



Producer group members in Kurigram district producing handcraft materials: Photo credit: Gana Unnayan Kendra (GUK) partner staff.

OXFAM BANGLADESH ECONOMIC JUSTICE AND RESILIENCE PILLAR

Integrated Impact Evaluation Report

The Economic Justice and Resilience Pillar of the Oxfam Bangladesh Country Strategy 2016–19 was an ambitious and far-reaching portfolio of initiatives conducted across widely varying contexts and with a large cast of partners. Despite the ambitious scope and challenging context, this report confirms that the Pillar has been highly successful and effective across several of its flagship projects. It reveals compelling evidence of economic empowerment of women and youth, emerging enterprises and value chains that create more highly skilled and capital-intensive opportunities for women producers, strengthened community-level climate resilience, and partnership strengthening at different levels.

ACRONYMS

BSTI	Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution
CBO	Community-based organization
CSO	Civil society organization
EDP	Enterprise Development Programme
EJR	Economic Justice and Resilience Pillar
EYW	Empower Youth for Work project
GEM	Gendered Enterprise Market project
ICT	Information and communications technology
PROTIC	Participatory Research and Ownership with Technology, Information and Change project
REECALL	Resilience through Economic Empowerment, Climate Adaptation, Leadership and Learning programme
TROSA	Transboundary Rivers of South Asia project
WASH	Water, sanitation and health

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1 BACKGROUND

Bangladesh is one of the world's most densely populated countries, with around 160 million people living in an area of almost 150,000km.² The delta-like landmass, coupled with climate change, leads to catastrophic natural disasters: Bangladesh's 600km coastline is one of the most disaster-prone regions in the world. Poverty is deep and widespread, with almost half of the population living on less than \$1 per day.

During the past decade, Bangladesh has faced multiple interacting development challenges. Climate change has become an ever more existential threat to communities in vulnerable regions, reinforcing environmental degradation in key ecosystems. These environmental stresses have combined with economic shocks to create inflationary pressures and undermine local livelihoods. Hosting nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees from neighbouring Myanmar has also created additional pressure on Bangladesh's economy and society.

Women and girls in Bangladesh face specific constraints in their daily lives, where unequal opportunities in the labour market combine with social norms that keep them in unpaid household work. Women lack economic justice as male-controlled household incomes, particularly in rural areas, are more likely to be spent on sons' education and investment in male-controlled livelihoods. Early and forced marriage is still common and women lack access to sexual and reproductive health services. Gender-based violence is widespread and reportedly intensified during the lockdowns implemented in response to COVID-19.

'In Bangladesh, despite notable improvements in gender equality indicators, especially in relation to maternal mortality and education, women still face social, cultural and financial discrimination.' (Skakun et al., 2021)



Dairy producers in Gaibanha district preparing fodder for their cows. Photo credit: SKS partner staff.

2 THE ECONOMIC JUSTICE AND RESILIENCE PILLAR

Responding to these challenges, the Oxfam Bangladesh Economic Justice and Resilience (EJR) Pillar was a key driver of Oxfam's Country Strategy 2016–19. The Pillar goal was that 'by 2019 the most marginalized women and men will have increased their income and livelihood security and will be more resilient to climatic and economic shocks and stresses'.

The Pillar was made up of 19 programmes¹ and projects across three areas of Bangladesh, including five flagship initiatives (Box 1). Most of these initiatives (14) were implemented in rural environments, with eight projects still ongoing. In total, 33 partner organisations were involved across all the Pillar activities.

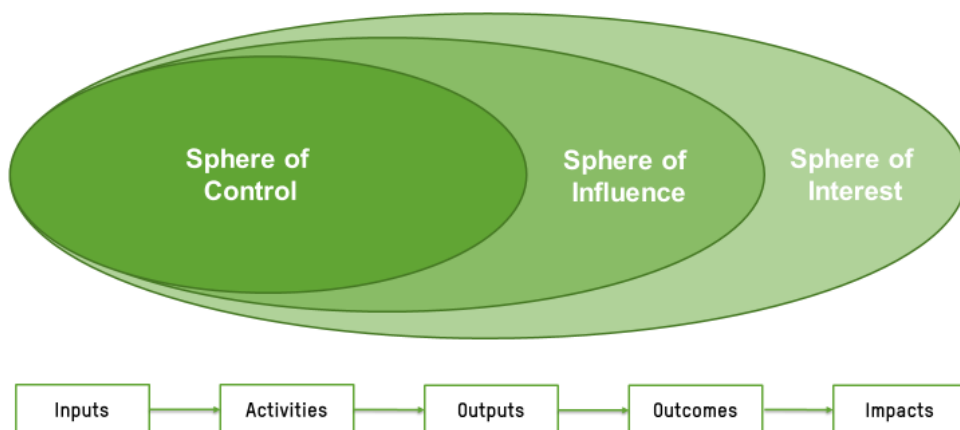
Box 1 – EJR Flagship Projects

The EJR Pillar included five flagship programmes and projects that contributed to the economic empowerment and climate resilience of women across different contexts:

1. The Gendered Enterprise Market (GEM) project aimed to develop inclusive and climate-resilient agricultural value chains led by women.
2. The Resilience through Economic Empowerment, Climate Adaptation, Leadership and Learning (REECALL) programme² and Enterprise Development Programme (EDP) aimed to improve the incomes and opportunities of poor households in Bangladesh by transforming women's responsibilities for unpaid work and promoting their leadership.
3. The Sustainable Building Materials of Bangladesh project targeted systematic change: for the entire brick-making sector in the country to move from fire bricks to alternative bricks, to reduce carbon emissions in Bangladesh's booming construction industry.
4. The Bangladesh component of the Transboundary Rivers of South Asia (TROSA) project promoted community capacity and leadership for claiming rights over natural resources related to river systems.
5. The Participatory Research and Ownership with Technology, Information and Change (PROTIC) project built evidence for the inclusion of digital technologies to support the climate resilience of women farmers.

During a design workshop in November 2021,³ current and past Oxfam and partner staff developed 'meta-Theories of Change' against which Pillar impact and contributions could be tested. Participants mapped Theory of Change pathways against three interlinked areas of the Pillar's contribution, that moved from 'sphere of control' through 'sphere of influence' to 'sphere of interest' (Figure 1). These Theory of Change diagrams have been combined into one simpler diagram (Figure 2) and are available in full in the Annex.

Figure 1: Theory of Change pathways



‘By 2019 the most marginalized women and men will have increased their income and livelihood security and will be more resilient to climatic and economic shocks and stresses.’
(Oxfam Bangladesh Country Strategy, 2016–19)



Producer Group members in Rangpur district receiving on the job training on sewing Nokshi Katha and bed sheets. Photo credit: RDRS partner staff.

BUILDING ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

In the first area of contribution, women are collectively and individually exercising economic leadership and influence, transforming power relations within households, communities and markets. Women and men have also increased their incomes and protected their assets and their livelihood security. Under this Theory of Change, combined project inputs were mapped retrospectively onto an impact pathway with four interlinked threads (see Figure A1). First, youth skills inputs build agency and expand employment opportunities to reduce economic disparities for young people, as well as gender gaps in capabilities. At the same time, facilitating decent work for women and fostering transformative leadership reduces gender-based discrimination, strengthens labour movements and increases women's access to political and economic power structures, thereby economically empowering women. Meanwhile, support to private partners for enterprise development creates innovation and a new and replicable business model for sustainable livelihoods. Finally, action on climate and disaster resilience promotes community preparedness and alternative livelihoods in support of equitable economic empowerment.

