

LISTENING TO PEOPLE - REBUILDING TRUST

INTERIM
REPORT
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Oxfam has found itself at the epicenter of the challenge set to the entire aid sector to improve how it prevents and responds to sexual exploitation and abuse while providing development and humanitarian aid. Scrutiny of Oxfam's management of several incidents reported in Haiti has led to some critical questions: Do survivors, staff, communities, and partners know their rights? Do they know how to report safeguarding incidents? How are such incidents investigated? What are the penalties for sexual misconduct? How is such information shared with Oxfam's stakeholders?

As part of its efforts to learn and reform, Oxfam established the Independent Commission on Sexual Misconduct, Accountability and Culture Change, and mandated it to conduct a confederation-wide review of its culture, accountability and safeguarding policies, procedures, and implementation. This work began in May 2018 and is expected to conclude in May 2019. This work is taking place in parallel with the ongoing internal review of the Oxfam confederation's governance structure and operations in its 19 affiliated organizations working across 90 countries.

Oxfam staff are undoubtedly committed to the vision of a just world without poverty and are working exceptionally hard to realize it. The commissioners have heard great appreciation for Oxfam's work from the local organizations that partner with Oxfam, as well as the communities it serves. However, the Commission has found that the organization has prioritized *what* it aims to achieve over *how* it is done, at some cost to its staff and the communities they serve. At the heart of this issue is how power is managed and trust is earned and kept. The risks associated with reporting allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse are often high; preventing and responding to such incidents requires the organization's full commitment.

Through talking with staff in the Oxfam International secretariat and affiliates' headquarters, regional teams, and country programs, as well as reviewing Oxfam policies, procedures, and

strategies, the Commission was made aware of a series of concerns that require redress. Staff clearly communicated a pressing need to address the root causes of sexual misconduct and other egregious behaviors that put staff, partners, program participants, and ultimately the organization itself at risk. Staff have expressed a desire for change and called for a reformed Oxfam that creates a supportive environment for the people it serves, its staff, and its stakeholders; institutionalizes a culture of accountability; implements a “zero tolerance” workplace; is actively accountable to the communities with which it works; and recognizes and honors the diversity of survivors. Solutions to fulfill these needs include a more effective confederation-wide governance structure; a single transparent, effective, and accountable safeguarding structure across the entire confederation; a robust and trusted safeguarding process that encompasses prevention, reporting, and investigations; a participatory approach at the core of all reforms; a central human resources management system that can hold aggregate information on any given employee; and a path to realizing Oxfam’s commitment to feminist principles and women’s rights.

The Commission recognizes that Oxfam is taking steps to address some of the concerns identified, as outlined in its 10-point plan¹ published in February 2018. Since February, Oxfam has approved new common safeguarding policies for the entire confederation, made a commitment to having one case management system across the organization, and trained its staff to support investigations. It also is doing a deeper analysis into its organizational culture, has had all staff re-sign the common code of conduct policy, and is reviewing its governance structures. It has also just begun incorporating values and safeguarding into organizational hiring processes. These are positive steps, but much more needs to be done.

This document is an interim report: the Commission’s work has yet to be completed. Research is ongoing, including in-depth field research within communities served by Oxfam. The Commission awaits the investigative reports of the United Kingdom (UK)

¹ “Safeguarding in Action: Our 10-Point Plan, Oxfam International,” accessed January 2, 2019, <https://www.oxfam.org/en/oxfams-commitment-stamping-out-sexual-harassment-and-abuse>.

Charity Commission (the UK government regulator of charities, which has specific oversight of Oxfam Great Britain) and the external investigator commissioned by Oxfam, as well as Oxfam's organizational culture and partner organizations' research. This will include reviewing staff surveys to help better gauge the depth and breadth of the concerns raised by the staff with whom the Commission has interacted directly. This continuing research inevitably means that the Commission's findings and recommendations will evolve during the remainder of its work.

However, the Commission has identified four areas of emerging recommendations, based on a transformative leadership framework, to improve Oxfam's approach to safeguarding and organizational culture and accountability more broadly.

Oxfam leadership needs to do the following:

1. Model Oxfam's values, good behavior, and commitment to safeguarding policies.
2. Empower and enable staff, communities, and partners to act through stronger systems when they see sexual misconduct.
3. Create space for staff to challenge bullying and negative power dynamics, and create positive space for better accountability.
4. Invest in personal and team reflections on how to improve Oxfam's culture and behavior for personal and collective accountability.

The Commission recognizes that Oxfam is not the only organization to face these issues and it notes that Oxfam is collaborating to find sector-wide solutions. It hopes its recommendations will be of value to the wider aid sector. It also recognizes that in this interim report, a heavier weight has been placed on recommendations for improvements pertaining to staff. Research is underway that will provide analysis for recommendations to support partners and communities; these will

be included in the final report. The Commission thanks the survivors, whistleblowers, Oxfam staff (current and former), Oxfam partner organizations, community members Oxfam serves, and the aid sector workers who have contributed to its work so far.

