

OXFAM'S COLONIAL HISTORY – AN INTRACTABLE IMBALANCE OF POWER? CULTURE AND LEADERSHIP FOR REAL CHANGE

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Introduction

Oxfam's structure and funding women's rights organisations

Oxfam Great Britain (Oxfam GB) is part of Oxfam Confederation, a multi-national confederation working in over 90 countries worldwide fighting inequality to end poverty and injustice. One of 21 affiliates that make up the Oxfam Confederation, Oxfam GB operates in difficult and fragile locations like Yemen, Nepal, Malawi, Ethiopia, Iraq and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), spending £230 million in 2023 on humanitarian aid, development programmes, global campaigns, and multi-level advocacy. Oxfam's Confederation is structured such that each of the countries in which Oxfam operates has an Executing Affiliate (the Oxfam affiliate who provides administrative functions) and at least one Partner Affiliate (the Oxfam affiliate that provides program funding, support and technical advice). In the OPT, for example, Oxfam GB is a partner affiliate with Novib (Oxfam in The Netherlands) as the executing affiliate.

In 2020, Oxfam GB began a pilot program in OPT and Kenya that centres women's rights: The Women's Rights Fund. This Fund, now worth nearly £1.3 million, provides small unrestricted grants for women-led grassroots organisations. It marks the start of a journey that allows Oxfam to deliver on its desire to demonstrate genuine focus on democratic ways of funding. Through this Fund, Oxfam also learns about the governance for this type of funding innovation.

Funding for women and communities

While the attention of the global North has been periodically drawn to gender in relation to the safeguarding of women from abuses by aid workers, the situation in relation to gender equality in the global South receives little coverage. Funding for women's rights programmes in the past has not offered a positive insight into this field. In 2020-2021, the share of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) for gender equality stopped growing after a decade on the rise. Whilst around 40% of ODA committed has gender equality as a significant policy objective, support to programs dedicated to gender equality and women's empowerment as the **principal** objective is only 4% of total bilateral ODA. A mere 0.3% of ODA goes toward ending violence against women and girls and this is decreasing¹. Yet, worldwide 1 in 3 women will be the victim of violence in their lifetime. An estimated 1 in 3 girls in developing countries are married below the age of 18, while in the least developed countries 1 in 10 are married before age 15².

Too often international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) take a top-down approach to decision-making, creating power relations where decisions are made at the international level and the projects are implemented by local partners. Quite simply, such paternalism creates a lack of engagement and ownership from local communities which has been particularly damaging to women's rights. When women are side-lined, under-represented in public roles, and lack meaningful participation in decisions about how community resources are used, then it stands to reason that decisions made for, and by, the community are less likely to reflect the needs of women and girls. This forms a deeply complex situation, sitting at the intersection between colonialism, racism and gender which requires radical strategies for change which address local norms and amplify women's participation.

Surface attempts to capture the arguments of most large donors demonstrate that their view, expectedly, is entirely different to the aspiration for localism. This case study highlights these realities,

¹ OECD. [Donor Emphasis on Gender Equality Faltered in 2021-22](#).

² Child Marriage, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 2024. <https://www.unfpa.org/child-marriage>.

with lessons from one INGO's program to improve women's participation and bolster their allyship toward grassroots organisations. The story explores what types of culture change are needed in INGOs and how to sustain them.

A Shift in Strategy to Increased Unrestricted Funding

In February 2023, Danny Sriskandarajah, then Chief Executive of Oxfam GB, and Eman Shannan, Founder and Director of Gaza Charity Aid and Hope, celebrated the Gaza Pink Ribbon appeal that raised \$15,000 USD. This reframed what most local civil society organisations would describe as a frustrating relationship with the donor community. This event culminated early three years of creative grant-making that began in Oxford, UK and ended in an office in Gaza, OPT.

It was a celebration of what can be achieved when an INGO truly becomes intentional about creating new power. The pair went on to plan an accessible platform aiming to end the gaps in support for other small civil society organisations.

"We used to think that as a small organisation, we wouldn't be able to get any funds from INGOs. Oxfam is different. It is "digging" and looking for new women's organisations to partner with", said Eman Shannan.



[Insaf and Mais preparing to speak at the Aid & Hope Program for Cancer Patients Care gala in Gaza in October 2022. US\$15,000 was raised at the event. Photo credit: Ein Media, October 2022]

"The Confederation is changing."

"The Confederation is changing." - Senior staff member of Oxfam GB, 2020

Sue (name has been changed) joined the call and waited for the Oxfam GB Board meeting to start. Sue was an external consultant and observer of Oxfam GB's culture over many years. She had also been on

the Board at the time of the Haiti Safeguarding Crisis in 2018³. This would be her last Board meeting. The meeting usually took place over 1-2 days, and she enjoyed the meetings although there was always a great deal to cover. Some colleagues would have travelled from Africa, Asia, the Middle East and South America for the meeting, but due to Covid-19 restriction, this particular meeting was virtual.