BUILDING CLIMATE RESILIENCE

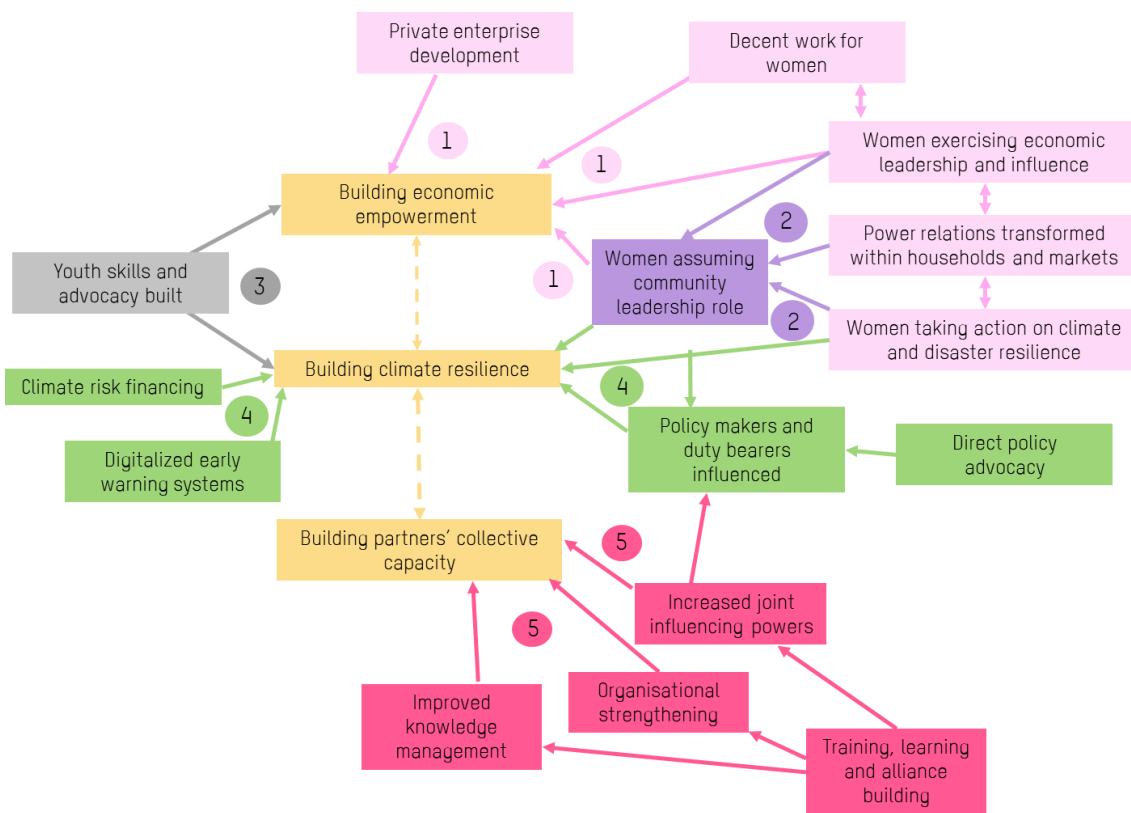
This second contribution area unpacks in more detail the expected change pathway towards community climate resilience. The Theory of Change envisages that women and youth become empowered and resilient to climate change-induced vulnerabilities. At the same time, the policy environment and duty bearers are influenced to strengthen both community social protection and the promotion of policy for climate change action, disaster management and improved natural resource management.

The mapping of project contributions under this Theory of Change (see Figure A2) focused on strengthening women's leadership capacity and participation for climate change and disaster management as a part of a 'diversified partnerships' approach. This was backed by technical and management support to networks and alliances for community natural resource management and expanded natural resource access. Projects also provided resources for enhanced resilience that centred on climate risk financing and digitalized early warning systems. Finally, the Theory of Change identified project support to collective policy advocacy by alliances of poor and non-poor urban communities to improve government climate policy.

BUILDING PARTNERS' COLLECTIVE CAPACITY

The third complementary area of contribution under the EJR Pillar was to build the collective capacity of Pillar partners (including Oxfam) to exert and sustain greater influence on its EJR objectives. The Theory of Change to achieve this objective (Figure A3) identifies training, learning and alliance-building activities that map onto change pathways and contribute to organizational and financial strengthening, improved knowledge management and communication, and increased joint influencing powers.

Figure 2: Outline of the EJR Pillar Theory of Change



3 THE EJRPILLAR IMPACT EVALUATION

During 2021–22, Oxfam Bangladesh and Oxfam GB commissioned an impact evaluation of the Economic Justice and Resilience Pillar of the 2016–19 Oxfam Country Strategy.⁴ This study proceeded through a six-step process (Figure 3).

First, stakeholders met in a design workshop to map theories of change onto the Pillar goals (summarized in Section 2), with follow-up discussions feeding into the final evaluation design. Colleagues then conducted secondary data analysis based on qualitative analysis of existing project reports.⁵ A sense-making workshop enabled partners to review impacts against this in-house evidence and identify data gaps for follow up.⁶ Six projects from the EJRPillar were purposively selected through index-based scoring based on geographic coverage, investment levels and Pillar priority.

Data gathering was then carried out in 10 project locations covering the three ecologically critical zones of Haor (flood plain), Char (island) and coastal areas, including two urban areas. Primarily qualitative data were gathered through key informant interviews, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with women’s and men’s groups, adolescent girls and boys, and local civil society partners and government stakeholders, to test and explain the Pillar’s contributions to impact. Consultative workshops were used to collate and consolidate evidence. A final sense-making workshop was then held with current and past Oxfam staff and partners to reflect on and further unpack the impact evaluation findings.

Figure 3. The EJRPillar impact evaluation process



This report integrates the findings and analysis of the EJRPillar impact evaluation⁷ with additional qualitative studies and survey findings to explain the Pillar’s contribution to increased income and livelihood security, and climatic and economic resilience.

4 EVALUATION FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The integrated impact evaluation found evidence of five areas of EJR Pillar contributions towards its goals of increasing incomes, livelihood security and climatic resilience among the poorest and most vulnerable women and men in Bangladesh. These contributions are numbered and mapped onto Figure 2 and discussed below.

FINDING 1. THE EJR PILLAR CONTRIBUTED SIGNIFICANTLY TO WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN HOUSEHOLDS, COMMUNITIES AND MARKETS

A key strategy of the EJR Pillar was to economically empower women by increasing their access to resources and markets. The REECALL and EDP programmes aimed to improve the incomes and opportunities of poor households by transforming women's responsibilities for unpaid work and promoting their leadership. Meanwhile, the GEM project focused on developing inclusive and climate-resilient agricultural value chains led by women.

FINDINGS

The impact evaluation found that the EJR Pillar economically empowered women in targeted project areas within households, communities and markets, but the impacts were uneven and there were some question marks over enterprise and value chain choices and sustainability.