INTRODUCTION

Beginning in late 2017, Oxfam has been shaken by a series of reports around its handling of alleged cases of sexual exploitation and abuse. It has been accused of mismanaging investigations and has acknowledged that it failed “to properly prevent and investigate sexual misconduct by our staff.”² This failure inevitably has contributed to impunity for perpetrators and weakened accountability to survivors. Further, it has eroded trust within the organization and between Oxfam and its stakeholders.

In the wake of these reports, and in an earnest attempt to learn and reform, Oxfam established and mandated the High-Level Independent Commission on Sexual Misconduct, Accountability and Culture Change (hereafter called as the Commission).³ This development comes at a time when the #MeToo movement has raised the profile of and discussions on sexual exploitation and abuse around the world. It also comes at a time when Oxfam is undergoing an organizational restructuring—its 2020 vision⁴—which aims to distribute the power and management of its work between the Oxfam International secretariat, 19 affiliated and legally distinct organizations, and regions and countries.

The Commission has been tasked with proposing recommendations on how Oxfam can better align with its values and strengthen its systems to prevent and respond to all forms of abuse of power; harassment; and interpersonal misconduct, including sexual misconduct, by anyone involved with Oxfam.⁵

² “Safeguarding in Action.”

³ A list of commissioners involved is available at <https://independentcommission.org/commissioners/>; the terms of reference for the Commission are available at <https://independentcommission.org/resources/>.

⁴ Byanyima, Winnie, “Oxfam 2020 – Why the International Secretariat Must Move South,” *Oxfam International* (blog), April 24, 2014. Accessed January 2, 2019, <https://blogs.oxfam.org/en/blogs/14-04-24-2020-secretariat-moving>.

⁵ “Terms of reference,” Independent High-Level Commission on Sexual Misconduct, Accountability and Culture Change at Oxfam, accessed January 2, 2019, <https://independentcommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Independent-Commission-Terms-of-Reference.pdf>.

As Independent commissioners, we aim to look into all aspects of Oxfam's culture, policies, and practices relating to safeguarding. We also want to contribute to a sector-wide discussion on safeguarding that listens to the people with the least power in the system – the staff, volunteers, and people in the communities Oxfam is there to serve.

In May 2018, the Commission convened for the first time; its members subsequently have traveled to country programs in five countries. Commissioners visited the headquarters of six affiliates and the Oxfam International Secretariat to better understand how the confederation operates. Commissioners have also spoken to many Oxfam staff and stakeholders, and embarked on a study of lessons learned and best practices throughout and beyond the aid sector.

The Commission herein releases its interim report, which outlines initial findings and emerging recommendations. The work is far from complete, and the evidence base is still being gathered. The first stage of the work has focused on issues related to Oxfam staff. The Commission is awaiting the results of the specialized inputs and research on issues related to communities before developing recommendations in that area. In addition, research and visits are ongoing, and the Commission has yet to see the UK Charity Commission's investigation report or the report of the external investigator reviewing a range of Oxfam cases from across the confederation. It also has yet to review further Oxfam research on partner organizations' safeguarding capacity and Oxfam's organizational culture. This will include reviewing confederation wide staff surveys to help better gauge the depth and breadth of the concerns raised by the staff with whom the Commission has interacted directly. Consequently, the findings and recommendations below will evolve as new information and analysis comes to light.

Despite the challenges that have touched all spheres of Oxfam staff and operations, a healthy dose of optimism exists that the moment is ripe for change and that change is feasible. This optimism, however, is tempered by a warning that change is non-

negotiable; reform is needed, and recommendations must be acted upon for their processes to be meaningful. At its root, Oxfam must urgently tackle the foundations of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) that lie within any abuse of power and erosion of trust.

BACKGROUND

SEA is a pervasive problem that knows no geographical, cultural, or socioeconomic boundaries. Many organizations in the private and public spheres are revisiting their operating environments with a view toward transforming workplaces and communities into safe spaces. The aid sector—both international development and humanitarian programming—bears a particular responsibility in this regard. In serving the world’s most vulnerable, aid agencies must ensure that they foster an organizational culture that reflects the values that drive them to fight injustice and promote the human rights and dignity of all.

Yet the sector itself acknowledges that it has been down this road before. In 2002, the aid community was shaken after a damning report demonstrated that “sex for aid” was pervasive in West Africa; some of the sector’s largest aid agencies—the United Nations and international nongovernmental organizations—were implicated.⁶ The aid sector thereafter declared “zero tolerance” for sexual abuse. Subsequently, the sector has produced a wide array of policies and procedures addressing this issue.

Despite this history, today there is ample evidence of ongoing abuses in the sector, as well as unchallenged fear and intimidation of survivors and those who wish to report. It is evident that current approaches to accountability have neither sufficed nor been effective. This view was reinforced by a report from the UK Parliament’s International Development Committee, which states that “(t)he international aid sector’s response to tackling SEA since 2002 has been reactive, patchy and sluggish.”⁷ This situation is unacceptable. It not only fails the courageous individuals who have previously raised complaints, at potentially great cost to themselves, but also discourages others from coming forward.

⁶“Sexual Violence and Exploitation: The Experience of Refugee Children in Liberia, Guinea and Sierra Leone,” United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees/Save the Children – UK, accessed January 2, 2019, <https://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-committees/international-development/2002-Report-of-sexual-exploitation-and-abuse-Save%20the%20Children.pdf>.

