realities,
- when we created a moral narrative that challenged the status quo,

- and when we ground-truthed institutional failure and spoke truth to power.

We saw that making this link between local and global could force more honest reflection about development failures and drive more systemic and perhaps lasting change.

We realized that for most of the world poverty was not news and that it only became interesting to the mass media when organizations like Oxfam took a principled moral position and picked a fight over policy and practice.

We saw the advantages of shaping public discourse and challenging the legitimacy of the hegemonic icons in the development field like the World Bank, IMF, WTO or major corporate brands.

Picking fights with these institutions catches the eye of journalists, politicians and other influentials. Through controversy, we could make poverty and injustice relevant.

Where did this lead us?

First, it led us to redefine poverty, not as the absence of public goods, but rather as “social exclusion”. Think of apartheid as an extreme form of social exclusion. But there are many other more subtle forms.

Adopting a definition of poverty as “social exclusion” led us to see the poor as actors with rights and the potential for “agency”.

Seeing the poor as actors with rights and agency led us to realize that the state is the principle duty bearer responsible for protecting citizen rights and that our role should be to assist citizens to operate effectively in the space between citizen and state in negotiating social compacts that advance justice and human welfare.

Moving down this path, we made a conscious decision to redefine ourselves as a rights-based development organization with a particular focus on the social, economic and cultural rights agenda.

We came to see development as less about needs and more about power---fundamentally a process in which the poor are marginalized by more powerful forces in their societies.

If development is about addressing power imbalances and creating access for the poor to opportunity, what would that mean for how we had to redefine our role?

In the simplest of terms, it meant that we had to work with poor and marginalized communities to understand their most serious concerns and grievances.

This grievance might be about access to affordable medicines or financial services or agricultural inputs or educational opportunity.

Our role would become helping them begin to understand the particular barriers that were blocking their access, devise strategies for overcoming those barriers and to give them the tools and the knowledge to do this effectively.

And finally, we realized that ideas were a far more powerful currency than money in driving social change. We embraced idea leadership as central to our theory of social change.

Adopting this rights based approach some ten years ago, changed us dramatically. We began to see the world through a human rights lens and see it in an entirely different way. This change in perspective required that we invest in a variety of new competencies and new ways of working.

It means that every project or program we undertake must have at its core a clear rights dimension and a power analysis.

It means that we see our role as assisting communities and nations in addressing the barriers to opportunity that limit their human potential. Our work is therefore inherently political with a small “p”

It means that in addition to our traditional work with grassroots organizations and civil society intermediaries, we must also have a strong policy research, advocacy and campaigning capacity in our home country. And we must use this strong analytical capability to fashion critiques of major institutional actors, be they governments or corporations or multi-lateral institutions.

It means that we link our global capacity to the needs and agendas of civil society and social movements in country. We strive to enable them to put these tools and knowledge to effective use for their ends while simultaneously supporting them globally by creating new global norms and policies.

It means that we must have the capacity to campaign globally as well as nationally and that we must employ state of the art tools in communications, web technology and social media. And we do.

But as we enter the 21st century there are some new realities and challenges facing those of us committed to work on development and human rights.

At Oxfam, we believe we are living at a critical historical inflection point and that we need to recognize the challenges posed by this moment and consider perhaps even further changes in our ways of working.

What do we see as major challenges that lie before us?

Newly emerging economies are eclipsing the US and EU as centers of global power and influence which may have dramatic implications for international relations and global security.

The new powers in these BRICSAM nations do not necessarily give primacy to human rights as a core pillar of their development agenda, creating serious challenges to civil society and the protection of human rights.

Foreign aid is drying up in the aftermath of the global economic collapse.

Meanwhile, foreign direct investment in developing countries is exploding and dwarfing traditional foreign aid in scale, quantity and impact.

Trade and investment are eclipsing aid as the driver of growth and development in the global south. Corporations and markets are shaping the new opportunity horizon in poor nations.

Globalization has on the one hand lifted more people out of poverty in countries like India and China than at any time in history, but on the other hand, it has created massive concentrations of wealth, accelerating inequality and diminishing social mobility in countries across the globe.

Market volatility prevails in global financial, fuel and food markets and in weather patterns driven by climate change. We have to ask ourselves: Is volatility the new normal? And how can vulnerable populations of the poor manage such volatility?

We see the global economic crisis generating a focus on growth as an end in itself without regard for the quality of that growth and its impacts on poor and disadvantaged populations.