'Sense-making workshop participants confirmed that ... women's economic empowerment and leadership were strongly strengthened through the EYW and REECALL projects. They reported that about 80% of the those who participated had increased their income through engaging in economic activities such as dairy farming, maize farming, and chili farming. They reflected that the establishment of the market linkages with women farmers was one of the key successes of the REECALL project across their 13 partners.'

(Impact evaluation report)

Within households, Pillar interventions expanded women's economic participation, by successfully challenging social norms around household and domestic work. As a result, women in project communities were able to spend less time on household chores and more time on income-generating activities. Households reported joint participation in agricultural and production activities (such as parboiling rice, winnowing paddy, and washing jute and harvesting) along with sharing household chores (including fetching water, collecting water for sanitary usage, childcare and care of elderly people). At the same time, many women reported having greater bargaining power in the household as a result of increased incomes.

An evaluation of the GEM project revealed a higher level of acceptance and participation by men in childcare and care of elderly people. Furthermore, women were increasingly empowered to challenge the status quo by openly requesting that men share responsibility for care work.

Within markets, EJR Pillar interventions empowered women through a combination of increasing access to finance and inputs, expanding enterprise activities and integrating women in selected strengthened value chains, particularly in the dairy, chili and maize sectors.

- **Improved access to finance.** In the case of dairy farming and some cash crops, bridging the partners' relationships with banks has enabled community-based organizations' (CBO) members to access finance through banks. In particular, access to credit through the revolving fund and the food bank has helped the marginalized population to be more economically resilient during disaster shocks. However, this access was limited to women entrepreneurs with medium-sized businesses and tended to exclude women entrepreneurs with smaller businesses.
- **Expanded enterprise activities.** Pillar interventions created new and diversified sustainable income-generating options for women. Investment in cheese processing, for example, has been instrumental in creating a captive forward market for the dairy value chain. Private sector investments in the forward value chain create captive markets that offer predictable pricing and sales volume. Other sectors, however, saw more limited success in shifting women from micro entrepreneurs into more highly skilled and capital-intensive production. The wage disparity continues to be stark, with women earning less than half their male counterparts in some instances.
- **Integration in strengthened value chains.** In selected value chains, extensive work was done to build the capacity of women farmers and producers, increase access to inputs and create access to markets. Most of the value chains worked well and market linkages had been developed. In some cases, however, the selection of a fragile value chain – such as ring slab, poultry, sanitary pads and tailoring – without comprehensive capacity, technological, financing and collective bargaining support, resulted in low returns on investment. As a result, some of the selected value chains for micro entrepreneurs and marginalized populations did not generate sufficient income for the households to graduate out of poverty.



CBO members in Rangpur District are performing a street drama on the topic of 'women's contribution in care work responsibilities'. Photo credit: RDRS partner staff.

ANALYSIS

The EJR Pillar worked effectively to **challenge household gender social norms** underpinning the allocation of domestic tasks. In part, this was caused by the economic empowerment of women as household income earners, which shifted the balance of power. There was also more direct project support to mutually strengthening processes for women that included increased decision making, dignity, access to control over resources, and reduced care work burden.

'In one village, women interviewees reported that male members of their households [even] jointly consult them ... to buy and sell a cow.'

(Impact evaluation report, citing key informant interview with Cahier Shurjomukhi Dol (CBO), Rowmari)

The EJR Pillar effectively targeted **women's market participation** through a combined strategic focus on finance, enterprise and value chains. The Pillar worked closely with CBOs to ensure that their financial records provided the required transaction evidence for banks to approve credit. As noted above, this strategy was successful in expanding access to finance among medium-sized enterprises but excluded micro entrepreneurs due to the evident mismatch in revenue and payment streams.

Through their exposure to CBOs best practice and with the training support from partners geared to new products, women gained the confidence to become producers, access the market and develop their own market linkages. Women entrepreneurs have done well with small-scale businesses, but progress towards becoming medium-scale businesses and engaging with mid-level intermediaries was weaker. Moreover, some of the ecologically friendly business support, such as with technical skills for

organic farming, required a much longer incubation period. The development of skills across the organic farming value chain would have generated more employment and better prices for agricultural outputs, along with environmental sustainability and climate resilience.

Market participation support at times failed to give sufficient weight to the collective bargaining power of women's producer groups, which is vital when negotiating in value chains with powerfully positioned intermediaries. Furthermore, Pillar support to enterprises and value chains was somewhat 'hit and miss' in its targeting of viable value chains. The selection of fragile value chains without comprehensive capacity, technological and financing support, resulted in low returns on investment. In part, this was a function of the uneven bargaining power of small producers competing with larger private sector operators over fair prices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings and analysis of the Pillar's contribution, the impact evaluation recommends that future programming invests further in the following key areas:

- Select value chains strategically. The selection of the value chain needs to take into account the size of the market, barriers to entry, scalability, adaptability, and return on investment. This means analysing the market to determine the size of the demand, prospective demand, and trends in consumption. Additionally, analysis needs to consider the nature of business competition in terms of barriers to entry and concentration of competitors in the market, as these determine the degree of margins available.
- Strengthen the strategic set up and collective bargaining capacity of women's producer groups. For scalability and sustainability in the market, collective bargaining power can be crucial. The producer groups in the REECALL and GEM projects, for instance, sell their products in the market individually. If a collection centre had been established where all the producers could accumulate their products and jointly sell to a large buyer, this could have increased the prices they secured for their agricultural or dairy products.
- Integrate aggregators and processors in key value chains. Local private sector entities in dairy and agricultural processing need to be integrated with producer groups in order to benefit from downstream diversification of products, particularly in milk and maize production.

'If the dairy producer groups can sell their products to a milk processing company, then the producer group will have a captive market within which to sell their milk at a competitive price. Similarly, maize producers can sell their surplus maize to small private entrepreneurs with grinding machines to prepare locally made chicken feed.'

(Impact evaluation report)

- Support capital investment for innovative businesses to increase their scale and margins. Oxfam supported several innovative businesses, such as those producing cotton sanitary pads, ring slabs, alternative bricks and shopping bags. Many entrepreneurs, however, could not scale up or were struggling to continue their business due to small revenue streams and low margins, reinforced by a lack of access to automated machinery. To ensure sustainability and higher profit margins, future programming should target capital investment. There is an opportunity here for greater private participation to build alignment between business interests and programmatic economic and social justice goals, while creating opportunities for private sector co-financing for product expansion and diversification.
- Support the certification of products, in collaboration with Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI). The commercial scale up of products is not possible without a BSTI license, which is also needed for entrepreneurs to properly package their products. Although BSTI licensing is a complex and expensive process, if there is collaboration between BSTI and the partner NGOs then the process can be simplified at the district level.



CBO members in Satkhira district are developing a business plan. Photo credit: Shushilan partner staff.

FINDING 2. THE EJR PILLAR EMPOWERED WOMEN WITHIN THEIR COMMUNITIES IN LEADERSHIP ROLES

The EJR Pillar brought a specific focus on women's positions in their communities as part of a broader goal of social, economic and political community empowerment.