⁷“Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in the Aid Sector: Conclusions and Recommendations,” paragraph 2, accessed January 2, 2019, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmintdev/840/84019.htm>.

METHODOLOGY

Direct engagement with communities, partners, and staff is the bedrock of the Commission’s approach to this body of work. Bottom-up and effective recommendations can be developed only by listening actively to what people identify as problems and solutions. Thus, the Commission has prioritized the following:

1. Listening to Oxfam staff through these actions:

- Visiting staff, partners, communities, and other stakeholders, including governments and donors in Oxfam country programs. These have been some of the most in-depth visits, with the widest range of staff and managers interviewed. The visits included asking staff to complete a survey specifically focused on safeguarding prevention and response. Countries have been chosen across a spread of regions, under the management of different affiliates and across both development and humanitarian programs. Five country programs⁸ have been visited thus far.
- Visiting the Oxfam International secretariat and multiple affiliates, including a range of secretariat offices, larger and smaller affiliates, and southern and northern affiliates. Affiliate visits have mainly focused on understanding the approaches that different affiliates take to safeguarding and accountability, and undertaking more in-depth discussions with management and those responsible for safeguarding. Six⁹ entities have been visited thus far.
- Making Commission members available to anyone who chooses to contact them via its website or its direct email.



2. Listening to survivors through having a Commissioner who is a survivor and has contributed to improving survivor support systems. The Commission has also convened a 10-person survivor reference group that will meet four times during the

⁸ The five countries visited to date were Benin, Kenya, Nigeria, the Philippines, and Zimbabwe.

⁹ The six entities encompass the secretariat: Oxford and Nairobi; and affiliates: Great Britain, Italy, Mexico, Novib (Netherlands), and Quebec, with some conversations with staff at Intermon (Spain) but not a full visit.

course of its research to provide input on key topics, such as survivor support, and ensure that the recommendations of the Commission are grounded in their experiences.

3. Listening to communities through commissioning in-depth community safeguarding research in three countries in which Oxfam operates, due for completion by the end of January 2019, as well as meetings held with communities during the visits to Oxfam country programs, as outlined above.

4. Listening to others through convening roundtables with experts on a variety of topics related to misconduct, organizational change, and accountability systems, in addition to consultations with the private sector.

5. Reviewing Oxfam documentation, including policies and procedures, and external audits of Oxfam. For the final report, this documentation will also include Oxfam's own survey of partners and a confederation-wide culture survey.

6. Reviewing other documentation, including the UK international Development Select Committee report, the UK Charity Commission report (when it is released), and other sector initiatives and best practices.

There are several limitations to this methodology:

First, although the Commission is making every effort to listen to a range of staff and communities, its work is mainly qualitative and not statistically representative. Staff self-select to complete surveys and contact the Commission, and the Commission can only visit a small number of offices. Instead, it aims to meet with a range of people who represent the spread of Oxfam's reach and work, and build on Oxfam's other research to examine issues such as organizational culture.

Also, although Oxfam is making every effort to implement positive organizational change, it often takes time before staff are able to perceive such change (for example, with respect to the efficacy of new safeguarding policies); likewise, management may not

immediately see that new policies are not having the intended positive impact. Inevitably, there is a lag time between changes in processes, policies, and culture, and seeing those changes bear fruit. Thus, a feedback loop that quickly provides information on both positive and negative impacts, even if partial at this interim stage, is important. The Commission will gain a better sense of the health of the organizational culture once the results of the anticipated Oxfam-wide culture survey are available. However, the concerns outlined below are those that the Commission has heard repeatedly in the course of its work, rather than from just a small number of people. Finally, the Commission has made Oxfam program countries its priority, as well as affiliate and secretariat offices. It has not reviewed Oxfam's trading division—that is, shops—located in affiliate countries, both to make its workload more manageable and because country programs and affiliate offices are where the vast majority of Oxfam investment takes place.

INITIAL FINDINGS

The Commission found encouragement in the aid sector regarding Oxfam's public approach to this review. Peers recognize that the need for reform is not limited to Oxfam alone. Some have welcomed Oxfam's public commitments, and many are keen to learn from Oxfam as it undertakes its self-reflection and makes reforms. Local partners, in particular, expressed a desire to learn from Oxfam. They recognize that they also need to make changes, but many do not have the capacity to undertake full reviews and instead look forward to applying the Commission's recommendations to their own work. Activists also have asked that Oxfam continue being vocal on this issue; they stated that it creates space for women's rights organizations to advocate for societal change in their countries.

The communities and local partners that Oxfam serves also have expressed a deep appreciation for Oxfam's work and its impact. Oxfam staff are overwhelmingly committed to its mission, and this commitment is reflected in their desire to be a part of the reform discussions and serve as change agents.

