

Executive Summary

Rationale & Methodology

Oxfam GB carried out a variety of Public Health & Livelihoods interventions in response to the October 2005 earthquake. Some of the activities in the rehabilitation/reconstruction phase (May 2006 through January 2007) included water supply scheme reconstruction, latrine & bathhouse construction, child-to-child activities, training with students, teachers, community health workers, line department staff and volunteers; agriculture and livestock distributions, and asset restoration matching grants to communities.

As well as the challenges of an ambitious work plan, staff went through a major change management process at the end of the emergency phase, involving closure of two projects, and a 70% staff reduction. Even in this context, Oxfam maintained very high standards and expectations regarding the quality of programs, in terms of accountability to beneficiaries, transparency, ensuring maximum benefits to the poorest people, and a positive, equitable, respectful working environment.

Given the intensive scrutiny of EQ program procedures in 2006, including program and finance audits and a finance & logs review, all of which made recommendations for improved performance in future emergencies and within the EQ program, we felt the Earthquake Review could afford to focus on different aspects of the program. While Oxfam emphasizes and values the 'softer, quality components' of humanitarian response, we rarely have the opportunity to specifically focus on, examine and evaluate our performance in these areas. Management therefore decided to make aspects of Program Quality the focus of the Earthquake Review.

We chose 5 topics to cover in depth in the two-day review meeting. **Advocacy, media, and communications** was an obvious choice, both because of Oxfam's lead role and prolific work in this field, and because of issues and recommendations already emerging, but still needing to be specifically articulated and documented. Similarly, **cross-cultural workplace & communications** issues are organizationally recognized as needing greater conscious attention and study, for OGB to achieve its multicultural aspirations. This was an area where problems were at times apparent in the EQ response, and the review provided a rare opportunity for these to be safely brought out for further discussion & learning. How decisions are made in Oxfam, particularly **decisions about the scale and duration of the EQ response** remained a burning issue for many staff, and one which management felt greater mutual understanding could bring closure and organizational benefit, if not agreement. Our ways of working with local **partner organizations**, and how partnerships functioned in the first phase was another topic, also of great interest to Oxfam Novib, where it is clear we still have lessons to learn and can be open to suggestions for improvement. Finally, it was felt useful to see how we were doing and whether there are ways to improve our work on issues of **gender equality and beneficiary accountability**.

Participants represented a balance of field and support staff from all sectors and departments, and included representatives of HD, ID and RMC management & advisors. Methodology was designed to encourage reflection, debate, openness, and opportunity for respectful challenging of assumptions and attitudes. A great deal of credit goes to senior managers from Oxford, the region, and the Pakistan program who met these challenges in a positive and learning frame of mind, and to staff who raised and also responded to questions with the same attitude. The tone of the workshop was set by opening with a parliamentary style debate on the topic, "OGB's earthquake response demonstrated that high quality humanitarian response can be delivered quickly & appropriately in first-phase emergencies." Lots of valid and less valid arguments were raised by both sides.

Each of the 5 sessions opened with a presentation designed to raise issues and focus attention on the topic: a panel discussion, a brief talk, review of questionnaire results or an open forum session. The greatest part of review and identification of key issues and lessons took place in structured small group sessions, where participants were pre-selected (usually by sector or position level) to address specific questions on each topic. A variety of methods were used to feed back and/or record information and recommendations coming from the small groups. Plenary sessions also served to highlight key points and ensure a wide range of viewpoints were heard.

Main Lessons Learned

Advocacy, Media, Communications

A panel of AMC Team and management briefly gave their perceptions of the strengths & weakness of advocacy/media work, and what they would do differently next time, followed by open discussion and comments from the floor. Small sectoral group discussions addressed questions about the relevance and effectiveness of AMC work from their various perspectives.

- What worked well: Investment in terms of staff capacity, resources and management commitment resulted in Oxfam making strong contributions to EQ advocacy. This had concrete impacts on policies affecting EQ survivors, and in establishing Oxfam's role as a lead agency and authority on EQ advocacy among INGOs and with the government.
- What needs improvement: The links between local operational field-level activities and those taking place centrally in Islamabad, particularly in terms of more bottom-up agenda setting, building beneficiary awareness of their right to speak up about policies; improved understanding of the different perspectives & interests of program and advocacy staff (induction); involving field program staff in advocacy work; investing resources in AMC capacity at field level; better linking to national partners; better support staff exposure to the operational program.

Cross-Cultural Issues

The objective of this session was heightened awareness of the existence and impact of cultural differences, the challenges of cross-cultural work, and recommendations to support positive ways of working.