FINDINGS

The evaluation confirmed that EJR Pillar interventions contributed to strengthening women's voices, positions and authority within their communities.

Notably, women had become more visible as participants in various community-level committees. This resulted in greater negotiating power among women in their communities and in their dealings with local government to improve access to public infrastructure and service delivery, such as repairing roads or access to widow's allowance.

'Women are more organized now and can resolve any issues regarding their community by getting involved with the local government.'

(Final sense-making workshop report)

'In Sunamganj, a woman was able to negotiate a settlement with the Land Office, which forced the office to rescind an order that would have deprived her of her housing allocation.'

(Impact evaluation report)

ANALYSIS

The Pillar's approach to women's community empowerment was strategically channelled through support to partner CBOs. This proved to be the key to successful community-level empowerment of women, increasing women's leadership qualities through their exposure to CBO best practices.

'Most of the CBOs were very strong, and the support from the CBO Sustainability (CS) Fund⁹ and different financial access made the CBOs sustainable. The members also benefited from this. All the activities have improved the quality of leadership, making them empowered in all aspects.'

(Final sense-making workshop report)

Since the CBOs were also strong bodies with a reputation for transparency, local governments and organizations could rely on them as monitoring partners. Local-level CBO alliances worked on monitoring the public financing service at the local level and then shared their findings on service delivery gaps with local and national governments (at times with the help of academics and researchers). The evaluation found evidence of national policy makers committing to policy implementation and revised budget allocations.

Project support to women's collective leadership targeted awareness raising and reducing gendered social norms, including early and forced marriage and the care work burden. Through project capacity building support, women engaged local government representatives, championing social programmes such as expanding the access of extremely poor households to government social safety-net support.

At the same time, Oxfam Bangladesh worked to facilitate links between women-led community initiatives and local duty bearers. Oxfam in turn worked directly at the national level on policy advocacy issues such as tax justice, fair milk prices for remote farmers, and fair wages for domestic workers.

Significantly, REECALL projects also worked to integrate economic empowerment support with community leadership promotion:

Women's leadership has been an integral part of REECALL: supporting women's inclusion in local decision-making bodies, thus elevating their socio-economic status and reducing violence against them, while fostering a more conducive environment for women's leadership and empowerment, and ultimately for gender equality.⁹

Finally, project support to engage women in disaster responses and recovery strengthened their community leadership role. REECALL targeted capacity-building support to women's leadership groups in disaster risk reduction initiatives, enabling them to build community awareness and adaptive strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear from the integrated reporting that the EJR Pillar proved successful in contributing to women's collective leadership in project communities, particular through its flagship projects. At the same time, leadership roles were largely confined to those women directly engaged in project activities, while significant patriarchal barriers to gender equality and women's leadership remain. Local advocacy for equitable budgets and services proved highly successful, but at times became somewhat disconnected from Oxfam's direct national policy advocacy efforts.

With these findings in mind, key recommendations are:

- Redouble efforts to engage male participants directly in reflections on women's community leadership roles, including encouraging attitude and behaviour changes on women's economic empowerment.
- Build future programming on the progress made on achieving greater gender equality around in-household care work in order to

institutionalize these behaviour changes and free up time for women’s community leadership.

- Sustain support to CBOs in their climate change action and local policy advocacy for fairer and more equitable budgeting and services.
- Sharpen future programme focus on building the capacity of project partners for national advocacy to pursue the CBO registration. The evaluation confirmed that only about half of all CBOs were registered during REECALL. The registration of CBOs is central to their sustainability. A national-level platform of strategic advocacy with the Ministry of Social Welfare could force district-level social welfare offices to speed up the registration of CBOs and enhance cooperation with Oxfam’s partner NGOs.



CBO members in Kurigram District are observing International Women’s Day. Photo credit: GUK partner staff.

FINDING 3. THE EJR PILLAR ECONOMICALLY EMPOWERED YOUNG PEOPLE, TACKLED ATTITUDES TOWARDS WOMEN'S ROLE AND RAISED AWARENESS AROUND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

The EJR Pillar brought an additional, specific focus on the economic empowerment of youth and the need to narrow the gender gap in norms and expectations, capabilities and opportunities for young women's economic participation. This focus on youth empowerment was a key element of REECALL and the Empower Youth for Work (EYW) project, among other Pillar projects.

FINDINGS

Project monitoring and evaluative reporting confirmed that EJR Pillar projects, notably EYW, successfully targeted young people with economic empowerment and accompanying behavioural and social norm change interventions.

The economic empowerment of youth emerged as an integral achievement of projects across the EJR Pillar. As one of its flagship initiatives, the REECALL programme achieved notable success in combining livelihood development with capacity building support for young people across project communities. Training and informal apprenticeship successes were recorded in the REECALL mid-term evaluation. Meanwhile, the PROTIC project created scope for young professionals to learn and share knowledge as interns. Ten male and female students secured internships during this project's pilot phase.

EYW had a positive impact on the agency and skills of young people and promoted youth entrepreneurship, especially for young women. Both young women and young men stated that EYW helped them to gain the skills and temperament necessary for them to explore new career paths, which contributed to better incomes.

This was confirmed by evidence from project reporting, including survey data collected at the EYW project endline. More than half of the EYW participants (53%) who were unemployed in 2015 had transitioned to self-employment in 2021. For young women participants, 62% who did not have a job in 2015 were entrepreneurs in 2021, while for young men, the figure was 44%. Overall, the employment rate among EYW participants increased from 10% at the baseline to 85% at endline.

Young people's incomes reportedly increased as a result, with almost all participants saying that their financial circumstances had improved significantly after their participation in the project.

EYW also contributed to greater gender equality. Social norms, according to the young people and community members, were now more supportive of young women's participation in employment than at the baseline. These improvements in the social context for youth were supported by a reduction

in the social sanctions against youth employment in project areas. This was reflected in reported changes in attitudes around households and earning activities. In the endline evaluation of EYW, young women reported that they believed their communities would now accept men doing household chores (for instance, collecting firewood or water). Community members' support for young women's employment increased between baseline and endline. An increase in personal attitudes and the normative expectation (approval of other community members) towards young women's employment was found.

Young people had become active in their communities in awareness activities around early marriage, violence against women and girls, recognition of unpaid care work, drug addiction, COVID-19 awareness and response, disaster risk awareness and preparedness, and organic cultivation. They also reported increased involvement in community development activities such as tree planting, road repairs, and organising sports activities. At the same time, improved employment opportunities and a sense of economic empowerment had reportedly reduced 'delinquency' among youth, especially among young men.

EYW had a positive impact on the number of young women who were more aware of what represented a threat of gender-based violence, on the percentage of young women who spoke up or took action against gender-based violence, and on increased gender-equality attitudes. Nonetheless, some young women still did not feel safe speaking up or taking action against gender-based violence.

Finally, EYW had a positive impact on young people's increased knowledge of family planning methods, improved perceptions of access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services, and increased knowledge of STDs. More than half of EYW participants, however, still did not have knowledge of family planning methods or did not know when girls are more likely to get pregnant, while a third thought that access to SRHR services was insufficient.



Youth group members in Khulna district are disseminating early warning messages about an upcoming cyclone. Photo credit: CODEC partner staff.