Nevertheless, a range of Oxfam staff have expressed strong views on the challenges that Oxfam must face head-on. Ultimately, the Commission's work so far has revealed that sexual misconduct is only one of the concerns floated by staff, and is seemingly symptomatic of larger systemic problems that must be addressed. The Commission has found that both the lack of robust policies and procedures across the confederation, as well as their poor implementation, have enabled an environment that permits sexual misconduct to be misunderstood at best and unaddressed at worst. Going beyond sexual misconduct, the Commission has heard from staff who feel that Oxfam's environment and processes for preventing and responding to harassment and bullying are deficient to the point that staff morale is compromised at times. Concerted attempts to address these larger issues should enhance staff morale, make for a more just organization, and also address the root causes of SEA in the organization.

"I visited an inspiring Oxfam and partner program that empowered women in a very poor rural community.

The positive changes to the lives of women, their families and their community symbolises how indispensable the work of Oxfam is."

– Commissioner

We have heard a call for change from across the confederation. Staff and partners are calling for the following:

- **A supportive environment**, although necessarily based on clear rules and codes of conduct, that must also proactively fight sexual and other forms of misconduct. The Commission has heard multiple staff raise concerns of elitism (both intellectual and language related), racism and colonial behavior (surfacing in organizational culture in expatriate-national staff dynamics, and reflecting issues staff have in differentials between national and international employment conditions and access to opportunities), sexism, rigid hierarchies and patriarchy that affect relationships among Oxfam staff and between Oxfam staff and its partners and program participants. Many staff and partners spoke to the Commission about the prevalence of bullying¹⁰ in their offices and in some cases, a toxic work environment built on the premise of the inequalities outlined above. These types of behaviors and inequalities can create an atmosphere that allows harassment, sexual abuse, and other forms of abuse to take place. As it works towards its final report, the Commission will probe these issues further, drawing from inputs such as the confederation-wide staff survey on culture.
- **A culture of accountability**, in which leaders hold both the staff who betray Oxfam values and the leaders themselves accountable for this mismanagement. Oxfam has now put in place a “zero tolerance” policy for sexual misconduct, including continuing investigations even if the accused abuser resigns; this approach leads to dismissal for cause. It is also publishing the number of investigated and resolved cases of sexual misconduct. Implementing these policies successfully could rebuild trust by demonstrating that offenders no longer operate with impunity. Nonetheless, we have heard accusations of various forms of nonsexual misconduct that either have not been reported or did not appear to trigger a human resources investigation. The Commission also heard from former staff,

“Senior managers do not link what happened in Haiti with the work Oxfam does on gender and the fact that we have a male-dominated society; it’s their responsibility not to abuse that power.”

– Oxfam staff member

¹⁰ As defined in the Anti-bullying and Harassment Policy of several Oxfam affiliates, bullying is “behaviour directed either against an individual or a group of individuals that creates a threatening or intimidating environment undermining the confidence and self-esteem of the recipient(s). It could be an abuse or misuse of power that humiliates or injures the recipient(s).” On file.

including survivors and whistleblowers, who felt deeply frustrated and saddened at the lack of accountability they experienced; in some cases, they reported being pushed out of the organization or having no choice but to leave. Some staff said that some leaders actively protected other leaders who were poor managers or exhibited bullying behaviors. Although the Commission is not investigating these cases, it is bringing them to Oxfam senior management's attention. Staff also are deeply frustrated because problem managers and staff often are not held accountable for their actions; rather, their contracts simply are not renewed or they are moved into other positions in the organization. The "zero tolerance" policy for sexual misconduct needs to be complemented by a similar policy for bad management, with poor managers not able to operate with impunity.

- **Accountability to affected populations.** Although commitments exist—for example in the revised and uniform code of conduct—staff have told commissioners that the focus of safeguarding efforts made so far has been on protecting staff in the workplace, and that much more needs to be done to ensure accountability to the communities Oxfam serves. The Commission has learned of instances in which Oxfam staff have not discussed with communities what is and is not acceptable behavior. Further, Oxfam has seemingly imposed reporting systems that have not been developed alongside, or with the input of, communities — meaning it is unknown whether they reflect and meet communities' needs. Finally, in some instances, Oxfam staff seemingly have not explained the purpose of the reporting mechanism to community members. These views were also reflected in the 2018 Humanitarian Quality Assurance Initiative audit, which showed that much more work needs to be done to build more effective and systematic accountability systems in partnership with communities.¹¹
- **An effective governance structure** of the confederation that will allow for strengthened implementation of safeguarding reforms

¹¹ "CHS Initial Verification Audit Report," p. 14, Oxfam International, June 18, 2018, accessed January 2, 2019, <http://hgai.org/wp-content/uploads/1.-Oxfam-CHS-Summary-Report-Final.pdf>.

within the organization. Oxfam has extraordinarily complicated institutional and governance arrangements. Power imbalances among affiliates and between affiliates and country programs dictate access to funding, decision making, and operations, undermining efforts to improve accountability and leading to negotiated but watered-down decisions.

