



TRANSFORMING THE SYSTEM OF HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE



OXFAM



ABOVE LEFT / Strong partner capacity: Scene from a hygiene kit distribution in Guinea-Bissau. Oxfam partner NADEL prepared communities along the border with Guinea to prevent outbreaks of both cholera and Ebola. “Now we know to wash hands with soap after using the toilet and before eating,” says resident Murida Sa (not shown here). “Knowing how to prevent Ebola has been good for us. Now we are not afraid. We are ready to face Ebola.”
Elizabeth Stevens / Oxfam America

ABOVE RIGHT / Working with governments and NGOs: In Lima, Peru, and its environs, earthquake risks are high, and the water and sanitation infrastructure is fragile. Oxfam and a local partner have brought key government and NGO actors together to create a working group and a set of protocols for handling earthquake responses. Now, says Claudia Salas, who works in Lima’s Department of Health Management and leads the group, “we have the coordination we need to act quickly in an emergency.”
Elizabeth Stevens / Oxfam America

Oxfam is helping build a movement to shift power and resources into the hands of local humanitarian leaders.

Across the globe, armed conflicts are triggering crisis after crisis, with no end in sight, and climate-related emergencies are on the rise. The number of people uprooted from their homes has reached a staggering 65 million, and international aid providers have been stretched to their limits. Now we face a choice: fall far short in our mission to save lives and prevent suffering in emergencies, or find a better way forward.

Oxfam and allied organizations are charting a new course—one that is based on the age-old humanitarian principle of neighbor helping neighbor.

THE FIRST TO ARRIVE, THE LAST TO LEAVE

When disasters strike, local people spring into action to save lives. They perform search-and-rescue operations and first aid, and make sure there is food and shelter for their neighbors. They understand the languages, cultures, and geography of the disaster-affected areas. And because they are helping their own communities, they are often the most dedicated humanitarian responders of all—the first to arrive on the scene and the last to leave. In many cases, their local and national governments are ready and willing to lead the way on evacuations and aid delivery, and to collaborate in reducing future risks.

In other words, many local and national responders are well qualified to take charge in times of crisis.

But there are inequities in the humanitarian system: the UN and major international aid agencies receive the lion’s share of international funding

for disaster responses, and with it an inordinate amount of decision-making power during emergencies. Meanwhile, local leaders are often overlooked and overshadowed.

This needs to change.

TACKLING INEQUALITY IN THE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM

International actors like Oxfam play a crucial role in times of crisis, rushing aid to the scene of disaster when a country’s government is unable or unwilling to do so. In the most catastrophic emergencies like the Syria conflict and the Nepal earthquake of 2015, local responders may always need our help. But to ensure sustainable gains, international aid providers have another critical role: to strengthen the capacity that is there.

One facet of this work is sharing skills with local partners, from developing expertise in first response and risk reduction to helping strengthen advocacy and fundraising capacity.

Another is improving the system for funding local humanitarians—not only increasing the amount of money made available but also helping improve the terms of agreement. Does a funder cast a local organization as a contractor that must do its bidding, or does it embrace the local perspective and priorities? Does a grant cover only program costs, or does it aim to strengthen the organization by helping cover overhead expenses? Many local organizations have been on the receiving end of funding arrangements that impede their progress, and this needs to change.



CASE STUDY: STRENGTHENING LOCAL PARTNERS

It used to be that the rainy season each year in Guinea-Bissau ushered in an unwelcome guest: cholera. Some years, there were more than 10,000 cases. In 2010, Oxfam partner NADEL—the National Association for Local Development—launched a campaign to promote good hygiene and cholera awareness. Teams of local health outreach workers fanned out through vulnerable areas, disseminating information door to door, and helping families construct latrines and hand-washing stations—a crucial grass-roots link to a wider response that included the UN and national and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The joint strategy was successful. Cholera risks subsided, and since 2013, not a single case has been recorded.

But in 2014, Ebola emerged in neighboring Guinea, posing an even greater threat. With its porous borders and fragile health system, Guinea-Bissau was at tremendous risk. NADEL sprang into action, bolstering the government's health surveillance at the borders, intensifying hygiene-promotion work in the communities, and teaching a lesson that could save a thousand lives: how to detect and contain a case of Ebola.