ANALYSIS

It is important to note that the EJR Pillar's ambitions for youth economic empowerment were undoubtedly limited by macro-economic conditions and a lack of employment opportunities caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite this, the initiatives made impressive gains in youth livelihood support and delivering training. EYW was notable in economically empowering young people – confirmed through the EYW project endline reporting – through its strategic combination of soft skills and vocational skills training with community conversations on social norms around youth employment, the division of unpaid care work, and positive impacts on youth employment, the entrepreneurship of young women, and the agency and skills of young women.

Soft skills training improved young people's capabilities to view a situation from different perspectives and to recognize opportunities (problem-solving skills). Through this soft-skill focus on agency and self-actualisation, youth participants (with no evident gender gap) felt more capable of changing things in their youth group, their community and for themselves and their families. The project contributed to an enabling environment where youth perceived themselves as facing relatively fewer age and gender restrictions on participating in economic activities.

Vocational skills training provided the springboard to entrepreneurship. The project was able to increase the percentage of EYW youth with technical skills from 19% at the baseline to 95% at endline. Significantly, the baseline gender gap in youth entrepreneurship skills had been closed.

To help translate agency and skills into jobs, the EYW focused on increased dissemination of information about job opportunities. At the baseline, only 7% of EYW participants said that they had had access to information on job opportunities. This increased to 53% at the midline and to 80% at the endline. This was allied with a project focus on increasing young people's access to finance to start up a business.

Although EYW had a positive impact on the employment rates of both young men and young women, at the endline, the employment rate among young men (99%) was higher than that of young women (72%). This indicated that access to economic opportunities was more limited for young women. The gender analysis showed a persistent labour income gap between young men and young women. For both labour income indicators analysed in this section, we found that young men earned more than young women.

Gender inequalities in social norms around youth employment were still present in the project areas. Despite the reduction in the frequency of sanctions against young women's employment, at the endline, social sanctions emerged more often for young women's employment than for young men's employment. Furthermore, social sanctions against young women's employment were still very common.

Finally, the project strategically integrated additional social norm elements into its primary focus on youth economic empowerment. In this way, the intervention was successfully able to shift some resistant gender social norms, as seen in attitude and behaviour changes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The EJR Pillar projects achieved remarkable positive impacts for youth economic empowerment, given the harsh economic conditions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nevertheless, some challenges need further work to fully achieve young people's economic empowerment. Several key recommendations emerged, specific to the EYW project but which have wider application.

- Redouble efforts to tackle high unemployment among young women and to close the gender income gap, which persists in project areas. This means persevering with efforts to tackle gendered social norms around youth employment and the unequal division of unpaid care work.
- Focus more strategically on access to finance. Many young people who applied for a loan to start up a business were not able to secure it, and a lack of access to finance was one of the main barriers to employment.
- Focus more attention on the graduation from training to apprenticeships. While young people's enrolment in apprenticeship programmes increased through the course of the project, the levels remained very low. Consider expanding support to advocacy for decent work standards for those young 'graduates' that go into paid employment.
- More generally, work harder on the link between training and market participation among trained youth. Project partners reported that they were rolling out business growth support and eagerly await the first results.



CBO members in Ranpur district observed International Women's Day. Photo credit: RDRS partner staff.

FINDING 4. THE EJR PILLAR CONTRIBUTED TO COMMUNITY CAPACITY TO TACKLE CLIMATE SHOCKS AND INCREASED RESILIENCE IN KEY AREAS, INCLUDING HOUSING AND WASH

The EJR Pillar focused strategically on empowering and strengthening resilience among women and youth to climate change-induced vulnerabilities. At the same time, the Pillar sought to influence the policy environment and duty bearers to strengthen community social protection, and deliver policies for climate change action, disaster management and improved natural resource management.

Specific projects supported different aspects of climate resilience within communities, including the PROTIC project which built evidence for the inclusion of digital technologies to support the climate resilience of women farmers.

FINDINGS

This evaluation found compelling evidence that the EJR Pillar was successful in its aim of strengthening climate resilience among the most vulnerable communities.

Community disaster preparedness had been strengthened through the Pillar's support to CBO-led disaster risk reduction. There was strong evidence regarding the increased capacity of women CBO members to tackle disaster crises in an organized and systematic manner. CBO leaders had received disaster resilience training, where they learned about weather-resilient crops, which they found useful. Additional project inputs facilitated climate-resilient agricultural practices. PROTIC, for example, increased accessibility to high-quality seeds in the project site of Nilphamari from 25% at baseline to 63% at midline.¹⁰

The evaluation found evidence of a strong positive impact on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in project communities. The introduction of double-headed tube wells, piped water supplies, faecal sludge management, and solid waste management through the Resilient City in Bangladesh project had contributed to the improvement of WASH in both rural and urban areas. Communities in rural areas also adopted climate-resilient WASH infrastructure projects – including wave-resistant latrines and high-ground tube wells and water tanks – which contributed to better access to clean water, and improved latrine facilities.

The projects were also successful in supporting other infrastructure investments for increased resilience to climate-induced disasters. In REECALL, for instance, these involved adapting different housing materials and construction techniques. Elsewhere, pond sand filters had been successful in creating access to the fresh water for communities, although the high cost of the battery meant that communities relied on external support.

'In Rowmari, the entire community – from union members to youth groups – were engaged on WASH issues.'

(Impact evaluation report, citing focus group discussion with youth group)

Meanwhile the instigation of food banks in project communities as part of REECALL had improved income and disaster resilience and provided quasi-insurance against shocks among more vulnerable households, although with a reported lack of guidelines on membership and modality. Young people received training in taking care of elderly people and people living with disabilities during natural disasters. In times of disasters, they use mosque loudspeakers to warn the community.

There was also evidence of impact on climate-resilient livelihoods. This included reported increased uptake of saline-tolerant crops and crop diversification, while generally women farmers promoted fewer carbon emission livelihood activities. Limitations in technical capacity building for agroecological farming meant that more time and longer training was required to transform it into community practice.

There were mixed results on the sustainability of climate resilience investments, in large part because the index-based insurance mechanism did not provide adequate payments to cover losses due to disaster. Moreover, the communities were unlikely to be able to cover the premium.



Climate vulnerable community members in Satkhira district (a salinity prone area) collected safe drinking water from PSF centre. Photo credit: Shushilan partner staff.

ANALYSIS

The Pillar's approach to disaster preparedness focused effectively on supporting CBOs' collective capacity for analysis and action. Through the REECALL programme's introduction of participatory climate vulnerability analysis (PCVA) and vulnerability risk analysis (VRA) involving CBOs and local authority disaster management committees, community capacity was

strengthened to help shape the disaster response of the government while also strengthening their own disaster preparedness.

Meanwhile, REECALL support to women-led community leadership was well targeted and sustainably delivered (see Finding 2). Through these initiatives, young women increased their access to vocational training and employment opportunities, including access to finance to start or expand their own business (see Finding 3).

The delivery of WASH infrastructure was widely appreciated, even when this meant that costs were higher (for example, for wave-resistant latrines). In such cases, the project's strategic decisions to adopt a more expensive approach were often viewed as both more practical and more sustainable.