- **Trusted safeguarding processes.** Drastic inconsistencies are evident in how safeguarding issues are handled between affiliates and across countries. There is also confusion among staff and communities regarding who to report to and how a case is managed. In some cases, this confusion even permeates senior leadership at the local level; they also question what has happened regarding cases they have referred to their own management. Equally, some staff have shared concerns around violations of confidentiality in investigations processes, often accompanied by rumor and speculation, and further propagated by a lack of transparency when communicating outcomes.
- **A participatory approach** to the ongoing development of a new and improved safeguarding regime that responds to staff and community needs. The voice and input of Oxfam’s staff, partners, and the communities it serves are at risk of going unheard as improved safeguarding policies and procedures are developed. Oxfam has motivated and talented staff who are eager to contribute to making improvements to Oxfam’s SEA prevention and response, as well as its organizational culture and accountability. These people are agents of change that ultimately can help realize Oxfam’s improvements.
- **A central HR management system** that can aggregate information and complaints that may arrive via the multiple channels through which staff can alert Oxfam of bullying, harassment, abuse, and other forms misconduct, such as fraud. In the absence of a holistic oversight of staff behavior, senior management are not able to obtain a full picture of staff appraisals and may make disciplinary decisions on the basis of incomplete information.

“Oxfam describes a feminist approach to its work but, at the country level, gender is just an ‘accessory.’ Before the donors, it’s a key component of Oxfam’s work. But in the field, those working on gender are perceived as just ‘creating problems’ and are like ‘rocks in the organization’s shoes.’”

– Oxfam gender justice staff member

- **A recognition that there are different survivor profiles** in the organization's current SEA discourse, which predominantly revolves around the "men versus women" narrative rather than "survivor versus perpetrator." Misconduct also affects men, LGBTQ people, and those who see themselves as nonbinary. Discussions around the code of conduct, which all staff recently signed again, are a flash point for airing these kinds of issues.
- **Clarity on how to realize Oxfam's commitment to women's rights.** Oxfam staff of all genders have told the commissioners that they would like to understand how to become champions of women's rights but do not know how. Oxfam is investing in gender justice programs, and has a target to expand this further. Despite this, there is still significant cynicism about the organization's commitment to gender justice, with Oxfam's capacity and will to honor the gender justice ideals in question. However, there have been candid discussions around whether Oxfam can or should be a feminist organization, and how it can apply feminist principles to its work, with papers already circulating within the organization.

These challenges are significant, mostly informed by the amalgamation of concerns expressed by Oxfam staff to commissioners. The Commission recognizes, however, that Oxfam is becoming increasingly aware of the SEA and non-SEA related reforms it must make. In addition to establishing the Commission, it has revised its code of conduct, hired and trained safeguarding focal points throughout the organization, and publicly disclosed case data.

Oxfam is also assessing systemic issues that may impact the coherence of safeguarding prevention and response throughout the confederation, such as the current governance review, which is designed to look at weaknesses that affect Oxfam's operations:

What we have done so far (October 2018):

- ✔ Established an **Independent Commission on Sexual Misconduct** led by women's rights experts which is looking into all aspects of Oxfam's culture, policies and practices relating to the safeguarding of staff, volunteers and beneficiaries.
- ✔ Invested €3m to manage our safeguarding work including training 119 safeguarding investigators across Oxfam to handle cases of abuse, harassment and sexual misconduct in confidential and appropriate ways.
- ✔ Trained staff in all countries where we have programs to act as "Focal Safeguarding Points" for grievances, advice, and to promote awareness and prevention.
- ✔ Set up 5 whistleblowing hotlines, a stronger reference system that makes it harder for people who have had charges of misconduct upheld to find new jobs in the sector.
- ✔ Updated our **Code of Conduct** to explicitly forbid the behavior that we witnessed in Haiti.
- ✔ Set up a central safeguarding database from which we are now disclosing information, every six months, on Oxfam's safeguarding investigations and finalizing a single standard operating procedure for case reporting, including to authorities and donors.

Oxfam's Safeguarding in Action: Our 10-Point Plan.
Oxfam will release shortly an updated 'What we have done so far' to reflect progress made through January 2019.
<https://www.oxfam.org/en/oxfams-commitment-stamping-out-sexual-harassment-and-abuse>

EMERGING RECOMMENDATIONS

Oxfam's safeguarding system clearly needs significant improvement, as the organization has acknowledged.¹² The Commission also believes that its recommendations need to go further: deep transformation around *trust* (between staff and with processes) and *power* (the space and ability to hold people to account) within Oxfam is required.

Systems and processes are important but not sufficient. Unwritten ways of working and the culture of an organization are fundamental. For this reason, in its diagnostic and recommendations, the Commission is using a bottom-up transformative leadership framework, which Oxfam itself has explored,¹³ to frame recommendations that it hopes will help to prevent and respond to SEA. The Commission asks the following questions and encourages Oxfam to do the same: How do conversations and decisions take place? How are staff involved? What are the power relations between international and national staff, as well as community-based volunteers? Do communities genuinely get a chance to critique the organization, or does their input merely receive lip service? Are they given an opportunity to submit a critique in a way that respects their agency while protecting their identity and interests? What informal behavior is permitted that undermines formal processes? This work is difficult but essential.

As mentioned above, these findings are emerging and will be expanded and developed further with supporting evidence from the Commission's research and lengthy conversations with Oxfam staff and program participants around the globe. Alongside its recommendations, the Commission also outlines areas of work that it will prioritize in the next phase of its work. The final report will provide a comprehensive overview of all areas of the Commission's work.

¹² "Safeguarding in Action."