We see climate change driving dramatic changes in weather patterns across Africa and Asia and now even the US. Yet we see little appetite for tackling this problem among global leaders either in major energy consumers in the West or newly emerging economies.

We see a world with increasing scarcity of the natural resources and systems required to feed a world with 9 billion by 2050. Meanwhile we see major powers rushing to secure their claims on energy, minerals, land and water supplies around the world. Land and water grabs across Africa. And an explosion in extractive industries across the globe.

So how is Oxfam responding? What do we need to do to be fit for purpose for the 21st century. What issues do we need to champion?

We see these problems of inequality, volatility and scarcity as the major challenges to the poor over the coming decade and sustainability and resilience as critically important programming pillars for work we do in emergency response, long term development and policy.

On volatility our major initiative will be in working on global food security over the next five years through our GROW campaign.

This campaign will focus on challenging donors to

- increase investments in agriculture,
- reduce subsidies and incentives for ethanol production,
- promote small farmer agriculture especially that of women producers,
- and challenge speculation in land, water and commodity.

We are already challenging the World Bank to assume a leadership role in creating global norms for addressing land grabs.

We will soon be coming out with a Sustainability Index in which we challenge major food producers to embrace sustainability practices throughout their supply chains.

In the field, we are promoting a new low input system of rice production that is doubling yields and lowering input costs for small farmers

On scarcity, we will redouble our efforts to promote greater public support for measures to address climate change both at the global and national level.

We will lead efforts to promote greater investments in disaster risk reduction, climate adaptation and resilience.

With the increasing frequency and intensity of weather events and natural disasters of epic proportions, we will shift from a model that stresses a response by large international agencies to one

that emphasizes the capacity of governments and citizens to act and lead their response to emergencies at the national level.

We are already carrying out training programs with governments and civil society groups in Central America on disaster risk reduction and emergency response. We are working with Swiss Re in Ethiopia to develop a weather indexed insurance program for small farmers.

On inequality, we will work with major institutional actors to build a global narrative in support of a vision of economic growth that emphasizes equity and inclusion.

We will continue to push for a radical reform of the international foreign aid system. We need to move from a donor driven model to an ownership driven model.

With fewer resources, donors have to work smarter and they will have to develop new kinds of strategic partnerships with governments and build in new mechanisms to ensure citizen accountability.

Here in the US this will require major changes in US policy and practice and in the creation of a new law to replace the antiquated Foreign Assistance Act of the Kennedy Administration that governs our foreign aid system to this day. The Obama administration took some steps in this direction but did not go far enough.

Given the growing dominance of the private sector, we need to give up the idea that development is all about donors and projects and realize that we need to develop capacity to engage the private sector on diverse fronts. .

Corporations are facing serious challenges to their supply chain practices.

The more farsighted corporations like a UNILEVER are embracing sustainability principles and joining us to lobby for policies to address climate change.

Public private partnerships is the new development fad yet it is unproven on the ground Yet there are opportunities to partner with some companies in finding new market based solutions to seemingly intractable problems and use markets in scaling programs to provide greater access to health, education and financial services.

In this new world, many poor nations will be seeing whole new revenue streams coming not only from foreign aid but from foreign direct investment, royalties from extractive industries, sovereign wealth funds, and an emergent tax base.

It will be critical that this new wealth and investment be channeled into positive development outcomes for poor communities.

New tools and organizations will be needed to ensure citizen oversight and accountability systems for monitoring the use of these funds.

Finally Oxfam will need to continue to invest in building constituencies that understand and support a progressive social change agenda that is anchored in human rights and focuses on seeking lasting solutions through far reaching systemic change.

Oxfam currently has 1.3 million supporters in the US with activist cohorts at the congressional district level in major metropolitan areas across the US, clubs on some 300 college campuses. Our work relies on this constituency to drive change in DC.

However going forward, the real challenge will be building such constituencies in the global south. This is sensitive work at a time when the political space for active citizenship is under assault globally.

So bottom line. We are not your grand daddy's NGO. We are about human rights.

We have moved beyond the old models of bilateral aid and are actively challenging its core premises.

We have opened up a whole new body of work to address the challenge of private sector expansion to the global south.

We are public in making the argument that development is a fundamentally politic act.

And we are building constituencies of active citizens in the north and south to advance their interests and hold governments and corporations accountable.

We think this is the future. We think these are the things we need to do in the 21st century. We hope you all find our approach to this work compelling and might join us in one way or another as we take on these challenges.

Thank you very much