A small but significant number of these innovative infrastructure projects – such as the piped water supply and community-based desalinisation plants – attained limited coverage while generating very high operational and maintenance costs which were unlikely to be covered by the community without government support. Despite this evident need for government intervention, there had been limited national-level policy advocacy to scale up and replicate Oxfam's innovative investments in WASH.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear from the integrated reporting that the EJR Pillar proved successful in contributing to climate resilience within project communities, particularly through its flagship projects. Key recommendations are:

- Target stronger climate justice policy advocacy to secure investments at scale from the government to replicate the innovative practices of Oxfam's WASH interventions. Future programming should mitigate sustainability concerns around infrastructure investment costs through a redoubling of emphasis on policy influence and alliance building, a key component of the Pillar's Theory of Change.
- Institute standard operating procedures for food banks. The buffering role of food banks was highly valued but now requires a clear constitution and rules on the exclusion or inclusion of new group members, changes in funding modality during disaster shocks, and so on. At present these rules are usually set by influential CBO members and are susceptible to elite capture. An agreed and localized Standard Operating Procedure – developed through a consultative process and with incentivized and trained personnel – will ensure better governance and the smooth operation of the food bank model.
- Engage the private sector in operating SWM and FSM. While project partners were successful in getting municipalities to allocate land and invest in establishing SWM and operating FSM services, most municipalities did not have the capacity to properly bear the additional management burden, which has implications for sustainability. Examples of private sector participation in revenue-sharing agreements with the municipality point the way to a more sustainable path for these investments.

'In Kushtia and Benapole, AID foundation has taken [on] the responsibility of operating both the FSM and SWM services with revenue-sharing agreement with the municipality.'

(Impact evaluation report)

FINDING 5. THE PILLAR CONTRIBUTED EFFECTIVELY TO PARTNERS' COLLECTIVE CAPACITY, ALTHOUGH WITH CONCERNS EXPRESSED OVER POST-PROJECT SUSTAINABILITY

The EJR Pillar aimed to build the collective capacity of Pillar partners (including Oxfam) to exert and sustain greater influence on its EJR objectives, through organisational and financial strengthening, improved knowledge management and communication, and increased joint influencing powers.

FINDINGS

The evaluation found strong evidence of Oxfam's positive role in building the capacity of partners, although with considerable concerns expressed over post-project sustainability.

Selected partners benefited from the strategic guidance and support from Oxfam's administrative, project, business development, communication, and financial management systems. In turn, Oxfam's benefits from partnership building included its scope and reach, including access to rural areas enabled by partner organizations.

The evaluation produced weaker evidence on the effectiveness of joint fundraising to sustain flagship projects such as REECALL, EDP and TROSA.

NGO partners reported facing an ongoing challenge in the critically important process of registering local CBO partners. This was due, in the first instance, to a lack of preparation of the CBOs themselves to manage the documentation; second to a lack of capacity on the part of the partners to develop the capacity of CBOs; and third, the supply-side challenge of reported corruption and governance issues in the registration process within the Department of Social Welfare.

ANALYSIS

Recognising the importance of effective partnerships to shifting policy and practices, the EJR Pillar adopted a highly focused and effective partnership-building approach that emphasized a decentralized and bottom-up modality.

The effectiveness of the Pillar’s partnership building was built on solid foundations of commitment and a theory of action. From the outset, the Pillar committed to a partner-led approach to implementation – with a focus on ownership and sustainability – as opposed to a managerialist, top-down technocratic style of delivery.

This involved a diversified and decentralized approach to partnerships based on the principle of mutuality of partnerships in reputation, networking and alliance building, underpinned by clear commitments from Oxfam and trust in Oxfam as a partner.

Diversification meant that the Pillar embraced coalitions and networks of CBOs, CSOs, the private sector, research organizations and government agencies, and local partners that worked collaboratively through project cycles.

Decentralization involved placing project decision making closer to impact areas and providing greater flexibility in project delivery to partners. While partners acknowledged that monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL) functions had been decentralized, there was less clarity on the extent to which decision-making authority and autonomy had been meaningfully decentralized.

In respect of Pillar strategy, there was a recognized need to link local-level action and networks vertically with national-level policy advocacy, feeding community voices and locally generated evidence into policy discussions. This linking of local change to national policy advocacy was, however, a consistently reported weakness across the Pillar’s areas of contribution.



CBO members and their counterparts in Gaibandha district are conducting a rapid care analysis. Photo credit: SKS partner staff.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given this largely positive but somewhat mixed set of findings on partner capacity building, several key recommendations emerge:

- Tackle the post-project sustainability question by promoting capacity building above the programme/project level. This will involve creating budgets and protecting staff time to foster cross-learning and capacity building beyond a given programme, and to consider more regular and frequent capacity building efforts.
- Assess partners' capacity on business value creation as well as on promoting a rights-based approach. Recognising this distinction, there is an opportunity for Oxfam to strengthen the synergies between business and rights-based values in its future support to partnership strengthening. This means building capacities among rights-based NGOs on an inclusive market systems approach, while working with business-driven NGOs to integrate a more rights-based approach into their strategic framework.
- Build partners' capacity for national-level advocacy. There is a clear need and opportunity for future programming to redouble its work on linking local-level innovation and change to higher-level policy mainstreaming. To achieve this, Oxfam will need to adopt a more strategic approach to scaling these innovative approaches through more investment in national-level advocacy and building the capacity of partners to engage in national-level policy advocacy – including on the specific issue of CBO registration – as needed.



Producer group member in Niphamari district produced handicraft materials. Photo credit: Pollishree partner staff.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The Economic Justice and Resilience Pillar of the Oxfam Bangladesh Country Strategy 2016–19 was an ambitious and far-reaching portfolio of initiatives conducted across widely varying contexts and with a large cast of partners. This integrated evaluation report is the result of a rich study process that captured this ambitious complexity through a careful sequencing of mixed-method data collection and multi-stakeholder sense making and analysis, overseen by a conscientious steering committee. The result is a robust and well-tested set of results backed by an in-depth analytical narrative.

It is important to remember that the EJR Pillar, with its focus on economic empowerment and resilience, was implemented during an extremely challenging period of macro-economic contraction caused by prolonged national COVID-19 lockdown measures. Despite this ambitious scope and challenging context, this integrated report has confirmed that the Pillar has been highly successful and effective across several of its flagship projects. Through a rigorous six-step process involving integrated secondary and primary data collection, tested and reflected on by Pillar stakeholders at key moments, the evaluation has uncovered compelling evidence of economic empowerment of women and youth, emerging enterprises and value chains that create more highly skilled and capital-intensive opportunities for women producers, strengthened community-level climate resilience, and partnership strengthening at different levels.

In securing these achievements, the EJR Pillar has, in general, maintained its alignment with Oxfam's Country Strategy. The Pillar's focus on economic justice is clear, although it should not be confused with a broader, rights-based notion of systemic justice for excluded and vulnerable groups which was for the most part outside the scope of this initiative.

Key challenges emerged, among them the need to sustain and deepen gains in addressing gendered economic inequality and underpinning social norms; to get better at identifying and supporting new enterprises and transformative value chains; to institutionalize local mechanisms – notably food banks and revolving credits – through standard operating protocols; to advocate more effectively for national policy support for scaling climate-resilient technical innovations; and to build and sustain partners' capacity outside and beyond the fixed life of programmes and projects.