¹³ "Transformative and Feminist Leadership for Women's Rights," p. 9, Oxfam America, accessed January 2, 2019, https://www.oxfamamerica.org/static/media/files/Transformative_and_Feminist_Leadership_for_Womens_Rights.pdf.

The Commission has identified four preliminary areas of recommendations:

1. Model Oxfam’s values, good behavior, and commitment to safeguarding policies

“Oxfam sang a beautiful song people believed in and has now become disconnected from the people inside.”

– Commissioner, reflecting on the Commission’s initial findings

There is a real need for Oxfam staff—particularly its leadership—to examine if and how they understand and exemplify feminist principles and Oxfam’s values of empowerment, accountability, and inclusiveness, and demonstrate how they uphold the code of conduct. This examination should extend beyond formal processes to the overall work environment that leaders (both senior and team managers in the secretariat, affiliates, regions, and country teams) create through their everyday interactions with staff; how leaders frame their conversations, receive feedback, and make decisions with staff and communities; and who is involved, how they talk, and how they listen. This approach is the foundation for a positive work environment that prevents SEA from taking place.

The Commission has heard from multiple staff across different Oxfam offices that bullying is pervasive and that **Oxfam’s values** are printed on wall posters but not always understood or upheld in action—and sometimes are even contradicted. Some staff, whose English is a second, third, or fourth language, believe they go unheard. People are hired for technical skills but without consideration for skills such as how they interact with peers and embody values in the workplace. Oxfam has recognized the need to stress hiring people based on values as well as skills, and currently is introducing guidance for including values in hiring processes across the confederation.

Staff have shared their views and examples of investigations into violations of the code of conduct or safeguarding incidents being treated as discretionary, depending on the perpetrator and survivor. Management has countered that cases are being



handled but that the protocols in use until the recent decision to report its caseload have meant that the results have been held in confidence. The results of the external investigator reviewing case management will be important in helping the Commission understand the full picture of SEA. Nonetheless, in its visits the Commission has observed real differences in understanding of the concept of safeguarding and the implications for transgressions of the code of conduct.

The Commission’s initial recommendations in this area are as follows:

- Leadership across the organization (secretariat, affiliate, region, and country) should formally hold to account those people who violate safeguarding policies, the code of conduct, and its values. Furthermore, leadership should make clear to staff that action is being taken, both to signal that the organization does not tolerate misconduct and to encourage people to report it. This approach must go beyond the stated “zero tolerance” policy; it should involve developing confederation-wide disciplinary standards for actions ranging from warnings to termination of employment. These actions also should be applicable to those who retaliate against other staff raising complaints.
- Leadership across the organization (secretariat, affiliate, region, and country) must be proactive in acting upon incidents and rumored incidents.
- Senior management, supported by Oxfam’s human resources, should undertake a timebound plan to diversify leadership by drawing from all parts of the confederation, taking into account gender, age, diversity, and other forms of representation.
- Senior management, supported by human resources, should ensure that support for Oxfam values and behavior is recognized in leadership hiring processes and performance reviews, building on recently-agreed hiring approaches.
- Managers, supported by human resources, should ensure that all staff on their teams have at least one annual work objective

“Some senior-level staff do not demonstrate a commitment to, or understanding of, protection or gender, which renders safeguarding difficult when those in higher-level positions don’t even appreciate the underlying need for protection or gender-based services.”

– Oxfam staff member

directly related to Oxfam values and demonstrate commitment to these values as documented in their mid-term and annual performance reviews.

- Human resources should strengthen leadership training in safeguarding, managing power, and building positive behavior. It must also include modules on conducting self-assessments and cultivating emotional intelligence.
- Senior management should take stock of the excellent thinking within the confederation that merits dissemination and adoption throughout. For example, Oxfam Canada recently published a document that discusses what it means for Oxfam to take a feminist approach, and the feminist principles Oxfam Canada is using to guide its work.¹⁴

2. Empower and enable staff, communities, and partners to act through stronger systems when they see sexual misconduct

*“What happens to the data we receive about cases and reporting?
It all disappears into a big black hole.*

We need to have [a] better understanding of what to do with the cases and complaints we hear about.”

– Oxfam human resources staff

*“We manage safeguarding on top of our normal responsibilities,
so it never receives the attention it deserves.”*

– Oxfam human resources staff

People must be able to trust that the systems in place will work, that they will receive support, and that justice can be done. Establishing this trust means that clear systems, roles, and responsibilities for preventing and responding to safeguarding issues are required, along with a strong sense of collective leadership and mutual trust, to help build an environment where people can feel confident about reporting SEA. The Commission recognizes that different prevention, reporting, and support

¹⁴ “Tackling Inequalities in the Global Economy: Making Canada’s Foreign Policy Work for Women,” Oxfam Canada, accessed January 2, 2019, https://www.oxfam.ca/sites/default/files/file_attachments/feminist_principles_-_oxfam_canada.pdf.

systems are needed for staff, communities, and partners. Communities, in particular, need different ways and channels to communicate safeguarding breaches that are fit for their context, including cultural and educational concerns, and are safe. These approaches must be developed with the help of the people who may need to use the system, thereby ensuring they are fit for purpose, and often including other actors, such as women’s rights organizations, and people in local services, such as health clinics.