Over the course of the meeting, the Board observed how the organisation's relations with its institutional funders had been troubled since the UK Government had cut all their funding to Oxfam GB⁴. Sue had also noticed increasingly how Oxfam, similar to many aid organisations, had found that institutional and large private funders had become much less flexible over the last ten years. She had visited Oxfam's program in Myanmar 5 years earlier and seen that when Country Directors and staff were too restricted in what they can fund, it became hard for them to give even small amounts of funding to respond quickly and flexibly to arising needs.

With the cuts in funding and criticisms of the culture of INGOs, in part due to the Haiti crisis, something was shifting in the Strategic Leadership Team (SLT). *"What value does Oxfam add?"* The SLT asked the Board this important question in 2019. Sue wasn't surprised when an Oxfam GB Board Member said: *"We realise we want to work in a more thoughtful way"*.

The Board discussed how Oxfam would need to increasingly work through partnerships. They aspired to make Oxfam GB an affiliate which, where possible, focused on helping grassroots organisations by bringing their technical capacity to bear, putting more pressure on political situations to create political will to change for the better, and funding leaders who were in a position to create more sustainable local organisations.

To innovate further, Oxfam GB would need to raise and grant more unrestricted funding. Over many months, the questions the SLT presented to the Board focused on unrestricted income: how could more funding be raised from the Oxfam shops network? Could greater sums of unrestricted funding be given to countries as a direction of travel? What are the implications of concentrating more resources in a smaller number of countries? The Board were able to increasingly see how local organisations – with more unrestricted income – could operate more flexibly, and how the Board's principles to be more inclusive were paying off.

Danny, the Oxfam GB Chief Executive, closed the meeting with a strong vision for the potential of unrestricted funding to help grow organisations: *"It is very difficult to be sustainable with just project funding. Although in Gaza many NGOs have survived with just project funding, in the rest of the world the biggest NGOs are those that have core funding and stable funding through donations and regular fundraising events."*

By the time of Oxfam's strategic refresh in 2020, 18 months after Danny Sriskandarajah's appointment in January 2019 from South Africa-based Civicus (the global civil society alliance), anyone watching Oxfam could see the internal arguments shifting. The 2020 strategy set a new direction for Oxfam GB: *"SLT have been hugely important for the internal movement in staff and the support for the wider movement"*, a member of Oxfam GB Impact Team told Sue. This made Sue think deeper about Oxfam's refreshed strategy:

³ In February 2018, an investigation by *The Times* newspaper found that Oxfam had allowed three men to resign and sacked four others for gross misconduct after an inquiry concerning sexual exploitation, the downloading of pornography, bullying and intimidation.

⁴ Oxfam was barred from applying for public funding while the abuse allegations were investigated and its issues resolved.

*“Radical lasting change will only happen if we give as much weight to **how** we work as **what** we do. That means working in partnership with local communities and organisations, truly valuing their skills and expertise. It means shifting our spending and influencing power to the global South as we stand together with civil society movements and communities driving their own change”⁵.*

To learn about working in partnership, Danny gave his backing to setting up a new program, the Women’s Rights Fund.

Meanwhile on the ground, Degan Ali, Executive Director of Nairobi-based NGO Adeso and a trailblazer in the movement to decolonize aid and rethink humanitarianism, spearheaded the Pledge for Change in 2021. She, too, said the power imbalance cannot be changed in the humanitarian sector without collective work and shifts from grant-givers in the way they distribute money.

The groundwork for a closer, participative relationship with country partners was also already being laid by the reaction to the George Floyd incident in the United States: *“In 2020, George Floyd shook the whole world and left all sectors touched. It opened up space for black action to mobilise and forcing sectors to open up the space. Networks, like the women in Colour Network talks about the experience of racism and colonialism and made demands of the sector to be accountable internally to black and brown staff and how they show up in country offices and civil society,”* said a senior member of Oxfam’s UK staff.

Sue and the Board knew the change in strategy would need a change in culture, too. Sue had seen first-hand how Oxfam GB had been bruised by the Haiti crisis, notably the allegations of hypocrisy in the British media. The opening sentence of a 2019 article in *The Guardian* ran: *“Just over a year since the allegations of sexual abuse in Haiti were revealed, Oxfam has been through the equivalent of a reality TV colonoscopy: the organisation has been turned inside out and upside down to reveal what lurks beneath.”*⁶

Oxfam leadership needed to be sure no one would put out a public statement about accountability *“until we have cleaned up our act internally”*. So they started with a focus on the evidence, looking at the experiences of black and brown colleagues in the sector. Sue knew that Oxfam were experienced in social and culture change, and she wasn’t surprised when a gender justice lead said: *“This can’t be a technical tick-box exercise”*. Oxfam GB was demonstrating that they were serious about decolonisation and internal culture change.

Soon after appointing a new Head of Partnerships, the Decolonial Deep Dive Team was appointed. Working across all the divisions in the organisation, it mapped internal mindsets, capturing where treatment of black, brown and white staff was different in order to understand how Oxfam’s framing of risk was colonial. From then on the Partnerships Team developed workshops with staff to move from a colonial view of risk to partnerships which were more equitable, and importantly came with more discretionary funding. Board engagement for the process was critical.

