An evaluation of partners and partnership issues in Oxfam International’s response to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami

by Stuart Kenward
Executive summary

With the ending of the OITF in December 2008, it is appropriate to undertake an evaluation of Oxfam’s Tsunami Response. This report is one of several reviews that make up the final evaluation. Its focus is on Oxfam’s work with partners; its specific objectives are to:

• ‘Document the management and programmatic approaches to partners and partnerships work;’

• ‘Identify processes, practices, lessons which have scope for influencing practice and policy of Oxfam and other humanitarian organisations in humanitarian responses.’

The report is based on data that have been collected from a variety of sources using a range of tools, including email questionnaires, workshops, and a range of documents, as well as targeted emails. It looks at partnership work in each of the tsunami response countries, focusing primarily on Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and India and to a lesser extent on Somalia, Burma, Thailand, and the Maldives.

During the tsunami response Oxfam has worked wherever possible through partners. It is recognised that local partners are likely to have a better understanding of the local context and consequently partnerships have been developed with some 200 organisations of varying size. Oxfam affiliates only implemented programmes directly where partners did not have the capacity to meet the needs of the affected population or where affiliates had no local partners. In some cases Oxfam affiliates chose to work through contractors or adopted a range of options (including contractors, local partners, and an operational approach) to implement their programmes. Factors influencing the approach included the capacity of civil society, affiliate history within the country, the affiliate’s own organisational capacity, and the sector itself. Some affiliates have a tendency to work with certain types of partner. For example, Oxfam Novib and Intermon Oxfam tend to work through larger NGOs such as BRAC and do not implement programmes themselves, while Oxfam Australia tends to favour working with community-based organisations (CBOs).
Affiliates employed a variety of approaches, followed different processes, and used a combination of criteria to select new partners. The rigour with which partner capacity was assessed did vary. Understandably, there was probably more rigour during the latter phases of the response compared with the emergency phase, but on the whole partners had the capacity to undertake what was asked of them.

Almost all partner organisations that were questioned on the subject indicated that their partnership with Oxfam had improved the managerial and technical capacity of their organisation. Management capacity was particularly enhanced in the areas of accounting/financial management, monitoring and evaluation, and reporting.

Approaches to building the capacity of partners varied by affiliate and included training workshops, secondments, and in the case of Aceh, Indonesia the development of a Partnership Support and Liaison Unit (PSLU). The PSLU had as one of its functions to build the capacity of local organisations and therefore ‘...to contribute to longer-term civil society development in the area’.

According to those affiliate staff questioned, ‘most’ partner organisations are now in a better position to respond to future emergencies. Capacity has been enhanced not only as a result of learning-by-doing but also as a result of capacity building provided through Oxfam affiliates. This is illustrated by Oxfam’s work with partners in India to develop contingency plans for future emergencies. Oxfam has also collaborated with RedR India to help 24 NGOs to develop rapid response plans and build up their emergency capacity.

The operating environment has had an impact on Oxfam’s approach to partnerships as well as the effectiveness of partnerships. The most significant contextual factors include the security situation (particularly in Indonesia and Sri Lanka), government policies, the amount of funding available and the state of civil society. For example, in Sri Lanka the northern and eastern districts were most affected by the civil war, which meant that Oxfam had to work through its network of CBOs, who had access. In Indonesia the large amount of funding provided great opportunities, but it also created challenges, such as the rapid recruitment of staff who did not always receive proper inductions or training, leading sometimes to an inconsistent approach.

On balance, partnerships with civil society organisations (CSOs) have been effective and capacity has been enhanced. There have, however, been a number of more challenging partnerships which have broken down, largely due to allegations of financial impropriety. A total of six partners were found to be either mismanaging Oxfam funds or were found to be guilty of fraud. All six partners came from India. Oxfam has recognised that ‘oversight of financial management in partner programs in India was sometimes inadequate’. However, Oxfam always investigated suspected mismanagement and/or allegations of fraud with haste and objectivity.

The review outlines a number of lessons and recommendations that can be applied in future emergencies. These are contained in the final section of the report.

References
1 OITF, Terms of Reference, 080908.
2 ‘Oxfam affiliates’ refers to the organisations that make up the Oxfam confederation, for example Oxfam Australia, Oxfam GB.
3 From the project description of PSLU as a project, OPAL IDSA57, in the Aceh-Nias programme, approved as PIP 00225.
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Oxfam International Secretariat: Suite 20, 266 Banbury Road, Oxford, OX2 7DL, UK
Tel: +44 1865 339100 Email: information@oxfaminternational.org
Web site: www.oxfam.org

For contact details of Oxfam International advocacy offices, please see the website of Oxfam International Secretariat, or: E-mail: advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

Linked Oxfam organization.
Oxfam International and Ucodep Campaign Office (Italy)
Email: ucodep-oi@oxfaminternational.org

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