Regarding how Oxfam responds to reported incidents, the research conducted so far has made it clear to the Commission that the organization’s safeguarding system must be redesigned. The Oxfam confederation model is complex, encompassing multiple legal entities working to deliver aid across ninety countries. Although changes are underway, beginning with recent agreement on common safeguarding policies and a Standard Operating Procedure for Reporting Misconduct, and a commitment to developing an Oxfam-wide safeguarding network, there is currently no single uniform system across the confederation for investigating complaints and levying penalties. Different Oxfam affiliates have entirely different safeguarding systems. The differences in approaches between affiliates responsible for countries and between countries means that people may experience a different process and outcome based simply on location. The Commission has heard of examples in which the speed and quality of an investigation relied on the individuals in country, rather than a high-quality system being in place. For staff, there is great confusion around where to report and a lack of understanding of how cases are handled. There are also indications that in some cases, data confidentiality standards—which are paramount—may be violated; detailed case information becomes widely known, yet case outcomes are seldom shared. With staff moving between countries and affiliates, separate case management systems that do not talk to each other raise the risk of some individuals possibly reoffending in other countries. Some Oxfam affiliates have more capacity than others and are in the process of further strengthening their systems; it is important that Oxfam have one system that can be used by both large and small affiliates.

“There is a continued lack of understanding of what safeguarding is – and why it is a phenomenon – among senior managers.”

- Oxfam staff member

The Commission’s initial recommendations in this area are as follows:

- The Oxfam executive board should lead the implementation of a single, unified, confederation-wide, and streamlined safeguarding system that protects data confidentiality and ensures consistent high-quality investigations and case resolution. The development of such a system has been agreed in principle. This system should escalate case management and decision making on disciplinary actions out of country management hands by taking it to higher management, thus ensuring consistency and alignment with confederation-wide standards. The system will need to recognize that, although the investigation system should be confederation-wide, disciplinary actions may need to be made by senior managers at the affiliate level because staff have contracts with individual affiliates, and each one operates in different jurisdictions with different labor laws. The confederation-wide system should have multiple channels at the field level that staff and communities can use to report, dedicated and well-trained safeguarding staff, and a single case management database for the confederation.
- Safeguarding and human resources teams should empower survivors to partner with—and ideally lead—safeguarding policy and procedure development to ensure it works for the people who need to use it.
- The aid sector needs to work with donors and industry regulators to make sure there are clear, consistent standards for reporting misconduct and high standards of data protection and confidentiality when cases are reported so people are not put at risk or discouraged from doing so.

The Commission recognizes that the recommendations above focus heavily on staff, and that existing safeguarding systems are not sufficiently sensitive or responsive to those who most need them.

Drawing on research currently underway, planned visits, and analysis that Oxfam itself is doing, in the next phase of work the Commission will look at the following:

- What are the specific core principles of and components required for a unified survivor-centered, confederation-wide safeguarding system? The elements identified will distinguish between staff and community-level practice.
- How can broader Oxfam community accountability systems reinforce a robust, context-appropriate community safeguarding system, and vice versa?
- How can what communities need from Oxfam to improve safeguarding be identified, including prevention, responding to cases, and what survivor support and justice should look like?
- How can Oxfam partner with others in the field, including local women’s organizations, health facilities, and other agencies, to increase the number of reporting channels available to survivors, and provide the support identified by communities as needed by survivors?
- What kind of support and safeguarding management needs to be put in place for and with local Oxfam partners to operationalize these recommendations, as well as the forthcoming recommendations from the UK Charity Commission and external investigators?

3. Create space for staff to challenge bullying and negative power dynamics, and create positive ones for better accountability

*“Policies and procedures are words,
and Oxfam needs to walk the talk of governance.”*

– Oxfam senior manager

In an organization as complex as Oxfam, there are many formal and informal power dynamics that must be reviewed, discussed, and improved. For formal power and accountability, this means starting from the top of the organization. It involves providing opportunities for people to speak confidentially when they fear retribution while also encouraging more open communication.

These processes should facilitate the airing of negative practices while identifying positive ones, so teams can collectively build the workplace they want to see.

In its research, the Commission has heard a great deal about the abuse of formal and informal power. Staff stated that people who have the trust of senior leadership can circumvent agreed-upon procedures, such as sign-offs, approvals, and consultations in programming, all of which undermine confidence that due process is possible on issues as important as safeguarding. Although Oxfam has recognized that power is something to be discussed and analyzed, the Commission believes much more must be done to embed this idea properly.

“Those with less power (local staff, partners, community members) are intimidated and do not want to create problems, resulting in their silence.”

– Oxfam staff member

Similarly, in an organization as complex as Oxfam, in which a confederation model is used, it is essential that the “One Oxfam” vision¹⁵ be put in place effectively. Although affiliates have their own approaches, it is striking how many people believe the One Oxfam vision exists on paper only and lacks the buy-in and commitment it needs to become a reality on the ground.