At the same time the Team were opening up a space to listen deeply and widely to the organisation, hearing from country teams about decolonisation. According to the new Head of Partnerships, a role created in 2020 to sit in the recently implemented Impact Team, country teams wanted to know the root causes of anti-racist attitudes. There was a specific interest in how attitudes toward risk and compliance

⁵ Srisikandarajah, Danny. (November 2020). [‘Introduction: for a Radically Better World’](#). Oxfam GB Strategy.

⁶ Doane, Deborah. (12 June 2019). [“Oxfam’s ‘hypocrisy’ is not unique: the aid systems is built on a power imbalance.”](#) Published in *The Guardian*.

have been shaped by money coming from the global North. Local teams in the global South wanted to be heard by the Head Office and have space for more of their own programming: *“And we all wanted to know if there would be space for conversations about decolonisation and equality... Only in this way could [Oxfam GB] show up as an anti-racist organisation”*.

Two years later at Oxfam’s 80th Anniversary event in 2022, the Head of Partnerships was delighted to hear some of the comments on how the internal organisational culture was changing. It was an opportunity to bring Country Directors and regional teams together with the Oxfam GB Senior Leadership Team and explore with all parties what decolonisation, feminist and racial justice meant from their different perspectives. The Head of Partnerships said to Sue after the Anniversary event: *“The Country Directors and Regional Directors say they can see the marked differences in approaches as the spaces feel a lot safer to participate and speak truthfully. OGB is less defensive and open to listening.”*

After her most recent Board meeting, Sue sat down and wrote out the main strategic issues she had heard the Board raise. In addition to providing external advice, Sue was interested in women’s rights and happy to inject some of her time in order to support Oxfam’s impact⁷. The questions related fundamentally to how Oxfam worked in partnership and there were a number of factors that would need to be considered if a strategy based on a different way of partnering was to be successful:

- 1) Sustainable women’s rights organisations: How should INGOs like Oxfam help create sustainable women’s rights? Is it just about a focus on funding local organisations, or is it also about localism and how they help build local governance, teamworking and leadership? Is the size of the partners the most important thing in thinking about sustainable commitment to women’s rights in communities? How could Sue use her experience of collective leadership to help achieve external goals to create more sustainable women’s rights?
- 2) Leveraging local country strategies: with their different cultural traditions and budgetary frameworks, the choice of Oxfam affiliates as partners in this pilot would be key. Who were the natural affiliates with which to partner? Who were the other stakeholders the Oxfam GB Chief Executive would need on board?
- 3) Creating sustainable culture change in Northern INGOs: the timing was unprecedented from the calls to meaningfully decolonize, for a new humanitarianism and the need for culture change following Haiti. What types of changes would be needed internally to work differently with partners and how would the choice of partners need to be different and how would Oxfam sustain this change?

Creating the Women’s Rights Fund

In 2019, Oxfam created the Women’s Rights Fund⁸. This Fund was piloted in two countries: Kenya and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) and encompassed two overarching objectives:

- to strengthen existing women’s rights organisations (WROs) that would not otherwise qualify for funding, changing norms around women’s participation
- to learn internally about how to truly work well in partnership with local partners

To make the Fund different from other initiatives, every aspect of the design would be consistent with its vision: helping local partners draw agency and power towards them and their communities. WROs would receive £20,000 annually, guaranteed for three years and an additional £26,000 in technical assistance to

⁷ Now that she had finished her term on the Board, Sue was evaluating the Women’s Rights Fund for Oxfam GB in the context of Oxfam’s culture and strategy.

⁸ <https://www.oxfam.org.uk/oxfam-in-action/women-equality/womens-rights-fund/>.

strengthen their individual organisational structures and processes, and for country office costs and management oversight.

The Fund would be free of many usual protocols, with a light-touch, 'no strings attached' approach. While not an entirely new concept, the Fund's ambition was to create a greater and more widespread precedent in development and humanitarian settings.

Oxfam found positively-motivated donors for the Fund to support local leaders along with the values and skills they bring which strengthen their communities. These leaders of small organisations may not always consider themselves to be trailblazers but they are the people best placed to drive change in norms. These motivated individuals take on some of the hardest challenges on the planet, inspiring acts of great courage and skill by those who volunteer more often than work for them. They are female activists in marginalised communities who campaign to end domestic violence, child marriage and violence against non-binary children. They comprise elected officials who sit on regional assemblies and stand beside women leaders who educate pastoralists about settled agriculture. They also include trained lawyers who give up more lucrative careers to professionalise thousands of women domestic labourers across East Africa. They are those who have the art of leading at whatever level of the community they happen to be. Above all, these women were eligible to receive support from Oxfam's new Women's Rights Fund.

Finding Support from Oxfam International in the Right Quarters

A year after Danny Sriskandarajah's appointment, Gabriella Bucher, the new Oxfam International Chief Executive was appointed. Sue noted that both leaders were committed to strong civil society as a route to more democratic governance and both advocated for greater localism in the Oxfam International structures and governance. An ally in Oxfam International could help shift the thinking of other affiliates. Sue hoped this would help Oxfam GB find affiliates across the Confederation serve as allies and support new ways of operating. Because of Oxfam International's unusual confederation structure, which involves each country having both executing affiliate (EA) and program affiliates (PA), Oxfam GB would need countries where either they played both roles of executing and program affiliate or where another affiliate was an ally and would support a new way of operating. In Kenya, Oxfam GB was both EA and PA, and in OPT, Oxfam GB was PA and worked closely with Oxfam Novib from the Netherlands, the EA.