Guinea-Bissau beat the odds. The devastating disease never slipped across the border, so community preparedness wasn't

put to the test. But by arming people with knowledge, NADEL was able to ease the terror that once gripped communities on the frontlines of this emergency.

At every step along the way in these responses, NADEL coordinated closely with the authorities, and when the worst was over, Oxfam and NADEL helped the government launch a new emergency operations center and develop a set of protocols to improve the speed and quality of future responses.

Oxfam's approach to its partner NADEL: rather than simply fund its programs, invest in the organization itself.

"Oxfam has provided NADEL with trainings in communications and advocacy, monitoring and evaluation, writing proposals and reports, and gathering data," says NADEL director Sidi Jaquité. "An Oxfam staff member was deployed for a year to help us learn to build safe wells and improve chlorination of water at the community level. Oxfam helped us purchase and renovate our office, and buy the trucks we need to reach the villages. When an IOM [International Organization for Migration] representative visited our office and saw our financial systems and the way we work, he said, 'Now, this is an organization,' and he was happy to fund our programs. This is thanks to Oxfam."

ABOVE LEFT / In the shadow of war: Local NGOs like Basmeh and Zeitooneh (in English, the name means "a smile and an olive") which provides education and employment opportunities to refugees of the Syrian war in Lebanon, can help people thrive in turbulent times. *Jesco Denzel*

ABOVE RIGHT / When violence is the crisis: Children gather outside a secondary school in Mogadishu, Somalia, that has been supported by the Elman Peace Center, an Oxfam partner. Local organizations can continue to function in crises where extreme security risks make it difficult for international staff to be effective. *Petterik Wiggers / Oxfam Novib*

// We can do search and rescue, and make sure everyone has food and water and shelter. We can apply a tourniquet and splint a broken leg with a piece of wood. We act fast, and we can save lives, especially if we have training and support. //

—Sara Torres, community leader in a precarious mountainside community near Lima, Peru



ELIZABETH STEVENS / OXFAM AMERICA

COVER IMAGE: Karen Ramírez of Oxfam partner PRO-VIDA meets with other aid providers to discuss their joint response to a storm surge emergency in El Salvador. Oxfam and partners like PRO-VIDA are helping keep Salvadorans in the driver's seat in disaster response.

"Traditional global humanitarian responses to emergencies do not strengthen our communities or local organizations," says Ramírez. "They weaken us and make us dependent. Oxfam believes in building on local capacity. Instead of bringing international staff to do things for us, they have taught us how to do the things ourselves."

Elizabeth Stevens / Oxfam America

GOVERNMENTS ARE DUTY BOUND TO LEAD

While local organizations have key roles to play in emergencies, the overall responsibility for disaster management rests with governments, so strengthening local leadership includes helping governments improve their disaster management systems.

Governments are duty bound to protect their citizens, but many devote only a small share of their resources to disaster management, and those that are implicated in conflicts may be unwilling or unable to deliver aid impartially to everyone in need.

Therefore, strengthening local humanitarian leadership is also about helping disaster-affected people understand their rights and hold their governments accountable. For example, Oxfam provided in-depth training to an organization in war-torn Somalia on influencing international policymakers. The group then advocated successfully with the African Union and the UN Security Council to bring pressure to bear on the Somali government around protection of civilians.

OUR VISION: LOCAL PEOPLE IN THE LEAD

Oxfam is helping build a movement to shift power, knowledge, and resources from inter-

national actors to local humanitarian leaders around the world to create a more fair, effective, and sustainable system, and one that strengthens disaster-vulnerable countries and communities over time. We are working to influence global policies and practices by speaking out at international forums, advocating for new methods of funding emergency response, documenting practical ways to boost local capacity and leadership, engaging with the private sector, and finding ways to bring women's leadership to the forefront. We are joining forces with national allies and partners to campaign for stronger investments in local humanitarian leadership. And we are looking at ourselves with a critical eye—committing to build more equitable policies and relationships to help our local partners grow and thrive.

"Oxfam has seen time and again that the best humanitarian responses have local people, organizations, and governments at their core, with international groups supporting as needed," says Raymond Offenheiser, president of Oxfam America. "Local people are already there, know what their communities truly need, and will remain long after the international attention wanes. We must ensure that these true first responders have the resources and power they need to make decisions for themselves and their communities."



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