Addressing these challenges will help energize Oxfam Bangladesh and its partners to build momentum towards a new phase of operational support for their ongoing economic justice and resilience strategic goals. There is an added opportunity here to raise the ambition of future strategies higher still to tackle some of the more systemic justice challenges that sustain unequal economic opportunities and outcomes for the poorest and most vulnerable people in Bangladesh.

ANNEX: EJR PILLAR THEORY OF CHANGE DIAGRAMS

Figure A1. Meta-Theory of Change – How the Pillar aimed at building economic empowerment

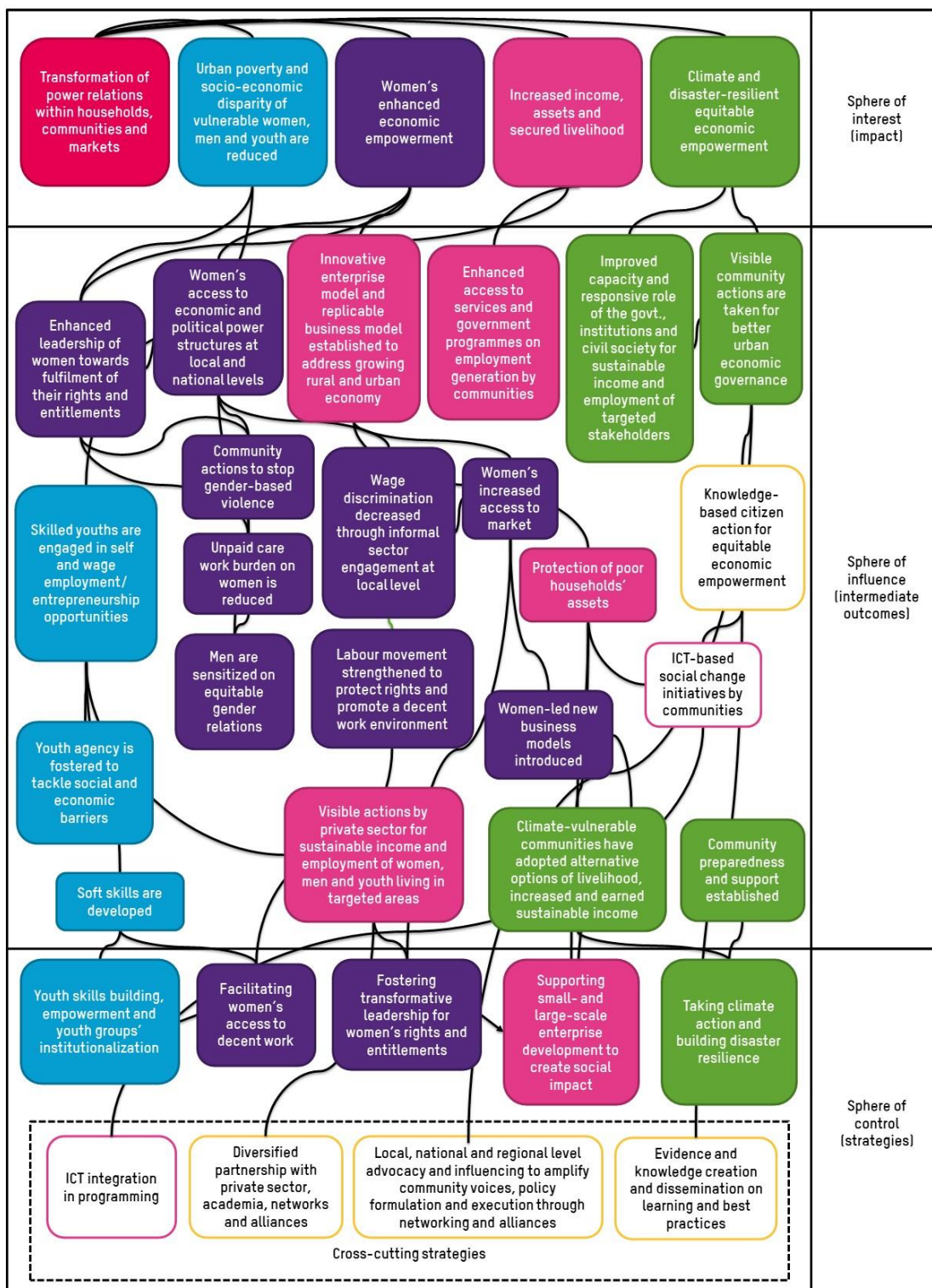


Figure A2. Meta-Theory of Change – How the Pillar aimed to build climate resilience