It was clear international structures played a part in the choice of pilot countries. How did country strategies and cultures also influence the choices, Sue wondered. She thought the best way to do the evaluation was to arrange a visit to Oxfam's office in Kenya and Occupied Palestinian Territories. She read the country strategies in preparation for her visits. Her first visit was to OPT, with her second to Kenya ,and it was there, where Oxfam International is headquartered, that the size and nature of Oxfam's work with women in the informal sector in East Africa truly struck her.

Sue familiarised herself with the Kenya country strategy, including quote by the Oxfam GB Gender Justice Lead in Nairobi which said a lot about the local context: *"Women are 80% of the informal economy, which is poorly regulated, and the informal economy is a priority for us."*

While visiting the office in Nairobi, Sue was given an overview by Dennis, an Oxfam staff member responsible for the Women's Rights Organisation who explained why women were at the heart of the program strategy in Kenya. *"Women make up 50% of the agricultural workforce and yet own 1% of the land,"* he said, and he noted that mobilising women's voices was a priority. In Kenya, the WRF supports partners advocating for women's rights in the mining, agricultural, and care sectors, and works directly with victims of gender-based violence. Sue noted that a genuine opportunity exists to build on Oxfam's strong traditions of gender justice programming.

There was also the potential to bring about real change by working with strong grassroots partners in Kenya. These had been recognised by Oxfam as the organisations best placed to bring about change for some time. *“I don’t know if you know the big change that has happened in Kenya,”* said Dennis to Sue, *“Over time the office has gone from 100s of staff to just 30. We have really embraced partnership working in Kenya and reduced the headcount.”*

Sue knew that there had been a food crisis in East Africa since 2017. For 6 years climate-related droughts, combined with ongoing conflict, have left up to 20 million people hungry. This extended humanitarian catastrophe meant the Confederation had learnt how to mobilise quicker. Real learning had come some years ago, when Oxfam International moved to a single country affiliate structure, so that multiple Oxfams were not impeding each other’s work in a crisis.

By 2023, there was ample evidence that Oxfam were working more closely than ever with local partners in Kenya. Dennis described the rationale of this model, explaining that it allowed Oxfam to reach the most marginalised people more easily. As he said: *“Before, it took us time to set up and go out to the field, but these organisations are already there and in small ways are already contributing. So, where there is a women’s organisation that is already working with this group, if we work through them, they can do even more.”*

What Sue had observed in Occupied Palestinian Territories had similar themes: Oxfam had strong traditions of gender justice work there, and there was great potential for local partners to do work which aligned to Oxfam priorities. As Shane, Oxfam’s Country Director in OPT noted, *“The Women’s Rights Fund is extremely important ... the idea of giving money for core costs and saying ‘we will let you decide what you want to spend it on’. It sits at the heart of our three program priorities: Women and Gender-Based Violence, Humanitarian and Economic.”* Beyond this, an Oxfam staff member in OPT said, *“The reality of occupation leads to high levels of restriction and GBV and requires us to be in the field all the time, to visit women all the time and provide services for women”*. In OPT, the reality of the occupation creates a context in which women and families bear the brunt of much suffering.

While visiting Oxfam’s operations in OPT, Sue heard staff in the office discuss how local partners may well be internationally renowned advocacy organisations and Oxfam GB could amplify their voice. Sue had heard of certain prominent local organisations, like Al Haq, and read their work; these pieces always filled her with optimism and admiration. She knew these organisations had sophisticated and powerful reach to international audiences. She heard from Palestinian partners how given multi-year flexible funding and technical assistance to improve their social media, they could amplify the Palestinian voice, challenge the status quo, and create more political will for change both locally and abroad. Sue reflected that this seemed a powerful way for Oxfam to add value – using funding from Northern donors to increase the voice and influence of local organisations who were best placed to speak up for the justices they wanted to see in their communities.

A few days later sitting with United Nations agencies in Jerusalem, a data point took Sue by surprise: *“The UK was once in the top three governments providing support to Palestine, but is now outside the top 10,”* she heard. *“Perhaps by providing unrestricted multi-year funding, we can fill some of the gap left by the British Government,”* an Oxfam staff member said. Sue realised that in choosing where best to add value, Northern INGOs also must take account of their own governments’ programs and consider how to complement them, or in some cases address their shortfalls.

Different Goals?

Beyond Oxfam GB finding itself working with smaller, grassroots partners, and changing ways of working, they needed to support better governance and systems best designed for large partners, and Oxfam GB themselves would need to engage as partners, in a far more flexible and light touch way.