Results of an EQ staff survey showing highly divergent opinions and experiences of working with international staff were on display. Small groups discussed various aspects of cultural differences and presented their findings about the positives & negatives of each, as they emerged in the EQ program. Two panels presented, on "Challenges of managing international staff working in Pakistan: problems & how we overcame them," and, "Challenges of being an international manager in Pakistan." These were followed by open plenary discussion.

- Effective: Evaluation comments highlight the significance of Oxfam acknowledging the impact, importance and influence of cross-cultural dynamics on program outcomes and effectiveness. The conscious management decision for national staffing was seen as another positive, as is greater investment in national HR capacity.
- Needs improvement: Cross-cultural work requires much more investment from all in establishing good personal relations, in sensitizing ones own attitude and behavior to values and communications styles of others. There is a lot more work to be done to

make Oxfam values of multiculturalism and equality a reality, and this can only happen if there is expectation that these are reflected in personal values and behaviour of staff, and are meaningfully included in performance management. The unequal power relations between international and national staff resulted in various tensions around management mandate and responsibility that need to be acknowledged and addressed. The combination of emergency and cross-cultural contexts requires simplification of organograms and management structures, when in practice the opposite often happens.

Decisions of Scale

The intent here was to achieve a shared understanding of how the decision to scale down was made, and to identify any other criteria that might be taken into account in making such decisions. Following management presentations about the criteria used to decide the size, funding and duration of emergency responses in general, and the EQ response in particular, participants worked in small groups to agree on and submit specific (anonymous, written) questions and observations about Pakistan EQ decisions to senior managers.

- What was effective: This session was characterized by some tension and critical attitudes of staff toward management regarding the decision to scale down. But while it was clear there would not be agreement from all participants on decisions taken, evaluation comments show that many appreciated the chance to question management directly, and credit the opportunity for frank and open discussion with increasing overall understanding of these decisions.
- Where improvement is needed: The need for clear and timely decisions, and the communication of these and their rationale through all levels of the organization. In future, consideration might also be given to the profile created by Oxfam's response in the first phase, and consequent public and stakeholder expectations, in deciding the course of a humanitarian response; greater consultation and perhaps better information-gathering than was achieved. There was a repeated view that decisions to scale up and/or scale down should be more participatory and democratic, but a consistent response that this is probably not practical or realistic;

Working with Partners

This session was intended to evaluate positive and negatives aspects of the first-phase partnerships, and make recommendations for improving them in future. Groups reviewed OI aspirational statements about partnership, to keep these ideals in mind when discussing the reality of work with partners in the EQ response.

Oxfam needs to be more clear in first-phase emergency, whether it is building partner relationships or merely outsourcing activities; we need to be more clear about the qualities we need in first-phase emergency partners;

- What proved effective: Clear recognition among participants of the benefits of working with partners, in terms of access to affected communities, partner's superior knowledge, links, relationships and experience with beneficiary communities and cultures, and sustainability.
- What needs improvement: The lack of a continuous integrated and well-defined approach for working with partners in different phases of the response; the lack of clarity and consistency around process, criteria and level at which decisions for partnership are taken; that partners lack many of the criteria and capacities to work

according to Oxfam standards; the lack of a common internal understanding and definition of what partnership means.

Aspects of Quality: Gender & Accountability

By means of a rapid organizational self-evaluation, this session was intended to highlight some aspects of program quality we might seek to improve, and to identify steps that could be taken to do so.

- What works well: We scored ourselves high on responding to the genuine needs of beneficiaries, targeting the poorest and most vulnerable, efforts to hire women staff, a positive work environment where mistakes can be acknowledged, appropriate & respectful behaviour toward beneficiaries, and providing useful inputs;
- Where we can improve: We scored lower on our ability to build beneficiary skills & capacity, to ensure that women have meaningful input on committees, our ability to assess and report on quality as well as quantity, that our work has an impact on who has a say in the community, that women beneficiaries have the knowledge and confidence to make complaints, and that our work increases the security and well-being of women. Recommendations highlighted the importance of having female staff, of improving M&E tools and practice, better feedback and communication mechanisms. Meaningful participation, information-sharing, awareness-raising and capacity-building in communities and with our own staff all take a lot of time. This was found to be difficult (and perhaps not very realistic) in such a short program.

Organizational Follow-up

There was a clear management commitment to take on board and develop further learning on cross-cultural issues; information from this session has already been forwarded and circulated for discussion in HQ departments. Interest in and commitment to pursuing a number of other issues raised, as well as replicating/refining some of the methodologies used, was also expressed by participants from various departments, sectors and levels. The participation of a wide range of people, many of whom will continue in humanitarian work, hopefully ensures some of the key points made and discussed here will actually be retained and acted on in future, as lessons genuinely 'learned'.