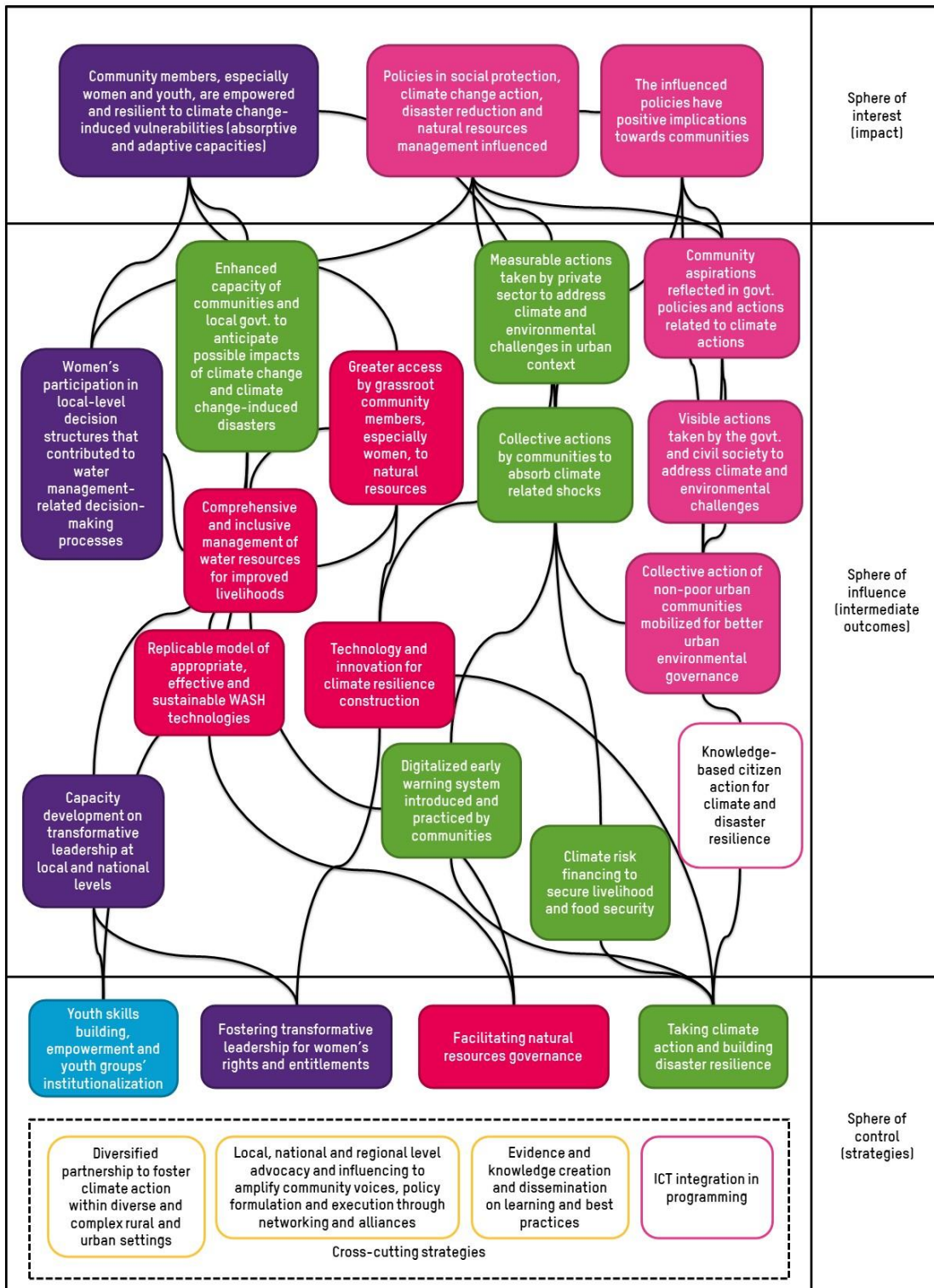
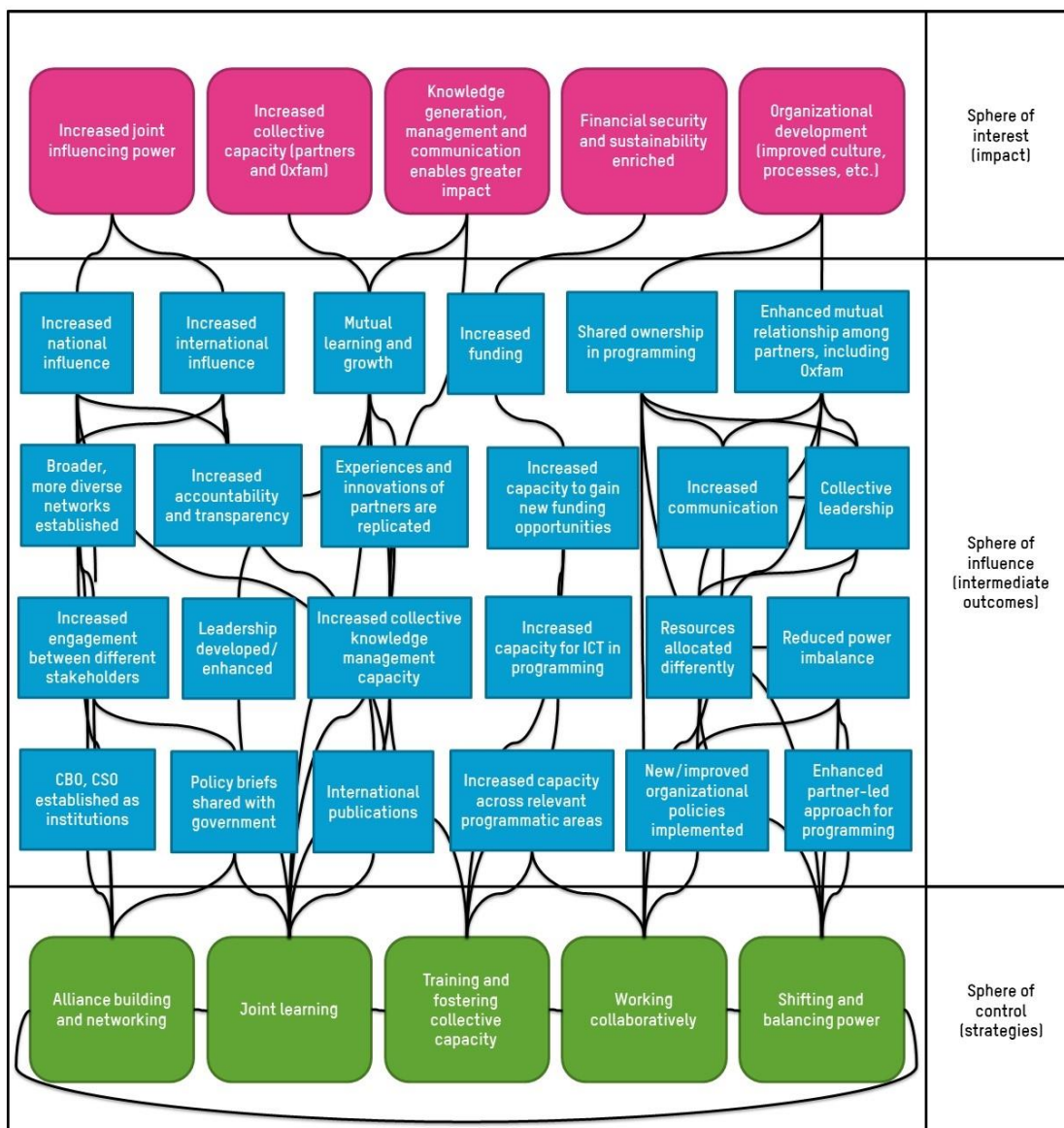


Figure A3. Meta-Theory of Change – how the Pillar aimed at building partners’ collective capacity (including Oxfam)



NOTES

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- 1 One being the REECALL programme, which is itself made up of several projects.

 - 2 For more detail on the REECALL Programme, see Oxfam Bangladesh. (2022). Action Plan on Gender Transformative Resilient Programming Experiences from Bangladesh, unpublished report, March.

 - 3 Oxfam Bangladesh. (2021). Design Workshop: Summary of the Reflections from the Group Works
Impact Evaluation of the Economic Justice and Resilience Pillar of Oxfam Bangladesh 2016–19 OCS, unpublished report.

 - 4 Catalyzing Sustainable Transformation (CaST) Network. (2022). Final Report: Impact Evaluation of Oxfam Bangladesh’s Economic Justice and Resilience OCS Pillar, Unpublished report, 6 September.

 - 5 The secondary data included project and programme midline evaluations and final evaluations, as well as donor reports.

 - 6 This process guided which primary data would be gathered and analysed.

 - 7 CaST Network. (2022). Final Report.

 - 8 This fund was provided by REECALL and supported the recovery of COVID-impacted CBO members who were involved in income-generating activities.

 - 9 Z. Skakun, I. Smyth and V. Minne. (2021). Gender-Transformative Resilience Programming: Experiences from Bangladesh and Myanmar. Oxfam Research Report, Oxford: Oxfam. Retrieved 6 October 2022, from <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/10546/621195/1/rr-gender-transformative-resilience-programming-140421-en.pdf>

 - 10 PROTIC Results-Based Monitoring Report.

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This publication was compiled by Jeremy Holland, based on the final evaluation report by Syed Muntasir Ridwan (Catalyzing Sustainable Transformation (CaST) Network), Dr. Nabila Idris (CaST) and Shamir Shehab (CaST), and other relevant documents.

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For further information on the issues raised in this publication please email policyandpractice@oxfam.org.uk

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