As Sue continued her visit to the OPT, during the first meetings she had with the local women who had built their NGOs in Gaza, she heard from these women about their experiences. Sitting with volunteers at the Aid and Hope Program for Cancer Patients Care in Gaza, Eman Shannan raised some central issues—namely that INGOs must crucially leave the mandate with local organisations, and it is important that Oxfam find small organisations beyond the usual suspects while being flexible and light touch in their operations. As Eman noted, *“The main thing we have learnt in the past 10 years is that everyone was telling us to change our mandate, and the main lesson from Oxfam is sometimes we should fight for our mandate because we will succeed in the end.”*

Sue knew that often large INGOs and the philanthropists who fund them are accused of not being transparent in their grant-making decisions, instead supporting their own ‘pet projects’ and in doing so, taking the mandate away from local partners. In 2023, at a learning event held by conference call, Danny talked to Eman again, this time about how the first cohort of recipients had experienced the Women’s Rights Fund. Again, Sue was able to observe. First, Danny recapped how over many years Oxfam’s monitoring and evaluation activities consistently show that investing in women’s roles in communities reduces poverty. Oxfam’s interest in backing women’s rights organisations was based on knowledge gained over a significant period, during which the organisation learned that gender justice and poverty reduction in communities are linked. Sue was pleased that Oxfam could be transparent with partners about the objectives for the Fund. She saw how this made it easier for partners to choose whether to put themselves forward and she realised this would help both sides to build a shared vision which would be important for maintaining equality in the relationship.

Sue next visited an Palestinian partner based in Khan Yunis, and to reach the site they would need to drive some 15 miles along the Gaza Strip. When she was in the car she asked Sukaina, Oxfam’s Lead for the WRF in OPT a question that had been troubling her. Sue was curious to understand how they were finding small partners and reaching beyond ‘the usual’ organisations. Sukaina described thoughtfully how some partners had been found by looking through LinkedIn: *“You’re right, most [funding] organisations apart from this Fund want to work with organisations that have systems in place,”* she explained. As Sukaina opened up and talked about this particular partner, it became clear that finding marginal organisations was important to her: *“Most of these organisations are usually marginalised or considered weak because they’re led by women and they focus on women’s rights issues which mostly nationally are considered to be a Western-driven agenda so this Fund has allowed us to support this.”*

But it was not easy to build a new process; Sukaina noted that her evenings were spent going through small women-led organisations she had come across in her previous job before coming to Oxfam, running a local NGO: *“There were no systems in place for small organisations and I started by just building my own spreadsheet which I then took to the Finance Department and said ‘this is who we’re going to be working with.’”* Sukaina had joined Oxfam specifically to work closely with this sector. Starting the Women’s Rights Fund had required her to draw on her previous experiences, bringing into Oxfam contacts and a way of reaching small organisations which had not previously existed.

Simpler systems

In the OPT offices in Gaza, the Country Director was excited for Sue to meet the Finance Coordinator, Tareq, who spoke movingly of the need to help Palestinian women living under the blockade: *“We work with them closely; I went to the offices, they are very interesting, with the right support they can grow to be larger organisations.”* He had been involved in the program throughout and was now also working closely with Oxfam GB technical staff to improve collaboration with the UK Head Office.

During this same visit to the OPT, Sue was frustrated when a meeting with a partner in Nablus was cancelled because of security concerns due to a local Israeli military incursion, and the Microsoft Teams meeting kept being interrupted as the link broke down. By the time Sue was able to visit the organisation in person, the space was deserted, and she had a mug of tea alone in an airy office. She reflected on the challenges of operating in this reality for the local partners and staff who were leaving early to be with families as the security concerns were rising.

Eventually Sue was shown to Tareq's office by a staff member named Mariam, the woman's reassurance that *"you can't understand the learning we've made in the office without meeting Tareq"* did not at first ameliorate the frustration Sue was feeling. Tareq had been sceptical of the ability of Novib's processes and systems to work well with small organisations and had to find an alternative to Prisma, a Novib risk assessment system: *"Prisma is geared for larger organisations, it asks partners if they have an accountant and a finance director and risk assesses them on the basis of their answers. But these small Civil Society Organisations can't pay for two roles,"* Tareq said. *"When we're working with CSOs, we need to do things differently."*

Documenting her meeting with Tareq on a tape recorder, listened to him more closely. She had been told that Finance was the problem, often seeking more detail than the partners could give. *"We can't take the same approach everywhere,"* Tareq went on. *"In Gaza, we monitor things more than we do in the West Bank because of the blockade."* He had visited all the partners and described the many ways Oxfam was adding value:

"We provide training for partners on financial reporting, how to write proposals, and how to develop fundraising strategies. We are expanding financial inclusion and equipping partners to be able to work with international systems. They didn't all have bank accounts before, but now they do and we can help them understand how they have to keep documents for 10 years to satisfy local law which makes their trading easier, and they are submitting really good financial reports which will make their fundraising better."

Sue thought this was an exciting opportunity for Oxfam GB to support small partners, but Oxfam had a lot to learn about how to provide a 'light touch' approach. Sue asked Tareq very frankly: *"How much more red tape is there to bust?"* To this Tariq replied: *"I think Oxfam did it the right way in terms of monitoring tightly in the beginning and now not so much."* He went on to say that *"monitoring of the financial reports of [a named partner] is now less than 60% because in the last financial report they submitted, we had only one comment, so they are really well established."* Tareq was following a principle of earned autonomy, monitoring partners less frequently as their systems matured and trust developed.