The Commission’s initial recommendations in this area are as follows:

- The Oxfam executive board and board of supervisors should institute a modern, smaller board of supervisors to strengthen Oxfam governance and accountability, and deliver a One Oxfam confederation. This effort may include a rotation of affiliates but requires an independent, diverse, and external expert group to help Oxfam drive the strategy, ensure that skills related to integrity (regarding sexual misconduct, fraud and corruption, and ethical behaviors) are well represented, and hold the organization to account.
- Human resources and all department managers should strategically leverage and incorporate staff surveys and 360-

¹⁵ “One Oxfam” is described in the Oxfam International 2013–2019 strategic plan as: “a step-change in the confederation’s ways of working... to embrace all the activities of all affiliates as ‘one Oxfam.’ It builds on the work we have done and learned from in collective campaigning, humanitarian response, the development of our global brand identity and the Single Management Structure (SMS) and it brings country programs together in one strategy, one management structure, speaking with one voice.” See <https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/oxfam-strategic-plan-2013-2019.pdf>, p. 22.

degree feedback into the performance management system to identify bullying, harassment, and other abuses of power; and support senior-level action to address these hotspots. The 360-degree feedback system should allow for all staff (or, for large teams, a well-developed random sample) under the manager to rate and comment anonymously.

- Team managers should convene regular team reflections on power dynamics, along with discussing clear actions that can be taken within the team and shared with senior management.

In the next phase of its work, the Commission will examine the feasibility of an internal Ombuds program, which is different from a regulatory or investigative function (and the initiative recently announced by the Dutch government at the London Safeguarding Summit, October 2018).¹⁶ Internal Ombuds offices are designed as participatory, with the goal of having a safe space for people to talk about issues, raise concerns, and receive advice on how to access formal systems. The Ombuds program would adhere to the industry-wide standard criteria of independence, neutrality, informality, and confidentiality.

4. Invest in personal and team reflections on how to improve Oxfam’s culture and behavior for personal and collective accountability

“Communications about safeguarding do not reach across the organization to staff in the field.

We need to adapt the way we talk about the issue.”

– Oxfam human resources staff

¹⁶ Sigrid Kaag, Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, announced this initiative on October 18, 2018. She referred to a study that had been commissioned to establish an ombudsperson-type function in field settings. This function is designed to be a shared function for the entire community. The aim will be to launch it in two different countries for purposes of testing and learning. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=22&v=QgfpV_BDnNg.

All staff must understand the meaning of the Oxfam vision, together with its values and code of conduct, and feel they can own and realize it both as individuals and together as teams. Equally, they must also take time to recognize and unlearn those habits and behaviors of their own and their teams that undermine the creation of a positive and supportive working environment. Finally, they need to be aware of the consequences of not behaving in line with the code of conduct and other policies.

Oxfam has begun some of this work by committing to stand-alone culture work with its own budget and specialist capacity from April 2019, establishing a voluntary staff working group on culture, a mandatory re-signing of the code of conduct for all staff across the confederation, the roll-out of an optional workshop to discuss the code of conduct, and issuance of an organization-wide survey on culture. **On Commission visits, it was striking that staff are motivated and want to be part of the solution as Oxfam improves its culture, accountability, and safeguarding procedures.** The Commission heard examples in which teams have arrived at common understandings through discussion of what is or is not acceptable behavior. Conversely, the Commission has heard examples in which discussions were held but people either were still confused or still misunderstood what is or is not acceptable. Building team and personal reflections should be done regularly to foster trust and allow for honest conversation and common understanding.

The Commission's initial recommendations in this area are as follows:

- All team managers across the confederation, with support from department managers, should continue to convene regular sex- and age-disaggregated team conversations on the code of conduct, safeguarding, power dynamics, and biases. These conversations should cover the contents of policies; the consequences of violating them; and individual, team, and organization roles and responsibilities. Outcomes should be

shared with department managers, who can share them with senior leadership.

- Safeguarding policies and the code of conduct, both written and audiovisual, should be provided in easy-to-understand language; discussed with staff, clearly explaining nuances; and available in local languages when needed to aid understanding.
- All staff should be required to re-sign the code of conduct every year, along with attending accompanying refresher trainings.
- Job applicants should be exposed to the code of conduct well before offers to them are finalized, so they understand the consequences of joining the organization.
- Managers, with support from human resources, should formally incorporate values and ethical behavior in all staff performance review processes.

Local partners are a critical part of the Oxfam model; their staff increasingly are the ones who interact with communities. In its next phase of work, the Commission will address how Oxfam can support the partners and community members who help deliver Oxfam's work to have a clear understanding of appropriate behaviors and take action to uphold those expectations. The Commission recognizes that in some cases, partners may have a great deal of learning to do, whereas in other cases, Oxfam can learn much from its partners.

NEXT STEPS

Moving forward, the Commission will continue to build the evidence base to support and finalize its recommendations:



1. Analyze information from in-depth research conducted in communities that Oxfam serves in three countries.

2. Collate information from ongoing staff surveys and meetings with staff in several other countries.

3. Consult the literature and experts on best practices related to the emerging findings, as well as the findings of the external investigators and the UK Charity Commission.

4. Develop metrics to mark progress in the implementation of recommendations.

5. In March 2019, the Commission will reconvene to finalize its research.

6. In May 2019, the Commission will release its final report.