Sue later spoke with Rawan, the new Partnership Coordinator, and asked her if Oxfam was going far enough to support small partners. Rawan's role was new in the organisational structure and she was enthusiastic about getting started: *"The role is creating the space for more listening to partners. Usually, we have been receiving the themes from international donors, the jargon dropped on us, whereas for the Palestinian partners, their priorities might be different."*

Sue saw in Rawan a genuine interest in learning about change. But this passion for partnerships needed to be supported by new processes and systems requiring real collaboration between finance and operations. Rawan went on to describe the requirements: *"We need to provide tools, ask them for samples of their work not entire reports, we shouldn't be checking every invoice, but a selection. We need to define the bare minimum of reporting for partners."* Sue replied: *"Wow, making those cultural changes will be hard. Would you do this just for the Women's Rights Fund?"* Rawan noted: *"No, with more unrestricted as part of our budget we will grow the number of partners. We now have 28 we need to agree a hazard rate across the portfolio, develop more relaxed auditing procedures."*

Cultural change is difficult anywhere, but creating a new, more relaxed approach to risk is particularly challenging in settings with high levels of inherent risk. Sue had already seen first-hand how Oxfam

aimed to change the quality of its interactions with partners, building trust, recruiting people into front line roles because they had a more relational skillset and putting a premium on face-to-face meetings. She thought this would need to be further supported with good due diligence and an ongoing focus on training partners in key risks like safeguarding. It was not an easy trade-off to make, but if Oxfam's stringent processes could be adapted for smaller organisations, she thought they could find a middle ground. Sue was hopeful that Oxfam's common sense would prevail as she had seen pragmatic solutions implemented before. She also knew that adaptive change could not be mandated: cultural change within an organisation required the correct local ethos and also active participation of local partners in co-design.

Teams and leadership

Sue worried about whether the required organisational culture existed in Oxfam's OPT and Kenya offices. Within the organisation, many people were sceptical about Oxfam GB initiating a cultural change which involved those in leadership positions 'letting go' of decision-making power. Though the Country Directors had argued for a new approach, backing a flexible fund and greater local decision-making, there was still some loss of power and control in enabling decision-making by front-line staff. In the office, though no one wanted to admit it directly, certain staff made veiled references to the risks of power vacuums. It was clear there was a wariness about whether 'old power' stepping back meant that new interests would come in to take its place. Could women's rights be marginalised because of local tradition? Could some types of partners, for example those from certain backgrounds, be favoured over others?

Sue knew having the right leadership was a larger conversation, and she was keen to gather insights from local staff. Clearly there was an awareness of the importance of teamworking and the need to change from a heroic model to something altogether more collective.

The morning she left Gaza, Sue drove to the Erez Crossing with the OPT Director and heard that he looked forward to a more participative culture and to working with other leaders in this way. He was reflective about the behaviours needed to do this well. But, this becomes hard in a sector that has put a premium on a heroic leadership model to lead differently. And, it was not just the Country Directors, he said. Delegating decisions to the front line meant leaders at every level letting go of their control and power: decisions once taken in The Hague and Oxford were now taken by local finance teams, gender justice staff, and program leads.

In talking to Sukaina, Sue formed the clearest picture of what it meant to be at the vanguard of change, leading differently. In the quiet of a long drive back from Khan Yunis to Gaza City, Sue asked Sukaina another question, wondering if she felt uncomfortable doing things differently to the way they've been done before. Specifically, Sue wanted to know if Sukaina and her colleagues received pushback from colleagues for being the only point of contact when a partner makes a decision, instead of previous models where the same decision would have been referred to Western donors. Sukaina noted: *"Typically, there is a lot of pushback from finance and most donors wouldn't understand how you give a grant for a third party (partner) to decide what to do. It's something which most people haven't wrapped their heads around because we've been so used to working in a controlled environment and because traditionally most donors have strategies or themes."* She gave Sue the example of a decision during the height of Covid-19 to switch funding from one program to another: *"Before the country office would have referred the decision to Head Office and the decision would have taken weeks. This time it was answered in one phone call to me."*

As evidenced, being on the front-line of organisational culture change in an INGO was enormously challenging. These shifts required individuals who could bring in the other colleagues not just from

finance – but communications, operations, legal, monitoring and evaluation, and logistics – on board. As Sakaina said, *“We do it through co-creation, when we are working with partners and reviewing their documents, we bring colleagues in so they are able to understand the level that partners are at.”*

Just before they reached the hotel in Gaza City, Sukaina told Sue: *“This is a very different way of working to assessing someone against their work-plan, it’s very qualitative and very face-to-face.”* For example, how the organisation does monitoring and evaluation is now a very different process, with a significantly longer list of touch points with partners. Oxfam’s role was now as much about actively training, co-designing and collective action with partners. New bi-monthly meetings meant all partners shared their progress and what support they need from Oxfam and from each other, co-designing the recording frameworks, guiding how partners should track activity, what outputs to capture, what different levels of success should be monitored. The partners were also active in designing the monitoring frameworks. Sue thought about how the very real constraints on movement for Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank would make this challenging.

Eventually, Sue thought again of the Oxfam GB strategic plan, which stated, *“Radical lasting change will only happen if we give as much weight to how we work as what we do. That means working in partnership with local communities and truly valuing their skills.”* Leader behaviour was certainly essentially to enable a participatory approach. Sue was relieved that the ‘soft side’ of this strategic plan had not been left to chance. In fact, the story was looking much more positive, with Oxfam increasing women’s voice in decisions and shaping how they were supported, including how they received funding.

New Power?

Back in Oxford, Sue received feedback from other key staff at Oxfam GB. What she had seen during her site visits looked promising – Oxfam were ‘in solidarity’, giving without strings, providing organisational development and technical support, which was clearly appreciated by local partners. But it was not yet clear that the process and internal culture changes within Oxfam GB could be sustained. Nor was it clear how much ‘power’ was being created locally and what would need to change in the long-term.

Sue worried that Oxfam could be accused of window-dressing, and its reputation damaged as others had been. Oxfam had staked a great deal on building women’s voice, taking on several officials in the two pilot countries for the Women’s Rights Fund. Over the years, Sue had attended Oxfam’s training for feminist leaders, and she knew how strong the networks were in Oxfam. She had seen many intense conversations about power. Yet, the decision about which partners, and which countries the Fund would work within, still sits with Oxfam GB leadership; in essence, women are not determining who locally receives funding.

As Sue sat in the café at the Bodleian library, she listened to Oxfam GB’s Chief Program Architect, Mona, discuss the program’s goals. Mona said, *“In actual fact, we have just completed a weeklong workshop in Jordan. All the partners attended from Kenya and OPT. We discussed the future of the Fund collectively. We want to move now to a model where the partners from Cohort 1 will decide on who is in the Fund for Cohort 2.”* That truly constituted a change, and Sue wondered how the donors would react.

Issues with donors: differing motivations

Sustained culture change at Oxfam GB required shifts in processes as well as culture. Sue had seen this momentum building in the various countries she had visited on behalf of Oxfam. But to build a sustainable Fund, the organisation also needed unrestricted funding and a more rapid change in donor attitudes.

What was the story the WRF could tell in order to help sustain these important shifts to traditional ways of INGO operation? So far, financial progress had been impressive. From an initial investment of £300k by a single private donor at the start of the pilot three years ago, the Fund was now worth nearly £1.3m, and approximately £1m had been raised by partners from namely institutional donors. This felt like a notable achievement, after only a short period of time.

But Sue knew it was difficult work to find donors for a light touch project for small grantees. She wondered why it was so hard to raise funds, as she believed that listening to communities helped to ensure that aid was targeted at some issues which wouldn't normally receive grants - including mental health, women's rights, conflict, and gender-based violence. She believed that obstacles to fundraising for a light touch Fund on social change were twofold: firstly, donors liked to see impact and impact measures, and they also hope to understand that controls are in place to prevent money 'falling into the wrong hands' – and often want evidence of controls.

Sue knew from conversations around the donor community that scepticism remained about light touch grant-making and the Fund's success – financial stability and a sustained community of gender justice organisations would only partially address this. Sue spoke with numerous donors over recent few months and was still perplexed by donor attitudes. In principle, donors believed that 'light touch' was intuitively appealing, but they were apprehensive about local organisations not having a framework, a profit measure, or a good strategy with intellectual rigour to measure progress. Sue had attended fundraisers and receptions, met donors for teas and coffees. One such donor was a successful entrepreneur; she asked him: *"What would give you assurance?"* They replied, *"I'd need to see a pooled fund with several donors to share the risk, or, far stronger controls and a range of process measures in place; and I'd expect there to be an articulated strategy with outcome measures."*

Sharing this insight with other members of the Oxfam GB team of observers, a long term Oxfam supporter said: *"That might be good for managing risk, but I don't find that very motivating"*. This individual went on, *"I was brought up in the tradition that once you've given something it's no longer yours and you stand back and it let people use it how they want."* Sue knew that attitude was unusual, and that the view of the entrepreneur was more common. Sue's husband noted: *"I hope it's not colonial hang-over, but I think it might be. Those traditions of bureaucracy and checking-up relate to the colonial legacy and how we operated in these countries for years."*

It seemed difficult to draw conclusions about private donors' motivations. Their individual experiences and tolerance of risk was so different. She asked herself what she'd learnt so far about what seemed to matter most to partners and to donors. As a donor herself, she tried to be as honest as possible. What had drawn her instinctively to the Women's Rights Fund was the light touch monitoring – she wanted to be permissive and give in a high-trust way which she believed would encourage local innovation. At the same time, she also had other priorities: 1) to measure of effective performance – evidence of more sustainable WROs and their enablers 2) to know funds were in safe hands and that Oxfam's due diligence had ensured partners operated on the principles of justice and compassion 3) to understand what Oxfam was learning about the leadership, culture and governance required for sustainable women's rights in communities, and 4) to know that learning about all of the above was meaningful and put into practice. Of these goals, Sue had seen 1 and 2 for herself on the ground. The first – the measure of increased sustainability - was perhaps even more interesting.

Oxfam's Head of Impact described how the organisation measures sustainability: *"We're now measuring how much money WROs can raise directly on their own that they couldn't raise before. We could be measuring how many of them are building reserves because that's probably the most critical measure of sustainability in any organisation."* The Head of Impact was also clear that the measures must be locally relevant and was keen to make the point that it is not for us in the global North to define what sustainability means. *"It is more about who defines what sustainability means"*, she said. Sue thought about what this meant, for a

while. It was true, the contexts in OPT and Kenya were so different, and even within country the contexts were wildly divergent: running an WRO in famine, drought hit Turkana, Northern Kenya versus running a similar organisation in Nairobi likely required different measures of sustainability: the former may need to build reserves to manage for ten months, and the latter might seek sustainability through a social enterprise model.

However, Oxfam's understanding of sustainability as a measure is dynamic and developing continuously as the organisation learns how best to support grassroots partners and demonstrate real social impact. Sue needed to maintain a dynamic dialogue with Oxfam and the local partners in order to understand whether the program was achieving sustained impact.

Sue arranged to meet a psychiatrist who delivered long-term conflict reduction programs for Syrian refugees and their host communities. They met in the psychiatrist's offices in the Psychiatry department at the University of Cambridge. Sue asked her: *"What do you think is good donor feedback?"* The psychiatrist responded: *"There has to be a very clear shared purpose between donor and partner, and this needs to be about social change, and there has to be some sort of a goal. It's hard to have a single goal for things like social change, but there still needs to be some attempt to monitor progress and measure outcomes. This seems to work well when the framework is worked on jointly with communities and with the donor and any intermediary."*

Sue tested this thinking with Sam, an Oxfam fundraiser: *"I think we do certainly need to educate donors about the risks involved in achieving the strategic goal. No strategy is set in stone, people on the ground must be able to make the change. We need donors to visit so they see for themselves how much more unpredictable things are on the ground. It's a different way of working with donors, it's much more transparent and more dynamic."*

When Sue returned to London, she received a call from the entrepreneur she'd met previously. He said, *"I've been thinking it over, my wife wants to back the Women's Rights Fund – she just gets the values of supporting women led organisations. For me, I'd like to know the Fund is delivering growth. Would it be possible to look at the portfolio and see broadly what impact it's having?"* Sue was pleased to hear this; although there were still only a small number of partners, the results looked good. Most partners had raised funds, totalling nearly £1 million in institutional funding thanks to Oxfam's capacity building and had a story to tell about how the Fund was creating meaningful changes in gender justice norms in communities⁹.

Finally – Challenges

As Mona from Oxfam GB finished a workshop in Amman, Jordan and reflected on what had been achieved, she felt comfortable that in piloting the Women's Rights Fund, Oxfam had started a profound journey which could change the balance of power between Oxfam and partners, thereby influencing the sector. She took heart from the donors who were already showing that they want to give flexibly, and that by doing so Oxfam have enabled women's rights organisations to make decisions for themselves.

⁹ At the time of writing this case study in December 2023, the Israel-Gaza war continues. Local partners in Gaza have all been displaced. Aid and Hope Cancer Charity is unable to distribute medicine or support volunteers, their property was destroyed, and vital medical supplies lost. One of the organisations in the South of the Gaza strip has repurposed, and is distributing aid packages and cash payments to the local community. Oxfam have consistently called for a ceasefire since the start of the war.

She knew that in culture change, scepticism will persist but she was particularly interested in what could be done to fill the following gaps:

- 1) How would Oxfam sustain and spread this new organisational culture?
- 2) What changes to communications, leadership, recruitment and operational oversight cultures would be needed to create a culture in which Country Heads and their direct reports felt safe taking greater risks?
- 3) What team goals could be developed to help align priorities and personnel between Oxfam and local partners, creating truly effective roles and objectives?

Mona knew that with Oxfam's global reach sharing power could achieve much more than simply empowering communities to make good decisions. Oxfam required an approach which enabled partners not just "*when someone remembered to include them in conferences,*" but more systematically. She asked herself:

- 1) How can Oxfam ensure that responsibility for engaging with partners sits with every staff member at every level?
- 2) Where should Oxfam use its scale and networks to build partner influence and so their expertise is recognised in its own right?

Mona looked through the feedback from a recent country visit by Board members to the OPT and Kenya. Board members enjoyed meeting the partners, visiting them in remote and even dangerous places of work because they were able to see the value of the organisation's contributions. But they felt Oxfam was not moving fast enough in adapting its systems for small partners. She worried that Board members feared waning donor interest. Mona wondered:

- 1) How can the Oxfam fundraising team educate donors and draw them into to giving in a light touch way?
- 2) What operating models could Oxfam explore to create less reliance on their own internal systems for financial, operational controls?

Mona reflected that the overriding goals of the Fund were already being met: Oxfam was diverting more of its unrestricted funding to supporting women, who in turn were supporting their communities. Bridges still remained to be crossed and change may not be immediate, but there was an intuitive sense to this approach, which she felt sure would mean the Board would continue to support the Fund going forward.

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